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Author
Asagi
Illustrator Shino
Long Story Short
I'm Living in the Mountains

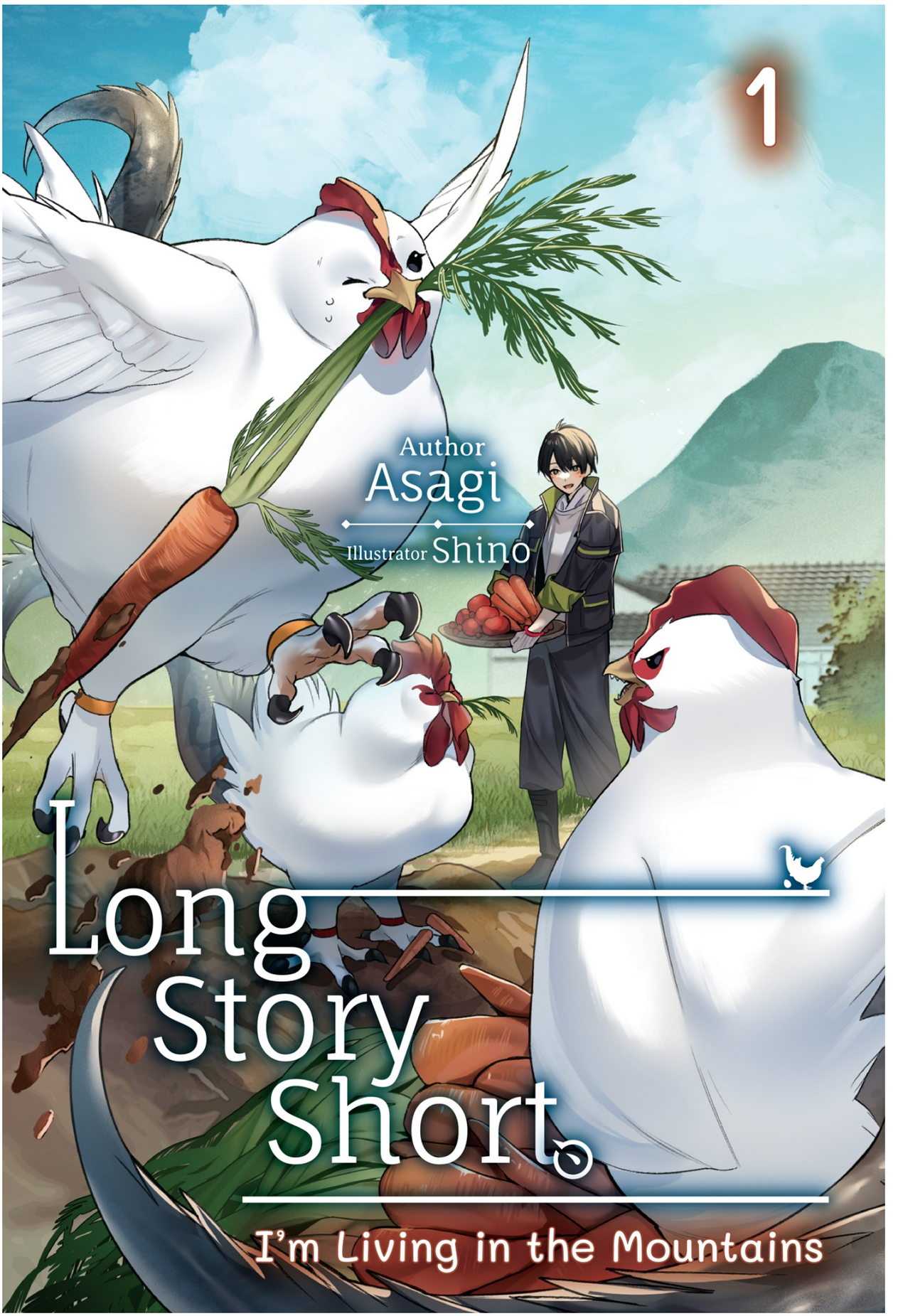

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Prologue

I got myself a mountain.

I'm sick of dealing with people.

My fiancée left me. I'm fed up with everything.

I don't need a girlfriend anymore either.

I decided to become a hermit, and I bought a couple mountains through some connections on my mother's side of the family. Yes, *a couple*. No particular reason—it's just that they would only sell me the two-mountain set.

On the mountainside, there stood a house that used to belong to the village head. I decided to make it my new home.

Three days into my new lifestyle, the loneliness started getting to me, so I wandered down to the village at the foot of the mountain. The townspeople were holding a festival, and one of the stalls was selling those dyed baby chicks. I bought three. I figured it ought to help stave off the loneliness.

I asked how to raise the chicks, and apparently there's a bit of preparation involved, so they gave me some supplies. Also, I bought feed and some other stuff on my way home.

There was something a little *off* about these chicks, though. Their tails looked kind of...reptilian. After a month, they had grown quite a bit larger than the average chicken.

That's odd. I tilted my head, and the three of them imitated the gesture.

Just what is going on here?

1. Do Dyed Chicks Grow into Chickens?

It’d been a month since I’d begun living on this nameless mountain.

The name’s Shohei Sano—twenty-five, bachelor. No interest in dating. No desire to get married.

The vegetation on the mountain had begun to grow rapidly thanks to the increasingly warm weather. *I wish I had some of that energy too.*

Well then, the first thing I needed to do was deal with all the overgrown grass. I brought out the electric lawn mower and got to work outside the house.

And I mowed.

And mowed.

And mowed.

But, as usual, there seemed to be no end in sight. Then again, because the chickens grazed around this part of the property, the effort didn’t go to waste.

I had started growing vegetables too. I’d gone over to what used to be the fields, pulled out the weeds one by one, tilled the soil, and planted the seeds I’d been given. Now that the crops were established, I knew they’d be a prime target for insects if I didn’t properly tend to them, so I tried out a recipe for organic pesticide I’d once seen an idol make on TV. While I was preparing it, the smell became so overpowering that the chickens got angry at me. *Sorry about that, guys.*

Oh, right. Speaking of the dyed chicks I’d bought at the festival—they were fully feathered now, and the color had worn off. All three had grown into healthy chickens.

Kind of big chickens, though. Big enough to make you think, *Are chickens even supposed to grow this large?*

I found some info on the internet about a breed of large chickens called Brahma, but even *those* weren’t this big. I’d only had these chickens for a month, and they had already grown over half a meter tall. *I measured them yesterday.*

From what I’d read, it should usually take more than one month

for a chick to grow into an adult chicken. However, one of my chicks, Pochi, already had quite the comb on his head. I thought maybe they'd been a few weeks old when I'd bought them, but when I went down to the village for some shopping and asked how old they'd been, I was told that the chicks sold at the festival stall should have been a week old at most.

That would make them slightly more than five weeks old now. Apparently, broiler chickens reached slaughter weight after about seven weeks, but the chicks sold at the festival were all supposed to be males with little market value. The old man down at the village offered to help if I was going to slaughter them; I politely turned him down. These chickens were my dear pals, and I wanted them to stick around for as long as they could.

Pochi, the one with the large comb, clucked a lot, and you could tell he was a rooster. The other two, Tama and Yuma, seemed like they might be hens. As chicks, they'd all chirped and tweeted, but I'd never heard Tama and Yuma cluck loudly like Pochi did. *Well, they* were *pretty damn freaked out that time I made organic pesticide. Again, sorry about that.*

There were a few other things I didn't quite understand about my chickens.

"Why does this grass have to grow so fast? I wish it would just take it easy. Gah, what a pain."

"...Whattapain."

"Whattapain."

"Whattapain."

What are you, parrots? Parakeets? I've never heard of chickens *talking.*

"God, what's going on?"

"...Gawd."

"Gawd."

"Gawd."

Are you guys religious or something?

All of a sudden, Tama moved briskly.

"Whoa?! What is it?"

Held within her beak was a small snake—a viper.

"Ooh..." I marveled. "I can always count on Tama for a surprise, huh? Hold on for a sec."

I went inside to get a plastic bottle. Then I carefully took the

viper from Tama's beak and put its head through the mouth of the bottle. The snake promptly slid inside. Old Man Yumoto had taught me how to do this. Sometimes, the snake could try slithering out again after going almost all the way inside. You couldn't let your guard down until it was fully trapped. (*Don't try this at home, kids.*)

"Thanks, Tama."

She raised her head.

Isn't it weird for chickens to attack snakes, though? Shouldn't it normally be the other way around?

The next thing I knew, Yuma flapped her wings, went around to the back of the house, and returned with another viper. *Way too many of these around here. I'd better watch out for snakes.*

"You caught one too, Yuma? Thanks. You guys can eat that if you'd like."

The three of them started hungrily pecking at the snake. *Chickens that prey on vipers... Scary stuff.* In any case, I had a strong feeling they could somehow understand what I was saying.

All that commotion had tired me out, so I went into the house to poke a hole in the plastic bottle so the viper could breathe.

This was about what an average day in my new life looked like.

Now, as previously mentioned, this mountain didn't have a name. It did, however, have a nickname of sorts. There was a river flowing near this house, and the mountain was abundant with water, so they called it Brook Mountain.

Locals said that back in the day, there used to be a small settlement here with five or six houses besides mine, which had been the village head's house. As the population had grown older, they'd moved away to other places, like the village at the foot of the mountain and other nearby towns. It seemed the other houses had been built on land that the village head had developed and leased, so there weren't any land ownership issues to deal with.

As for the village head and his family, they had done their best to stay here as long as they could, but the cold mornings and evenings—as well as the decline in strength and endurance that comes with aging—had taken a toll on them. Husband and wife had moved to the village down below three years ago, and their children apparently had a house in N-Town.

They had still owned the land though; they'd been coming here every week to take care of the buildings and fields. That explained why the house had still been in good shape when I'd moved in, but naturally, they hadn't been able to keep it up through the winter.

If it weren't for that, I would've had to rebuild the house from scratch, and getting the road back to a usable condition would've been hard work too. *I'm sure I would've given up in no time anyway.* It was about twenty minutes by car between the village at the bottom of the mountain and this house. The road was narrow and winding, so it was a pretty tough drive. In winter, snow didn't pile up that much around here, but it was still rather difficult to reach the village during colder months.

I'm really glad I got those chicks. Well, they're not babies anymore, I guess. Really clever ones, they are. So clever that I fear someday they might replace me.

Maybe it was because I'd bought this place as an escapist impulse, but I'd had no idea what living in the mountains would be like. I would have surely found myself at a loss in no time if not for the help of Yumoto-san, a friend of a relative on my mother's side of the family. He'd been concerned about me—he'd even lent me a minitruck and had also made me a shopping list of mountain life essentials.

I'd moved here at the end of March, and now April was already over.

There was electricity and signal here, which meant I could watch TV and browse the internet no problem. For gas, I bought propane down at the village, and water was drawn from the river. *Technically, it's from a nearby spring.*

The toilet could flush, but there was no sewage—it ran on a septic tank, so I had to call someone to clean it out at least once a year, which wasn't cheap.

But enough about utilities and infrastructure. I had to find a way to dispose of the vipers. They probably had a nest somewhere in one of the abandoned houses on the property, and they'd become active with the arrival of warmer weather.

I recalled my first encounter with them, which had been around two weeks earlier.

Pochi caught his first one. It wasn't all that large—probably not an adult snake. He dutifully came to me to show me his prey. It

certainly took me by surprise.

"Huh? A snake... A viper, I think? Are you guys gonna eat that?"

Pochi nodded.

"Uh... Is it safe to eat? I guess if you want to... I'm good. Help yourselves."

The three of them started gobbling away at it. *Is it normal for chickens to eat snakes?*

With some research, I was able to confirm that it was indeed a viper. It had a striped pattern and a rather menacing aura.

However, when I looked again, there was no trace of the viper. *Huh, did they eat* everything*? What did they do about the venomous bits? Did they throw those parts out somewhere?* I spent a few days watching them for anything unusual, but thankfully, all three of them were as full of energy as ever. I was relieved that they didn't get sick and die from the venom or anything.

Then, two days later, Tama brought me another viper.

"Whoa! Um, yeah, feel free to eat it..."

Having received my permission, the three chickens began devouring the snake. Apparently, they *did* understand that I was their owner. They would often come and show me things they had caught. *I wish they would stop with the snakes, though. I might have a heart attack one of these days.*

And then, *again*, two days later, it was Yuma's turn to show me the snake she had caught.

Just how many snakes are there on this mountain anyway?!

Later that day, I went down to the village to buy some stuff. I also paid Old Man Yumoto a visit. Pochi wanted to ride in the passenger seat, so I took him along.

"Vipers, huh? Must've taken over and proliferated after everyone left," Yumoto mused.

I shuddered at the thought. The recent spring weather had brought more bugs around, and the snakes were also waking up from their hibernation.

I then told him about how my chickens had been catching and eating vipers.

"Bit of a waste," he replied. "I've been craving some snake wine. Bring me a live one next time you see 'em. I'll buy it from you."

"I'm afraid I'm not brave enough for that!" I exclaimed.

"Don't worry—I'll show you the ropes."

At that point, he decided that he would come over tomorrow during the daytime. And it just so happened that the next day, Tama caught a viper, so Yumoto was able to give me a live demonstration.

“Never heard of chickens eating vipers,” said Yumoto. “But anyway, it’d be great if you could bring me one every three days. Should be fine to let the chickens eat the rest, I reckon.”

He headed back home in a cheerful mood and took the viper with him in a plastic bottle.

This all happened about a week ago. And now, I’d captured another one—the second viper I’d caught since moving here. I was certainly still somewhat afraid of them, but I was also glad they would be of use to someone.

I loaded it, along with the one from last time, onto the truck. Yuma was in the passenger seat today.

Time to go down to the village.

I drove to Yumoto-san’s place, and he greeted me with an ear-to-ear smile. “Ooh, he’s grown pretty big! Wait… He? She? Wasn’t that thing a rooster?”

“Apparently not…” I muttered.

“But now you’ll be able to get fresh eggs, huh?”

“I guess that’ll be nice…”

I wanted Yumoto-san to take the vipers off my hands, so I headed straight to his house.

Come to think of it, there aren’t any active volcanoes in the mountain range around here…right? Just between you and me, that possibility freaked me out a bit at first.

When I hopped out of the truck, Yuma acted like she wanted to tag along, so I brought her with me. She looked kind of cute strutting around the earthen floor of the old man’s home.

“Here, Yumoto-san—I brought you these vipers.”

“Oh! You caught two of them? Nice job!”

I gave him the two plastic bottles.

“All right then, now let me get your pay.”

“Pay?” I asked.

Yumoto-san’s wife (her name is Machiko-san, so I’ll call her that to avoid confusion) soon stepped into the room. “I can’t believe there’re so many vipers there,” she said in a concerned tone. “Are you all right?” She had brought tea and snacks—big, crunchy rice

crackers. *Yum.*

"Thank you," I said, accepting the refreshments. "I haven't had any trouble with them so far. I do see them quite often near the house, though. I figure they might have a nest in some abandoned house or shed."

Looking into the infestation seemed headache-inducing. I didn't want to get jumped by a wayward viper.

"Why don't you have my husband go get rid of them?" she suggested. "It's not like he has anything better to do."

"It's okay. My chickens catch them…" I said.

"Bright creatures, aren't they? Who's with you today?"

"Her name is Yuma. She caught one in the backyard just this morning."

"My, Yuma-chan, you're such a good girl! Want some veggies?"

Machiko-san gave Yuma some vegetable scraps that were on the corner of the earthen floor—carrot skins, radish leaves with holes, stuff like that. With the old lady's permission, Yuma came over and began eating. *I really do get the impression that these chickens can understand what we're saying…*

"I'll give you a thousand yen a viper," said Yumoto-san. "Take some vegetables too."

"Thank you. I appreciate it."

I didn't know what the market price for vipers was, but I'd heard of places that bought them for two thousand yen apiece. It wasn't like I had any use for them at home, though—at best, they'd end up as food for the chickens—so a thousand yen was still a good deal for me. And besides, Yumoto-san had been helping me out with all kinds of things.

"Shohei-kun, we've got a lot of beverages and canned food too. Feel free to take some with you."

"Thank you very much."

The Yumotos lived in an old-fashioned house with a large storage shed full of canned goods and other stuff. A year into his retirement (he'd been reemployed, so he was already well into retirement age), Yumoto-san had come to the realization that he was getting more than he could eat in midyear and year-end gifts. Their two sons lived in the city and came to visit about once a year, but…

"Our kids don't like it when we send them canned food,"

admitted Machiko-san, “so we can’t count on them to help us get rid of it.”

“Oh, really?”

Most of the stored food had been gifts, so the quality was higher than your usual canned fare, but the selection was hit-or-miss—not a lot of stuff you could eat straight from the can. I picked out a few, taking care to choose things that were within six months of the expiration date. I then thanked them and went on my way. They invited me to stay for lunch, but I didn’t want to impose any further, and I also had shopping to do.

Well, at least my shopping list is smaller now, what with all the food they gave me.

I intended to buy some meat at the village’s general store. If I wanted to go to a proper butcher shop, I’d have to go to the town past the mountains, which was a thirty- or forty-minute drive from the village. Pretty boring trip, but at least I had someone to keep me company.

“Yuma, did you eat your fill?”

Yuma cackled. She really liked the vegetable scraps Machiko-san gave us.

“Saves me the trouble of throwing the rest of the scraps into the fields. Thanks, Yuma.”

She cackled again in response.

The villagers were warm and welcoming, and they didn’t seem to mind that the chickens could understand human speech. Rather, they just found it convenient.

I felt truly indebted to the village. I took plastic, cans, bottles, and other recyclable trash to Yumoto-san’s house, and he disposed of it for me. Thankfully, garbage disposal was free here—otherwise I would have needed to take it myself to the town’s disposal site. I’d already been there a few times to dispose of oversized garbage.

There were three general stores in the village, and when I had time, I liked to check all three of them. I stopped by a candy store, where I saw a kid contemplating what to buy. It was nice to see kids roaming around the village.

“Big chicken!”

“Right?”

The boy pointed at Yuma. Because there weren’t many places

that let their chickens roam free, my chickens often attracted attention.

"Does she lay eggs?" the boy asked.

"She's still only about a month old, so not yet."

"No way! Look at how big she is!"

Yuma hid behind me, perhaps feeling annoyed. If this had been Pochi or Tama, they would've probably pecked the boy. *They shouldn't do that, of course.*

"Hi, Sho-chan. Your neighbor from the next mountain over was here earlier."

"Next-mountain neighbor, huh?"

Hearing that from the shopkeeper reminded me that every mountain had its owner. In the case of a neighbor next door, it was customary to go and say hello, but next *mountain* was a different story, so I'd been putting it off. With it getting warmer, maybe it was time to introduce myself. *I wonder if I should bring a present or something.*

I decided not to trust my own judgment too much, and that night, I called Yumoto-san. I didn't want to show up unannounced twice on the same day, and if I did, they'd probably tell me to stay around for dinner too. Not that I didn't want to have dinner with them—I was just being polite.

"Er...your neighbors...?" Uncharacteristically for him, Yumoto-san seemed a bit evasive. I heard him turn to his wife and say, "Hey, Shohei's asking about his neighbors," before handing the phone over to her.

"Hello, Shohei-kun?"

"Hello."

Come to think of it, I'd heard that the mountains next to mine had also changed owners recently. On the mountain to the east lived a young woman, and on the one to the west there was a flashy-looking guy—that was what I'd been told at least. And, like me, they were both living in the mountains, which was surprising.

"The young miss from the mountain to the east moved in just about two years ago, I think, and the one to the west came three years ago. Both mountains have wild animal warning signs, and it seems they both moved out here after unpleasant experiences in the city. I think maybe it would be best if you talk to them when they come to the village."

Basically, “don’t intrude on another’s mountain” was what she was probably trying to say. I assumed they both had their own circumstances.

“Wild animal warnings… Do they put up those signs on all the mountains?” I asked.

“Well, I’ve never seen them around here, though apparently there are bears, boars, and other such beasts out there. Shohei-kun—that’s a bit of a mouthful, so I’ll just call you Sho-chan, okay?—there might be bears on your *other* mountain. Be careful, will you, Sho-chan?”

I paused for a moment, then replied, “Okay.” I had indeed been warned about that when I’d bought the mountains.

When most people thought of bears, things like teddy bears came to mind, and the zoo was the only place folks would ever get to see a real one. Because of this, people had a tendency to forget that bears were, in fact, vicious beasts. I remembered reading in a book somewhere about the Sankebetsu brown bear incident, a series of bear attacks in Hokkaido. The sheer horror chilled me to the bone. If there were indeed bears on the mountain, I had to do something about it.

Maybe I should have gotten a hunting license before moving here.

As usual, I had underestimated life in the mountains.

After the call, I was feeling blue. The chickens gathered around me, as if trying to console me.

“Pochi, Tama, Yuma, you’re such good chickens… You know, it looks like there might be bears around here. You guys be careful.”

What do you even mean by “be careful”? I thought to myself as I gently petted their wings. Chickens liked taking dust and water baths, which actually got them pretty clean. Yuma even took baths with me. I was worried at first that the water might be too hot for her, but she seemed to enjoy it a lot, so I started inviting her to bathe with me every night. I did invite Pochi and Tama too, but they just gave me a “What the heck is he saying?” kinda look. *That hurt, guys. Maybe I traumatized them by bathing them when they were chicks.*

“Wild animals and neighbors… First, I have to do something about the wild animals.”

There were apparently a few villagers with hunting licenses, but with the aging population, they’d been getting scarcer every year.

Getting a license myself would cost money, and there was no guarantee I'd actually have a use for it. Plus, guns needed maintenance, and most hunting was actually done through trapping anyway. It was a far cry from the *bang-bang* type stuff I imagined.

Carnivores were indeed a problem, but so were prey animals such as deer. A lot of people associated deer with the city of Nara and its vast park where they roamed freely, but they often needed to be exterminated after finding their way to human civilization and causing damage to crops. Their usual habitats were in forests and meadows, but I'd heard there were deer around here too. They could also only be hunted during a specific season, and failure to follow this was punishable by law. *I'm not sure about the details.* All in all, they were quite a pain to deal with. Incidentally, deer-hunting season here was between November and mid-March. The hunting sign boards didn't list the months because the season length varied by location.

"I wish I had asked them more about pests…" I knew so little I didn't even know what I should ask. "And I hope nothing happens to my fields."

Life in the mountains was a fight for survival.

All of this weighed on my mind, but there was no point in mulling it over, so I decided to go to sleep.

2. Hunting with Chickens and Meeting My Neighbor

The next morning, after finishing their vegetable scraps, the three chickens zoomed away.

“They sure are full of energy, aren’t they?”

Life in the mountains demanded money and effort. You had to take care of the trees, check the river’s flow, and patrol the mountain looking for anything out of the ordinary. Illegal dumping had also become an issue, but there weren’t that many people around here to begin with, so garbage-related problems weren’t a big concern.

“No problems with the mountain, but I should probably look into where exactly my mountain starts and ends.”

I thought it was a good idea to discuss with the other mountain owners about who needs to take care of what parts.

***

When the chickens still hadn’t come back past noon, I got a bit worried.

“Wh-What’s this?!”

When I came back after a little patrolling, there was a boar down on the ground in front of my house and three chickens around it. *Which means…*

“Did you guys…do *this*?” I asked with a trembling voice, and Pochi clucked proudly.



The boar was still alive, but its legs were injured, so it couldn't move.

"Yumoto-san! Help!"

I had no idea what to do in this situation, so my first instinct was to call old Yumoto. He quickly picked up the call. *Good thing he was home.*

"What? You caught a boar? Hang on, I'm coming!"

Yumoto-san, always quick to act, got here in no time.

"Whoa, pretty big... How did you manage to catch it?" he asked with a puzzled look.

I just scratched my head. I didn't expect him to believe me, but claiming I caught it myself would have been even more unbelievable. I simply told him the truth.

"The chickens caught it?! How in the world?"

"Actually, I...don't know. I was out on patrol and came back to this... How *did* they do it?"

Upon hearing that, the three began swinging their reptilelike tails, mercilessly slamming them against the boar's legs. The boar gave an anguished cry. *What the actual hell is* with *these chickens?*

Yumoto-san nodded. "Uh... Yeah, that's quite something. So what are you gonna do with the boar?"

"I was hoping we could all eat it together. But I don't know how to butcher it or anything like that."

Yumoto-san seemed like he'd already expected that of me. "Well, you don't have the stuff you need to prepare it. With these leg injuries, it won't be moving for a while, so I'll ask someone who knows how to dress game animals. I'll also need some time to chill the meat. Drop by tomorrow night."

"Sorry for the trouble. Um...can I also ask you to invite the other villagers?"

"Sure—after all, this thing *is* pretty huge. I'll let them know. Hey, chickens."

The three of them looked at him. *They really are quite smart.*

"This is your quarry. You've earned the right to eat it. I'll be taking it home with me today, but I'll dress it and have it ready tomorrow, so you three come to my place with Shohei, got it?"

Pochi cackled in response. *I'm not sure how much they actually understand, but he's probably saying, "Okay."*

"Thank you."

“Oh, right. A boar this big means there must be a fair number of them on this mountain. They’re probably afraid of humans. You probably won’t run into them out on patrol, but if you accidentally corner them, they could ram into you and kill you, so try to be careful.”

“O-Okay…”

Wild animals are scary.

“I’m impressed you chickens can catch boars! Just leave the piglets alone.”

The chickens tilted their heads. They even did it in sync.

I couldn’t hold in my laughter. *This is adorable. I want a picture.*

“Boarlets look like small boars with stripes. Boars have this thing where if their children die, they just start breeding again, so you have to go after the adult boars only.”

Pochi responded again. *Can they really understand us?* I wondered. *Scary.*

“I see,” I replied to Yumoto-san.

“Yup, they can birth about four at a time. Mating season is twice a year. They stop breeding when they have boarlets to raise, but otherwise, they keep at it. They multiply faster than you can get rid of them.”

“I guess they must do a number on crops.”

“Sure do. We take measures against them, like building fences, but that takes money. There’re also machines that make noise to scare them away, but boars aren’t terribly dumb, so after a few years, they grow used to the sound. That’s why we’re always in need of people who can hunt them. Or *chickens*, in this case.”

This was probably his real motive for trying to talk with the chickens. Normally, the mere prospect of chatting with one would be too ridiculous to take seriously, but the Yumotos approached them earnestly. I was grateful for that.

“Well then, I’ll be taking it with me,” Yumoto-san said, and the two of us loaded the boar onto his truck. It was pretty heavy. *How many kilograms is it, I wonder.* I was already incredibly tired just from loading it.

Suddenly, Yuma ran over to the other side of the house, as if she’d found something. My chickens had great eyesight and hearing. She came back shortly with a viper in her beak.

Again, just how many snakes are *there on this mountain? I’m*

starting to fear for my life.

Yumoto-san welcomed her back excitedly. “Whoa there! Eh? I can have it?”

Pochi clucked.

Hey, you weren’t the one who caught it.

“I’ll go get a bottle,” I said.

Yumoto-san put the viper inside the bottle—a lot more skillfully than I could’ve, I should note—and went merrily on his way home.

“I’ll pay you for this tomorrow night,” he said on his way out.

“Oh, no, please don’t worry about it.” *You’re already preparing the boar, after all.*

“This is a different matter—don’t mix things up.”

“All right. Thank you. I’ll see you tomorrow night.”

It turned out people in the countryside were not as complacent as I’d thought. When someone gave you something, you were expected to return the favor, and failure to do so could result in being ostracized. *Or at least, that’s what I’ve heard. Guess it’s only natural.* Well, in any case, I wanted to avoid receiving unwanted presents if possible.

“Thanks, Yuma.”

I petted her wings, and she cuddled up to me. *My chickens are so cute.*

“Wild boar, huh? I guess tomorrow’s a boar hot pot night.”

“Hot pot!”

“Hot pot!”

“Hot pot!”

“Eh? What’s got you all riled up?”

They only spoke when I said “boar hot pot,” and weirdly enough, only after Yumoto-san had gone home. These are definitely not just regular chickens…

In any case, I was looking forward to tomorrow night.

“I wonder if my neighbors will show up too.”

I hoped this might be a chance to get to know my next-mountain neighbors.

The next morning, I was awakened by a rattling sound coming from my bedroom’s sliding door. I sat up in my futon, and in the dim morning light, I could confirm that the door was indeed rattling.

Could this be a poltergeist…? Cold sweat dripped down my back.

The rattling went on for a while. Then, as I was still recovering from the fright, a cheery voice greeted me from the other side of the door.

“Wake up!”

“Huh?!”

I bolted awake and opened the door to find Tama standing there. When she saw me, she went running down the hallway.

“Whew, it was just Tama…”

I breathed a sigh of relief, but I didn’t seem to be able to go back to sleep. *Why did she have to wake me up?* I washed my face and headed to the living room-slash-kitchen, where the three chickens were fidgeting about on the earthen floor.

“We’re not going to Yumoto-san’s until this evening. You know that, right?”

I could see the look of disappointment on their faces. *No, really.* I realized that this was probably the reason Tama had come to wake me up, and I felt a bit relieved. It would seem my chickens were quite the gluttons.

Later, at nightfall, I helped the chickens onto the truck and went down to the village before it got too dark. I stopped at the general store, thinking I should buy something to bring them. Suddenly, a voice called out to me.

“I hear you caught a wild boar!” exclaimed the shop owner. “That’s incredible!”

“O-Oh, it’s no big deal…”

Word sure does get around quickly in small villages like this. I wondered why she knew about it, but it turned out that the man who’d butchered the boar was a relative of the general store’s owner. Everyone seemed to be related in some way or another.

“I can’t go this time, but invite me next time you catch one!”

“I will.” *But if possible, I’m hoping there won’t be a next time.*

The Yumotos grew their own vegetables, and the store didn’t sell any vegetables they didn’t have at home. Also, since we were having meat for dinner, bringing more meat was off the table. That left me with few options for stuff to bring, and I ended up getting rice crackers.

By the time I got to their place, the sun had already long set.

“Good evening,” I called out.

“Hey, Shohei! What took you so long?”

“Sorry.”

Yumoto-san was already drinking. Besides him and his wife, there were a few other people from the neighborhood gathered, all adults.

“From what I hear, you were the one who caught it, right, Sano-kun?” asked one of the villagers. “That’s amazing! Hope you don’t mind us joining you tonight!”

“Oh, no, of course not. I’m always thankful for your kindness.”

“We’re not that kind, though!” Yumoto-san’s friends laughed heartily. I gave a reserved smile and scratched my head. They had made barbecue preparations in the backyard. *I should have come earlier and helped them set things up.*

“I’m sorry. I wish I could have helped more,” I told Machiko-san.

“Oh, please don’t mind. We’re having boar hot pot later—is that okay with you?”

“Of course. Thank you.”

It was dark, so I couldn’t quite tell, but it looked like all the meat was already precooked. I figured this was probably a necessary step to get rid of any parasites.

“Er, Pochi-chan, Tama-chan, and Yuma-chan, was it?”

“Yes.”

The three chickens had been following behind me like chicks following their mother.

“We picked out half of the innards for you. Would you like some?” Machiko-san asked them.

On the dot, Pochi replied to her with a cluck.

“Come over here, then.”

The innards were laid out on a stone in the corner of the garden, along with vegetable scraps and bones with some meat on them.

I thanked her once again.

“Oh, don’t worry about it. Let me know if you need anything else. I haven’t had boar in a while, so I’m looking forward to tonight’s dinner!”

She said not to worry, but I couldn’t just keep imposing on their kindness. *Maybe I could try looking for something you can only get in the mountains…*

Just then, someone else arrived at our gathering.

“Sorry I’m late…”

The tardy attendee was a young woman, and it seemed there was something else tagging along behind her. I was straining my eyes to try to get a better look when I felt Pochi tugging at my pants.

“Oops, sorry. Yeah, you guys can go ahead and eat.”

Pochi clucked. Not wanting to get dirty, I left them to eat their dinner and went back. They were probably going to make a mess, especially with the innards.

“Hi, Miya-chan!”

One of the old women, probably someone from the neighborhood, called out to the young woman.

“I’m sorry I wasn’t able to help…”

“Don’t fret, don’t fret. Life in the mountains is pretty tough, isn’t it? Right, Sano-kun?”

“Indeed,” I replied. It was hard to tell in the dark, but the woman that they called Miya appeared to be in her early twenties.

“Miya-chan, this is your neighbor Sano-kun. I hope you two get along!”

“Nice to meet you…” I greeted her a bit reluctantly.

“G-Good evening, nice to meet you…”

It was my first time meeting my neighbor from the mountain to the east of mine. She glanced down and took a slight step back. *Maybe she’s not good at talking to men*, I pondered, also stepping back a little.

“You know, Miya-chan, Sano-kun is raising chickens. Three of them, and they’re pretty big.” The old woman then turned to me and brightly said, “Sano-kun, she’s raising a big lizard.”

“Chickens… Then it’s probably best not to get too close…” Miya noted in a disappointed tone. As I asked myself what she might have meant by that, I took a look at what was behind her. “Big” was an understatement, to put it mildly. It felt more fitting to describe the thing as a crocodile or dinosaur rather than a lizard. Pretty frightening. She must have meant that it could eat the chickens.

“Uh… So, what does he eat?” I asked.

“I try to discipline him, but…he will eat just about anything…”

Even my chickens are no match for this, I thought to myself. I wanted to get along with my neighbors, but this could

unfortunately make it a bit difficult.

“Hey, Shohei! Come here!”



“Coming! Well then, I’ll talk to you later.”

“Okay…”

Yumoto-san was calling me, so I went to see him. He and the other men were already pretty drunk. There was an appetizing smell wafting in, which meant that the women had started grilling the meat. *Finally.*

“Shohei, this is Akimoto-chan. He’s the one who butchered your boar.”

“Oh! Thank you very much.”

I bowed to the man Yumoto-san had introduced as Akimoto. I regretted not bringing something for him as well.

“It’s no big deal, and besides, I don’t want to let my skills get rusty. Is it true that the chickens caught it?”

“Yes. My chickens are a bit, shall we say…aggressive.”

“Sounds like you can count on them. Let me know next time you catch one. I’ll be glad to help, provided you don’t catch it with a snare or something.”

Most hunting was done via trapping, but you needed a specific license to use traps, and there were also different kinds of snares and stuff.

“Well, not like there’s any problem if we eat it ourselves!”

“You got that right!”

The men burst into laughter.

“Thank you,” I said.

“Shohei’s chickens are great hunters!” exclaimed Yumoto-san. “They catch vipers too!”

“Must be nice. You can drink snake wine to your heart’s content!”

I heard making snake wine takes about three years though, so it would be a while before he could actually drink it.

“Give me some of those vipers too if you catch ’em, will ya? I’ll give you three thousand a snake.”

Yumoto-san shook his head. “Whoa, whoa! If you pay him that much, he’ll stop selling them to me!”

I wasn’t sure how much of their conversation was just banter and how much of it was serious. All I could do was smile wryly.

The women soon called out, “The meat is ready!”

“I’ll go get some for us,” I said, relieved at finally having an excuse to leave.

Despite boar meat having a moderate gamy smell, it was pretty tasty. It was said that the key to cooking tender boar meat was to let it simmer for a while, so that was probably why they had precooked it.

We finished off all the food and stayed for the night.

It was really delicious... *So much so that it's worth saying twice.*

The Yumotos' house, as tended to be the case with those old-fashioned houses, was pretty spacious. If someone called it a mansion, I wouldn't bat an eye. It had several large rooms, which probably made cleaning a huge chore. The men were up until late into the night drinking and making a racket. The single ones even stayed the night.

My neighbor also stayed the night, though I only found out the next morning.

I had a bit of a hangover from all the alcohol they'd made me drink, but I was a guest, so I didn't want to laze around in bed until late. I got up with some effort, went to the toilet, and then to the kitchen to get a glass of water. My neighbor, dressed in an apron, was talking to Machiko-san.

"Good morning... Can I have some water?" I asked.

I hadn't gotten a good look last night, but looking at her again in the daylight, the young woman had pretty features. She was probably about the same age as me, if not a bit younger. Her medium-length hair was dyed dark brown, and she had large eyes. I couldn't imagine why a young woman like her would buy a mountain in the middle of nowhere and go live on it, but I figured it was none of my business. She bowed in my direction, and I did the same.

"Sho-chan, good morning. Are you two acquainted already?"

"I only caught her first name..."

Obviously, I couldn't just go around calling her "Miya-chan." She seemed a bit taken aback.

"Ah! Sorry, my name is Miyako Katsuragi. Er, I live on..."

"The mountain east of mine, was it?" I asked. "I only moved here a month ago, so I'm still learning the ropes. I'd appreciate it if you could teach me about maintaining the mountain, what to look out for in each season, things like that. Even just general pointers would be a big help for me."

Machiko-san watched, amused, as we bowed at each other.

“Here’s your water, Sho-chan.”

“Thank you.”

I took a sip and felt the fresh well water soothe my uneasy stomach. *That reminds me, how are the chickens?*

“By the way, have you seen the chickens…?” I asked.

“They’re in the garden,” said Machiko-san. “I put out some vegetable scraps.”

“Thank you. I’ll go check on them.”

“Oh…” Katsuragi-san’s eyes went wide. “I’ll go too.”

Her giant lizard was also in the garden. *I sure do hope he didn’t eat the chickens or anything.*

Thankfully, nothing of the sort had happened. The lizard was resting in the shade. Getting a good look at him now, I thought what he resembled the most was a European dragon. *I wonder where she got him from. Or did she find him in the mountains? Is it a Komodo dragon, maybe?*

My chickens were in the corner, apparently catching and eating bugs.

“Heeey, Pochi, Tama, Yuma.”

When I called out to them, Yuma came trotting over. She tilted her head, as if to say, *What is it?*

This gesture’s kind of cute. I petted her wings.

Is it just me, or are they growing again? Could it be because of the boar innards and other stuff they ate yesterday…? Yeah, right—there’s no way that’d make them grow in the span of only a day.

Katsuragi-san seemed fascinated as she observed the chickens from a distance.

“Er… Sorry for intruding, but those tails…”

Naturally, some people do *notice.*

“Right? They look nothing like regular chicken tails. If you ask me, they look more like something you’d see on a reptile…”

“They say birds are descended from dinosaurs. Maybe it could be some kind of atavism?” Katsuragi-san remarked, cocking her head. She did have a point. They’d evolved from dinosaurs, after all.

“That could be it. Uh, Katsuragi-san, what about your…that…”

“Ah, I’m sorry. His name is Tatsuki. He’s quite big for a lizard, isn’t he? I got him two years ago at a festival stall…”

Another one from that stall, huh? I bet at the time, it just looked like

a small, ordinary lizard.

"I see. Actually, I also got my chickens at one of those stalls. They were selling dyed chicks."

"That's strange, isn't it?"

"Indeed."

With some distance between us, we looked at each other and laughed.

"He looks more like a dragon than a lizard, doesn't he?" I commented, and upon hearing this, the large lizard opened his half-closed eyes, as if to agree with me. *So you really are a dragon after all?*

"A dragon! That would be lovely. Tatsuki, a dragon..."

Katsuragi-san seemed really happy about this for some reason. *I mean, I realize that it sounds much cooler to say you're raising a dragon instead of a lizard, but still...*

"If we think of it that way, maybe Sano-san's chickens are actually cockatrices!"

"Cockatrices..."

Those mythical beasts that look like giant chickens and can petrify other creatures with their gazes? I'm not sure what to think of that.

"Ah, I'm sorry. You see, I'm a big fantasy fan..." she said.

"Oh, no, I was just thinking they do kind of look like cockatrices now that you mention it. Their tails are lizard-like, and it looks like they're still not done growing either..."

There was plenty of food for them in the mountains. I also got the impression that they were only eating animals that could harm our homestead. After all, they didn't eat the worms in the fields. And right now they were eating locusts.

"What do you usually feed Tatsuki?" I asked.

Katsuragi-san averted her gaze when I asked her that. "Um... He basically eats anything. That's why, uh, I'm surprised he didn't attack your chickens," she remarked uncomfortably.

"I don't mean to be rude, but does that mean he usually attacks other animals?"

"I've seen him catching and eating large birds..."

A true wild animal.

"By the way, I have a lot of vipers around my house—is it the same on your mountain?"

"Well... He just eats them all..."

Dragons are scary.

"What about boars, like the one from yesterday?"

"I've only seen one so far, but it ran away before Tatsuki could attack it. My mountain's not too steep, so I see a lot of deer. He eats those too."

Boy, dragons are really *scary.*

"That's...quite something."

"Next time Tatsuki catches one, I'll bring it here. I'd like to eat it together with everyone."

When Katsuragi-san said that, her dragon once again opened his eyes and seemed to nod in agreement. *So it's not just my chickens that can understand human language. What is up with these animals?*

Katsuragi-san's mountain was a bit taller than mine, but it had one very steep part, and the rest was mostly gentler slopes. Her house was on the mountainside, just like mine. We exchanged contact info and went our separate ways.

Meeting her piqued my curiosity about my other neighbor, the one who lived to the west.

"Yumoto-san, the mountain west of mine..."

"Hm... There's a guy living there, I think? I don't see him too often. I hear he's always driving a minitruck with a long-haired woman in the passenger seat."

Ugh, a normie.

"I see..."

I didn't want to see any couples right now.

However, fate works in mysterious ways, and it was only a matter of a few days before I ended up meeting my other neighbor.

3. Finding Out What True Darkness Looks Like and Meeting My Other Neighbor

The morning after our boar extravaganza, I and the others who'd stayed the night helped clean up. The women had already taken care of the dishes and other smaller things last night, leaving us to lug heavy stuff around and clean the wide garden. I mostly worked on the garden, and I made sure to wash the stone the chickens had eaten on.

I really can't thank the Yumotos enough for yesterday.

Incidentally, the reason Katsuragi-san—who also lives in the mountains—had stayed the night was because she'd been with an acquaintance yesterday, but that woman's husband was afraid of reptiles, so they hadn't been able to stay at her place. *At that size, I can see why you'd be scared, even if you're okay with reptiles.*

The next few days passed by without anything noteworthy happening.

The grass was growing nonstop as usual, and the chickens were running around the mountain. As for me, I had plenty on my plate, from picking weeds near the fields to mowing the grass in overgrown areas. *I've heard too much grass is bad for the soil.* I also needed to check the riverbank and prune trees where needed.

The mountain forest around here was all-natural and rich in vegetation—I'd heard this was the case for almost all of the mountains north of the village. I spent most of my free time leafing through books about wild mountain plants and flowers—though to be honest, I still had trouble identifying them—and reading encyclopedias to find out more about birds, insects, and reptiles. *Thank god for the internet.*

There was always at least one chicken following me around too. These trusty bodyguards constantly protected me when we ran into vipers and such. *There's no way they're regular chickens, right? I'm really glad I got them at the festival that day.*

There was also a cemetery some way up into the mountain. (*More on that later.*) I thought it'd be a good idea to do some maintenance on it, so I drove the truck up there. Yuma was with

me today. As soon as she got out of the truck, she started pecking at the ground.

Near the back of the cemetery, I found some blossoming yae-zakura trees, also known as double cherry blossom trees. I didn't know much about flowers; I hadn't even known what those trees were the first time I'd seen them. Back when I was a kid, my sister had actually told me what they were called, and now that I was witnessing them in full bloom, even *I* could tell they were yae-zakura.

"Eh? Isn't it almost May already?" I asked.

Compared to Yoshino cherries, which were the most common type of cherry tree, the blooming season for yae-zakura was a bit later. Even so, I thought it was probably unusual to see them in bloom this late into April. *I guess because they're in the mountains...?* I looked it up later, and apparently, they bloom around May.

"That reminds me, I didn't go flower viewing this year..."

Usually, I'd go flower viewing around late March or early April, but it'd still been too cold back then to bother.

I hadn't heard anything about it from the Yumotos either, so maybe there wasn't much of a flower-viewing tradition around these parts. *Maybe they're too busy with farmwork to go stare at some flowers.*

After doing some cleaning in the cemetery, I went home and started preparations to go flower viewing by myself.

Some tea, beer, pickled vegetables, rice crackers... I also had some cooked rice at home, though it wasn't freshly prepared, and I made a few onigiri. *No dango...*

I got some leafy greens for Yuma and a plastic sheet to sit on before heading back up to the cemetery.

Yuma tilted her head. She was probably confused about why we were going back.

"Yuma, let's go flower viewing."

"Flower?" she repeated.

I set a can of beer and an onigiri on one of the larger graves as an offering—the rest I kept for myself. I gave Yuma some of the vegetables; after eating them, she exclaimed, "Flower!"

"Yuma?"

"Flower!"

She inched closer to me.

Wait, does she think these vegetables are the "flowers" I'm talking about?

"Yuma, I meant those flowers over there," I told her, pointing at the yae-zakura. "We're eating and drinking while enjoying the view."

She tilted her neck again, then looked back at me and repeated, "Flower!"

Ha ha, now you've got it.

"Here, eat up."

I gave her the rest of the vegetables little by little. There wasn't anyone nearby, but I decided not to drink the beer. I opened the bottle of tea instead and started eating the pickles and crackers. *Seeing cherry blossoms always makes it feel like spring, even if they're not Yoshino cherries.* I spent a while appreciating the blossoms overhead.

Once I'd had my fill, I took the beer and onigiri from the grave and prepared to leave.

"I hope you won't mind if I come again next year to see the flowers," I said, clasping my hands before the grave. Afterward, I headed home.

Next time, I'd like to take Pochi and Tama too.

Later that night, as I opened the beer can I'd taken from the grave, I suddenly thought, *Oh, Golden Week starts tomorrow, huh?*

I didn't go to a formal job anymore. I was starting to lose track of dates and even days of the week.

Speaking of which, according to Machiko-san, this area got a few visitors during the holidays. People who came to visit family already knew that the mountains were private property, so they didn't cause much trouble. The problem was tourists. *I do wonder why someone would want to come here on holiday...* But anyway, she said that occasionally, people barged into the mountains, camped, and went home without cleaning up after themselves. Sometimes they'd also pick wild plants and bamboo sprouts without permission. I'd already told the Yumotos and other acquaintances that they were free to come and pick stuff growing on my mountain, but I didn't want any strangers coming here.

My mountain had paved roads, so you could drive a car from my house a ways up—to about where the cemetery was. I did

have a wire fence down at the foot of the mountain, which I kept locked (Yumoto had a spare key), but they warned me about people who like to break in. *How about you stay away from people's mountains and just buy your own?*

So yeah… Being a mountain owner wasn't easy.

"Well, I did check the signboards just to make sure."

There were some signboards around. "Private Land—No Entry," "Beware of Vipers," "Beware of Wild Boars," "Beware of Bears," and so on. They'd been placed where people who might try going onto the mountain would see them. These warnings were true too—the chickens *did* catch vipers often, and just the other day, they'd caught a boar. I wasn't so sure about the bears, but I checked the distribution of bears in Japan, and we definitely had them around here. *Boy, I really,* really *hope I never run into any.*

I had other signboards too, like "No Illegal Dumping! Violators will be prosecuted." I'd bought that one from the village office, and I hoped it would prevent any trash-related troubles. There were municipalities that gave these signs away for free, but sadly, the village down there wasn't that well-off.

"Starting tomorrow, we're going to be patrolling the foot of the mountain for a while."

"Patrolling!"

"Patrolling!"

"Patrolling!"

The three chickens sang in unison.

Thanks, guys.

I'd already showered and was thinking I might as well go to bed soon, but then the chickens suddenly raised their heads and ran off to the front door.

"Huh? What is it?"

This had never happened before, so I hurried after them. They were standing in front of the door, and they looked back at me. *Do they want to go outside?*

"Hang on a sec."

I quickly changed, put on a jacket, grabbed a flashlight, and went outside with them. Pochi bolted down the mountain at a tremendous speed. Tama came behind me, pushing me to run faster as we went toward the foot of the mountain.

"Hey, Tama! That hurts!" *Stop pecking!*

I ran along the road, barely able to see in front of me, because Tama kept pecking me from behind. It was like she was saying, *You're the owner! You gotta come with us!*

It's a good thing the road is paved. Otherwise, I could easily trip and get badly hurt, I thought. I could see the road, albeit just barely, thanks to my strong flashlight and Yuma in front of me. Everything else around us was pitch-black. My parents lived in a town, but it was pretty dark around their place too—there was, however, light from streetlights, vending machines, and other buildings. Even then, it was still pretty scary at night, but that was nothing compared to the darkness in the mountains. I realized just how dangerous it was to not have any streetlights.

I definitely can't drive around here at night relying on nothing but the truck's headlights. Though nowadays, a lot of cars have really powerful LED headlights, so it's not as dangerous as it used to be. Uh, anyway...

I ran after Yuma, with Tama following my footsteps and pecking me, until we got near the foot of the mountain. Just when Yuma had finally stopped running, I heard the sound of something heavy being dragged, then a sharp, chain-like sound, and finally, the sound of wings flapping.

Eeeh? What's going on?

I was about to point my flashlight in the direction the sound had come from to see what was going on, but then I heard a low-pitched voice.

"Rin! Stop it already! We're in someone else's home!"

"Huh...?" I murmured.

That was a man's voice—someone was nearby. I called out to him.

"Excuse me! Is anyone there?!"

"Jeez..."

I could hear him saying something, but I couldn't quite make it out. Pochi cried out loudly and came to me with his feathers standing on end.

"Pochi! What happened?"

Unlike me and the other two chickens, Pochi hadn't used the road—he'd come running straight down the mountain, so it was no wonder he was all disheveled. That was also why he'd gotten here way before me.

Suddenly, from the direction Pochi had come, a brown-haired man emerged from the darkness.

"I'm sorry. Do you live on Brook Mountain?" he asked.

What's a guy like him doing in the mountains? He was a dashing man with a deep voice. *This guy's got me beat in every aspect... I mean, not that we're competing, but still.*

"Yes, I'm Sano, the owner of Brook Mountain." I made sure to let him know it was *my* mountain, which made me feel kind of pathetic.

"I'm sorry to disturb you. My name is Aikawa. I'm your neighbor from West Mountain."

I was dumbfounded. I'd ended up meeting my western neighbor in a very unexpected manner. Immediately, I became nervous.

"N-Nice to meet you... Sorry, I should have gone to greet you when I moved in..."

"Nice to meet you too. Oh, no, please don't mind. My mountain *is* pretty steep, after all..."

This is a pretty bizarre situation, isn't it? Greeting each other in the dark, illuminated only by our flashlights. He actually seems like an okay dude. Not that I had any preconceived notions just because he's a handsome normie. Nope, definitely not.

I was impressed that even in the dark, I could still tell he was good-looking. His hair was medium-long. I'd heard from the villagers that he was a "flashy guy," and my first impression didn't contradict that.

"Uh, so what are you doing here this late at night?" I asked.

It wasn't *that* late, strictly speaking, but it was already pitch-black outside. Compared to my family's place, it felt like nights here came earlier.

"Er... How should I put this?"

Aikawa-san seemed to be having difficulty finding the right words. *Maybe it's some reason that's hard to talk about.*

Then my eyes caught something that shook me to my core.

I shrieked and fell on my rear. *Th-There's something behind him with long hair...*

After seeing my shock, Aikawa-san looked over his shoulder. "Ah... Uh, yeah, I can see why you'd be scared."



So he can see it too. Why is he so unfazed? What now? Is this one of those haunted samurai settlements or something like that? I didn't hear anything about this! Yumoto-saaan! You have some explaining to do!

I had a million things to say, but I'd lost my voice from the shock. If I hadn't had Pochi and Yuma standing in front of me and Yuma right next to me, I might have broken down and cried. *What, you think I'm pathetic? Oh, just leave me alone.*

"Rin."

I heard that heavy dragging sound again. Aikawa-san walked up to the long-haired thing and gently ran his hand through its hair, revealing the beautiful, fair-skinned face of a woman.

What...?

"I'm sorry. Looks like Rin startled you," Aikawa-san said with a bitter laugh. The woman bowed. You could clearly tell that she was very pretty, but for some reason, my first impression of her had been that she looked sort of like a snake. Obviously, I didn't want to be rude, so I didn't say anything of the sort.

"N-No problem..."

With much effort, I was able to get up and stand on my feet. *I did it! I stood up! Heidi, are you seeing this? (Old-school reference for you. I watched it on streaming—I'm not old enough to have seen it on TV.) In any case, why is a woman from the neighboring mountain wandering around here late at night?*

It dawned on me that maybe this was one of those lovers' quarrels. *Goddamn normies.*

"Well then, uh, if that's all, then I'll be on my way..."

I can't believe I ran all the way down here for nothing.

"I'm really sorry for the disturbance. Will you be home tomorrow?"

I nodded. "Yeah."

"I'll pay you a visit tomorrow to introduce myself properly. Where's my phone...?"

It seemed he had come out in a hurry and left it home. *Me too, actually. What if something happened and we needed to call for help? Yikes.*

"I forgot mine too..."

We both let out a strained laugh.

"I'll be coming tomorrow afternoon, then—is that okay?"

“Oh, yeah…”

He soon departed. Aikawa-san had already disappeared into the night. I couldn’t hear the heavy dragging sound anymore.

He’s pretty polite. But I wonder why he went back into the mountain instead of following the road. Is it faster that way? Isn’t it dangerous in the dark, though?

“What was all that about?”

“About.”

“About.”

“About.”

I laughed at the chickens repeating after me. *It’s really a good thing they’re with me.*

When I got home, I thought the same thing: *It’s really a good thing they’re with me. This climb is one of the toughest parts of living on a mountain, and it’d be even worse if I were alone.* The mountain was chilly, but I was drenched in sweat.

“Oh jeez, I’d already showered and everything…”

I didn’t want to go to bed sweaty. At the front door, the chickens began to peck at me. I always got leaves, dirt, bugs, and things like that on my clothes after walking around in the mountains, and some of it was hard to spot on myself. Sometimes, I’d see mosquitoes at home and wonder how they’d gotten inside, only for it to turn out I had brought them with me when I’d walked in. That was why I always shook out my clothes before going inside, but today I was too tired to do it, so I ended up getting pecked here and there. Since the chickens ate the bugs, it kind of felt like they were grooming me.

Thanks.

The bathwater had already gone cold, and I just wanted to wipe off the sweat, so I didn’t bother running the bath. *Gas isn’t free, after all.* Yuma had pecked at my hair—it was probably clean. Or at least, that was what I told myself.

“Man, I’m beat…” I muttered as I stroked Pochi’s disheveled feathers.

“Beat.”

“Beat.”

“Beat.”

I laughed. “What, you guys too?”

As I drifted to sleep, I reflected on my encounter with my neighbor. *That Aikawa guy... I thought I'd seen him somewhere, and I just figured it out. He looks like that idol, Kamenashi-something. Well, they just kind of have the same vibe. If you put them next to each other, they probably look pretty different. Not like that's ever gonna happen, though. And maybe I just got that impression because it was dark.*

The next morning, I woke up a little later than usual; I was more tired than I'd thought, and I seemed to have some muscle pain in my calves.

"Ouch..."

This had happened pretty often back when I'd first moved here. After a while, I'd grown used to my surroundings, and I'd forgotten what that felt like, but running all the way down there last night had taken a toll on my body.

"What to do today...?"

I could take the day off, but that came with a price—now that it was warmer, the vegetation grew at a faster pace. Since it was Golden Week, I decided to go patrol the foot of the mountain, and I ate the rest of yesterday's food.

Now then, let's get started.

I took the chickens with me, drove down, and stepped outside the wire fence. This was still part of the mountain, i.e., my property.

There was a crossroad a bit further down. The road to the right led to Aikawa-san's mountain; if you went down the left one, after a while, you'd see a bridge to your right, beyond which was the village. If you didn't cross the bridge and kept walking, you'd reach another bridge and another crossroad. Left at that junction led to Katsuragi-san's mountain. If you went straight, you'd see a bridge to your right that also led to the village. If you didn't cross it and kept going straight, you'd start climbing toward the mountain east of Katsuragi-san's. That mountain also had an owner, but they weren't living there, apparently.

Sorry, I'm pretty bad at explanations.

If you took the road to the west of the village—or took the one to the south that went between the mountains—then down again, you'd reach a town. The road to the east plunged deep into the mountains. The southern road forked to the east, where there was

another small village. I heard there were a few people living even deeper in the mountains. Before coming here, I probably would've thought, *Why would anyone choose to live in such an inhospitable place?* But the fact of the matter was, if you cleared the land and planted crops, you'd have food.

Back when people had little means to learn about what went on outside their local communities, there were plenty of people who spent their entire lives without ever leaving their villages. Nowadays, we might think, *What did they do when they got sick?* but the people who settled these villages deep in the mountains couldn't afford to think of anything besides getting enough food. Some people back in the day fled to the mountains because land taxes were too high, and there was also a time when you could just keep the land if you cultivated it. However, in the information society, there was a strong tendency for young people to move to cities, either for work or just because they were attracted by a more convenient lifestyle. This village had an elementary and middle school, but not a high school; there was only one medical clinic, and due to the irregular terrain, it was hard to get around if you didn't have a car.

Pochi and Tama were nice enough to lead the way on our patrol around the foot of the mountain.

Meanwhile, I was checking the roadside with Yuma for illegally dumped trash and such. Suddenly, I thought back to last night.

Wait a minute, can chickens see well in the dark? I've heard most birds can actually see decently at night, but what about chickens?

"Hey, Yuma... Can you see in the dark?"

Yuma poked me lightly, as if to say yes. Hens didn't cluck as much, so it was hard to tell. *They* do *repeat after me like parrots, though it doesn't seem they can actually understand the nuances of what people are saying.*

"So chickens have night vision, huh?"

I looked it up later, and it turned out that chickens were actually night-blind, though there was conflicting information on the subject.

Then these really are unusual chickens...

I picked up litter along the way and put it all in a plastic bag. *Technically, I* should *separate the burnable stuff, but just look at how dirty this plastic bottle is... Just burn it all.*

“There’s more trash than I thought.”

“Thought!” Yuma replied, maybe because there was no one around.

Come on, plastic is not biodegradable, so throw it away properly. There’re some kinds that are*, but this is just a regular plastic bottle. Oh, I see a cigarette butt there. Give me a break.* Thankfully, there wasn’t any trash big enough to qualify as illegal dumping.

I loaded the trash I had picked up onto the bed of the truck, checked the signboards again, confirmed that there was no one around, and went home. Aikawa-san was supposed to come over today, so I left the fence unlocked. I took care to not make it obvious at a glance that it was unsecured so that no one I didn’t know would enter.

For lunch, I had rice with stir-fried meat and vegetables. The vegetables were from Yumoto-san. I’d bought the rice myself, and the meat was just frozen stuff they sold at the general store. I could get fresh meat if I went to the town’s supermarket, but I didn’t care that much.

A meal after a hard day’s work tastes amazing. I wonder if it’s because of the air here. The chickens ate up the vegetable scraps I’d thrown away when cooking, then went outside to look for more food. *Sorry for not feeding you well enough.*

After lunch, I tended to the crops. The chickens liked to eat grasshoppers, moth larvae, and other things that were harmful to crops, which saved me a lot of work. They were omnivores—they also ate boar innards and various other stuff. *That was a rather…*shocking *sight, to put it lightly.*

“Oh yeah, I wonder if they’ll also lay eggs.”

I was thinking I might try searching about that later when I heard the sound of a car. *That must be Aikawa-san.*

“We’ve got a visitor.”

Pochi went to greet him. It was indeed Aikawa-san.

“Sorry for being late,” he said.

I got a good look at him in the daylight, and he was, in fact, a handsome guy. *Yup, he definitely reminds me of that one idol.* It looked like his brown hair was natural. *I wish I looked good in work clothes too.*

I had him park his truck next to mine. The long-haired woman was in the passenger seat, but she showed no signs of getting out

of the truck.

"Uh, your girlfriend...?"

"Please don't mind her—she's just really shy around strangers," he said with an awkward smile. *She's shy around strangers, but she still wanted to come with him, huh? Goddamn normies.*

For some reason, Pochi was clucking angrily at his truck. *This is pretty unusual for him. I wonder what's up?*

"Pochi, give it a rest. What happened?" I asked.

Aikawa-san waved it off. "Oh, don't worry about it. This always happens. That aside, your chickens are pretty clever, aren't they?"

Tama raised her head proudly. *Yeah, as usual, they seem to understand what we're saying.*

"Well then, please come in."

"Thank you."

Aikawa-san had even brought me a gift. *Handsome, polite,* and *sociable? He's really got me beat at everything. I mean, again, not that we're competing.*

I was still wondering what was up with his girlfriend, but either way, I made us tea and got us some rice crackers. Aikawa-san's present was a piece of ham—the expensive kind that people give as midyear or year-end gifts.

"Wow, isn't this really expensive? Can I really have it?" I asked.

"I got a bunch from a farmer acquaintance of mine. Please don't worry about it."

"Thank you!"

I promptly put the ham in the fridge with a large grin on my face. The people around here tended to exchange midyear and year-end gifts, so the farmers' fridges were always chock-full, especially older people who had a tendency to stock up on everything. *Probably because they've been through times of serious scarcity. But still, canned goods more than two years past the expiration date are a bit too much, I think. Of course, this is just my opinion. You can probably still eat them, but do it at your own peril.*

Aikawa-san was busily looking around. "Did you have the kitchen renovated?" he asked.

"Er...?" I cocked my head, not really understanding what he meant.

Aikawa-san elaborated, probably sensing I wasn't following. "There were also people living on my mountain before me, and

now I'm living in one of the old houses that was left behind. It had an earthen-floor kitchen with one of those old cooking stoves. I thought it would be way too much of a hassle to use that kitchen, so I had it renovated."

Oh, I see. True—older houses usually have earthen-floor kitchens.

"It was already like this when I moved in," I explained. After all, the old village head had been coming here until recently.

"Oh, that's nice."

"Yeah, I got lucky."

On the other hand, maybe because the village head used to live here, the house was a bit *too* big, with three large bedrooms. I didn't have that much stuff, so for now I just swept the empty rooms regularly.

Aikawa-san straightened his posture, and I did the same.

"I'm sorry about last night," he said.

"Oh, no, it's all right…"

Still, what's up with my chickens? Did they sense the presence of an invader or something? Maybe Katsuragi-san was right and they really are *cockatrices…? But I think cockatrices have claws on their wings…*

"I also wanted to ask about your chickens… Were they already on the mountain when you came here?"

Of course he's curious about them. I gave a wry smile. "No, I bought them at a festival stall shortly after I moved here. They were still chicks."

"Oh, those dyed ones? You don't see many of them these days."

"That's right. The dye has already worn off, though."

Aikawa-san's expression became stern. "By the way… Have you met Katsuragi-san already?"

"Yes, we met for the first time just the other day…"

I don't see what Katsuragi-san has to do with this. Wait! Don't tell me he's after Katsuragi-san? Well, not that it's any of my concern, I guess…

"So I take it you've also seen Katsuragi-san's, uh, *pet*?"

For some reason, the topic had shifted to Katsuragi-san's lizard. *I think he might be a bit too big to call a pet, no?*

"Yes, that big lizard, right? I thought he looked kind of like a dragon."

Aikawa-san nodded. "Right? I was surprised too. I heard she also got him from a stall at the village festival."

“Oh yeah, I heard the same.”

Aikawa-san’s information was secondhand, though. *Does Aikawa-san also have a pet?* I decided to ask.

“What about you, Aikawa-san?”

“Well… I moved here three years ago, and the first time I went to the village festival, I got two small snakes.”

“I see… Three years ago, it was snakes, huh?”

“Yes, I also made sure they weren’t venomous before buying them…”

Aikawa-san then sighed.

“Er… Is something the matter?” I asked.

There are snakes that grow to enormous sizes, like pythons and anacondas. Is that what happened? Why in the world were they selling those? Last thing you’d want is to end up getting eaten by the snake you raised.

“You see… They turned out to be pretty big ones…”

“Pythons?”

“Probably close, but I really have no idea why or how they ended up like that.”

“Hmm…”

He seemed troubled, but I’d need to see the snakes myself to offer advice. Aikawa-san gazed at Yuma, who was standing beside me.

“Sano-san, your chickens are pretty big too, aren’t they?”

“Yes, I measured them the other day, and they’re about half a meter tall…”

“And their tails aren’t feathered either.”

“Yeah, they look sort of reptilian. Katsuragi-san even compared them to cockatrices…”

“That’s it!”

“Huh?”

Aikawa-san stared at me with wide eyes. *What is it?*

“I don’t know why, but don’t you get the impression that the animals sold at this village’s festival stalls resemble mythological creatures?”

“What?” I asked. *Is he a fantasy nut too? Weirdo.* “Well… It might just be a mutation…”

I thought about it. *Three chickens that all have tails like that…? But maybe they gathered chicks with the same mutation and sold them…*

“That doesn’t explain my snakes…” he pointed out.

I wondered what his snakes were like. *Some Yamata no Orochi-type multiheaded thing? Heh, right. But in that case, he should’ve noticed it when he bought them, no? Did it grow another head?*

“Uh, do they have more than one head or something like that?” I asked.

As it turns out, the truth was stranger than anything I could imagine.

“Sano-san, you saw her yesterday, didn’t you?”

“Who?”

“Long hair and fair skin…”

“Ah…”

I thought back to what I’d seen yesterday and shuddered. It’d been a frightening scene, even after I’d learned that she wasn’t a ghost.

“She was also in the passenger seat today.”

“Wh-What?”

That’s his girlfriend from yesterday, right? I could still hear Pochi clucking at her outside.

Wait… No way…

“You’re joking, r-right?” I stammered. I prayed he was just trying to play a prank on me. I started breaking into a cold sweat.

“Let me introduce her to you,” Aikawa-san said, standing up. I reluctantly stood from my seat too.

It was still daytime, but I could feel an unpleasant cold sweat building on my back. *What in the world is happening around here?*

Walking out the front door had never felt this terrifying. We stepped outside and headed toward the trucks. Pochi was still clucking furiously at Aikawa-san’s truck.

Seriously? Is he for real?

“Ouch!”

My legs were shaking. Tama poked me sharply, as if telling me to get my act together. I just had to laugh. *Sorry for being such an unreliable owner.* I took a look at Aikawa-san, and he also had a nervous expression on his face.

Aikawa-san walked over to the passenger seat and called out to her. “Rin.”

The truck’s windows were down, and you could see the woman inside raise her head to get a look at what was happening outside.

“I told Sano-san about you. These are his chickens, so don’t attack them, okay?”

There was a long pause, and then she said, “Okay,” in a droning voice.

The door opened…

“Huh?!”

I’d already gotten the gist of it from our conversation earlier, but nothing could have prepared me for what I was seeing. I felt myself getting dizzy. *This has got to be a dream, right? Or some sort of practical joke?*

Pochi sharply jumped away from the truck and stood in front of me.

“This is one of my snakes,” explained Aikawa-san. “As you can see, it’s a female. The other one is at home.”

“O-Oh, i-is that so…?”

My voice was trembling, my mouth all dried up. Her face was that of a beautiful woman, with long black hair and fair skin. She was wearing a long-sleeve graphic T-shirt. But under that…

The woman got out of the truck in one smooth motion and went over to Aikawa-san’s side. Then she coiled herself around him.

“Rin, you’re heavy.”

“Annoying bird.”

She was expressionless and spoke in a monotone voice, but she seemed to be annoyed with my chickens.

“Ah… Pochi, she’s with Aikawa-san. Stop it, will you? It’s okay.”

Pochi clucked in response, but he remained in front of me and wouldn’t budge. He was clearly wary of Rin-san. *I mean, you can’t blame him—just look at the size of this snake…*

“So, uh… It was just a regular snake when you bought it, right?”

“That’s right. The other one’s a male, and it just looks like a huge snake, but Rin… One morning I woke up and she looked like this.”

He said the male “looks like” a huge snake… What does he mean by that? It was a bit weird talking out here, so I suggested we go back inside. However, Rin soon interrupted.

“Eat bugs.”

“Ah… Sorry, is it okay if Rin eats some of the bugs around here?” asked Aikawa-san.

The fact that he's asking for permission probably means she eats a lot. Actually, what do snakes usually eat?

I glanced at the chickens. They clucked at me like they were giving their permission.

"Seems it's all right... Oh, but if you could try to only eat pests..."

Is she able to tell which bugs are harmful to crops? I can't tell at all, so I just rely on the internet.

"Yes, no problem. I can hear the sound of water—is there a river running nearby?"

"Yeah, there is."

"She eats crayfish, if there are any."

"She eats invasive species too?! That's great."

I don't know much about this stuff, but it looks like her eating habits don't disrupt the ecosystem much.

"By the way, do snakes prey on other snakes too?" I remembered we had a lot of vipers around the house, so I figured I might as well ask.

"They do eat snakes smaller than them, yeah. Well...I doubt there are any snakes *bigger* than mine around here."

"Y-Yeah, I guess..."

Snakes this big in every corner? That's straight out of a horror movie.

"There're a lot of vipers around here, you see," I clarified.

"Should I have Rin take care of them?"

"Oh, it's okay—the chickens eat them."

He said, "take care of them." This is starting to sound like some sort of yakuza conversation.

"That's good to hear, then. Viper bites can be dangerous." Aikawa-san seemed relieved.

He's a nice guy.

I remembered something else I wanted to ask him. "Aikawa-san, do you have wild boars and bears on your mountain?"

"I've never run into a bear before. I think I've seen Rin and Ten...catch and...eat boars..."

Aikawa-san gazed into the distance. *That must have been quite a sight. Did they swallow it whole, or...?* I shuddered at the thought.

"Th-The other day, the chickens caught a boar..."

"Yes, I heard about it down at the village. You held a boar banquet for the villagers? Maybe I'll try doing that too."

“I’m sure everyone would be happy to join.”

The fact he’d said it so nonchalantly meant he was probably running into boars relatively often. *They’re a big environmental problem, so catching and eating them is killing two birds with one stone.*

“Are there that many boars around here?” I asked.

He nodded. “This area has a lot of mountains, and the ones on this side are all natural mountain forests rich in vegetation. It’s probably the perfect habitat for them.”

“I’ve heard there’re fewer and fewer hunters every year.”

“Yeah,” he replied. “Oh, speaking of which, I do have a hunting license.”

“Eh?! Really? So you have a hunting rifle and all that?”

“I do. If you ever need to hunt something, just let me know.”

“That’s awesome!”

I was pretty excited to learn Aikawa-san had a hunting license. *I thought he was around the same age as me, but is he actually older?*

We were chatting near the fields when Yuma, who was standing next to me like a bodyguard, suddenly moved.

“Whoa! What is it, a viper?”

Yuma raised her head proudly—as usual, with a viper in her beak.

“Thanks, Yuma. Can I have that?” I turned to Aikawa-san. “Excuse me for a moment, will you?” I headed inside to get an empty plastic bottle. With Yuma’s help, I managed to squeeze the viper inside. *This is always nerve-racking.*

“Very impressive!” Aikawa-san exclaimed as I was opening a hole in the bottle.

“Yumoto-san from the village taught me. This is going to give me a heart attack someday…”

“Doubt it—you seem pretty skilled. What are you gonna do with the snake?”

“I’m giving it to Yumoto-san. He said he wants to make snake wine with them.”

“Oh… That’s a great use, yeah.”

We chatted the afternoon away—Aikawa-san must have been craving a conversation partner. As the afternoon waned, we decided I’d be visiting his mountain after Golden Week, and I saw him off.

I was definitely caught off guard by Aikawa-san's snake, but she seemed to obey him, so there was probably no danger.

"Whew... But still, that was quite a shock..."

"Shock."

"Shock."

"Shock."

What's up with your voices, anyway? Do chickens...? Gah, it's no use thinking about it.

"Tomorrow, we're going patrolling again."

They didn't repeat after me this time.

Best-case scenario, no one shows up, but if someone does, I gotta tell them to leave. I've never done anything like that before, though. Will I be okay?

I'd gotten a bit anxious.

What am I gonna do if they don't listen to me? Do I have to call the village's police station? It's illegal trespassing. I've got a bunch of "No Trespassing" signboards inside the fence. I'm pretty sure this is covered in the Minor Offenses Act. And picking wild mountain plants without authorization is a forestry crime, you see. You should take heed when you go to a mountain.

Wait, who am I even talking to?

"Hey, just letting you know I'll be over tomorrow to pick some wild plants!"

I'd gotten a call earlier from old Yumoto, and of course, I'd said it was fine.

Yup, that's right. You should ask for permission. Well, if it's Yumoto-san or other acquaintances of mine, they can come whenever they want. Not like I have any use for these plants. I don't know how to prepare and cook them, and even if I tried to learn, I don't think I could. Seems way too difficult.

Anyway, that was about what my easygoing life in the mountains looked like.

4. Everyone Has Their Own Reasons for Coming Here

We were two days into Golden Week. I was doing my rounds as usual when I received a call from Old Man Yumoto. “Hey, we got some bamboo sprouts, so stop by tomorrow!”

Huh, I didn’t know you could still find those in May. I suppose it depends on the location. That reminds me—wasn’t there a bamboo forest at the bottom of my mountain, near the boundary with Aikawa-san’s?

The border between our mountains had come up in our conversation yesterday, but needless to say, it wasn’t like we were able to pinpoint exactly where each mountain started and ended. In any case, his mountain also had the usual signboards: “Beware of Wild Animals” and “No Trespassing” and “Beware of Bees” and so on.

The vipers were food for his snakes, according to him. Does that count as cannibalism?

By dangerous “wild animals,” he must’ve meant Rin-san and the other snake, surely. If someone did trespass and my chickens attacked and hurt them, I’d feel at fault too, so it was a complicated issue. At the same time, I couldn’t just put up a wire fence around the whole perimeter of the mountain—that wasn’t realistic. I’d been enthralled with the idea of owning a mountain for myself, but now that I actually owned one, I understood that it came with its fair share of trouble.

I still like this mountain, though. It’s hard work, but I feel like I can do it if I have the chickens with me.

I was starting to get in a sentimental mood when my phone suddenly rang. Wondering who it could be, I checked the caller ID—it was Katsuragi-san.

“Hello?”

“…rry! I’m sorry! I don’t have anyone else I can ask! Please! I need you to come here! Help me!”

I could tell from her voice that she was quite desperate. I took a brief pause to collect myself, then said, “Okay. Where do you want

me to go? I'll be there as soon as I can."

"Please come to my mountain. I'm sorry! I'm really sorry!"

"Don't fret; just calm down. Did you also try talking to the villagers?"

"I… I can't ask them to help with this. I'm sorry."

"Got it. I'm on my way."

Given the state of panic Katsuragi-san seemed to be in, I assumed this was more than just a trespasser or something. I turned to the chickens, who were on the other side of the fence.

"I need to go to Katsuragi-san's place the next mountain over. What about you guys?"

Tama and Yuma stepped forward. *Looks like it's the three of us this time.*

"Well then, Pochi, I'll leave the rest of the patrol to you."

Pochi raised his head sharply. He seemed to be saying, *I've got this!*

Such a reliable chicken.

I drove to the outer side of the fence, locked it, and left a note: "Be back soon—call in case of emergency." *I don't think anyone's gonna be coming here while I'm away, but you never know.*

I sat Tama and Yuma in the passenger seat, texted Katsuragi-san, and headed out.

We were already at the foot of the mountain, so Katsuragi-san's mountain was close by; it was a ten-minute drive before her fence came into view. I hopped out of the truck and checked my phone. There was a message from her saying the fence was unlocked. That fact was hard to tell at a glance, but I managed to open the gate, then got back in the truck and drove inside. I decided to lock it behind me. *Not sure why, but I have a feeling it's a good idea.*

"I should've asked her what's going on."

Why do I always forget the most important part? I felt frustrated at myself, but I had plenty of time to mope later. Katsuragi-san's mountain was steeper than mine, as I'd previously heard from her. There was an area with gentler slopes to the northeast of the mountain, which was also part of her property. *She basically has two mountains, then*, I thought as I drove onto the mountain. Before long, I reached a clearing and spotted a modest house.

Looks like it's here.

Katsuragi-san came running out of the house as soon as I parked my truck.

“I’m really sorry for asking you to come all the way out here!”

She bowed profusely with an apologetic look on her face. *Must be a real emergency.*

“Please don’t worry about it. So, what’s the matter?”

“Ah… Um…”

Katsuragi-san seemed terribly flustered. I saw that her house had a veranda, and, after asking for her permission, I had a seat on it.

“Katsuragi-san, where’s Tatsuki-san?”

“Oh… He’s, er, over there…”

The dragon was resting in the house’s shade. *Good. I definitely don’t want to be caught off guard by something of* that *size.*

“Hello, Tatsuki-san. Thanks for having me over. Do you mind if my chickens eat some of the bugs around here?”

He opened his eyes slightly and nodded. Without a doubt, this dragon was this mountain’s apex predator, so I thought I’d better pay my respects. Likewise, for Aikawa-san’s mountain, that spot probably went to Rin-san and the other snake.

What about my mountain? Well, the chickens, I guess? To be honest, I’m only doing this because Aikawa-san also asked for permission when he was over yesterday.

“Tama, Yuma, he said it’s okay.”

I let the two out of the truck. They stared warily at the dragon from a distance, then, seemingly having reached some sort of agreement, began to walk around in the vicinity of the house.

I realized I’d left Katsuragi-san by herself and looked back at her, only to find that she was in tears for some reason.

“Thank you… Thank you so much… I’m sorry…”

“Please don’t apologize—it’s all right.”

It must be something really serious. Katsuragi-san and I sat down on the veranda with some space between us.

Come to think of it, my tone was a bit too frank when I spoke to her on the phone, wasn’t it? I’d better watch myself—don’t wanna seem too pushy. Hopefully she didn’t notice.

“Ah… Please hold on. I’ll bring us some tea…”

She was no longer crying, and she seemed to have calmed down a bit. She briskly stood.

“Please, don’t worry about it,” I said.

“I’ll go make some tea!”

If making tea helps her calm down, then I guess I shouldn’t stop her. Anyway… This house is pretty unusual, huh? Looks like one of those cozy log cabins, but it also has a Japanese-style veranda. Wonder if the previous owner built it.

“Sorry to keep you waiting…”

Katsuragi-san soon came back. She’d also brought a pair of shoes. *Does she want to talk here on the veranda and not inside? She* is *a young woman living by herself, so I guess I can see that. I’d feel awkward barging in too.*

“Thank you. I went ahead and locked the entrance. I mean, the gate to your mountain. I hope you won’t, uh, mind…?” As I said that out loud, I realized how awkwardly I’d phrased it.

“Oh! That’s okay, thank you…”

Guess she’s wary of trespassers.

She’d brought us tea and some rice crackers. *Always a winning combination.*

After taking a sip or two, Katsuragi-san apologized quietly. “Sorry for calling you here all of a sudden…”

“Please don’t worry about it. Did something happen?”

If she wasn’t comfortable talking about it, I didn’t intend to press any further. *I’m sure women have their own problems that us men can’t even begin to understand. Like it or not though, one thing we do have over them is physical strength, so some things must be pretty hard for her.*

Her lawn was well-kept, and the roads around her mountain were also in a good state. *I guess someone from the village helps her out with this sort of stuff.*

“I’m not sure how to explain things… Do you mind if I just tell you the gist of it…?” Katsuragi-san asked awkwardly.

“It’s okay if you don’t feel like you can tell me.” *We both had our own reasons for moving here, after all.*

“No, it’s… Okay, you see…”

“I’m listening.”

She *did* want to talk about it, it seemed. I pursed my lips and recalled my father’s words: When a woman’s talking, don’t interrupt, and definitely don’t talk back. Just listen and nod.

Katsuragi-san started to talk, bit by bit.

To summarize: Before moving here, Katsuragi-san had been living with her ex-boyfriend. He used to be kind and gentle, but he'd turned violent not too long after they'd moved in together. Fearing for her life, she'd fled to her family's home, but he'd chased after her and she'd needed police to intervene. She received a hefty sum from his parents as a settlement, which she used to buy this mountain with the intention of living as a recluse. This all happened about two years ago.

She had taken care so that her ex-boyfriend wouldn't find out about her current whereabouts, but earlier today when she'd gone down to the village to do some shopping, she heard through the grapevine of a suspicious man who had been asking around about her. His description matched her ex-boyfriend, which had sent her into a panic.

I'd be afraid in that situation too.

"It might just be someone else, but I'm still really scared… Sorry…"

"That's definitely scary."

Still, I wasn't too sure what I could do for her. *Best thing to do would be to just not leave the mountain for a while, no? She's got a fence and everything… Wait, but if he already knows she lives here, then it's pointless. You could climb the fence if you really wanted to… I can't just stay here with her the whole time either.*

"Uh… Have you told other people about this?"

"I… I think Yamanaka-san from the village knows about it…"

That's the old woman from the other day who calls her "Miya-chan," I think. It seems the villagers have a pretty solid information network. They already knew my name before we'd even met. In any case, Yamanaka-san's husband is afraid of the dragon, so staying at their place is out of the question.

That left us with the local police, but there were only two police stations in the entire village, and one of them was a joint police station that was empty for half the week when the policemen were patrolling another nearby village in the mountains to the east. We couldn't just go and ask them to hold off on their routine patrols because Katsuragi-san had a stalker.

"Does Yamanaka-san know your ex-boyfriend might be around here?"

"I…haven't told her yet."

“I think you should probably let them know. And then think about what *you* wanna do.”

“What I want to do…?” Katsuragi-san echoed, puzzled.

I was of the opinion that people had to decide for themselves how to deal with their own predicaments, but I figured she was still too busy dealing with the shock to think straight, so I tried listing a few options that came to mind.

“I can think of three courses of action. One—you could shut yourself in the mountain. Two—you could ask the Yamanakas to take you in for a while. Or three—you could go about your business as usual, stay alert, and also gather information on the side.”

“Gather information…?”

She didn’t quite seem to understand what I meant.

“For example, you could ask people if they’ve heard of any outsiders asking about you, and if so, ask what they look like, etc. Letting the police and the Yamanakas know about what’s going on might also help.”

“I don’t mind telling Yamanaka-san… But the police…”

“So you’re just gonna shut yourself in here, then?”

“That’s the only option…”

“But if he finds out you’re here, that fence won’t be enough to stop him. Wait… Is Tatsuki-san able to tell when someone comes in?” *My chickens can, so maybe her dragon can too.* “You can have Tatsuki-san let you know if someone shows up. If someone does, message me and I’ll come over, but I can’t guarantee I’ll be able to respond immediately every single time.”

Maybe I’m being cold here, but I can’t just dedicate one hundred percent of my time to this.

“I see…”

“Well, anyway, there’s no right answer here. At the end of the day, whatever you decide to do, you gotta be careful. By the way, I’m going over to Yumoto-san’s place tomorrow at noon. What are you doing then?”

“I-I want to go too! Can you ask him if that’s okay?!”

It’s probably better to come with me than stay here all by yourself, I thought, so I gave the old man a call.

“Oh, the young miss from the other mountain? Sure, bring her over!” Yumoto-san willingly replied.

“He says it’s okay. I’ll drop you a message tomorrow, then.”

We’re not going together*, though.*

“Okay! Thank you for everything. I cooked some rice with bamboo shoots, so please have some!”

“Sure, thanks.”

“I’ll go get it!” Katsuragi-san exclaimed, and she hurried inside.

Oops, look at me getting too casual again. Yuma stared at me as I sighed. I felt like she was chastising me and telling me to get my act together.

“Here you go!”

Katsuragi-san handed me a fairly heavy bundle: a huge (I didn’t even know they sold them in this size) plastic container filled to the brim with rice and bamboo shoots. *Nice bamboo shoot-to-rice ratio. Looks delicious too. This should last me until breakfast tomorrow.* It was so much food that I just *had* to ask if it was really okay for me to take this much.

Katsuragi-san averted her gaze. “I…got a bit carried away and dug up too many of them…” she admitted.

Sure, I can see how that might happen. But why did she cook all of it *with rice? There was enough to try other recipes too. Maybe a simmered dish… Of course, it’s not* my *food, and I’m not the one who cooked it, so it’s really none of my business.*

We went home before it got dark.

How come the grass grew this much in only half a day? I spent the last moments before nightfall pulling weeds from the fields.

“Maybe I should also tell Aikawa-san about this?” *It can’t hurt to ask him about any suspicious guys wandering around, but I perhaps shouldn’t say it’s got anything to do with Katsuragi-san.*

I hesitated a bit before messaging him, but I ultimately wrote, “Please let me know if you see any strangers in the mountains. It *is* Golden Week, after all.”

He replied almost immediately with “Okay.”

It’s late, so he’s probably already home.

I didn’t have anything to do after the sun went down. Being enveloped by true darkness made me realize how insignificant I was in the grand scheme of things.

“I wonder where I went wrong…”

I reminisced about what had happened before I moved here.

It was my third year working for a local business. I led a pretty

frugal lifestyle, so I had a decent amount of savings and decided it was a good time to propose to my then-girlfriend. She accepted, and we got engaged.

I thought I was going to marry and live an ordinary life. It never even crossed my mind that she would just leave me at the last minute.

I let out a sigh, and Yuma cuddled up to me.

"Thanks, Yuma."

That had happened only three months ago, so the shock still lingered. Up until now I'd been too busy getting acclimated to life in the mountains, and I'd managed to keep my mind occupied with other things, but hearing about Katsuragi-san's troubles with her ex-boyfriend had triggered some unpleasant memories.

"Sheesh, I've got enough on my plate already..."

I need to focus on myself for now. But the bamboo sprout rice was pretty great.

***

The next day, I texted Katsuragi-san before leaving the house.

I still had some leftovers of the food she'd given me. *That was even* more *food than I thought. Mainly the bamboo sprouts.*

Speaking of which, aren't we having bamboo sprouts at Yumoto-san's place too? Well, there should be some other mountain plants too, or at least, I hope so.

I got into the truck with Yuma. I did invite Pochi and Tama as well, but they gave me the cold shoulder, as if to say, *Mountain plants? No thanks*, and trotted off into the mountain. *I mean, yeah, I guess if they wanted to eat mountain plants, they could just go get some.*

On my way, I made a quick stop at the general store and asked around.

"Do you usually see many strangers around here on Golden Week?" I inquired.

"Not too many of them, but yes. The villagers' kids and their families also come to visit."

I nodded. "Besides those visiting family, what kind of person tends to come to the village?"

"At this time of the year? Probably people who come here to

hike and pick mountain plants."

"They come all the way here just for that?"

"Right? Not like there's anything to see or do here."

I bought some frozen pork as a gift for Yumoto-san. *Not exactly the greatest of gifts, but it's this or rice crackers.*

I arrived at his place before Katsuragi-san.

"My, you didn't have to bring any more food! We picked the bamboo sprouts and other plants on *your* mountain, Sho-chan!" Still, Machiko-san still seemed happy about the pork.

"I don't know how to prepare them anyway, so you're the one helping me out." *Honestly, I can't even tell which ones are edible, so…*

"I see Yuma-chan is here too. How about some veggies?"

She had set aside a basket full of vegetable and meat scraps, which Yuma promptly began to eat.

"By the way, I heard Miya-chan is coming too, isn't she? I don't think we have any food for her big lizard…"

"I think she's probably already taken care of that, and besides, maybe it can go some time without eating."

I'd heard there were some carnivorous reptiles who, after eating their fill, could go several days without eating again. *Then again, I've only* heard *about it. I have no idea if it's true.*

"Well, I hope so."

I heard a vehicle approaching and went over to have a look—it was Katsuragi-san. She got out and came to the door.

"I'm sorry for imposing on you…" she said after greeting everyone.

"It's okay, it's okay," said Machiko-san.

"Um, here… I brought this for you."

Katsuragi-san had brought some mountain plants too. *She must have picked them herself.*

"Oh, perfect! We had to eat some of them yesterday because they spoil fast, so we could use some more. I'll make them into tempura."

Meaning, if not for Katsuragi-san's vegetables, we'd be having a bamboo sprout all-you-can-eat. Thanks, Katsuragi-san.

Her dragon had come too. He crawled sluggishly toward the garden. *Probably wants to rest in the shade.*

"Hey, you're here!" Yumoto-san noisily came out to greet us.

"Ah, Yumoto-san, here." I handed him a pair of plastic bottles.

“Caught more of ’em, huh?”

Katsuragi-san took a look at the bottles and let out a shriek. *Well, I don’t blame her. Vipers* are *pretty scary.*

“Oops, sorry.”

“I-It’s okay…”

Yumoto-san walked away with the bottles in hand and a smile on his face.

Katsuragi-san went to the kitchen to help cook, and I went with Yumoto-san to get beverages for everyone. The house itself was already pretty big, but they also had a storage shed with a fridge. We took beer from there.

“We’ve got a lot, so take some home with you, will ya?” asked Yumoto-san.

There were several boxes next to the fridge, and at least three or four of them were beer.

“But Yumoto-san, I’m sure you can take care of *these* yourself.”

“Heh, I guess you’ve got a point there!” He laughed heartily, grabbed as much as he could hold, and we headed back. The food was already laid out on the table.

“Here’s to the blessings of the mountain and to our newest couple!”

“Uh, Yumoto-san? What are you talking about?”

I had a feeling he might have gotten the wrong idea.

On the table we had boiled mountain vegetables, simmered bamboo shoots, mountain plant tempura, and some sashimi. I wanted to make a toast and start the meal, but the old man’s words lingered in the back of my mind.

“Well, you know, you brought her with you, so that’s what’s going on, no?”

Please stop being so vague and just say it.

“Give it a rest already!” His wife smacked him over the head with a newspaper.

“Ouch!”

“Just stay quiet, will you! Sorry, Sho-chan, I’ll give him a good scolding later.”

“Oh, it’s all right. Thank you.”

Yumoto-san was a nice person, but he was slightly lacking in tact. *I don’t really blame him—there’s not a lot to keep yourself entertained here.* If he saw a man and a woman together, he

seemed to be prone to jumping to conclusions. *Maybe I shouldn't have invited Katsuragi-san. We might have spoiled the mood a bit.*

We enjoyed our meal together. As a child, I used to dislike the bitterness of mountain plants, but I'd grown able to appreciate the flavor. *Is this what they call a mature palate?*

We ate, chatted, then called it a day. On our way out, I handed Katsuragi-san the container she'd given me yesterday, and she thanked me.

"I appreciate you inviting me today," she said.

"And thank *you* for the meal," I replied. We bowed to each other and went our separate ways. Yuma and the dragon had both spent some quality time in the Yumotos' garden.

This year's Golden Week ended tomorrow. *Let's hope nothing else weird happens.*

Back at home, the chickens caught sight of me clasping my hands at the setting sun. They joined in, cocking their necks. *Cute.*

"What's up?" I asked.

"What's up!"

"What's up!"

"What's up!"

The chickens sang in unison. Seeing them made me appreciate the peace and quiet. I felt warm and fuzzy inside.

The following day was spent mostly mowing the grass.

These days, I feel like I'm competing with the grass around the house to see if I can mow it faster than it grows. Overgrown grass attracted snakes, so it was fairly dangerous, especially since some of them, like vipers, were venomous. *I should probably also get to mowing the grass around the road as well.*

Golden Week ended without any further issues.

As for Katsuragi-san's ex-boyfriend, he'd been working a regular job at the time she'd moved here, so we assumed that after Golden Week, he would have to leave and go back to his routine. Yamanaka-san (Katsuragi-san's acquaintance) had shown a lot of concern for her and told some of the other villagers about it. *We still need to stay on our toes, but we should be safe as long as we keep each other informed. Not like there's anything else I can do anyway.*

The chickens, as usual, were out and about running around. Pochi was with me today.

Lately, I get the feeling that they don't think of me as their owner

anymore. It's like they're keeping me company or looking after me… Should I be worried?

We were down at the riverbank doing our rounds when Pochi caught a viper.

So many of them on this mountain. I've got my work clothes and mountain boots on, but I don't know if this is enough to keep me safe from a viper bite.

During the warmer months, we also had to look around and check for wasps and such. They weren't too dangerous in the spring (they *did* still sting, though), but they became more and more aggressive through the summer into early fall. Wasp nests had to be dealt with as soon as possible. *I need to learn more about the mountain's ecosystem, for the chickens' sake too.*

I was pretty interested in insects and animals. What I didn't know anything about was wild plants and mushrooms. Old Man Yumoto had warned me to stay away from the mushrooms. Although you didn't see them too often this time of year, they were plentiful during colder months, so some people liked to head up into the mountains to pick them. But you *really* had to know your stuff. Every year, there was news about people around here who got food poisoning from wild mushrooms. *I've heard there are varieties of poisonous ones that look almost the same as shiitake. Scary.*

I let Pochi have the viper. After devouring it, he raised his head with a satisfied look, then plunged his beak into the river.

"Eh? Looking for dessert?"

Held within his sharp beak was a struggling crayfish. He tilted his neck at me, probably asking what I wanted to do with it. I paused briefly, then said, "Sure, go ahead." *I heard they taste like shrimp, but preparing it seems like way too much of a hassle for me. Well, it's always good to have options, I suppose.*

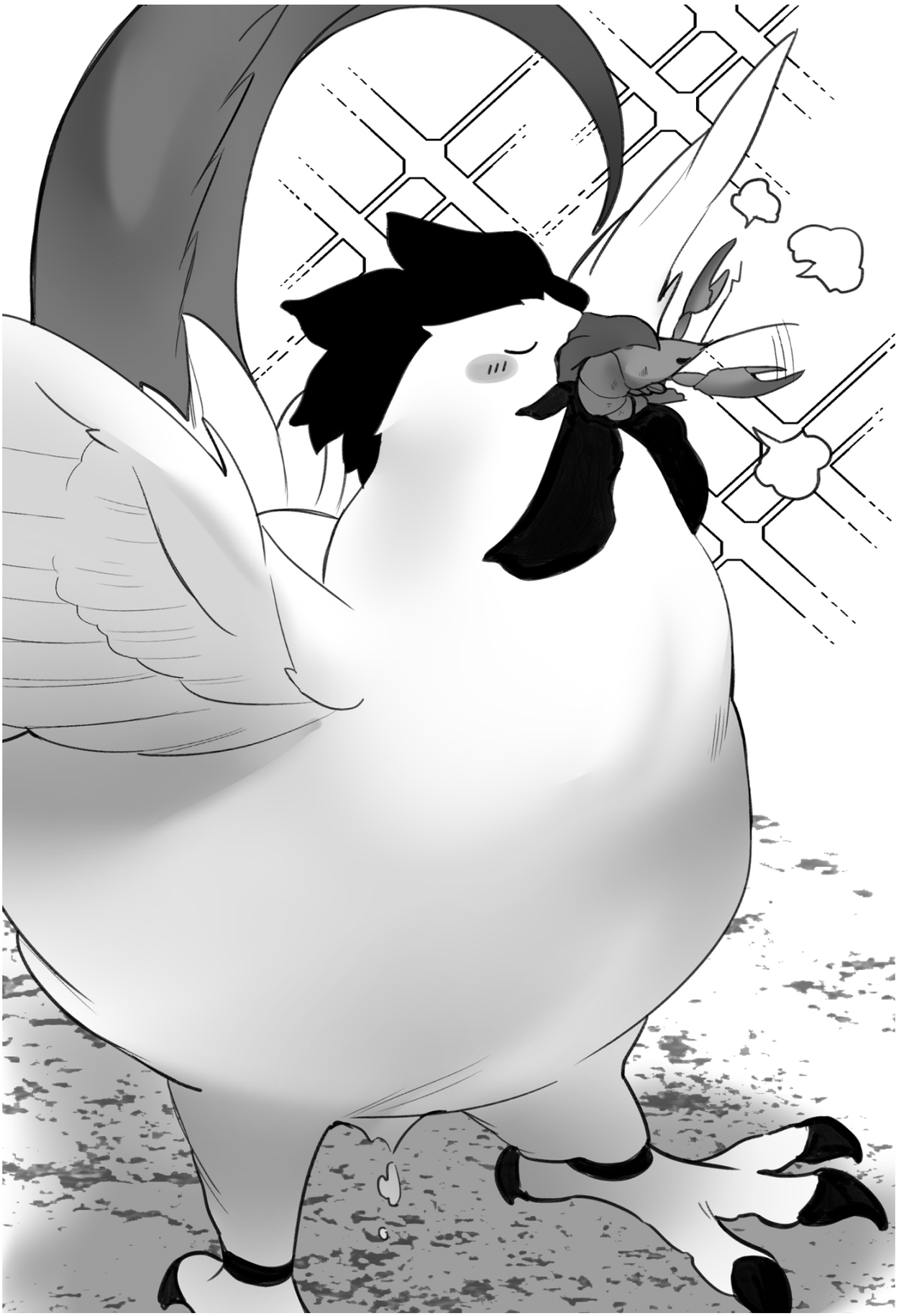
That reminded me: *Aikawa-san's snake, Rin-san, liked crayfish, didn't she?* His mountain also had a river, but the current was pretty fast—it was probably hard to find crayfish there. On the other hand, the river near my house was shallow, and the current wasn't that fast. Apparently, there were a few other rivers on my mountain too. *I haven't had the time to check all of them yet.*

Crayfish were commonly found in rivers by suburban areas, so it was surprising to see them all the way up here in the mountains.

Most likely, someone had thrown some live ones away around here, and they'd multiplied.

If I ever catch whoever did that, I'll have a word or two for them.

I was watching Pochi try to eat the crayfish, but he was struggling with the shell. *Funny how he has an easier time with wild boars.*



“Oh yeah, I’m supposed to pay Aikawa-san a visit soon…”

Hopefully he wasn’t just being polite. I dropped him a message just in case. (*What’s that? You think I should be more confident? Oh, leave me alone.*)

He replied at around the same time I came back from the riverbank: “Anytime is okay with me.”

I texted back, “I was also wondering… Should I bring some crayfish for Rin-san?”

“Sure, thank you. Please bring them alive if possible,” he replied.

True. Dead shellfish spoil really fast. Better to bring her fresh ones. I decided to enlist Pochi’s help and catch some crayfish.

“Hey, Pochi, are crayfish easy to catch?”

He clucked and raised his head, as if saying, *Leave it to me!*

“Good, so when we go to Aikawa-san’s place, let’s catch a bunch and bring them as a present for Rin-san.”

Upon hearing that, Pochi turned away and ran down the mountain toward the river.

“Eeeh?! Wait, wait, Pochi! Not today! When we gooooo!”

I ended up having to chase after my chicken, who was a bit too quick to jump to conclusions. *Please listen to me! I wasn’t done talking!*

“Not today! We’re not going today! I’ll let you know when we go!” I protested, and Pochi, who had already caught a couple, pecked at me. *It’s not* my *fault, you know.*

I ended up feeding the crayfish he’d already caught to Tama and Yuma. They seemed to have a lot of trouble peeling the shell, so they had a hard time eating them.

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Two days later, I paid Aikawa-san a visit.

That morning, I took the chickens to the river and had them catch me a bunch of crayfish. *Maybe too many.* The large bucket I’d brought was filled to the brim with what we’d caught while doing a thorough patrol of the riverbank.

With this many crayfish around, there might just be no fish in this river, even if the water itself is clean. They’re an invasive species, so it’s probably a good idea to get rid of as many of them as I can. At any

rate, this should make for a good present.

I thought all three chickens would be coming with me, but Tama decided to stay and watch the house.

"You're not afraid of Rin-san, are you?" I asked her as a joke, and she pecked me hard. *Seriously? Okay, my bad.*

Aikawa-san had told me about himself when he'd come over the other day. Three years ago, he'd quit his job and bought the mountain to the west and the one behind it—like me, he owned two mountains. The previous owner had sold the mountains and moved to the nearby town, and Aikawa-san had bought them from a friend of an acquaintance. He'd gotten a hunter's license, thinking it'd come in handy to keep himself safe in the mountains, and in the process, he'd gotten acquainted with the hunters from the village.

I'd asked him about Akimoto-san, the villager who'd butchered the boar I'd caught.

"Yeah, of course I know him. He told me if I see any dead animals lying around, bring them to him," Aikawa-san had replied with an awkward smile.

You needed a license to lay traps or hunt with a weapon, even on your own mountain, but if you caught prey through other means or just found something dead already, you didn't need a license. *I guess my chickens count as "other means"? Eh, it's my mountain anyway.*

Much like Katsuragi-san's mountain, the mountain where Aikawa-san lived was considerably steeper than mine. His other mountain was more like a hill—smaller than my other mountain. *That reminds me... I still haven't been to my other mountain, have I? I should probably go check it out sometime soon.* Anyway, my other mountain used to be someone else's property too, but there weren't any roads that went there, so it was all but abandoned. Apparently, there were quite a few places like that up here. Some time later, I would find out it was a national forest.

Aikawa-san's house was on the mountainside. *I guess everyone must build their houses on basically the same part of the mountain—it's more convenient that way.*

"Hello. Thanks for having me over."

I parked my truck next to his. The road was tidy and well paved.

"Hey," said Aikawa-san. "Huh, there're only two chickens with

you today?"

"The other one is watching over the house."

"Very clever." Aikawa-san laughed.

Yeah... He is *pretty handsome.* I could spot a few wrinkles around the corners of his eyes. *Early thirties, was it?*

His eyes widened when I unloaded the crayfish bucket from the tonneau. "That's a lot... I wish I had this many on my mountain too."

"Feel free to come by anytime. I didn't expect to catch this many either... These are just the ones I saw while walking along the river, actually."

"Maybe someone dumped them... They're omnivores, so the mountain vegetation was probably more than enough for them to thrive."

"I think that's probably what happened, yes."

"Well then, I'll take you up on that offer and head over again sometime. Rin! Ten! Sano-san brought a present for you!"

I'd met Rin-san the other day, but I still didn't know what Ten-san looked like.

Whoa, that's a massive snake. Probably a python, I think?

Rin-san's body looked half human, but Ten-san just looked like a snake. An extremely large one. *How many meters is that?*

Rin-san greeted me with a stoic look. "Hello. Thank you."

"Hello, Rin-san. Is that Ten-san next to you?"

Suddenly, the huge snake opened its mouth and...spoke. "Ten talk. Thanks."

"Whoa..." I murmured. *What's going on with his vocal cords? Obviously not a normal snake.*

"Ten, the chickens are Sano-san's family. Don't eat them, okay?"

"Okay."

Pochi and Yuma stood in front of me, tails standing on end. *Yeah, I can see why they'd be wary of a snake that big. At that size, he could probably swallow me whole...* I shuddered.

Aikawa-san took the bucket and placed it down a little farther away from Ten-san.

"These are a present from Sano-san. You can eat them, but do it after we've gone inside. Be sure to eat everything."

"Okay," said Ten-san.

Still a bit taken aback by the snakes, I looked over to Aikawa-

san's house. It was pretty large, with several bedrooms—it'd probably also belonged to a former village head, just like mine.

We walked over to the house, and I peered beyond the frosted glass front door. I could see a spacious room—*It's probably undergone extensive renovations*—with a concrete floor, a table, and some chairs. We stepped inside.

Aikawa-san turned to me. "Please make yourself at home."

"Thank you. Really nice space you've got here."

"I've had it renovated twice. Back when I first got Rin and Ten, I heard they would grow pretty large, so..."

I see. So the snakes stay here at night or during colder months. There was a large stove beside the table.

"Er, do you mind if my chickens eat some of the grass and bugs around here?" I asked.

"No problem—go ahead. In fact, I'd even appreciate it if they ate the weeds in the fields."

"Right, your snakes are...carnivorous, after all."

"That's right. So I can't really count on them to help me weed the lawn," Aikawa-san explained with a smile, adding that Rin-san *did* help every once in a while. *A lamia who helps with gardening... Now* that *must be a pretty bizarre sight. Well, she's not a lamia, but yeah.*

I turned to my chickens. "He said you guys can go ahead and eat."

Pochi raised his head briskly and went off to have a look around. Yuma stayed nearby.

"Quite the clever birds," Aikawa-san said cheerfully as he served us tea and rice crackers. *Even his tea set is all fancy. I'm not used to this...* The next room over was the kitchen. The interior of his house was far more modern and stylish than you'd have guessed from the exterior.

"Are there no Japanese-style rooms?" I asked.

"The room at the back is Japanese-style. It was a lot of work replacing all the tatami flooring, let me tell you."

"I bet."

Luckily, in my case, the previous owners had still been taking care of the house, so I hadn't needed to do any renovations. Aikawa-san told me that his house had been all but abandoned when he'd moved in. He let me have a look at the firearm he used

for hunting—a shotgun—which he kept in the Japanese-style room. I didn't get a chance to try holding it, but it had a long barrel, and I could tell it must be quite heavy. *Looking at it up close, it's pretty impressive. And scary.*

"Maybe I should get a hunting license too. I heard there may be bears in the mountains…"

Aikawa-san hesitated for a moment. "It's always nice to have more hunters around, but you should know that getting a license is a long process. You also need a separate permit to own a gun for hunting."

"Is that so?"

I looked it up later at home, and there was indeed a lot of paperwork to wade through. *Maybe not.*

Aikawa-san was big into cooking, and he was in the habit of picking mountain plants and preparing them himself.

"To tell you the truth, this is actually the first time I've had someone over," he said. "I hope you enjoy the meal."

Wow, I'm honored.

"It's great how eco-friendly chickens are," Aikawa-san remarked excitedly when I asked him if he had any vegetable scraps to spare for Yuma. "Snakes are… Well, at least they're dependable."

"They each have their pros and cons."

I was treated to a full-course meal, from rice with bamboo shoots to stew to tempura. *Amazing to think that all of this comes from the mountain.* Aikawa-san's cooking was both delicious *and* visually appealing—it almost made me feel like I was eating at a restaurant.

"Please feel free to come by anytime," he offered.

"I'd be happy to stop by again."

We didn't get to talk much about the snakes, but I had a great time chatting about various topics. *That stereotype about men being taciturn couldn't be more wrong.*

Rin-san and Ten-san, having eaten all the crayfish I'd brought them, seemed to have taken a liking to me. They huddled up close to my body. I was happy they'd appreciated the gift, but it was kind of terrifying. *I was* this *close to wetting myself.*

There was still a lot I wanted to talk to Aikawa-san about, so I continued to visit him regularly after that.

One day, around the time it was starting to get hotter, I received

a call from him that was quite unlike our usual conversations—I could tell over the phone how distressed he was. This was very out of character for him, so I got worried and hurriedly drove over to his place with Pochi and Yuma.

"Sorry to call you so suddenly," he apologized.

Usually, he asked me to leave the gate unlocked, but not this time—he outright asked me to lock it, which spoke to the graveness of the situation. *I know I shouldn't jump to conclusions, but this reminds me of that time I went to see Katsuragi-san.*

When I got to his house, I found Aikawa-san with Rin-san coiled around him. I squinted my eyes. *He's not gonna ask me to get her off him, right? Sorry, but no can do.*

Ten-san was also there, and he came over to greet us. *I kinda wish he'd keep some distance, though.*

"So, uh... What's the matter?"

Aikawa-san had a troubled expression on his face. *And yet he still looks good. I bet I'd look ugly as heck if I made that face. Curse my ordinary looks.*

"This is really embarrassing, but I was hoping you could give me a word or two of advice..."

"Sure. What's on your mind?"

I'd figured it might be a sensitive matter, but it was already too late to change my mind and go home. Rin-san finally let Aikawa-san go; I asked her if it was okay to let the chickens graze and eat bugs outside, and after getting the okay, Aikawa-san and I went inside.

He served us tea in his fancy tea set. *Every time I come here, I feel like I've just wandered off into another world.* The snakes were outside with Pochi. Yuma had dutifully tagged along with me.

This time, the tea snacks were pickled cucumbers instead of the usual rice crackers. Aikawa-san, always the perfectionist, had pickled them himself.

"Oh, these are pretty good."

"I'm glad to hear. I got a bit carried away and made way more than I can eat, so why don't you take some home with you?"

I feel like I've had this conversation before...

"Thank you, I'll take you up on that."

As I chowed down on the cucumbers, Aikawa-san let out a deep sigh, and, after some hesitation, started talking.

“So, uh… You know how nowadays, when you tune into the news, you often hear about stalking incidents?”

“Yeah… What about it?”

“In most cases, it’s women being stalked by men… Usually, that is…”

Aha, I see. The price of good looks.

“But there are also cases where the stalker is a woman…”

“Aikawa-san, is that perhaps why you moved to the mountains?”

“Indeed…”

I can’t even imagine what that’s like, but I guess it does *make sense.*

“I can’t say I relate,” I told him, “but I’m sure it must have been tough on you.”

“Yes. We were coworkers, and somehow or other, she got the idea that we were dating. Before I knew it, she’d somehow made a spare key to my place, and I found her rummaging through my stuff…”

“Yikes…”

That’s even worse than I expected. Isn’t that going into criminal territory?

“So… What did you do?”

Aikawa-san told me about how it had started to interfere with his work life. He’d discussed it with his superior, but that ended up catching the stalker’s ire when she caught wind of it. In the end, it became a police matter, and that put him in a very awkward position in the workplace. *An unpleasant situation for everyone involved.*

“I do have a restraining order against her, but I’m still afraid of what might happen. Feel free to laugh at me.”

“Oh, no, I can totally understand!”

After that, having made a decent amount of money from trading stocks, he’d decided to quit his job and buy his mountains. He’d managed to keep himself busy for a while—preparing to get his hunting license and maintaining the mountain—but after some time, the loneliness had started getting to him.

One day, when he’d taken a trip down to the village, there’d happened to be a festival going on, and he’d bought two snakes at one of the stalls. At the time, they were snakelets, about ten centimeters long. However, they began to grow larger and larger,

and after a year, one of them had strangely grown a half-snake, half-human body. That was, of course, Rin-san, whose upper body looked just like a woman. *Is she…a lamia?*

But anyway, back to his stalker.

"So, have you perhaps seen her around the village…?" I asked.

"No, I… I think I saw her when I went to do some shopping in the nearby town…" Aikawa-san replied.

"Huh?" *By "nearby town," he must be talking about the one to the west of this road.* "Do you mean N-Town?"

"That's right."

"Are you sure it was actually her?"

He paused for a moment, then nodded. "I am. That was just yesterday. I did also think it might be someone else, but I gave my lawyer a call just in case, and…it turns out she moved to this prefecture earlier this year…"

"I…see…" I shuddered at the thought. *My reason for moving here is starting to feel really petty.*

"What about *this* village…?"

"She hasn't been here yet, I don't think. But still, just imagining it…"

"I don't blame you." It *was* a terrifying prospect.

"Sano-san! I'll help you take care of your mountain or whatever else you want, so please come with me when I go shopping!"

"Uh, I… Okay…"

Not like I've got anything better to do anyway.

"Oh yeah, what about Rin-san? Do you take her with you when you go to town?"

"Yes, but she stays in the passenger seat."

I guess he can't rely on her in town. She'd probably cause a big commotion if she didn't stay inside the truck.

"I feel so pathetic…" he lamented.

Aikawa-san had the front of his jacket open, and I could tell even through the running shirt he had underneath that he was fairly muscular.

His clothes made him look a lot thinner. He also had ten centimeters or so on me. *It's a bit odd to think that a man of his build is cowering in fear of a female stalker, but I guess it's not just about physique.*

"Don't worry, I can't relate to your situation, so I can't judge you

either," I told him firmly.

He stared at me wide-eyed, then laughed and said, "Sano-san, I might fall for you."

"Stop it, you're giving me the creeps!"

"Just joking. But you did help take a load off my shoulders. Thanks for that." Aikawa-san laughed heartily.

I'd like to think that her being in a nearby town is just a coincidence, but if it's not, this might spell trouble. For now, we should probably stay alert and try to gather information about her. At least now I have another person to keep me company when I go shopping. Plus, he did *say he'd help with my mountain, so that's also pretty nice.*

I stayed over for lunch and then went home.

"Dealing with people really tires me out... Pochi, Tama, Yuma, I'm glad I've got you guys with me." I hugged Tama and Yuma, and Tama pecked me.

Please, Tama, I'm begging you, don't be so rough. Pochi was just like, *whatever*, and paid us no mind.

I was a bit bummed out that Tama didn't seem to care for my display of affection, but Yuma cuddled up to me, so it was all good. *Yeah, I'm pretty simpleminded, but that's okay.*

5. Dealing with the Rainy Season and Chicken Vaccines

The next morning, I woke up to find that, for some reason, my chickens had grown larger yet again.

"Why?"

I measured them—they'd grown to about a meter tall.

"Whyyyyyy?!" I exclaimed.

"Why!"

"Why!"

"Why!"

Hey! You *tell* me*!*

I *did* have a feeling they were growing bigger. As of yesterday, they'd been probably about seventy centimeters tall, compared to the half meter I'd measured them at in late April. But since I was spending time with them every day, I thought maybe I was just imagining things. This time, however, the change was so sudden and apparent that I couldn't write it off as my imagination.

"Should I be worried?"

They'd grown at an absurd pace—it might have taken a toll on their bodies.

"Any growing pains or that sort of stuff?" I asked, tilting my neck, and they copied my gesture. *Even at this size, they're still pretty cute, huh?*

"I'm asking if you're hurt anywhere from the huge growth spurt. Do you hear me?"

"You hear me?"

"You hear me?"

"You hear me?"

"You're doing that on purpose, aren't you…?"

They didn't seem to be feeling any pain or discomfort, and they were flapping their wings and tails with no issues. *I didn't know they could swing their tails like that.*

"A veterinarian…will probably have no idea what to make of you guys. I doubt I can find one who's seen chickens with tails like these."

Previously, I had thought they resembled lizard tails, but these were more like something you'd see on a dinosaur or something. I tried touching their tails—they were smooth, hard, and had bones. *They're basically feathered dinosaurs.*

"Doesn't seem like you can cut these off…"

They were definitely different from lizard tails. I also had a look inside their beaks, and I found they each had a set of sharp, jagged teeth. *Scary as hell.*

I looked it up, and chickens weren't supposed to have teeth. To be more precise, sometimes, right after hatching, they had teeth on the tips of their beaks that disappeared after a while. But certainly, they shouldn't have teeth like *these*, which you'd usually find on a predator. *Just what* are *you guys?*

I wonder if anyone else had bought dyed chicks from the festival that day. *Did the other chicks also grow into* this*?* "If that were the case, people would notice that something was off…"

Katsuragi-san also got her dragon at the festival—the same went for Aikawa-san and his snakes. If there were a bunch of people out there raising bizarre creatures like these, I'd have already heard about it on the internet or the news or something. I wonder what's going on here…

"Anyway, let me know if anything feels off," I told the chickens. *Worrying about it will do no good.* I had some shopping to do today, so I weeded the lawn and then headed out.

I didn't bother pulling weeds by the roots and just gave them a run over with the lawn mower, except for the ones near the house and around the fields. I'd been using that organic pesticide I'd made on the fields, so I didn't need to worry about bugs. *The chickens also stay away from the fields… But come to think of it, they eat bugs. Is the pesticide actually necessary? I do want the crops to grow strong and healthy…*

The cucumbers I'd planted had started to ripen, and so had the komatsuna (also known as Japanese mustard spinach), which made me happy. *It really is a great feeling, growing your own food.* I was lost in thought when my phone rang—it was Old Man Yumoto.

"Hey, you coming over today?" he asked.

"Yes, I'll stop by before I go shopping."

"Come over for lunch, will ya?"

“Okay. Oh, by the way, the chickens grew larger again. I’m letting you know in advance so you’re not too shocked when you see them.”

The Yumotos had been very kind to me, and they would often invite me over. I tended to accept their invitations unless I already had something I needed to attend to.

I tried to think of something that would make for a nice gift for them. “Vegetables…are out of the question. The Yumotos grow their own…” Just then, Pochi came over, holding something in his beak.

No way…

“Eh…? A rabbit…?”

It was a wild rabbit with short ears and long hind legs, struggling to escape Pochi’s hold.

I quickly called Yumoto-san again to ask what to do in this situation. “Yumoto-san, the chickens caught a rabbit! What do I do with it?!” He explained that they were considered a nearly endangered species around here, so as long as they posed no harm, I should let them go. *Whew, that’s a relief.*

“Pochi, go deeper into the mountain and let him go. Yumoto-san said we have to leave the rabbits alone.”

Pochi did as he’d been told and ran off with the wild rabbit in his beak. Many people adored rabbits’ cute appearance and kept them as pets, but they could also ruin crops and eat tree bark, so in some places, they were considered pests.

“Well, we used to eat rabbit meat back in the day…”

If I’m not mistaken, I think it was in the Edo period when Tsunayoshi, the fifth shogun of the Tokugawa shogunate, issued the Edicts on Compassion for Living Things*. These were laws meant to protect “living things,” which included orphans and disabled individuals, but also animals. Birds were considered exceptions, and rabbits were grouped in the same category due to their ability to jump, so the consumption of rabbit meat was legal. Those laws were widely criticized, but they also had positive aspects that were retained, like protecting orphans. Uh, anyway, back to rabbits.*

I’m aware rabbits are often considered pests, but I haven’t suffered any rabbit-related damage myself—I wouldn’t know what it’s actually like. I’ve heard they’re a big problem in Australia, and there are states over there where it’s illegal to buy or sell them. They were introduced

to Australia by humans, though. Rabbits and deer look cute and all, so a lot of people recoil at the idea of exterminating them, but if they start becoming a problem, then you gotta do what you gotta do. I'd better prepare myself in case that ever happens.

I stuck the vipers in plastic bottles like always. *Are there no end to the vipers on this mountain?* Then I headed over to Yumoto-san's place with Tama. *Tama's pretty strict with me, so I'd better behave myself. I don't know what "behave" is supposed to mean in this case, but yeah.*

"Well then, I'm off. I'll be back before it gets dark, so you two hold down the fort," I said to the other chickens. They clucked back at me. *I'm really happy I've got such dependable chickens.*

I drove off with Tama. *How long do chickens live again?* I couldn't imagine life without them anymore.

On my way, I stopped at the general store to look for something to bring the Yumotos. As always, I didn't know what to buy—rice crackers or frozen meat. *Yeah, yeah, I know—I'm terrible at choosing presents.*

When I arrived, I hopped out of the truck. Machiko-san was in the front lawn picking weeds.

"Hello, Sho-chan!"

"Good morning. Let me help you."

"Oh, it's okay. This is...Tama-chan, right? Hello there."

Tama bowed lightly. *Well, more like just tilting her neck forward.*

"Can you go get some beverages from the shed?" she asked.

"Sure."

I took some beer and soft drinks from the fridge in the storage shed next to their house. The beer was for Yumoto-san. A large spider weaving its web between the house and the shed startled me, but it wasn't hurting anybody, so I just let it be.

I'd told the chickens not to catch any spiders, since they eat bugs. That was probably why Tama left the spider alone.

I opened the glass door and called out to Yumoto-san, who was inside. "Good morning!"

"Hey, Shohei. Come here."

"Hello, Yumoto-san. I brought you more vipers. I'll go get them."

"There're really a lot of them at your place, huh?"

I put down the beverages near the front door and got the plastic bottles. Tama was next to Machiko-san, eating bugs while

she weeded the lawn.

"Sho-chan, she's amazing! She can even catch mosquitoes!" *Talk about reflexes.*

"Now then, I'll go get everything ready for lunch. Tama-chan, do you want some veggies?" The old lady asked. Tama nodded. Machiko-san seemed to pay no mind to Tama's sudden growth spurt. *I guess she doesn't sweat the details…?*

"Whoa, now that's a huge chicken. Never seen one this big," Yumoto-san exclaimed, astounded.

"Yeah, I thought so…"

"My, you didn't have to bring us anything!" Machiko-san exclaimed when I handed her the frozen meat.

"Ha ha…"

She seems happy about it, so it's okay. The Yumotos often held gatherings, meaning that more food and drink were always in demand. *Not vegetables, though. They already have more than enough of those.*

"You don't have to bother with this stuff, y'know," Yumoto-san said.

The table was plentiful, as usual. It was the season for pickles—I saw various different kinds of pickled vegetables, all homegrown. We also had stir-fried meat, vegetables, and fried dishes, all delicious.

"So, it's been about three months since you came here, hasn't it, Shohei?"

"Yes, just about, I think."

"Rainy season's just around the corner, so be sure to take good care of your house. Check the roads too. You're in the mountains. Worst-case scenario, if you run out of food, you can just go look for some. But if the roads get blocked by a landslide, that could be trouble."

"Thank you for the warning."

I would've probably forgotten about the rainy season if he hadn't reminded me. The roads were paved, but they *were* in the mountains, meaning a higher risk of landslides. I had to check for any potentially dangerous places.

Is there anything I can do to actually prevent damage from landslides, though? It's not as if I can just go and cover the ground in concrete. Only thing I can think of is barricading the roads.

“Mountain roads, huh…? Are there any preventive measures I can take?” I asked.

“First, you gotta look for any particularly dangerous spots. The only thing I know is that a few years back a tree fell on your road, and it became impassable for a while. You gotta stay on the lookout.”

“Impassable, huh…? Do you happen to know how long it stayed closed?”

“I heard they needed heavy machinery to remove it, so probably around ten days or so.”

Whew. Given the need for heavy machinery and what the road was like, ten days was probably pretty fast. There weren’t many people living up on the mountain, after all. They were lucky the road opened up so soon.

“Heavy machinery…”

“You’d have to ask the town leadership or look for a company that deals in that sort of thing.”

“I suppose there aren’t any here in the village?”

“Only small ones. These things are hard to maintain, y’know.”

“Right…”

Life in the mountains was tougher than I’d thought. There *were* excavators in the village, and also a miniloader, but for anything bigger than that I’d need to go to the nearby town or somewhere else.

“I also wanted to ask you… You know how I got my chickens at the village festival, right? Do you know if there was anyone else who bought dyed chicks from that stall?”

“I wonder. I’ve definitely never seen another chicken that big.” Yumoto-san turned to his wife. “Have you heard anything?”

“I don’t think I have,” she replied. “There *is* a chicken farm nearby, but they don’t sell chicks.”

“Don’t they hatch the chicks there?”

“They don’t bother with that stuff. The chicks are imported. Or was that only for eggs?”

“Eeeh?!”

Importing chicks? So my chickens are foreigners? I glanced over at Tama, who was in the earthen-floor room eating vegetable scraps.

“Tama, were you actually a foreigner all along?”

Tama raised her head and stared at me with a look that said,

What the heck are you on about?

Uh, sorry.

"My, my, Sho-chan," Machiko-san said with a laugh.

"Chicks sold at stalls like that are usually males unsuitable for meat. You got one rooster and two hens, so you lucked out."

"I wonder if they'll lay eggs."

"I've heard they can start laying 'em as soon as four months of age. Usually five months or so."

"So, I might see eggs around July?"

"I guess so."

But I've got Pochi too, so won't the eggs be fertilized? I don't want to eat that...

"Oh yeah, what about vaccines?" Yumoto-san asked.

"What, me?" *I did get vaccinated for tetanus and other common diseases...*

"No, no, I mean the chickens."

"Eh?! Do chickens also need vaccines?"

"Of course they do. Especially if they're laying eggs."

I guess that makes sense. Humans get a bunch of different vaccines when they're kids, so it's only logical that I should also get my chickens vaccinated if I want them to stay by my side for a long time.

It's a good thing I got to talk to Yumoto-san about this. How do I get my chickens vaccinated, though? I don't think they're the type to let someone give them injections.

I had a lot I needed to take care of. For starters, I decided to pay the chicken farm a visit.

***

Yumoto-san introduced me to the farmer that day, but I didn't go to the farm since it would be impolite to show up so suddenly. After all, I didn't know if there was anything I needed to prepare for the visit. To be honest, I wasn't too interested in the chicken farm itself, but since Yumoto-san connected me with the farmer, I didn't want to be rude.

Two days later in the afternoon, I headed over to a house on the mountain in the eastern corner of the village. There were four long buildings—livestock sheds—next to the house, and something that looked like a tank on top of them.

What's that?

The farm specialized in broilers (chickens raised for meat) and didn't deal in eggs. The broilers took about seven weeks to reach slaughter weight, apparently.

"Hello, nice to meet you. I believe Yumoto-san told you about me. My name is Sano."

My purpose in coming here was to ask about chickens, so I'd only brought Yuma with me.

"Yumoto-chan's relative? You live on Brook Mountain, right? I'm Matsuyama—nice to meet you."

"Oh, Yumoto-san is a friend of a relative. We're not related."

"I see."

Matsuyama-san seemed like a nice, affable old man. He looked at Yuma, and his eyes widened.

"That's…quite the big chicken you've got there. Is it really a chicken…?"

"Huh? Is it *not* a chicken?"

True, they're a lot bigger than your regular chicken, but I've always just assumed they were chickens. I unwittingly stared at Yuma. *Yeah, they're big… Yeah, they have weird tails… But other than that, they just look like chickens to me.*

Yuma cocked her neck with a confused look on her face. *Cute.*

"Hmm… I've never seen a chicken this big. I reckon it *could* be a jungle fowl, but then, those aren't supposed to be white like your friend…"

Matsuyama-san observed Yuma with a quizzical expression. *Well, yeah, I think it's fair to be confused at a meter-tall chicken. Incidentally, the jungle fowl that Matsuyama-san mentioned is a bird from the pheasant family that's said to be the ancestor of the modern domestic chicken. I know they can fly a little bit, but I don't think they're supposed to grow this big either.*

"So, um, your friend here seems pretty docile. Is she always like this? Or is she usually more aggressive?"

"Uh, she does catch vipers and other prey, but she's mostly docile."

"She catches vipers?!"

Matsuyama-san seemed even more confused. *On behalf of my chickens, I apologize for the trouble.*

"Well, anyway… Please come in."

“Thank you.”

“Vipers… The bigger ones can swallow chickens whole, can’t they…?” Matsuyama-san muttered to himself, tilting his head.

Sorry…

Yuma had also tagged along, so I had her stay in the earthen-floor room. Matsuyama-san asked what she ate, and I told him she liked vegetable scraps. “There’s some over there in the corner—feel free to feed them to her.”

“You can eat that, Yuma.”

Yuma nodded, or rather, tilted her neck forward.

Matsuyama-san seemed impressed. “She seems to understand you. She’s pretty smart, huh?”

I’d brought him the usual rice crackers as a gift. *Yes, same as always. I don’t have any other good ideas, unfortunately.*

“Oh, you didn’t have to. Thank you.” His wife took the crackers and went into the room in the back, probably to set them on the Buddhist altar as an offering.

“She really is huge, huh?” Matsuyama-san remarked. “She seems really full of vim and vigor… Uh, you wanted to ask about vaccines?”

I nodded. “Yes. She’s healthy now, but who knows what might happen in the future?”

“True, true…” Matsuyama-san seemed to be deep in thought. “Well, it depends on the vaccine, but we usually administer them via spray or mix them in the water. Sano-kun, if your chickens are okay with that, I recommend the four-in-one injection.”

“An injection…”

Not a problem for Yuma, I think, but as for the other two…

“Other than that, nasal drops are also an option,” he said. “Do you let them roam free?”

“Yes.”

“In that case, I think mixing them in some water won’t be very effective.”

Matsuyama-san said that if I wanted to get them vaccinated, I should bring them here next time a veterinarian came over, and he’d ask the vet to administer the vaccine. It would cost a pretty penny, sure, but I didn’t really have another option.

I also learned that there were different types of vaccines for chickens: live vaccines—which could be administered via eye

drops, nasal drops, spray, or in drinking water—and inactivated vaccines—which could be administered via injection. *I want the chickens to stay as healthy as possible.*

I originally hadn't intended to stay long, but he ended up giving me a guided tour of the farm. Yuma stayed outside, of course. I was disinfected from top to bottom, put on protective clothes, changed my shoes, and had them disinfected again. *Sanitary conditions are pretty important for farming, huh? Looks like my instincts were right, and this is a place you should only visit with an appointment.*

A picture is worth a thousand words, as they say. I could tell they took the utmost care to ensure proper conditions for the chickens. *Maybe I should be nicer to my chickens too.*

I wasn't expecting much, but since we were on the topic of chickens anyway, I decided to also ask him about the dyed chicks from the festival stall. As expected, he just apologized and said he didn't know anything about that—he said that the stall owner had procured them on their own. He did mention that usually, those stalls sell male chicks unfit for meat, though. *That doesn't explain Tama and Yuma.*

He said he'd let the veterinarian know about me and that I should come here again next time they visited. *Thank you.*

I wonder how Katsuragi-san's and Aikawa-san's animals are faring. I doubt they've shown them to a veterinarian.

"You came all the way here, so why not eat something before you go?" Matsuyama-san offered.

"Can I?!"

I felt like Yuma was glaring angrily at me, but the chicken meat was delicious. *I love chicken! I also love fried chicken!* Matsuyama-san also gave me a bunch of frozen meat he'd butchered himself. *What should I give him in return next time? I'd better up my gift game for Yumoto-san's sake as well.*

***

I began my preparations for the rainy season by messaging Aikawa-san. He replied promptly.

"Landslide prevention? I usually make do with nets and fences. You can buy plastic fences that are easy to set up."

As expected, Aikawa-san was thorough in his preparations.

"Sorry, I actually have no idea where to even begin… Could I ask you to teach me more about it?"

"Yes, no problem."

I'm glad I can enlist the help of a more experienced mountain dweller.

I had indeed noticed, when visiting Aikawa-san, that the roads on his mountain were very well maintained. I decided I wanted to get another good look, so I took Pochi and Yuma with me to pay him a visit. Tama absolutely refused to go. *I don't think she's* afraid *of snakes. She eats vipers all the time, and the other day she caught a rat snake in the village. The rat snake wasn't harmful or anything. I just let it go.*

The next day, I checked the conditions of Aikawa-san's mountain as I drove along its roads. The grass was neatly trimmed, and he'd put up nets in places that seemed to be at a higher risk of landslides. *I get the impression that he might be a bit of a perfectionist.* I caught sight of something that looked like a wooden fence. *What's that?* Other than the metal fence at the foot of the mountain, he seemed to be taking care to make everything look as natural as possible.

"Rin-san, Ten-san, how are you doing?"

I parked my truck next to Aikawa-san's. The two snakes—one a half woman, half snake wearing a short-sleeved shirt and the other just a regular huge snake—greeted me. *A regular huge snake? It's either "regular" or "huge," no?*

I was about to hop out of the truck, but Pochi and Yuma were already outside and standing in front of me. *I don't think there's any need to be so wary, but the snakes* are *scary up close, and they* do *seem to have a problem respecting personal space, so…*

Ten-san headed toward the house and pressed the doorbell. With his mouth. *Maybe I'll film this and upload it to social media.* (*No, I won't.*)

"Yes?"

I heard Aikawa-san's voice, and the glass door slid open. "Oh, hello, Sano-san."

"Hello, Aikawa-san. Thanks for having me over today."

"I'm glad I can be of help."

I feel like his effortless nice-guy personality might also be part of

the reason his stalker felt so attracted to him. Of course, that's a sensitive topic for him, so I'll keep it to myself.

Aikawa-san had told me he didn't have much contact with the villagers—besides his fellow hunters. He'd bought the mountain, done all the paperwork and maintenance stuff, and he went to the village or the nearby town once in a while for shopping. He'd gone to the village on the day of the festival when he'd gotten the snakes, but other than that, he didn't spend much time there.

He usually left the fence gate open, and he'd told the villagers they were free to come by and hunt or pick plants if they liked. I remembered I'd heard at the village before about how well-kept this mountain was.

I thought we were going to check the mountain roads straightaway, but he served us tea and a simple snack made with green beans, bonito flakes, and soy sauce to go with it.

"This is really good," I remarked.

"Glad to hear it. I'm making rice with green beans today. I'd love to have you stay for lunch."

You could say this guy is...a real human bean. Sorry.

"Landslide prevention, was it?" he continued. "Like I told you, for me it's nets and plastic fences."

"Right."

He showed me what the plastic fences were like. They were brown and had a wood texture, so they didn't stand out. The stakes went pretty deep into the ground, so the fence was stable. It looked simple, and simple to maintain as well.

"I usually buy a bunch of these," he said. "It's easy to set them up yourself—really convenient, you know."

"I see. This definitely looks like it helps."

"They do help, but it's also important to maintain the mountain regularly," he added with a wry smile.

Yes, you don't have to remind me...

"Your mountain was never totally abandoned though, so it shouldn't be too much work."

"That's true."

"Besides..."

Aikawa-san had a stern expression. *What is it?*

"I guess I just got lucky, but ever since I got Rin and Ten, there hasn't really been any damage to the mountain..."

“What do you mean by that?”

“Well, last year we had damage from typhoons and heavy rainfall. I heard a lot of trees in the mountains around here fell down because of that, but luckily, my mountain was safe.”

“That *is* pretty lucky.”

“When I went to the town or the village after that, I heard about how bad the landslides were and how some people had to evacuate. They asked me if I was okay in the mountains. But nothing happened here.”

“Hmm.”

“If that’d only happened once or twice, I’d write it off as a coincidence, but last year, there were frequent evacuation orders around here.”

“Oh, there were?”

So this means my mountain will be plenty dangerous if I don’t take proper care of it, no? Also, even if there’s an evacuation order, where do I evacuate to? Would the roads even be usable in such a situation?

“I can’t be too optimistic, but I’ve started thinking maybe it’s thanks to Rin and Ten.”

“That would be nice, yes.”

I didn’t know what to make of it either. *Sure, we’re talking about a snake-human hybrid—it wouldn’t surprise me* that *much if she could control the weather with magical powers or something of the sort. That’s just being complacent, though. I think Aikawa-san might be a rather superstitious person. Well, I* can *understand why you’d grow superstitious if you had Rin-san around.*

I looked at Yuma, who was standing beside me. She cocked her head cutely. *Now, a* chicken *controlling the weather* would *be pretty surprising. It’s better if I don’t count on any of that—I should just prepare thoroughly.*

After that, we checked around the roads on Aikawa-san’s mountain, and I noted anything that I thought might be important. Now the only thing left to do was to actually buy all this stuff. The rainy season was just around the corner, so I had to hurry. *I wonder how Katsuragi-san is preparing.*

After getting home, I ordered as many of the supplies as I could, then let out a sigh.

I’d used Yumoto-san’s address for online shopping, as well as mail. Aikawa-san said he had packages delivered to the foot of the

mountain. *True, there was a mailbox by the fence.* The delivery people were already used to it, and they always gave him a call before deliveries. He went down to the fence to pick them up. *If you're ordering supplies for mountain life, it* does *make sense to have them delivered to the mountain. Maybe I should do that too. But not for now.*

I was more affected by the whole ruined engagement thing than I'd thought.

My ex-fiancée and I had been engaged and just about to get married. I'd lived in a place with a lot of neighborhood socialization and had worked for a local company, so everyone had known about my engagement—then, naturally, they'd all found out about how she'd walked out on me.

I couldn't stand all the stares…

My ex? I'd loved her, and I'd really wanted to build a family with her. Shortly before our marriage, she'd said she wanted to do a short-term student exchange. I'd told her that if it was only a month, I didn't mind. But she never came back. She'd said her world had felt cramped, and she'd rather go to college overseas than get married…

"Gah, this sucks…" I muttered.

"Sucks."

"Sucks."

"Sucks."

Yeah, thanks.

I burst out laughing. *I'm really glad I have the chickens with me.* Yuma cuddled up to me.

"Thanks, you guys."

I hugged Yuma. *They've really grown huge.*

Her parents had felt guilty about her unilaterally calling off the engagement, and they'd given me a hefty sum as compensation. *Probably wanted me to forget about it all.* I'd met her at my former workplace, so I hadn't wanted to stay there. That was what led to me buying this mountain on an impulse—and getting the chickens.

Am I maybe…depressed?

Fed up with everything, I turned off the lights and went to bed. *The dark soothes my soul.*

Katsuragi-san and Aikawa-san are also carrying their own

emotional scars. Mine might not be as bad, but it's still there. And I won't, can't *share it with anyone. It's the same for them too. Here's hoping all of our scars will go away someday.*

6. Getting Along with Neighbors and the Importance of Vaccines

I always got a bit nervous when messaging Katsuragi-san. *Did I write anything uncalled for? Am I being annoying at all?*

The other day, on my way back from Yumoto-san's, I ran into her acquaintance Yamanaka-san, who asked me how Katsuragi-san had been doing. I told her we exchanged messages every now and then, and she asked me to look after her. I just gave her a vague smile.

She must be worried about Katsuragi-san too. Honestly, right now, I still don't want to deal with women around my age if I can avoid it. Aikawa-san said the same thing. Uh, not that this means I'm switching teams *or something like that. Don't get the wrong idea.*

Yamanaka-san seemed troubled, but I didn't understand why she expected me to be that much of a busybody. *If Katsuragi-san herself asks me to help with something, I'll be glad to, but I'm not "looking after her" because someone else asked me to.* Having said that, I *was* aware of the circumstances involving her ex-boyfriend, and I kept that in mind.

With a sigh, I decided to drop Katsuragi-san a message: "Rainy season is just around the corner. How have you been faring lately?" I wasn't actually expecting a reply, so I put my phone back in my pocket.

I drove up to the cemetery—the same place I'd gone flower viewing with Yuma before. It was a two, maybe three-minute drive. Back in the day, there used to be a few people (two households, to be precise) living up here, but they'd moved to the village at the foot of the mountain five years ago. By the time I got here, the old houses had already been cleared out and left at the mercy of the weather.

However, the graves still remained. Some people who moved away had taken the remains of the dead with them, but needless to say, it wasn't possible to do that for every single grave, so there were still a fair number of people resting in eternal slumber here. I'd asked the villagers to let me know in advance when they

wanted to come visit the graves, but so far, the only one who had come was the former village head. *Maybe it'll get more visitors in the fall…or maybe no one will come. Who knows?*

After tending to the cemetery—washing the graves, picking weeds, and so on—I set some flowers and water on the graves. I'd picked the flowers on the mountain, looking for the prettiest ones I could find. I clasped my hands and prayed for a peaceful rest for the deceased and also that they'd watch over me and my chickens.

They're not gods *or anything, but I think it's a good idea to pay my respects to the people who lived here before me.*

If not for the dense vegetation on the mountainside, this cemetery would overlook the village. *That was probably their intention when they decided to build the cemetery here. Maybe they'd appreciate it if I cut the trees down?*

But first, I had work to do on the roadsides, and it had to be done from top to bottom. *Boy, I've got a lot of work ahead of me…*

The chickens were out and about, full of energy as always. *I could use some of their energy.*

Pochi came to me with a viper in his beak. "Jeez, again…" *Waaay too many on this mountain.*

I didn't have a bottle on me, nor did I want the snake bad enough to bother going back to get one, so I just let them eat it. I walked away as the three chickens began to devour it. *I've gotten somewhat used to them tearing it apart, but it's still not a pretty sight.*

I checked my phone and found that Katsuragi-san had messaged me back: "Hello, I'm doing fine, thank you. Recently, the peas I planted ripened, and I've got a lot of them. Why don't you come over for a meal sometime?"

I froze for a moment. *She…doesn't have any ulterior motives, I'm sure. She's probably just lonely.*

"Thanks. What time would be good for you?" After replying, I realized that maybe she was just being polite, and I regretted my message. Thankfully, she soon replied back with date suggestions that would work for her.

"Pochi, Tama, Yuma… Teach me how to talk to girls…"

Yuma trotted over to me, but Pochi and Tama just stared at me and gave me the cold shoulder. *That hurts, you know?*

I knew they weren't being cold to me on purpose—the chickens each had their own unique personalities, and Yuma just so

happened to be kind and caring in a straightforward way. *I* do *wish they'd be nicer to me in times like these, though. Yeah, yeah, I know—I'm an adult, and I should be able to look after myself. Whatever.*

Tama and Yuma tagged along the day I went to Katsuragi-san's mountain.

"What about you, Pochi?" I asked, and as usual, he replied by lifting his head, puffing out his chest, and clucking—his way of saying, "Leave the house to me!"

"I'm counting on you then, Pochi. See you later."

Just then, I heard my phone ring. It was a message from Aikawa-san.

"I've come into some quality liquor—would you like to come by for a drink?"

He must be feeling lonely. I'm probably the only one here who knows about his circumstances, after all. I ultimately decided to accept his invitation, and I messaged back, "I've got some business to take care of today—how about tomorrow?" He promptly agreed. I did plan to come back from Katsuragi-san's before sunset, but you never knew what might happen, so it was probably a good idea to make sure I had no scheduling conflicts—even if letting him know about an eventual change of plans was as easy as messaging him. *Well, either way, I gotta tend to the mountain every day.*

Over at the neighboring mountain, the fence gate had been left unlocked. I went inside and locked it behind me. *Would be nice if we could lock it remotely or something. But then, I suppose it's actually safer that we have to check our surroundings when opening and locking the gate.*

I parked my truck next to Katsuragi-san's. Hearing the sound of the engine, she looked outside, and our eyes met. She was heavily dressed—work clothes, a straw hat with a towel tucked in, another towel around her neck, and gloves on her hands. It was still reasonably cool up here in the mountains at this time of year, but this was probably too much clothing for midsummer.

"Hello."

"Hello, Sano-san!"

I helped her carry a basket full of vegetables—tomatoes, komatsuna, peas, and such—that she'd harvested. *I doubt she can eat all of this by herself. Tomatoes, huh? I thought they ripened in*

summer, but it looks like they're already good to harvest.

"Thank you! I wasn't expecting this big of a harvest," Katsuragi-san said gleefully. "Please also take some with you, if you'd like."

"Thank you, I'd appreciate it."

The weather was a lot nicer than the last time I'd visited her. *It's probably a bit too hot down at the village, but up here, it's just right. Well…other than the bugs.*

"Where's Tatsuki-san?"

"He's…over there in the shade, I think."

"I'll go say hi."

I went looking for the dragon with Tama and Yuma. He was much closer than I'd thought—resting under a tree by the fields—which startled me. *I'm almost tempted to take a picture and upload it to social media.* (*Again, I won't.*) *I'm sure he's also worried about Katsuragi-san and tries to stay by her side as much as possible.*

"Hello there, Tatsuki-san. Do you mind if my chickens eat some of the bugs around here?"

He cracked open his eyes and gave a slight nod.

"Thank you. Tama, Yuma, he said it's okay."

Suddenly, for some reason, Tama walked over to him and began to peck at his body.

"T-Tama?!"

"Wow, is she picking the bugs from his body, like an oxpecker? That's amazing! Ah, or maybe it's more like a crocodile bird?"

Did she just call the dragon a crocodile…? Tatsuki-san himself seemed to be enjoying it, so I figured it was okay, though I did get pretty nervous for a moment there.

Incidentally, the oxpecker that Katsuragi-san mentioned is an African bird that perches on large animals and eats ticks and parasites from their bodies. It's not exactly a symbiotic relationship, but the animals let the oxpeckers do their thing, so it is, to some extent, mutually beneficial. Crocodile birds are said to exhibit similar behavior, except with crocodiles, and unlike oxpeckers, that is *supposedly a symbiotic relationship.*

I set the basket full of vegetables next to the front door.

"I'll go get us some tea," Katsuragi-san said.

"Thank you," I replied as I sat down on the veranda. Katsuragi-san was a woman near my age—I had zero intention of going inside. *The house is not particularly large, anyway.* She soon came

back with tea and rice crackers.

The view from her veranda was nice enough. The grass looked well tended, and there was a wooden fence around the house, with trees beyond it.

“I need to prepare lunch. Can you wait here for a bit?” she asked me.

“Got it.”

Seems pretty peaceful here. I saw Tatsuki-san crawling toward the house. Tama was out and about. Yuma, as always, stayed near me and occasionally ate bugs and stuff. *Thanks, Yuma.*



“Yuma, I’m okay, so you can go play if you want to.”

She cuddled up to me. *I have the cutest chickens in the world.*

“Sorry to keep you waiting!”

Katsuragi-san came back with *massive* servings (the kind you’d see in cartoons) of rice with green peas, miso soup, and cucumber salad.

“That’s…quite a lot of food.”

“Sorry, I got carried away again…”

The green peas-to-rice ratio was also crazy—almost the same amount of each. It wasn’t exactly the most balanced meal, but it *was* pretty delicious.

The topic soon shifted to maintenance of the mountain. “Actually, I pay a maintenance fee and have the villagers come over to take care of the mountain,” she explained. *Makes sense—it* is *pretty hard work.*

“I see—so there’s always that option too.”

“Other than that, you could also ask someone from the village to help with simple tasks like lawn mowing.”

True, that’s also a good option. It’s a bit too much to take care of all by myself. I’m impressed that Aikawa-san manages to get by.

I wasn’t too sure if this was even applicable in her case, but I figured I might as well also ask her about animal vaccines.

“I…don’t think I’ve ever heard of vaccines for *this* sort of animal,” she said.

“Right, I thought so. Not exactly your usual pet.”

“Maybe there *are* vaccines I can get him. I want him to stay by my side for as long as possible. Maybe I should look into it…”

I’d never heard of vaccines for reptiles. (*Have you?*)

“So how have things been lately?” I asked.

“Nothing out of the ordinary. I haven’t heard any rumors about my ex since Golden Week, so I’m a bit relieved. Sorry for the trouble…” Katsuragi-san apologized and bowed to me.

“Don’t worry about it. I’m glad I could be of help.” *Besides, nothing had actually happened. Thankfully.*

“Um…” She lowered her gaze. “I know I’m being impudent, but I’d really appreciate it if you could come by and check on me every now and then…”

Now, what does she mean by that?

“Well, if you let me know…and I’m not busy or anything…” I

mumbled. “I guess…”

“Thank you.”

We were sitting more than a meter apart from each other, with Yuma between us “protecting” me. Yuma paced here and there, pecking at the ground and walking over to Katsuragi-san, who petted her wings, then coming back and cuddling up to me.

Katsuragi-san must be lonely too, like Aikawa-san. That’s all there is to it. I’m sure she has no other intentions.

She handed me a big plastic container filled to the brim with food—just like last time—along with some vegetables. I then returned home. *“Getting carried away” doesn’t even begin to describe it; she made* way *too much food. At least it’s pretty good.*

Tomorrow, I’d be visiting Aikawa-san and staying the night. *I’m sure I have nothing to worry about…right? What am I even thinking? I must be pretty tired.*

Speaking of which, what’s up with Rin-san, anyway? How does a snake even grow a human torso? I’m kind of afraid to find out, honestly.

Tama wanted to stay home again.

“Hmm, I’m not so sure about this… I’ll be staying the night there…”

I was a bit worried about leaving her all by herself for a day.

“Come on, Tama, you should come too,” I tried persuading her, but she ran away—not that far, but too far to go and catch her.

“Tama…”

I tried calling out to her once more and got pecked by Pochi. *He’s probably trying to tell me it’s fine, but I’m still worried.* Tama showed no signs of changing her mind, leaving me no choice but to give up on convincing her. My chickens were far too strong and fast for me to catch, and I’d even gotten a kick to the face once when I’d tried chasing them around—this had been back when they’d just become adult chickens.

“I’ll leave the house unlocked, so make sure to sleep inside, okay?” *The chickens could open doors with their legs and beaks.*

I loaded buckets full of crayfish onto the truck and headed over to Aikawa-san’s mountain. Once there, I locked the fence gate, drove up to Aikawa-san’s house, and parked my truck next to his. The snakes came over to greet me.

“Hello, Rin-san, Ten-san. I’ll be staying over tonight. Is it okay if I

let the chickens eat bugs?"

Pochi and Yuma immediately stationed themselves in front of me. *I already told you, there's no need to be so wary of the snakes.*

"Okay."

"I don't mind."

As usual, I had absolutely no idea where Ten-san's voice was supposed to be coming from.

"Oh, here—I also brought you this."

I took the two crayfish buckets from the truck and set them down. I had the chickens catch more than usual since we'd be staying the night. *Aren't there way too many crayfish, though? Maybe I ought to check the other rivers too…*

"Sano, nice person."

"Sano, like."

"Er… It was the chickens who caught them, not me…"

The snakes seemed to have taken a liking to me—they crept closer, but frankly, the sight of two huge snakes slithering toward me scared me to death.

Just as I was thinking about how to escape this situation, Aikawa-san showed up to save the day.

"Oh, hello there, Sano-san." *Is that a halo I see around his head?*

"Aikawa-san, hi… Uh, the crayfish…"

"Wow, you caught this many?! Thanks. Rin, help me carry this."

Aikawa-san and Rin-san took the buckets and went toward the fields. To my relief, Ten-san followed them. *Is it just me, or is that snake getting longer? I'm aware they're friendly to me, but it's still a terrifying sight up close.* I sighed deeply. *"Beware of Wild Animals"? Well put.*

"I'm back. Pochi-san, Yuma-san, hi there. Please make yourselves at home."

Aikawa-san was polite and courteous to the chickens too. *I feel everyone around here is pretty open-minded when it comes to pets. The villagers don't seem too surprised by my chickens either. Are there other households with pets like these, I wonder. Is it even correct to call them "pets" in the first place? Sometimes it feels like* they're *the ones taking care of me, as much as it pains me to admit it…*

Pochi went off to patrol Aikawa-san's mountain, and Yuma stayed with me, as always. We sat down in the large room by the entrance. That was when I realized I hadn't bought anything for

Aikawa-san. *Crap, why didn't I remember sooner...*

"Sorry, I didn't bring anything today..."

Aikawa-san looked confused. "What are you talking about? You brought all those crayfish for Rin and Ten. Thank you—they were really happy." He served us some tea. Today's snack was cucumber and enoki mushroom salad. The mushrooms had such large caps that I couldn't tell what they were at first.

"Thank you. Oh...? Are these enoki?"

"That's right. I bought a growing kit last year and have been growing them at home," he explained with a smile.

"A growing kit?!" *I didn't even know that was a thing.* I was impressed with how Aikawa-san seemed to always be trying new things. The salad was excellent too.

"This is the liquor I told you about..." he said, showing me a bottle. I'd instinctively assumed he was talking about Japanese sake, but it was actually something else—a Chinese spirit in a red box.

"This is Chinese liquor, right? Do you drink it often?"

"No, I just got it as a present. The acquaintance who sold me this mountain invites me to his home in the nearby town every few months, and he gave it to me last time I went over there. He said it was a present from someone who'd been to China on a work trip, but he asked me to take it off his hands since he doesn't drink alcohol."

"I see... What is it called?"

"It's called mao-tai, apparently. It's pretty strong, so they usually serve it on the rocks or with water."

"Is this different from Shaoxing wine?"

"Yes, seems like it's another type of liquor."

Aikawa-san had also prepared a lot of finger food, so I was looking forward to a fun night of drinks. I took a bath before sunset (he had an open-air bath), and we began drinking.

For food, we had pickled vegetables, fried chicken, and fried fish that he'd caught in the river, as well as dried fish. For drinks, aside from the mao-tai, we also had beer and sake. *I* really *should have brought something...*

"This fried chicken is fantastic," I exclaimed. I looked at Aikawa-san, realizing my blunder, then at Pochi and Yuma. The chickens didn't seem to mind at all, thankfully.

“Er, my bad. This might have been an insensitive menu choice…” Aikawa-san apologized.

“Oh, it’s okay. I ate chicken meat the other day when I visited the chicken farm nearby. I don’t mind, really.”

“Oh, how was the chicken farm, by the way?”

“They have a pretty good operation running.”

Eventually, the topic had shifted to vaccines. Aikawa-san pondered for a moment.

“Vaccines, huh? I don’t hear much about vaccines for reptiles. And besides…” He glanced over at Rin-san. “Even if they *do* exist, in Rin’s case it might be, uh, a little complicated…”

“Does Rin-san always look like that?” I asked.

“Yes—she developed her human half about a year after I got her. She’s been like that ever since.”

“You mentioned it just happened suddenly one day, right? Did something trigger it?”

That was what I was most curious about. *I doubt this is ever gonna happen, but what if one day I wake up to find that Yuma has turned into a cute girl?* I glanced over at Yuma, who was eating vegetable scraps. *Pfft, yeah, right.*

“Hmm… Well, I’ve given it a lot of thought myself, but… I wonder if *that* could have been the trigger.”

So he does *have a possible idea.*

He told me that a year after he’d purchased the snakes, they’d already been around two meters long and pretty thick. The patterns on their scales looked somewhat like the patterning on pythons, but they didn’t quite match. Aikawa-san would often take Rin-san along on drives—Ten-san didn’t like riding in the truck very much.

One day, in N-Town, some women had hit on Aikawa-san. *It’s the face, isn’t it? He* does *look like that one idol. Me? No, I’ve never been hit on. Not even a single time in my entire life. Sigh. Anyway…* At the time, Aikawa-san still hadn’t gotten fully over his fear of women brought on by the stalking incident, and being hit on had given him some unpleasant flashbacks, so he’d fled into the truck. The women had come over to the truck, and just when Aikawa-san had been starting to panic, Rin-san had popped her head up from the passenger’s seat, scaring off the women. Relieved, Aikawa-san had hugged Rin-san, and they’d gone home after he calmed down.

“I know it’s pretty pathetic, but later that night, I vented to Rin and Ten, and I mentioned how these people would have probably left me alone if there’d been a woman riding in the passenger seat. But since I was scared of women, I didn’t have anyone who could help me with that. I didn’t know what to do. And then the next morning…”

“Rin-san looked like this?”

“She was sleeping next to me. I was freaked out—I had no idea who this unknown woman was that I’d brought home.”

“You assumed *you*’d brought *her* home, huh…”

“I’d had too much to drink the night before, so I didn’t know what might have happened.”

Right, I’m sure if I woke up next to an unknown naked woman—at least, as far as her upper body is concerned—I’d probably make the same assumption.

“I was about to run away when I caught sight of her lower body, which confused me even more.”

“I bet…”

Rin-san was right in front of me, so I obviously knew she was real, but if I’d only seen her in pictures, I’d probably assume she was CGI.

“I only realized it was Rin because Ten was right next to her…and because her eyes were still the same.”

“Ah… That explains my first impression of her…”

Rin-san’s upper body looked like a beautiful woman with long hair, but when I first saw her in the dark, I’d gotten the impression that she looked “sort of like a snake.” Now, I finally knew the reason even her human half seemed snakelike.

We ate most of the food and continued to drink while occasionally nibbling on snacks. The mao-tai was transparent like sake, and I’d heard it was a type of Chinese liquor called baijiu. It was stronger than Japanese sake, but also surprisingly easy to drink, and as a result, I was already pretty tipsy.

“So, I’ve told you my story, but what about you, Sano-san? Why did you buy the mountain?”

“Eh, nothing as dramatic as your story. My fiancée left me, and I got fed up with everything…”

I was pretty ashamed of myself, so I hadn’t told my story to anyone here other than the Yumotos. However, it seemed that the

alcohol had considerably loosened me up—plus, it was just the two of us here. It'd just slipped out.

Aikawa-san cocked his head. "Can I ask why that happened?"

"We were engaged and had already arranged everything, just counting down the days… Then she decided, right before we got married, that she wanted to do a study abroad program. I said I didn't mind as long as she came back in time for the preparations for the wedding… A one-month program is fine… And then…"

I felt tears roll down my face.

"Sano-san, that's enough. I'm sorry."

"She…never came back. She said she wanted to study more. That it's a whole big world out there. That she wanted to go to college abroad… And that she didn't want to get married…"

The tears just wouldn't stop.

What am I crying over? I couldn't really tell how I actually felt about my ruined engagement. Sorrowful? Desolate? Exasperated?

"It must be tough on you," Aikawa-san murmured.

"I know it might not be a big deal compared to stalking or domestic violence…but why did it have to happen *then*, of all times? Why didn't she go study abroad sooner and stay out of my life? Why that timing?!"

If she had quit her job sooner and gone to study abroad or whatever else she wanted, we would've never met. Why did I have to get pulled into her orbit?

The tears overflowed nonstop. I couldn't rein in the kaleidoscope of negative emotions.

She'd chosen to pursue her own dreams instead of a future with me. *That's all right if you want to chase your dreams. Just don't drag me into it, please.*

Aikawa-san set a cup down in front of me.

"Huh?" I asked.

"It's water. Fresh and tasty."

I took the cup and gulped it down. It was cold and delicious.

Right, I'd better watch out for dehydration from all the drinking and crying.

The last thing I remembered before passing out was feeling very thankful for Aikawa-san's kindness and thoughtfulness.

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The next morning, after the headache had subsided a bit, I knelt down and apologized profusely.

"I'm really, really sorry about yesterday!"

For some reason, Pochi jumped on my back. *Urgh, I'm gonna die…*

"Please raise your head," Aikawa-san said kindly. "I also had too much to drink… Sorry. Pochi-san, you should get off him too."

Aikawa-san shooed Pochi from my back. *I really can't apologize enough.* Pochi was still standing nearby though, as if looking for the next opportunity to jump on me. *Why are you being so mean, Pochi?*

"I hope we can continue to get along well, Sano-san. After all…you're the only one I've told about Rin and Ten."

I raised my head. *Huh. That's true. Hey, Pochi, stop it! Don't jump on me!*

"I'm sorry for being such a loser…" I mumbled.

"I don't think you're a loser at all, Sano-san. I mean, you're not at fault here in any way."

Oh no, I can feel the tears coming again.

"Thank you…"

"Feel free to fall in love with me."

"No freaking way!" *You're giving me goose bumps!*

"Just kidding. At least you seem to be your usual self again."

"Thanks. Hey, Pochi, get off me!" *Stop ruining the nice mood!*

Aikawa-san and I started our day with some good laughs…which made my headache come back.

I drank the tea Aikawa-san had brought me and thanked him reticently. With my hangover, there wasn't much else I could say, even if I wanted to. From the corner of my eye, I could see the chickens, and unusually for her, Yuma seemed angry at Pochi—she was pecking at him. Pochi ran around the cramped room trying to escape her onslaught. *Next time, you better think twice before you jump on people's heads!*

The whole ordeal had taught me a good lesson about the importance of moderation and holding one's liquor.

I was still at Aikawa-san's, trying to recover from my hangover, when my phone rang—it was Matsuyama-san, from the chicken farm. He told me the vet would be coming in two days or so. I replied that I'd be there. *Life in the mountains sure is busy.*

I wondered if they had vaccines for reptiles. *Though even if they do, I doubt they give them to two-meter-long dragons or half human, half snakes well over three meters long. Maybe they could strike a TV deal with a kaiju show or something.*

But perhaps the same could be said of my adorable chickens…

No way, I'm not gonna let anyone make a freak show out of my chickens! I shook my head.

I told Aikawa-san about how I wasn't sure what to bring Matsuyama-san as a gift, and he suggested assorted fruits. That wasn't the best gift for a single man, but it would be a great choice for households with women or children.

The next day I went over to N-Town with Aikawa-san and bought a fruit assortment. There were already cherries for sale. *Already that time of the year, huh?*

"You really have an eye for detail, don't you, Aikawa-san?"

"There's a lot you need to take care of when you're living in the mountains, but most of the time, you're all by yourself, so that gives you a lot of free time to think. Sometimes you end up overthinking things, but I feel it also gives you plenty of opportunities to come up with good ideas."

A lot of free time to think… I hope I can become like that too.

Yuma had come along to town. Aikawa-san and I had parked our trucks next to each other, and when we came back, we were greeted with the peculiar sight of Yuma and Rin-san seemingly talking to each other. Rin-san was in the passenger seat, while Yuma, for some reason, had moved over to the driver's seat. They'd both opened the windows, so that was probably why it had seemed that way.

"They're both girls, right? Hopefully they get along." Aikawa-san laughed. *Yup, friendship is beautiful.*

I gave Aikawa-san some cherries as a token of gratitude for always helping me out.

"Why, you didn't have to… But thanks. I'm sure Rin will be happy."

Is the stereotype about girls having a sweet tooth true for snakes too? Incidentally, when I let the chickens try the cherries I bought for myself, they ate them all. I heard the seeds are harmful to chickens, so I told them not to eat those. In any case, I don't know what their sense of taste is like, but I guess everyone likes sweet stuff…

The next day was when I planned to visit the chicken farm. Last time I visited, I told Matsuyama-san about how I'd like to get the chickens vaccinated, but first, I needed the vet to have a look at them—that was the main purpose for today's visit.

However, when I told the chickens to get in the truck…

Pochi ran away.

I was getting the truck ready when he trotted off into the distance, in the direction of the forest.

"Oh, boy…"

Sure, I did tell them I'd be taking them to the vet, but I didn't mention anything about vaccines. Did his instincts warn him about it?

"Heeeey, Pochi! Come on, we're leaving! Come baaack!"

I could just barely see his head peeking from behind the trees.

"Tama, Yuma, isn't there something you can do?"

"Can do?"

"Can't do."

Eh?

Wait a minute, am I hearing things, or did one of them just say, "Can't do?" I stared at Tama and Yuma intently.

However, we had business to attend to, and I couldn't spend all day on this staredown. Today was just a regular examination, so I decided to give up on Pochi this time.

"Pochi, next time, you're going too—don't forget that! Take good care of the house while we're away."

I thought I saw Pochi's comb moving up and down. *He's probably nodding and saying, "Okay," but I don't know… I have a feeling next time won't go smoothly either. He can easily outrun me if he wants to. I'll try asking if we can go with another option besides injections.*

I headed over to Matsuyama-san's house along with Tama, Yuma, and the fruit assortment I'd gotten as a present for him.

"Hello there."

"Oh, hi, Sano-kun."

It was his wife who greeted me—I handed her the fruit assortment and watched her face light up.

"Oh dear! Oh my, thank you! You really didn't have to."

Well, well, that's a very *different reaction compared to last time when I brought rice crackers. Looks like fruits are a good ace in the hole when it comes to presents for women. Nice job, Aikawa-san!*

“Hi, Sano-kun.”

Matsuyama-san showed up from the direction of the chicken farm, along with another man I wasn’t acquainted with.

“Hello. Thank you for contacting me,” I said.

“Oh, it’s no problem. I had some personal interest too, you see.”

The other man’s eyes widened when he saw my chickens. “Whoa… They really are *quite* large…”

“Sano-kun, let me introduce you,” said Matsuyama-san. “This is Kimoto-san. He’s a veterinarian. Kimoto-san, this is Sano-san, the owner of those huge chickens.”

“Pleasure to meet you. I’m Kimoto, and I work in S-Town as a veterinarian.”

“I’m Sano. Nice to meet you.”

S-Town was located to the south of the village, beyond the mountain range, and it was larger than N-Town to the west, if I wasn’t mistaken. Kimoto-san was an affable old man with his fair share of gray hair. *First impression: regular old man.*

“I was told there were three of them…”

“Yes, sorry. One of them, uh, maybe he sensed danger or something and didn’t want to come…”

“You let them roam free, right? Well, at this size, there’s not much you can do. Matsuyama-san, do you mind if we go over to your house to measure and examine them?”

“No problem.”

We borrowed the earthen-floor room of Matsuyama-san’s house.

“They’re even larger than Brahmas, huh? Height is 100.3 centimeters. Weight is…7.82 kilograms. Pretty heavy. Is it the tails? Those tails are kind of reptilian… Dinosaurs? Some sort of atavism? Can they open their mouths? Whoa… What are these teeth? Don’t bite me, all right? Ha ha. Never seen anything like this before. Incredible… I bet I could write a paper on them. Okay, that’s it for the examination. They’re very well-behaved chickens, aren’t they?”

Dr. Kimoto turned to me after deftly finishing Tama’s and Yuma’s examinations. *Wait a minute, did they grow bigger again?*

“They do resemble chickens, but they’re closer to feathered dinosaurs. I can give them vaccines for chickens if you want, provided you’re fine with taking responsibility if anything unexpected happens…”

“I see… Um, I heard you can vaccinate them via drinking water.”

“Yes, but that doesn’t necessarily make the vaccines any safer—they’re still *live* vaccines. That’s not to say inactivated vaccines are necessarily safer either. I guess the best course of action here would be to give them the four-in-one and see how it pans out. The vaccines *do* help prevent diseases, but again, that’s if we’re talking about regular chickens…”

“I understand…”

I gazed at Tama and Yuma. Yuma cocked her head cutely.

“I’ll have to talk it over with them.”

I needed to tell Pochi about it too. *My chickens seem to understand human language, so it’s probably a good idea to explain all of this to them before making a decision. It would definitely be for the best if vaccines helped keep them healthy. Leave the natural immunity stuff to humans.*

I was treated to chicken meat, like last time—and it was scrumptious. *Can’t beat freshly slaughtered chicken.* I ignored the glares of disapproval I could feel coming from Tama and Yuma. *Sorry, but I can’t go against my taste buds.*

I decided to visit Dr. Kimoto’s clinic in S-Town at a later date.

Up in the mountains, the rainy season loomed near.

7. A New Problem: Dealing with Humidity During the Rainy Season

Modern humans were blessed to be able to count on dehumidifiers and dryers to help us get through the rainy season. *Technology is incredible!*

Most older houses were made of wood, so I wondered how people back in the day had dealt with humidity. I asked Yumoto-san and Aikawa-san—apparently, they'd used charcoal. *Maybe I should start cultivating the habit of looking things up myself before they get fed up with my questions.*

Aikawa-san had repaired the charcoal kiln that had been in his house and was using it. *A smart choice—there's no shortage of wood here, after all.* I decided to ask the former village head who used to live on my mountain if my home had a charcoal kiln. He told me there *was* one, but it had been left unused for some time. With Old Man Yumoto's assistance in cleaning and repairing the kiln, I succeeded in making charcoal. It was a lot of work, and it took more than a week, but I was able to make a sizable amount. I shared some with the Yumotos and their neighbors, who were quite content with the gift; there were a lot of uses for charcoal. I was glad to be of use, and I decided to do this again next time I made charcoal. (*All of this happened in May, by the way.*)

I'd also asked about other effective methods for dealing with the humidity. One solution was to simply pluck weeds and mow the grass around the house, which apparently made a big difference. My face went pale when I heard that from Aikawa-san—I had actually been *planting* white clover around my home! I'd heard that it was good food for the chickens, so I'd pulled out a cluster by the roots that'd been growing near the fields and had replanted it near the house. White clover was pretty resilient, and you didn't even need to divide the roots—you could just cut off a piece, plant it, and it would still grow.

I thought a house surrounded by flowers would look like something from a fairy tale. I'd been completely unaware of what I was actually doing.

“Tasty!”

“Tasty!”

Well, at least Tama and Yuma were happy about it. I hadn’t planted any right by the front door, but all the chickens had to do was go outside, and there was food all around them. At first, when I’d been planting it, Tama hadn’t known what I’d been doing. She’d pecked at me.

“Ouch! Hey, I’m planting food for you guys around the house! Don’t interrupt,” I’d chided her, and she’d started pacing about. *Heh, I can tell from the way she’s walking that she’s pretty excited. They’re so easy to figure out.*

“Don’t touch it for at least a week or so, got it?” I’d told the chickens, and they’d seemed to heed my warning—they had just loitered around for a while. The clovers had taken root after just a week, so they really *were* pretty resilient plants. This had all happened in late April.

Sometimes, when we went down to the village and stopped by the general store, the children would put flower crowns on the chickens. *That looks pretty cute. Maybe I’ll try making them myself.*

However, I got the impression that Pochi and Tama wouldn’t appreciate the present very much, so I decided to do it when I was alone with Yuma. I looked it up on the internet and found a tutorial.

“So, first you tie the stems together…”

This isn’t going as smoothly as I expected. I checked the tutorial again on my phone. *Wait, I’ve got it wrong. First, you bundle a couple of flowers together and then tie a stem to that.*

“This is harder than I thought.”

Yuma tilted her neck, as if to ask, *Not done yet?*

“You can just go play outside. I’ll call you when I’m finished.”

She nodded and trotted off toward the fields. As for me, I began to realize just how clumsy I was. I thought it was just a matter of getting the hang of it, but I just couldn’t seem to tie the stems together to make a ring.

Yuma came back, probably thinking that I must be done already.

“Uhhh… I couldn’t quite get it right. My bad.” I apologized and put the misshapen flower crown on her. *Yup, I’m definitely not very good at this.*

“My bad?” Yuma cocked her head, which was decorated with flowers. *The crown itself might be misshapen, but this has its own clumsy charm.*

“Yuma, that looks cute.”

“Cute?”

“Yep, cute.”

“Cute!” She flapped her wings happily and ran off. I was a bit disappointed that I couldn’t make a proper one, but seeing Yuma’s reaction made me feel warm and giddy. *Thanks, Yuma. You’re the best.*



Anyway, having white clover near the house was apparently bad for humidity, meaning I'd have to do something about that. Mold was a big concern for wooden houses like mine. I had no choice but to move the flowers somewhere else, and I had to do it before the rainy season set in. *Not that I care about the fairy-tale vibe—it's just a shame I have to move the chickens' food farther away from the house.* While Pochi and Tama were out on patrol, I moved the clover to where it had been originally, near the fields. *Oof, I'm beat.*

Yuma was around, but she didn't peck me. The problem was Tama. In the evening, when she came back, she noticed that the flowers around the house weren't there anymore. "Flower?" She asked inquisitively.

"Sorry, I learned that having them nearby is bad for the house, so I moved them over there, by the fields," I explained, pointing to the flowers.

Tama's gaze remained fixed on me. "Flower."

"I told you already—I had no choice. Otherwise, we might've ended up with no house to live in."

"Flower!" Tama walked up to me, and when I rebuked her again, she pecked at me, much harder than usual.

"Ow! Stop it! That seriously hurts! I'm telling you that it had to be done!"

However, Tama wasn't satisfied with my excuses—she kept pecking me. *Did you really care* that *much about the white clover?* I felt sorry for her, but at the same time, I was dead exhausted from trying to run away from her.

The next day, I woke up stiff and achy—probably from moving all the flowers by myself and running from Tama. She seemed to notice this, and she took the opportunity to peck me even more. *Heartless monster.*

As for Pochi, he also ate the white clover, but he didn't seem to mind not having them right by the house. *Probably a personality thing.*

I was able to weed the area around the house, including the white clover, before the rainy season. *This should help with the humidity.* I didn't want to move *all* the white clover to the fields, though. I ended up putting some in a planter and kept it under

the front eave. *If the chickens eat all of it, I'll just bring more from the fields. Shouldn't be a problem with how hardy clover is. Actually, why didn't I just use planters from the beginning…?*

I still had a few unused planters, so I decided it'd be a good idea to leave a few of them around the house outside of the rainy season. *What's that? You think I pamper my chickens too much? Leave me alone.*

***

There wasn't much I could do outside when it rained—I checked the fields and did a little patrolling, but mostly, I stayed cooped up at home. The chickens still went out on patrol, so I tagged along at least once a day. *Not for too long, though.*

Today was just a light drizzle, so I went to check the river nearby. The water level had clearly risen.

"The water around here is still pretty clear. Why's it so muddy downstream?" I muttered. *A higher water level means more soil, rocks, and that kind of stuff being washed away, so I guess that's why the river looks more latte-colored the farther downstream I go…?*

Because of the potential danger, I checked for landslides from a distance and then went back.

The rainy season made mold grow much more easily, meaning I also had to check inside the house—especially in humid places like the toilet or the bath. I had a dehumidifier running at full power in the tatami room, I'd put charcoal in the toilet and bath, and I also wiped any water droplets whenever I found them.

Being a shut-in is pretty hard work too.

I was also unable to dry my clothes outside, so the clothes dryer was proving very useful. It was really humid up here in the mountains.

I still had a lot of vegetables—the villagers had given me a ton in exchange for charcoal—so thankfully, food wasn't such a big concern.

"No meat, though…"

I opened my fridge and noticed I was running low. *I need my fill of meat to give me energy.*

"No eggs either…" I muttered. I glanced at Yuma, who was standing next to me. She cocked her head. *It'll probably be a while*

until they start laying eggs. Plus, we have Pochi, so the eggs will probably be fertilized, and I don't want to eat that. At least not other than as a last resort...

"Time to go shopping, I guess..."

"I guess!"

Yuma was raring to go. *So cute.*

I had three vipers in bottles. They hadn't shown up for a few days, probably due to the rain, but they were starting to come out again. Recently, Pochi had caught a yamakagashi snake too, and as usual, he'd devoured it after obtaining my permission. *I'm pretty sure those are also supposed to be venomous. Is it okay to let him eat it?* I only thought about this *after* he'd already finished, though. *Too late.* The head and neck, likely the place where its venom was located, were nowhere to be found, so Pochi had probably eaten those too. *I try to avoid watching him eat.*

I observed Pochi for a few days, just in case, but he was full of his usual pep. *What's with these chickens anyway...?*

"Hello. I'm going to the village today. Will you be home?" I asked Yumoto-san over the phone, and he replied affirmatively. He also informed me that the things I'd bought online the other day had just arrived. *Perfect.*

"Oh yeah, I've also got something I'd like your chickens to help with. Can you bring 'em with you when you come? Doesn't have to be all three."

That was an unusual request.

"Help?" I asked.

"I'll tell you when you're here. Nothing to worry about."

"If you want them to go on TV or something like that, I'm sorry, but I'll have to decline."

There's no way I'm letting anyone make a freak show out of my chickens!

Yumoto-san laughed. "No, no, it's nothing of the sort. Anyway, might be hard to talk about it with only one of them, so bring someone who can understand us."

"Okay."

I asked Yuma to bring the other two to me. They were drenched. *Aren't they cold?*

"Looks like the old man needs your help for something," I told them as I dried their wings with a towel. *I must look like a real*

weirdo doing this.

Pochi clucked loudly, probably intending to say he'd go. *That's our Pochi for you! A true man among men!*

"What about you, Tama?"

She looked away. *Okay, so you want to stay and watch over the house. I'll leave that to you.*

Yuma was tagging along too—she'd already intended to go with me from the start. *Aww, thanks.*

"I wonder what it is he needs help with," I mumbled. *Hope it's nothing bad.*

Hearing me, Pochi stared at me with a look of disapproval that seemed to say, Y*ou didn't even ask what it's about?*

I mean, he did *say he'd tell me when I was there.*

Lately, I'd started to feel like I could read the chickens' expressions much better, and that enabled me to see just how astonished Pochi was. *I'm sorry for being such an unreliable owner... Wait, why am I even apologizing to a chicken?*

We left Tama at home and drove down to the village.

This time, I had better presents than usual for the Yumotos—three snakes in bottles, of course, but also assorted fruits. *Well, actually, I still need to pick them up. And at the Yumotos' house, of all places. Sounds crazy, but all my packages are being delivered to their place, and that includes the assorted fruits I bought. Probably not a good idea to pick up the package and give it back to him, so maybe I should put it in the truck first and* then *give it to him.*

Guess I'll stop by the general store on my way home later to buy meat and eggs. After deciding that, I headed straight to the old man's house.

"Hello!"

Usually Machiko-san was outside the house during the daytime, but not with this rain. It had been raining for a few days now, and everything was all damp.

"Oh, hello there, Sho-chan. I see Pochi-chan and Yuma-chan are with you today. That's a big help!" Pochi and Yuma sat quietly as she hugged them.

"Please be careful—they're wet."

I had wiped them with a towel, but their wings were still not completely dry.

She seemed unfazed. "I'll bring a towel, then. Oh, and here's

your package." She pointed to a package on top of the large shoe rack.

"Thank you. Excuse me." I went back to my truck with the package and opened it. *Yep, it's the fruits, just as I thought.* I returned to the house and gave them to her.

"Eeeeh?!" she exclaimed, wide-eyed. "My, you really didn't have to! These must have been pretty expensive, no?"

Looks like it was a hit with her too—you can see it on her face. This is *a lot better than rice crackers, I agree. Aikawa-san really knows his stuff.*

"Just a token of my gratitude for helping me out, so please accept it."

"My, my, thank you! Pochi-chan, Yuma-chan, do you want some veggies?"

Even her voice sounds different from usual. I had no idea fruits were such a great choice for gifts for women. Is it because they tend to like sweets? If so, I wonder if a box of chocolates would have a similar effect.

I'd also brought snakes, of course.

"Hoo, that's quite a lot of vipers," Yumoto-san remarked. "It's starting to look like Brook Mountain was a breeding ground for 'em. Good thing you've got the chickens."

I nodded. "For sure—I don't know what I'd do without them."

Yumoto-san took the bottles and went merrily to the back of the house. It had already been a while since I'd started giving him snakes, and apparently, his friends had been pestering him to let them have a drink of wine.

"You gotta leave 'em in there for at least half a year. Otherwise, it's rude to the snake," he explained.

He must already have a lot of these wine bottles lying around. I shuddered to imagine what it might look like a year from now. *A warehouse filled to the brim with bottles of snake wine…*

I went to get us beverages and then sat down in front of Yumoto-san.

"You're pretty hard at it, eh, Shohei? Remember to have a drink and unwind every now and then."

With a gesture, I politely declined the beer. "I'm sorry, but I still have to drive up into the mountains. I wouldn't want to drive off a cliff because I was under the influence."

Some places had guardrails, but some only had small curbs. All it took to get in serious danger was a slip of the steering wheel. *I should probably also look into doing something about that area.*

"Guess you're right about that," he said. He poured the beer into his own glass.

Needless to say, even if I didn't live in the mountains, drunk driving is still bad. You should avoid driving the next day too, just to be safe.

The pickles they served were great.

"So, you mentioned you had something to ask my chickens," I said. "What is it?"

"Right, about that…" Yumoto-san began to explain.

Almost everyone in the mountain village ran a farm, and there were a fair number of rice paddies. Naturally, this meant the villagers were used to coexisting with various animals and creatures, but it seemed that this year, there'd been a spike in the number of yamakagashi snakes.

"There're already a couple of people who've been bitten. One was all right, but the other is in the hospital. And what's more, they seem to show up near rice paddies a lot, so everyone's having a hard time."

"That's definitely troubling. Now that I think about it, Pochi actually caught one the other day."

"Oh, so the chickens *can* catch them! That's great to hear!"

Because yamakagashi snakes tended to avoid people, biting incidents were uncommon. *Specifically, that's true for yamakagashi in this area. I've heard it might be different in other regions.* Also, the fangs that released venom were in the back of their jaws, meaning shallow bites weren't usually venomous. On the other hand, the venom was stronger when compared to vipers, and they had venom glands in their necks, so if you pressed on their necks, they might release venom. *Apparently, the venom in their necks comes from preying on toads and other creatures.*

"Usually, you wouldn't worry too much about them, but lately, they're being spotted in the village pretty much every day…so yeah," Yumoto-san concluded.

"So that's what you wanted the chickens to help with?" I asked.

"Yep. More snakes means fewer frogs, and do you know what *that* means?"

"More bugs, right?" *I certainly don't want an increase in pests*

either.

"You got it."

"That could throw the ecosystem out of balance…" I turned to my chickens. "Pochi, Yuma, Yumoto-san wants to talk to you both."

Invasive species of frogs had to be dealt with, yes, but there were also native species. I didn't know what could be the reason behind the increase in yamakagashi snakes, but I figured my chickens would be able to help.

"Er, Pochi and Yuma, was it? Thanks for always catching vipers. Have you seen any snakes with red and black patterns around? Those are called yamakagashi. Lately, we've been having trouble with them here in the village."

I saw Pochi and Yuma listening attentively to Yumoto-san, and, once again, I thought, *These are definitely not normal chickens.* I could see them nodding every now and then too, which was pretty funny. *Well, Yumoto-san talking to chickens with a serious look on his face is also quite a sight.*

After hearing what Yumoto-san had to say, Pochi assented with a loud cluck.

"Good! You'll help catch them, then? Thanks, that's a big help," he replied gleefully. I saw Pochi scratching the earthen floor with his feet, and I had a bad feeling about it. I quickly went over and held him.

"Kwaaahh!" Pochi cried loudly. He seemed furious with me. *You were just about to run off into the fields, weren't you?*

"Pochi, not today! We'll come again another day! Okay?!" I protested several times while he pecked at me, but eventually, he gave in. *So you really* were *just about to run off, huh?*

"That's…quite the unusual chicken, all right," Yumoto-san said.

He's not always like this, Yumoto-san… Please believe me! He's a good chicken. Uh…whatever that means. I stared into the distance.

Yumoto-san said he'd tell the other farmers about the chickens and that he'd let me know at a later date—probably would take a couple of days, he said.

Pochi kept pecking at me, but anyway, I bought meat and eggs and went home. *Look, Pochi, I understand that was probably embarrassing for you, but could you stop pecking me? It hurts, you know.* I was lucky I was wearing sturdy work clothes. *Pochi didn't poke any holes in the fabric, but I might have gotten some bruises.*

Yuma didn't seem to mind Pochi pecking me. Now that we were home, she was just lazing around, pecking at the ground.

After finishing my work for the day, I checked my phone to find a message from Aikawa-san. "I can't stand this weather. How have you been faring?" *I wonder if he knows anything about the yamakagashi—he probably knows a thing or two about snakes.* I decided to give him a call, not really expecting much. He picked it up after three rings.

"Hello."

"Hello, Sano-san? How are you doing?"

Aikawa-san was courteous, as usual. I told him about how there had been an unusually large number of yamakagashi around the village and how my chickens had been asked to help with that.

"I wonder if you might have any ideas about why there're so many of these snakes around."

"Uh... Sano-san, have you been keeping up with the news lately?"

"The news...?" *Is this related?*

"The story was about pests in general, not just snakes, but..."

He told me the gist of it: There was a large house in T-Town, which was next to S-Town (the town to the south of the village). The man who'd lived there, a pest control specialist, had passed away last year. His children had gone there to sort through his belongings, and they'd found a large collection of snakes—mostly *venomous* ones—that their father had kept as a hobby. They hadn't known how to deal with them. The children and their mother had been releasing the snakes into the mountains little by little, up until about a month ago. *Quite ironic that the bereaved family of a pest control specialist would do something like that...*

That had gone unnoticed until recently, when a friend of the late father who ran a pet shop had contacted them about it. The children had insisted that they didn't know the snakes were venomous, but either way, it'd resulted in a lot of trouble for everyone.

"Uh... So, could that possibly also explain why there are so many vipers on my mountain...?"

"It's certainly a possibility. I saw in the news that they'd been releasing them onto uninhabited mountains. It's definitely related to the increase in yamakagashi, I think. They say the man kept

many of those."

God, I can't believe this. No wonder I run into so many vipers.

"Do the villagers know about this?"

"There hasn't been that much publicity around this incident. A lot of people probably missed the news."

"Why didn't they just kill the snakes instead of releasing them…?"

"I agree. We're talking about venomous snakes here, so releasing them might come with severe criminal implications too."

There was only one news story about this. I thought maybe I could find out more if I looked it up, but at the end of the day, media was all about views—if no one cared, they would stop pursuing the incident. For me, it was a local happening, which made it all the more worrying.

"Also, Rin caught a habu today."

"A *habu?*!"

Habu were venomous snakes native to the southern region of Okinawa. *Why the heck are there Okinawan snakes here?*

"That…definitely seems related…"

"I've got Rin and Ten to keep me safe and catch them, but who knows what might happen if they show up in the village."

"I'll let Yumoto-san know. Thanks!"

I ended the call and tried to collect my thoughts. The first thing I did was call Old Man Yumoto and ask him if he'd heard the news—he hadn't.

"Yamakagashi aren't that dangerous, but habu are big trouble. We'll probably look around for a professional, but tell the chickens to stay on standby just in case."

"Okay."

"Oh, also, if they have an actual habu, could you ask the guy from the western mountain to show it to us? Just so we know what it looks like."

"I'll ask Aikawa-san."

I called Aikawa-san again. He would be going over to Yumoto-san's place tomorrow, and he asked me to go with him, which I, of course, agreed to.

I sighed deeply. *Who could have imagined something like this was going on?* Yuma cuddled up to me, and I petted her wings. *I guess the animal therapy thing I hear about really does work.*

“Yuma, come here a sec.”

I hugged her tightly. She was still a bit wet from the rain, but it felt nice. Pochi and Tama let me pet them, but there was probably no way they’d let me hug them like this. *Such cold chickens.*

“Yuma, thanks.”

“Thanks!”

I laughed. “Ha ha! I’m the one who should thank you.”

I was suddenly reminded of Katsuragi-san. *Crap. The dragon is probably keeping her safe, but I still need to let her know what’s going on.* I quickly called her.

“Whaaat?! Habu?!”

“They were spotted at the mountain to the west…”

Katsuragi-san seemed to be panicking. I could hear her yelling over the phone, and she didn’t seem to be listening to me. I was wondering what to do when Yuma took my phone from me.

“Yuma?!” *Don’t press that button!*

She dropped the phone on the tatami floor and pressed the “End Call” button with her foot.

“Yumaaaaaaa!” *That was an important conversation!*

Next, she picked up the phone with her beak and ran off with it into the room at the back.

“Yuma, hold on! You’re gonna crack the screen! Please give it baaack!”

She went into that room and dropped the phone on the tatami.

“Yuma… Why would you do this…?”

I picked up the phone reluctantly. It did have a protective case, and it didn’t seem to be broken anywhere. I sighed in relief and glared at Yuma.

“I told you phones are fragile, didn’t I?”

Yuma cuddled up to me. *She’s so adorable. Wait, now’s not the time for that!*

“Now listen here!”

She cuddled even more. *Gah, I know she’s doing it on purpose, but I can’t resist it! Okay! I forgive you! Wait, I’m falling into her trap!*

“Don’t do it anymore, okay?”

More cuddling. I petted her wings. *Okay, I give up. I can’t win. I know I’m spoiling her, but she’s just too cute. Wait! What am I thinking?! Come to your senses!*

“I’ll call Katsuragi-san, so don’t interrupt, okay?”

She still kept cuddling me. I called Katsuragi-san again while petting her. *I'm really not cut out for this…*

"Hello, it's Sano. Sorry, the call got cut off…"

"Sano-san, sorry for panicking earlier… It's hard for me to listen to other people when I'm in that state. I'm really sorry."

She seemed to have calmed down compared to the previous call. *Yuma, looks like it turned out for the best. I still haven't forgiven you, though. Keep cuddling with me.*

I could understand why Katsuragi-san had panicked. I was scared of habu too.

"So what you're saying is that someone might have released habu around here, right?" she asked.

"It's a possibility. I just wanted to let you know that they were spotted on a nearby mountain. Please be careful."

"There shouldn't be any habu around here, right?"

"I've never heard of any. Do you think telling Tatsuki-san what they look like might help?"

"Probably," she replied weakly.

Aikawa-san is bringing the habu they caught to the Yumotos' place tomorrow, so maybe we should all meet up there. I still need to ask Aikawa-san if that's okay, of course.

"Well then, tomorrow Aikawa-san, my other neighbor, will be bringing a habu he caught to Yumoto-san's house. Would you like to go too?"

"Oh, yeah! Sounds good!"

"Okay, I'll let him know."

Well, I should probably ask *him, not "let him know."* I ended the call and dialed Aikawa-san.

"Uh, so all I have to do is show the habu to Katsuragi-san's lizard, right…?"

Aikawa-san was still reluctant to interact with young women. At first, I'd been a bit jealous of his looks, but it seemed there were also downsides—even if you didn't take the stalker incident into account. Perhaps that had just been a trigger. He'd said he never wanted to work a job where he had to interact with people again.

"Uh, well, that and just a basic greeting, I guess."

"I'll go with Rin… If something happens, I'll just say I can't get close to women because Rin is too jealous. Can you cover for me?"

"Okay."

Rin-san was also “protecting” him in that sense. *That might be a bit rude toward Katsuragi-san, but it is what it is. Aikawa-san still hasn’t gotten over his trauma. I think it’ll be okay, though.*

Next, I called Yumoto-san and informed him that Katsuragi-san would also be coming by to see the habu.

“Catching a habu is pretty amazing. Did Aikawa-kun catch it himself?”

“It was one of the large snakes he keeps—the snake caught it.”

“Must be a pretty smart one, like your chickens. A large snake, huh? I’d like to have a look.”

“Er, he’s pretty big, maybe over three meters long. He’s probably impossible to bring somewhere else…”

“Is that so? Ask him if I can go visit him sometime. I wanna see just how big it is!”

“Please don’t tell anyone else about this… You can ask him yourself tomorrow.”

“All right!” Yumoto-san said excitedly. The rat snakes that showed up in the village occasionally were about a meter long—so not that large. Apparently, they ranged from a meter to two meters in length, but they were thin, so that was probably why they didn’t seem so big.

I could understand his curiosity, but there was a need for some degree of courtesy, even among friends. *Well, I guess Yumoto-san and Aikawa-san barely know each other, but still.* I became worried and decided to call Aikawa-san again to ask about it.

“He wants to come here?”

“Yes, it seems he’s developed an interest in Ten-san. It’s okay if you’re not comfortable with that. I just thought I should let you know in advance so you don’t get blindsided by his request tomorrow.”

“Thank you for the warning.” I could imagine Aikawa-san smiling on the other side of the call.

Before I forgot, I later messaged Katsuragi-san to let her know she could go with us tomorrow.

I feel like I spent all day on the phone. Hmm. I don’t think there’s anything else I need to do today.

Just as I was thinking that, I heard a loud sound coming from the front door. It was Tama, who had just come back from patrol, kicking the glass door. *Oh crap, I forgot to leave the door open.*

“Sorry, sorry. Tama, stop kicking the door! You’re gonna break it!”

“Break it!”

“Break it!”

Pochi and Yuma chanted in unison.

Please stop! It’s really gonna break…

8. The Three Mountaineers! Clash of the Monsters!

It rained again the next day. Old Man Yumoto had told me to come around noon, so I spent the morning checking the fields and around the house. Tama was staying home today too.

"Why don't you come along?" I asked, trying to persuade her. I got pecked pretty hard. It was like she was saying, *Don't make me repeat myself!*

Sorry.

Yesterday the chickens had patrolled in the rain. *I wonder how far they usually go. They can run pretty fast, but I actually don't know how much stamina they have.*

Our visit was on very short notice, and I pondered whether to bring them a gift. *Maybe something for everyone to eat together?* I helped Pochi and Yuma onto the truck (the passenger seat was a bit tight for the two of them), and Tama saw us off. My chickens were in the habit of dutifully seeing me off whenever I went out. I had no idea what they got up to after that. *I could try putting cameras on them, but I can already imagine Tama getting angry at me.*

I arrived at the Yumotos' after stopping by the store to buy some rice crackers. They were sold by the bag, but they were pretty big and filling. I always kept some at home too. When I arrived, I noticed there were no other cars, which meant the other two guests hadn't arrived yet.

"Hello there," I said.

"Hi, Sho-chan. Great timing! I'm picking mugwort—can you lend me a hand?"

"Sure thing."

There was an area beyond the Yumotos' fields that was rife with weeds. They took care to trim it regularly so it wouldn't attract snakes and the like, but a large variety of plants still grew there. I enlisted Pochi and Yuma as bodyguards, just in case, and went over there to pick mugwort. I was wearing a wide-brimmed straw hat—it was no umbrella, but it did help with the rain, allowing me

to focus on my task without worrying too much about the weather.

"Thanks! You're a big help," said Machiko-san. "I'm a bit on edge lately with all the talk of dangerous snakes."

"That's understandable."

My chickens were extremely reliable during times like these—not only could they take care of snakes, but they also ate bugs harmful to crops. *Were chickens actually the Swiss Army knife of animals all along? Note: Normal chickens can't take on wild boars one-on-one.*

After a while, I heard the sound of an engine—it was Aikawa-san's car.

"Hello, thanks for having me over."

"Hello. Aikawa-san, was it? Please make yourself at home. My, I see the rumors about you being a handsome young man were true!"

Uh, is it me, or is she giving him a bit of an odd look? I discreetly stepped between them and greeted Aikawa-san. "Hello, Aikawa-san."

"Hello, Sano-san. Is that mugwort you're picking? I didn't know it was still in season."

"That's right," the old lady said coquettishly. "I'm thinking of making it into tempura—what do you think?"

"That sounds great," he replied.

I see he doesn't feel uncomfortable around older *women.* Or so I thought, but upon closer inspection, I could see his mouth twitching. I quickly remarked that we were standing out in the rain.

"Oh my, how thoughtless of me. Please, come inside," she urged Aikawa-san.

"Thank you. I need to get something from the truck."

I put the mugwort I'd picked in the basket she was holding and went with Aikawa-san over to his truck. Rin-san was in the passenger seat, coiled up listlessly. It looked like he'd removed the seat itself so she could be more comfortable. *She* is *pretty big, after all. Maybe I should also remove the seat from my truck.*

"Hello, Rin-san."

"Sano, hi."

She was as pretty as ever. Her impassive expression gave the impression of a cold, unapproachable beauty, but even then, I

could tell she had a favorable opinion of me. She was draped in a large cloth from the waist down so that you couldn't see her snake half, even if you looked inside the truck.

She had an air of melancholy about her as she felt the breeze through the slightly open car window. *Definitely hard to compete with these looks. If only she could speak more properly, she'd be perfect, though I guess there's also a certain charm to her broken accent.*

"Ow! Hey, Yuma, that hurts!"

It was uncommon for Yuma to peck me. *What is it?*

Machiko-san had already gone inside. The habu that Aikawa-san had brought was coiled up inside a big bottle, similar to the ones people use to make plum wine, with a few air holes poked near the top. *It's bigger than I expected.* It did indeed match the characteristics of a habu—triangular head and yellowish skin with a blotchy dark pattern.

"That's pretty big…"

"Probably over a meter, I think. Rin came to me holding it in her mouth. It was pretty clearly a habu, so I really had to think about how to store it."

"Great job, Rin-san."

When we went back to the house, the first thing Aikawa-san did was hand the old lady the present he'd brought them. I hurriedly followed.

"My, that's very thoughtful of you!" she said with a smile.

"Hey, Shohei, you're here," greeted Yumoto-san. "So that's the habu, huh? Pretty big. And you're Aikawa-san, was it? Come in."

"Sho-chan, will you go get us something to drink?"

"Okay."

"I'll help too," Aikawa-san said.

Yumoto-san came from the living room and stared attentively at the snake in the bottle. I'd gone to the shed with Aikawa-san to get beverages for everyone when I heard the sound of a car stopping. *And that must be Katsuragi-san.*

"S-Sano-san…" murmured Aikawa-san.

"Don't worry—it's okay."

Aikawa-san had already started to go pale. *He's pretty badly traumatized…*

Katsuragi-san soon hopped out of the truck. "Sorry, I'm late… I

was picking some mountain plants, and… Huh? Whaaaa?!" She seemed taken aback by Aikawa-san, who quickly hid behind my back. *Um, you* do *realize I'm shorter than you, right? That's not a very good hiding place.*

"Katsuragi-san… This is Aikawa-san, from the mountain to the west. Aikawa-san, this is Katsuragi-san, from the mountain to the east."

"I-It's a p-p-pleasure to m-meet you!" Katsuragi-san stammered.

Aikawa-san paused for a long moment, then said, "Same here."

Katsuragi-san, you're getting way too flustered. Your face is all red and everything. Her dragon then came down from the tonneau and pushed her forward.

"Hello, Tatsuki-san."

He nodded lightly; it sort of looked like he was apologizing to me. He went over to Aikawa-san's truck nonchalantly and, catching sight of Rin-san, nodded to her as well. *She's got a terrifying look on her face.*

The meter-tall chickens were nearby, poking at one thing or another. *Probably bugs or something.*

This is straight out of a kaiju crossover movie. Have I possibly made a big mistake? I felt a chill run down my spine as I led Katsuragi-san into the house.

Aikawa-san stayed glued to my back until Katsuragi-san went inside. *Give me some space here.*

We decided to get a better look at the habu later, so we set the bottle by the front door for now. *I hope the Yumotos aren't expecting any other visitors—those folks would be in for an unpleasant surprise.*

Aikawa-san explained that Rin-san had to stay in the car because she was very shy around people.

"Is that so? But…" The old lady didn't seem quite satisfied with this explanation.

"Don't be a busybody. It's none of our business," Yumoto-san reprimanded her.

"I suppose," she said reluctantly. *I understand your curiosity, I really do, but it's a much better idea to let her stay in the truck.*

"I'm sorry to impose, but could I have a bite to eat?" Aikawa-san asked apologetically.

"Yes, yes, no problem! Hold on, I'll make some onigiri too!" Machiko-san replied enthusiastically. *She's frying vegetables—does*

Rin-san eat those? I seemed to remember Aikawa-san mentioning she was a carnivore, so the veggies were probably for him to eat at home. Apparently, since his snakes swallow their prey whole and digest slowly, it was common for them to go several days without eating. There was plenty of food for them in the mountains too. Skipping lunch was no big deal for them.

We—Old Man Yumoto, Aikawa-san, me, Katsuragi-san, and Machiko-san, in that order—sat at the lunch table. The old lady was happy about the mountain plants and vegetables Katsuragi-san had brought, and she made them all into tempura.

Huh, I didn't know you could still find bamboo shoots. Apparently, some sprouted out of season.

There was also a large plate of fried chicken, some boiled vegetables and pickles, and they'd even gone out of their way to buy sashimi. I really couldn't thank them enough for the lavish meal.

And yet, I was feeling pretty uncomfortable in my seat. I could tell that Katsuragi-san kept stealing glances at Aikawa-san, who leaned closer to Yumoto-san and did his best to avoid looking at her. *Katsuragi-san's ex was an abusive scumbag, but she's not* afraid of men *per se. Not the case for Aikawa-san, though. This is a pretty complicated situation...* These thoughts kept running through my head, and I wasn't really able to enjoy the meal. *Ugh.*

Pochi was patrolling nearby, and Yuma was in the earthen-floor room eating vegetable scraps. The dragon was lying down near the entrance.

After lunch, we had tea, and Katsuragi-san went over to help Machiko-san do the dishes. When it came to this sort of thing, there was a general expectation that women were supposed to take the initiative, especially in the countryside. *It's a form of role division, I guess, but I don't think it's fair that they can't even sit down and take their time enjoying a meal.* It was inaccurate to say *all* domestic work around here was left to women, though. For example, Yumoto-san had a friend who liked to make noodles.

"Aikawa-kun, that snake you caught is definitely a habu." Yumoto-san opened the glass front door and had another look. The dragon also seemed to open his eyes narrowly to take a look.

"For crying out loud... What were they thinking? Their father got rid of pests, but they did the opposite. You mind if I keep this as

evidence?"

"Of course not. Given how fat it is, I can't imagine it was a wild snake."

"Yeah, about that, I'm pretty sure you need a license to keep these as pets. Wonder if he used his work connections to get one. Either way, it's all a big hassle for everyone," Yumoto-san lamented.

"Definitely."

The man might have had foreign species of venomous snakes too. In any case, the authorities had already been notified. The health department wasn't of much help, apparently—they wouldn't catch the snakes. The police would respond to reports, but there was only one policeman stationed at the village's own police station, and as for the joint police station, it was shared with another village deeper into the mountains, and the policeman from that station was only around for half the week. In other words, the villagers were expected to deal with it by themselves. *Well, other than actual criminal incidents, of course.*

I was lost in thought when I heard the door open. I worried it might be another visitor, but it was just Pochi, thankfully—though he was holding something in his beak. *That's a pretty big one...*

"Whoa! Nice going, Pochi, that's a yamakagashi! Thanks!" Yumoto-san commended him.

Pochi didn't come inside, probably because his wings were dirty. *Just* where *were you patrolling?*

"My, they really do catch snakes! Pochi-chan, good job!"

The snake was too big for the usual plastic bottles. Yumoto-san led Pochi outside, went over to the shed, and brought a hatchet. *I don't think you can make snake wine from these, so I guess instead of drowning it, he's just gonna kill it the quick way.*

As for what became of it after he gutted it...

"Looks like we're having tempura tonight."

"I-I see..."

He said he'd been thorough in removing all the venomous bits—he placed those parts carefully into a bag, which he'd throw out on garbage day.

Pochi went out on patrol again. *Such a hard worker.* I wanted to see what he was up to, but Katsuragi-san had already finished doing the dishes. She sat down again at the table, leaving me

stuck in my seat as a barrier between my two neighbors.

"Thank you for the meal—it was fantastic. I should get going soon," Aikawa-san said after tea time.

"Oh my... Already? But then, I guess you shouldn't keep your girlfriend waiting too long. Here, take this." Machiko-san handed Aikawa-san a package she had prepared with onigiri and tempura vegetables.

"Thank you very much."

"Next time, tell your girlfriend she's also welcome."

"Thank you, I'll let her know," Aikawa-san replied with a smile—even though that was most certainly not happening. He was just being polite, of course.

We'd also talked about how Yumoto-san wanted to see Ten-san. After some deliberation, Aikawa-san said, "He's not always home, so even if you did come, you might not be able to meet him..."

"Is it okay to let him roam free?"

"Oh, he's still nearby. We have an entire mountain, after all."

"I guess you're right."

"If you let me know a couple of days in advance, I'll try to do something about it."

"I'll go see him after the rainy season ends, then. You're coming too, right, Shohei?"

"Well, yes, I suppose. I'll try to bring some crayfish too."

"Oh, that might help." The snakes were big into crayfish.

Aikawa-san grabbed the package and stood up. I took a quick glance at Katsuragi-san—she had lowered her gaze. I stood up as well and went outside to see him off, with Yuma next to me.

"Let me know if anything else comes up," Yumoto-san told him.

"Thank you. I really enjoyed the meal. Please contact Sano-san when you want to come over."

"Got it. Thanks."

I waved to Rin-san, and she waved back at me in a stiff motion, which was kind of amusing. After Aikawa-san's truck drove off, Katsuragi-san came out, looking somewhat spaced out.

"Oh, are you leaving too?"

"Yes, I should get going... I...see Aikawa-san has a girlfriend..."

It seemed she hadn't caught sight of Rin-san in the passenger seat when she'd arrived. *Of course, normally you wouldn't think that someone stayed behind in the car.*

“There was someone in the passenger seat, yeah.” I neither confirmed nor denied the “girlfriend” part.

“To be honest, I’m all about looks, so someone like Aikawa-san is dangerous for me… I should be careful to avoid him.” She was red in the face. “Plus, I fall in love easily, so… Um, anyway, thank you for today…”

“No problem…”

Yeah. Whatever. I know I’m unremarkable anyway. I don’t care whether Katsuragi-san finds me attractive. But still…

Yuma stood by my side and cuddled up to me after Katsuragi-san hurriedly drove away, which helped soothe me.

“Ah, jeez… Thanks, Yuma…”

By the way, just where *has Pochi gone off to?* As I was petting Yuma, I grew worried and wondered when he’d come back, but it didn’t take long for him to return with yet another yamakagashi. Yumoto-san lavished him with so much praise that he immediately tried to run off again to look for more snakes, but I held on to him. I got a good pecking, naturally, especially after I mentioned how his beak stank. *Jerk.*

“We’ve got a few people coming over tonight, so I’ll show this to them and discuss what to do about it. Pochi, thanks again.” Yumoto-san was in a really good mood thanks to the snakes. *I understand where you’re coming from, but I wish you’d stop praising him, or he’ll get carried away again.*

“Pochi, we’re leaving!” I said sternly. I tried to put him in the truck, but he was way too dirty, leaving me no choice but to give him a quick wash using the faucet outside. I scrubbed him with a towel, and we finally left for home. I still had a lot on my mind, though.

“Pochi… You stink…”

Maybe I should’ve made him rinse his mouth too. He was prudent enough to refrain from pecking me while I was driving, but as soon as we got home and I stepped out of the truck, he pecked me again. *Why?!*

It was all damp everywhere due to the rain. I spent that day checking the house for any humidity-related trouble. *I need to remember to let the charcoal dry in the sun next time we get good weather.*

The next day, I got a call from Yumoto-san late in the morning.

“Hey, lend me two of your chickens for a while starting tomorrow. Can you come here so we can discuss the details?”

“Okay, I’ll be there.” *Not like I’ve got anything better to do in this weather.*

“Yuma, can you bring Pochi and Tama here? We’re going to Yumoto-san’s place.”

It didn’t take too long for Yuma to come back with the other two in tow.

I explained to the chickens that two of them would be going on a business trip tomorrow, and that we were going to the Yumotos’ to hear the details, and they all understood and came along. *It’s a good thing they’re so dependable.* As only two could fit in the passenger seat, I covered the truck bed with a blue tonneau so that one of them could ride under it. At least, that was what I thought would happen, but both Pochi and Tama hopped beneath the tonneau.

“You don’t prefer the passenger seat? There’s room for one more,” I asked them, and Tama pecked me. *Why?!*

I thought it was good to shake things up, so I decided to bring the Yumotos some jelly candy instead of the usual stuff.

“I see everyone’s here,” said Yumoto-san. “Thanks. Come in. Pochi, you don’t have to go hunting today. I’ll be counting on you starting tomorrow.”

Pochi was just about to run off like he usually does, but he stopped in his tracks when he heard that.

“You can wait in the garden if you want,” I told Pochi.

I got pecked. Again. *Whyyyy?!* I worried I might have to start looking for new work clothes soon.

“Shohei, you gotta choose your words better.” Yumoto-san laughed. *Maybe I do, but that doesn’t justify all the pecking. It hurts, you know.*

“I showed the guys from the village the snake Pochi caught yesterday,” he explained. I straightened. The chickens, sitting on the earthen floor, were listening attentively. *What a surreal sight.*

“He caught two of them in a pretty short span. There’re probably a lot more around.”

“Was the collection that large…?”

“No, no—what I mean is that they released the snakes last spring, and summer is the spawning season for snakes, so we

have no idea how many are actually out there."

"That's...pretty worrying. Wait, but didn't that pest control guy pass away more recently than that?"

"They started releasing the snakes when he was still in the hospital—they were told his chances were slim. They said they only started doing it after he died, but that was a lie."

"That's awful."

"Right? Anyway, yamakagashi usually mate before hibernation and spawn in the summer, though not always."

"Which means it's almost spawning season, right?"

"Yup... Having a few around is not a big deal, but too many of them is trouble. That's where the chickens come in. Can you lend them to the villagers for about a month? Of course, they'll pay you." He bowed his head, which surprised me.

"Eh? Um, no, don't worry about the money..."

"I can't do that."

"Huh?"

"You gotta do these things properly. The chickens must be doing a great job at keeping your mountain safe. I'm asking you to lend two of them. It goes without saying that this will cause a harder time for you. That's also included in the money, so you should accept it."

"Okay..."

He did have a point. Having only one chicken for a whole month would be tough. They would probably be taking turns, but taking them to the village and picking them up every day wasn't feasible, so they would probably stay at Yumoto-san's place. I would only bring them home once every few days.

"I need to pay you for their accommodations, then," I pointed out.

"Don't worry about it. They'll be a big help for me too—especially if they eat bugs in the fields. *I* should be the one paying you, actually."

"Oh, no..." I scratched my head. I didn't know he thought so highly of my chickens.

"They'll get weekends off." He turned to the chickens. "I know this is sudden, but I'll be counting on you guys from tomorrow on."

Pochi clucked loudly. *Looks like it's a deal.* I didn't want to stay until the evening and impose on the Yumotos, so I went home

after having tea. Incidentally, the present Aikawa-san had brought them the previous day was a box of sweets from a famous patisserie. *Can't compete with a ladies' man. No, I'm not jealous or anything.*

The old lady also gave me some food to take home and eat for dinner, which I appreciated.

The sum I was offered for a month's worth of the chickens' labor was quite respectable. I *did* protest, saying it was too much, but Yumoto-san persuaded me to accept it. *This is probably a one-off thing, but at least I have a notion of the price in case something like this ever happens again. True, you can always negotiate lower, but asking for more can be pretty difficult.*

"Shohei, this isn't just about you. Take the money."

"Okay, I understand." I couldn't argue with that.

I'd happened into a source of extra income, and I figured it was a good time to give some more thought to the chicken vaccines. *I mean, I still need to think about it, even without the extra income.*

Pochi and Tama would be on duty the next day.

9. Chicken Squadron on Duty!

The next morning, I took Pochi and Tama to the old man's place.

"You two be good and listen to Yumoto-san. Also, don't peck people. Or cats, dogs… You get the idea."

At their size, if I let my chickens attack other animals, I'd probably get reported for animal abuse. Pochi and Tama were distracted and seemed to be paying me no mind as I spoke. *Now listen here! I'm your* owner*, you know.*

Incidentally, if you were wondering what became of the yamakagashi snake Yumoto-san killed, I was told they skinned and fried it. The bitterness of the meat is a "nice accent" or something. In other words, it generally doesn't taste very good.

"All right, come pick them up on the weekend," said Yumoto-san. "Pochi, Tama, come with me. I'll give you guys a briefing." The two chickens followed him obediently.

Well, I mean… It's not like I wanted them to be devastated at our parting or anything… But they didn't even look back at me—what's up with that?!

"Okay then, I'm leaving!" I exclaimed, *slightly* louder than necessary.

"Sure! I'll let you know if anything comes up!" Yumoto-san turned to me and replied, but the two chickens didn't even give me a second glance. *Coldhearted monsters.* I left the Yumotos' place angry and stopped by the tofu store.

It was a really simple, old-timey shop that also sold various kinds of fried tofu dishes. I liked their tofu for the size and texture, and they also gave you free okara with every purchase. I'd once asked them why they always gave something so delicious away for free, and they'd explained that since okara was a by-product of making tofu, they got a ton of it every day—it just wouldn't be realistic to sell it all, especially considering that okara spoils quickly. Large tofu factories could afford to hire specialized services to dispose of it, but that wasn't possible for a small shop like this, so they gave it to whomever might want it. I bought some

fried dishes from the shop and got a whole bag of okara to go with them. I liked to stir-fry okara with vegetables every now and then, and it was also a big hit with the chickens. Nowadays, okara-based diet products, like okara cookies, also existed. If you wanted to throw it away, it would be considered industrial waste and taxed accordingly. It was important to find ways to make use of it.

After finishing up at the tofu shop, I went back to the mountain. There wasn't a lot I could do today due to the rain.

"Yuma, I'm back." I could see her head pop out to greet me as I parked the truck. *She must have been looking after the house.*

"I brought some okara for us."

"For us!"

She waved her tail in excitement. *I'm glad she's happy about it, but lately, I've been thinking that their tails are basically lethal weapons. Imagine getting smacked with that... Ouch. That's how they hunted the boar, right? That was, uh...before Golden Week? They weren't this big yet...* I was a bit frightened by their growth, but they didn't seem to be having trouble finding prey for now, so I decided to pay it no mind.

I put my purchases in the fridge and went over to the fields to have a look. All the rain we were getting wasn't good for plants' health. The chickens took care of bugs and pests, but they couldn't do anything about illnesses. *Seems there's nothing out of the ordinary for now.*

"I hope we can get better weather soon." I wanted to dry my laundry and futon outside. Dryers just weren't the same.

That reminds me... There's a theory you might have heard of. It states that the characteristic pleasant smell of clothes dried outside is actually the smell of dead mites. Apparently, that's complete nonsense—what really happens is the ultraviolet rays in the sunlight break down fibers like cotton, causing that familiar "scent of the sun." (*It's complicated—look it up.*) *I'm glad it's not mites. I want to fill my lungs with the scent of the sun.*

The chickens also look adorable and smell nice when they sunbathe. Only Yuma lets me smell her, though. Oh well.

That afternoon, I went down to the river, and the rising water level made me concerned. Once I returned home, I dried Yuma with a towel and then just lazed around. I hadn't really thought about it during the day, but after I made dinner, it dawned on me

—that's right, Pochi and Tama aren't here today.

Yuma ate okara and vegetable scraps, and I put the food I'd accidentally made for the other two in the fridge. Pulling myself together, I decided to take a bath with Yuma. *If she grows larger than this, we might not fit in the bathtub anymore.* The bathroom itself was quite spacious, so at least that wasn't a concern. *I guess I'll need to buy a big washtub or something like that. That, or we just take turns bathing on our own. That's a bit sad, though.*

"Pretty quiet, isn't it...?"

"Isn't it..."

My chickens didn't make too much noise, but usually at this time of the day, they were all inside, and you could hear the sounds of them moving around the house. It felt a bit unnatural to be enveloped in silence. I counted on my fingers: *Today's Wednesday, and I'm picking them up on Saturday, so it'll be just me and Yuma until then.*

"I might miss them more than I thought..."

Pochi and Tama weren't touchy-feely, but I'd grown used to them being around. *It just doesn't feel right without those three. They're irreplaceable members of my family.*

I didn't need any money—I just wanted the chickens to come back. But I'd already given my word.

"Yuma, can you sleep next to me?"

I didn't mean she should get into the futon with me. I just wanted her to sleep in my bedroom instead of in the living room or hallway or somewhere else, like the chickens usually did. Yuma did as I asked and snuggled up to me. *Such a kind and adorable chicken. I really don't know what I'd do without you guys. Sorry for being such a lame owner.*

That night, I felt a bit like crying.

***

However...

The next evening, an exhausted-looking Yumoto-san brought Pochi and Tama to me, much to my confusion. I hurriedly checked my phone for any missed calls from him. *No calls or messages... What's going on?*

"Hey. Sorry for the sudden visit," he said, sluggishly raising his

hand to greet me.

"No problem... What happened?"

I told him to come inside, but he said he'd be leaving soon. Our conversation went as follows.

"Talking...in their sleep?" I asked.

"Well... Looks like they couldn't get a good night's sleep. I could hear them last night..."

"I... I'm sorry." I'd occasionally heard the chickens when they would wake up at night—they'd start clucking. *Was it something like that?* I recalled that happening a few times back when I first got them, but eventually, it had stopped, so I'd forgotten about it.

"I don't mind it myself, but I was worried about the neighbors, y'know. I think it's better to just have them come over during the day instead of sleeping at my place. What do you think? I'll bring them back here in the evening."

"So I just need to take them to you in the mornings?" I asked.

Yumoto-san nodded. "Yeah. Is that okay with you?"

"No problem. Let's do that."

"Sorry. I'll pay for the gas, plus some extra."

"Huh? Oh, no, don't worry about it..."

"We've been over this. Take the money."

"O-Okay..."

Yumoto-san was very principled when it came to this sort of thing.

It was already getting dark, but I could sense that Pochi and Tama still hadn't gotten enough exercise. They seemed raring to go.

"Pochi, Tama, come back before it gets too dark, okay?"

Pochi replied with a loud cluck, and the two took off running. *And this is after a hard day's work at the village. Where do they get all that energy from?*

"Here's something from the old lady," Yumoto-san said, handing me a package.

"Thank you. Around what time should I take them to you tomorrow? Eight or so?"

"Hmm... Same time as yesterday should be okay. See you then."

"Good night."

I couldn't hold in my grin after I saw Old Man Yumoto's truck off. Pochi and Tama would be here, if only for the night. That still

felt like the world to me.

The package from Machiko-san—*I gotta remember to thank her*—contained pickled cucumbers and turnips. Thanks to her, I had a very enjoyable evening.

The problems started after that. The chickens were up clucking, cackling, and cock-a-doodle-dooing.

Of course, this was in the middle of the night.

As a mountain dweller, I didn't have to worry about bothering the neighbors, but still—it was the *dead of the night*. I could see why Yumoto-san was troubled. The houses in his neighborhood had a fair amount of distance between them, but not nearly enough for *this*.

When Pochi clucked, Tama followed—in a lower volume.

"Shuuuuut uuuuuuuuup!!!" I bellowed. They were so noisy that I had to kick them out. "You can come back when you've had your fill of making noise!"

I left the glass door at the front unlocked so they could open it—these chickens could open doors. After that, I was finally able to fall asleep.

The next morning, I woke up to find Pochi and Tama covered in grass and sleeping on the earthen floor. They got up as soon as they saw me.

Wait a minute... Could they have woken up in the middle of the night because they didn't get enough exercise yesterday?

"Pochi, Tama, Yuma, good morning. Pochi and Tama, let's wash all that filth off you."

The bathwater from yesterday had already gone cold, but it wasn't as cold as the river. After I washed them outside, they seemed to feel refreshed, and they shook the water off their bodies. *Ah, shoot! I already told you not to do that near me! At least I haven't changed yet.* I dried them off, made breakfast, and before I knew it, I needed to take the chickens to the Yumotos'. I let out a big yawn.

Yuma tagged along today. I told her I was just going to drop them off, but she stared at me with her cute, round eyes, and I couldn't say no. *My little chickens can't be this cute! I'm aware I have a very limited vocabulary, yes.*

I'd been meaning to ask Yumoto-san how Pochi and Tama were faring on the job—maybe this was a good opportunity.

It was drizzling gently. I'd thrown them outside last night, but only because it hadn't been raining, of course. Wondering what to do about the chickens, I drove to the old man's house.

"Hey, Shohei, thanks for bringing them."

"Er... Can I ask you what Pochi and Tama have been up to for the last two days?"

"Hm? Two days ago I had them watch over a neighbor's fields... Yesterday it was mine and the other neighbor's. They caught two medium-sized snakes and found some eggs too. They did a great job!"

"That was their work for two days?"

A couple of farms a day... I pondered to myself with a serious expression.

"What about it?"

"Well, uh, how should I put it..."

These were farms with fields and rice paddies, so obviously, they were pretty large in terms of area. However, this was a village in the mountains, meaning the farms were smaller than average. *I'd wager each property is about six thousand meters or so...by my estimates.*

My mountain was about fifteen times as large, and that was only counting the mountain I lived on, *without* the other mountain I'd still barely been to. *I'd bought the two mountains as a set of around forty acres of land, which was, to put it lightly, a lot for a single person to own. I suppose it must be around the same for Aikawa-san's and Katsuragi-san's properties.* My chickens had been spending their days patrolling my vast mountain. In other words, they hadn't been able to get enough exercise for the past two days.

"I think it's probably okay to have them patrol across a wider area," I said. "Something like five farms every two days. My chickens patrol the mountains every day, so..."

I thought maybe my explanation might've not been clear enough, but he seemed to have understood what I was getting at.

"Oh, so that's what happened!" Yumoto-san exclaimed. "No wonder that amount of exertion wasn't enough for them!" He turned to glance at the chickens. "Problem is, we've already decided the order for the farms. We're gonna discuss it again over the next two days. I'll tell them about this and see what we can do.

Sorry for not realizing sooner."

"No, no, I should have been more attentive myself."

Yumoto-san took Pochi and Tama to the farm where they had an appointment today.

"Sorry, Sho-chan. I didn't realize either," his wife said.

"No, this is my responsibility."

"Oh, there's no need to beat yourself up over it."

I had tea, chatted with her for a bit, and went home with Yuma. *Hmm... Yuma's always with me. Is she getting enough exercise?*

"Yuma, you don't have to stay with me all the time—you can go play if you like," I told her, and she pecked me lightly. *Why?*

That evening, as we'd discussed, Yumoto-san brought Pochi and Tama to me. They would be getting weekends off—I cracked a smile while imagining them spending the next two days running around on the mountain. However, that night, I found out that they once again hadn't gotten enough physical activity during the day. They still had so much energy left over. And unfortunately, it was raining, so I couldn't kick them out. I had to listen to the chickens' chorus all night. *This is rough.*

I woke up the next morning lightheaded and sleep-deprived. I made breakfast and took the chickens outside. *Blasted chickens, screaming and singing all night. Don't you get tired?*

The large bag of okara I'd gotten at the tofu store was already nearly empty. *No wonder they eat a lot—they spend all day running up and down the mountain.* It was raining again, but I hoped they'd get their fill of exercise today.

The dehumidifier filled up in no time. *I gotta remember to check the outside of the house too when the rainy season is over. This mountain sure is a lot to take care of.*

"Can you believe there's this much water in the air? Wow..." I looked inside the house. *So we can't see it, but there're small water droplets floating around everywhere. No wonder mold grows so easily if you are vigilant.*

I harvested some cucumbers and komatsuna from the fields. I picked up one of the cucumbers, removed the tip, and took a bite. *Yup, juicy and tasty.* Yuma was next to me; I offered her one, and she crunched on it loudly. *The chickens have some bizarrely sharp teeth... I don't even want to think about what would happen if they bit one of my fingers by accident. Guess they're really not chickens.*

I checked the river's water level and stuff like that, then went back to get some sleep.

The two chickens who'd gone out on patrol didn't come back for a while, but I felt relieved and happy that they were on the mountain. At that size, and with those tails, I figured there wasn't anything on this mountain that could pose a threat to them, so there was no need to worry.

"Did they maybe…grow larger to make me feel more at ease?" I was reminded of Aikawa-san and Rin-san. It *was* pretty unusual, but not completely unheard of.

Well, as a downside, their voices also grew louder.

I yawned and stretched. *I think I've done everything I needed to do today. I'll make something with fried tofu and komatsuna for lunch. Then I'll have a nap, maybe.*

Yuma was loitering near the house, pecking at the grass and the ground.

Pochi and Tama spent the day running around the mountain and only came back when it was almost dark. That was probably why I was able to have a good night's sleep. *So the problem really* was *pent-up energy.*

On Sunday morning, as usual, I made breakfast and took the chickens outside. It was cloudy but not raining. *I'm pretty sure the forecast said it shouldn't rain. Not that you can really count on the forecast up here.*

I turned to my chickens and asked them, "Hey, can chickens predict the weather?" It was said that cats licking their faces meant it was going to rain. Maybe my chickens also had some kinda thing like that. Tama tilted her head and gave me a judgmental *What the heck are you saying?* look.

Always so mean…

Pochi and Yuma were out on patrol today. Usually, Yuma stayed and kept me company, but it seemed they took turns. *All three need an appropriate amount of exercise, I guess. Oh yes, I understand. They won't get any if they stay with me. I'm sulking a little bit, it seems.*

I decided to take advantage of the decent weather and drive up to the cemetery to check the graves. As an inhabitant of this mountain, I felt like I might get haunted or something if I didn't take good care of them.

I washed the graves, even though it might not make much of a difference due to the rain. I also pulled the weeds. You had to do this regularly and thoroughly, or they'd quickly take root and grow thick and strong like trees. *I wish I had some of that vitality too.* I felt a bit sorry that it was me—not the descendants of the buried—who was taking care of the graves. *Oh yeah, that reminds me. I haven't visited my own ancestors' graves in a while…*

"Obon, in August…will probably be too crowded… But if I go after the rainy season, I could run into acquaintances…"

It was a hard decision. Plus, it was one thing in this village, where the people were used to them, but taking my chickens to my hometown was probably out of the question.

"Can I just not take them? But…"

Visiting my hometown would take at least a full day. It was a three-hour drive on the highway. That was how far I'd run away.

"Having them stay in the car the whole time…would probably also be a problem…"

"Not a problem."

"Huh…?"

Tama, did you perhaps just say, "Not a problem"? Tama just kept pecking at the grass as if nothing had happened. *Can you actually speak more or less normally, like Rin-san?*

"Hey, Tama, if you can talk, let me vent to you a little, won't you?"

"Wooon't."

"Say what?!"

So you can *understand me! So you* can *talk! What's going on with your vocal cords?!*

"Tamaaaa!" I was so happy that I instinctively hugged her. She shook me off and threw me to the ground, then pecked me furiously, as if to say, *What are you doing?!*

"Ow! Tama! Ouch! That hurts! Sorry! I'm sorry!"

Come to think of it, was that sexual harassment? I'm sorry. I should have known that Yuma only lets me hug her because she's really, really nice.

I lightly brushed the dirt off my clothes and prepared to go back, but first, I checked my phone and found a missed call from Yumoto-san. I quickly called back.

"Hello?"

“Hey, Shohei. We’ve decided how it’s going to work. Starting tomorrow, we’re gonna do five or six farms at a time, every two or three days. I’ll tell you more about it tomorrow.”

“I see. Thank you.” *That still might not be enough for my chickens, but it’ll be a lot better than a farm a day.*

There was also a message from Aikawa-san asking if I’d like to go to N-Town with him tomorrow. I accepted the invitation.

Let’s hope we get good weather again tomorrow.

10. Out on the Town with My Western Neighbor and My Chicken

I told Aikawa-san I'd drop off the chickens at the Yumotos' before meeting up with him. He said he'd go out when I left Yumoto-san's house and asked me to message him. We would meet up at the foot of his mountain. It was faster to take the road in front of his mountain to N-Town. Of course, we could also go through the village.

I headed to the old man's place with the three chickens in tow. Pochi and Tama were on duty again today.

"Morning. Sorry about them needing to stay the nights with you, Shohei," said Yumoto-san.

"No, it's okay," I replied. "It turns out that they really weren't getting enough exercise."

"Is that so? They're definitely not your usual chickens."

Apparently, many of the farms around here were organized in blocks that contained multiple properties, and the chickens would watch over these whole blocks.

"The eggs were pretty good too," Yumoto-san said.

"Huh? Do you mean snake eggs?"

"Yeah, they're actually pretty rich and flavorful. Hard to come across, though."

True. I don't think it's feasible to secure enough of them to distribute to normal consumers. He said they were also taking care to preserve the natural balance and not catch too many snakes. That said, it wasn't like this snake hunt was an exact science, and some live ones would be released at a later date after some deliberation.



“I’m impressed,” I told him. “You’re really thorough about this…”

The old man sighed. “If only they weren’t venomous. Snakes eat rats and other small critters, so we don’t mind having them around. It’s just… Too many venomous snakes is…”

“I can see that.”

Coexisting with them was difficult, and the reality was that humans had the final say. Of course, some things were beyond human control.

“I’ll be out and about in town today, but I’ll be sure to let you know if I end up coming back later than expected. You plan to drop them off at my place before it gets dark, right?” I asked.

“Yeah. Well, just let me know.”

“Okay, thank you. Pochi, Yuma, you guys listen to Yumoto-san, okay?” They both looked away from me at the same time. “Hey, and listen to me too!” *They’re absolutely doing this on purpose!*

“Ha ha ha! They really love you, eh, Shohei?”

“How do you see *this* behavior and arrive at *that* conclusion?!” *They love* mocking *me, you mean.* Once again, I left Yumoto-san’s house angrily. And again, Yuma snuggled up to me. *Gaaahh, she’s just too cute!!!*

“Thanks, Yuma. I’m okay.” I petted her gently, messaged Aikawa-san, and went on my way. Pochi and Tama ignored me until the end. *Guys, you* do *realize I’m your owner, right? I feel like crying…*

A few minutes after I arrived at our meeting spot, Aikawa-san’s truck came down the mountain. Rin-san was with him.

“Hello. Sorry to keep you waiting. Shall we go, then?”

“Sure.”

I drove behind him toward the town. *Now, you might be thinking, “Why did you go in separate vehicles?” That’s a good point. However, due to our circumstances, we wanted to avoid walking around town.*

We parked our trucks next to each other in the usual parking lot.

“Well then, Yuma, I’ll see you later.”

Needless to say, I couldn’t just walk around with a massive chicken. The same went for Rin-san, of course.

Aikawa-san held a large bag. “What’s that?” I inquired.

“Work clothes. I thought I’d get them washed at the laundromat. Not a big fan of how they smell when I dry them

indoors…”

“Oh, that’s a good idea!” The smell had been bothering me recently too. “Does washing stuff at the laundromat get rid of the smell?”

“Yeah, if you choose the option to wash with hot water.”

“Huh, I see.” *The key is water temperature—not detergent. I didn’t think of that.* “So, let’s say I let them soak in hot water before washing them at home… Would that also work?”

“I’ve heard sixty degrees is enough to kill the bacteria that cause the smell, so that could work too, yes.”

I’ll have to try that out. If it doesn’t work, I’ll just start using the laundromat too. I’d tried different kinds of detergents to remove the smell, but nothing had worked. *That smell’s really hard to get rid of. I also don’t want to use bleach and stuff like that because I don’t know if it might be bad for the chickens. Hot water should be safe.*

I did some shopping and stopped by the bookstore to kill time. When I went back to the car, Aikawa-san was already back from the laundromat, cooped up in his truck, leaning on Rin-san to hide his face.

“Sorry to keep you waiting,” I said. *Did he come back immediately after washing his clothes? Didn’t he have other stuff to take care of as well?*

“…saw her…”

“Hm?”

“I saw *her*…” he mumbled.

“What?”

By “her,” does he mean his stalker? I did consider he might have just mistaken someone else for her, but I didn’t voice that concern out of consideration for him.

“I thought my eyes might be playing tricks on me… But there’s no mistaking her…”

“I can see how that’d be an unpleasant experience, even if it *was* someone else…” I replied. “Do you want to call it a day and go home? Or…”

“Sorry, but would you mind coming with me?” he asked. “I want to check again just to make sure…”

“Uh, yeah, that’s fine with me…” I replied falteringly. I wondered if it might not be better to leave this sort of thing to a lawyer or something. On the other hand, I could also see how it might be a

good idea to make sure, plus it was better than letting him go by himself. Rin-san, however, seemed to disagree—she hugged Aikawa-san tightly.

"Don't go."

"Rin, but…"

"No. Katsumi, acting weird."

She's right—he's definitely not his usual self. The Aikawa-san I know is a lot more prudent.

"I gotta make sure…"

"Call phone. Find out."

I guess she's telling him to call his lawyer. Aikawa-san hesitated for a few moments, then let out a deep breath, seemingly having calmed down a bit.

"Thanks, Rin. I'll go buy some stuff with Sano-san real quick."

"Come back soon."

"Okay."

"Sano, look after him."

"Got it. We won't be long."

Some things are just hard to see from a male perspective. I petted Yuma's head, which was popping out from the truck.

"We'll be back soon," I told her.

"Back soon!"

"Yup."

I thought that was it: Aikawa-san would go home, make a call, and that'd be the end of it.

However…

We'd just stepped out of the supermarket near the parking lot after buying some things when Aikawa-san stopped in his tracks. *Hm? What's up?*

"Kano-san…" he murmured.

I followed his gaze to find two figures—a man and a woman. The latter seemed to take notice of Aikawa-san. She lowered her face slightly.

"You're Aikawa-san…aren't you?" the woman asked. "What an incredible coincidence… I'm really glad I got a chance to talk to you. Nice to meet you—my name is Yuko Kano."

Aikawa-san's face went visibly pale. *Now, what's the best course of action in this kind of situation…?* I was at a loss, and I gave him a light pat on the back. Although I had no intention of prying, I had

to admit I was a bit curious about what was going on between them.

Aikawa-san was startled when I patted him. Then, looking as if he'd mustered up the courage to do so, he turned to the two.

"I'm sorry, have we met before?"

The woman who had introduced herself was not his acquaintance, apparently.

"Sanko Kano is my older sister. Well, she's Sanko Ito now. I'm really sorry for what she did to you."

"Your sister..." Aikawa-san muttered. They decided to sit down at a nearby café to continue their conversation. I was unsure if it was all right for me to join them, but Aikawa-san requested that I sit.

"Aikawa-san, who's this...?" the woman asked, turning to me.

"A friend..." he replied. "Ever since *that* happened, I've been afraid to interact with young women, so I have him tag along with me."

"I'm... I'm terribly sorry..."

The man who was with Kano-san was her brother, it turned out. *Right, they* do *look somewhat similar.*

Aikawa-san averted his gaze to avoid looking directly at Yuko-san. (Let's call her that and use "Kano-san" for the brother to avoid confusion.) Kano-san sat across from him.

Long story short, Sanko-san had gotten married at the end of last month. *At least* someone *got a happy ending.* She had indeed been to N-Town, wanting to apologize to Aikawa-san before getting married. *That thing about her moving to this prefecture earlier this year was true. Then, after getting married, she moved to another prefecture. The whole thing is kinda confusing, but I'm impressed by her proactivity, if nothing else.* She hadn't been able to talk to Aikawa-san, since she didn't know anything about his recent whereabouts except that he lived somewhere around here. However, she'd thought she had caught sight of someone who looked like him in town, and she'd entrusted her siblings with an apology letter she'd written, hoping they would find some way to deliver it to him.

So Aikawa-san wasn't imagining things when he said he spotted her in town last month. I felt a chill run down my spine.

"You must have been coming to this town regularly, then, huh?" Aikawa-san asked.

“Yes. My brother and I have been taking turns coming here. This is our third time. We planned to send the letter to your lawyer if we couldn’t reach you by the end of this month.”

“You could have just done that from the start, right…?”

“Yes, but then we wouldn’t know if you actually received the letter.”

Aikawa-san sighed deeply. “I don’t need a letter, and I don’t need an apology. As long as she keeps her distance from me, that’s enough.”

“I’m so sorry…”

“You don’t have to apologize either. Send her my congratulations on the wedding.”

“Thank you…”

I couldn’t taste my coffee at all. *Ah, well.* The perpetrator was happily married, and the victim was left with a deep-seated trauma. *This is all terribly unfair, isn’t it?*

We parted with the Kano siblings after leaving the café. Aikawa-san quietly breathed a sigh of relief.

Hm?

“Good… Now I don’t have to live in constant fear of her shadow anymore…” he murmured softly with a sorrowful smile.

If he’s okay with it, then I suppose that’s that.

“But this…is not really the end of it. My fear of women still remains.”

“Have you considered therapy or…?”

“No, I’m fine,” Aikawa-san said feebly. “I don’t mind, really. But I’ll probably be asking you again to help me out with this kind of thing, Sano-san.”

“Coming to town every now and then? Sure, I guess.”

“Come and see Rin and Ten occasionally too.”

“If you invite me, sure.”

What’s with this conversation anyway? I wondered as we exchanged words sparsely. By now, it had been a while since the Kano siblings had vanished from our sight.

“Is it okay to leave?” I asked.

“Probably…?”

Even though it seemed unlikely, we couldn’t fully discard the possibility of being followed. Plus, we didn’t know if what they’d told us was the whole truth. Both of us had far too many scars to

be able to trust people blindly.

"Ah, I need to put the stuff I bought in the cooler!" I ran back to my truck…and found a furious Rin-san. She was platinum mad, as the kids say. (*Or do they not say that anymore?*) Yuma also stared at me with a disdainful look. *Sorry…*

"Late," said Rin-san.

"Sorry, I was talking to that woman's siblings," Aikawa-san explained.

"You said…wouldn't meet."

"Sorry, but I couldn't just ignore them."

"Angry."

"I know. Sorry."

It was a bit difficult to put it into words, but Rin-san was clearly different from her usual self—she had a very intense aura to her. Aikawa-san was pretty impressive in his own way, being able to talk to such an enraged Rin-san with a smile on his face.

"Yuma, sorry for taking so long."

She gave me the cold shoulder. *Ouch.*

"Yuma, come on! I'm sorry. I couldn't just leave Aikawa-san on his own, now could I?"

"Couldn't."

"Right? I knew you were worried too. Thanks." I hugged her gently. *My girls are so adorable.* I took a quick peek at Aikawa-san, and he was being hugged by Rin-san.

All this had taken quite some time, but it was still only a little past noon. We ate onigiri in our trucks—Aikawa-san, resourceful as always, had made a few in case we stayed longer than we'd originally planned. Then, we headed back to the village, taking a detour just to be on the safe side.

Aikawa-san called his lawyer at once to confirm the story. "He'll probably get back to me tonight. Jeez, so it really *was* her that I saw last month… I was right to be careful."

"Definitely. It's a good thing you didn't run into her." *And besides, you weren't sure if it was her, but* she *knew you were around here. That's the stuff of nightmares.*

"Sano-san, thank you for today."

"I didn't actually do anything."

"Just having you along was really reassuring. If not for that, I would've probably run away with my tail between my legs."

“I…actually don’t think there’s anything wrong with running away in that situation.”

“But that doesn’t solve anything… Don’t you agree?”

“Well, I suppose that’s true.” We both laughed.

After parting ways, I went back to my mountain and let Yuma out.

“Sorry. It was probably tiring for you to stay inside the truck the whole time.”

“Tired.”

“I bet. Thanks, Yuma.”

She went trotting off, probably to look for more food—*that onigiri was not enough for her, I’m sure. I heard cooked rice is not very good for chickens, so I only let her have a little.* She soon came back after picking bugs and pecking at some grass.

“Yuma, you can go and play if you want to,” I told her.

She pecked me. *Why?*

Yumoto-san came by that evening to drop off Pochi and Tama. Both went running off somewhere as soon as they stepped out of his truck. *Good, good—get as much exercise as you can.* I wondered why Yuma was so different from them.

It was already dark outside.

“I’ll talk to you tomorrow. See ya,” he said before going home. He’d brought something for me again—this time it was canned tangerines. *Thanks.*

I wonder if chickens can eat tangerines… Probably not canned ones. Too sweet, for one. Wouldn’t want them to get cavities.

***

Last night, the chickens hadn’t made any noise, meaning they must have gotten enough exercise to be able to sleep soundly. *But they spend the day in the village on weekdays, so I still need to watch out. Not that there’s much I can do even if I watch out, though. At best, I can kick them out if it’s not raining.*

As for Aikawa-san, he told me he’d gotten a call from his lawyer last night confirming that his former stalker had gotten married and moved to another prefecture far away from here—far enough that you’d usually take a plane if you wanted to go there by public

transport. Aikawa-san didn't want anything to do with her, and he requested that his lawyer not accept any letters or such from her.

"I'm glad it's over..." I could hear the sheer relief in Aikawa-san's voice over the phone, which left a strong impression on me.

He said he didn't want to see her or have anything to do with her, and that was enough for him. He wouldn't be pursuing legal action or anything. *I don't really get it. But I guess it's got nothing to do with me. It's for him to decide.*

I dropped the chickens off at the Yumotos as usual.

"Gotta tell you, I'm impressed with how spry and agile they are. No wonder last week's workout wasn't enough for them. Were they all right last night?" Yumoto-san asked.

"Yep, they slept like babies." *Let's hope it stays this way.*

"They're a big help to us. They caught three snakes yesterday."

"Yamakagashi snakes?"

"Nah, yesterday they caught vipers too."

"A lot of venomous snakes around, it seems..." It was a fight for survival out here in the boonies.

"Well, we did have them go through six farms yesterday. We'll have them patrol the same places today, but there'll probably be no more snakes."

That reminded me. "About that... Did that man with the snake collection keep any foreign species?"

"Seems he did, yeah. For god's sake, where was he getting them from...?" Yumoto-san grumbled. *Keeping them is fine, provided he acquired them through proper means. The problem is releasing them into the wild.* "I heard someone from the next village over got bitten. They say it was a viper, so it might be unrelated to this whole mess. Either way, we get at least one of those snakebite incidents every year. There's no use fretting about it too much."

Every year? Yikes. Apparently, there were around three thousand viper incidents per year nationally, of which ten or so were lethal. *Better be careful.*

"Hopefully there aren't any foreign venomous species around," I said...and then I broke into a cold sweat as I realized I might have just triggered an event flag. *Ha ha, no way...right?*

"Hey, Pochi, Yuma, if you see any unfamiliar-looking snakes, be sure to catch them and show them to the villagers, okay?" Pochi paid me no mind, as usual. They were supposed to patrol the

same places today, so I'd brought Yuma instead of Tama, hoping that having a different perspective would help. Yuma looked back at me and nodded slightly. *Yuma's such a good girl.*

"I'll drop them off in the evening, then," said Yumoto-san.

"Thank you." I bowed and went back to my mountain.

Aikawa-san messaged me asking if I'd like to come over today, but as soon as I asked Tama about it, she ran away. I'd have to go tomorrow, then, and I told him as much.

Tama's not very good with those *snakes, it seems.*

"You're scared of them, aren't you?" She pecked me fiercely. *Looks like I hit the nail on the head.* She also gave me a good kick while she was at it, as if to say, *Don't bother asking if you already know the answer!*

Ouch. I'm sorry. But you didn't have to go that far, you know.

I checked the fields and the river for anything unusual. Despite all the rain, the crops seemed fine for the time being, thankfully. The river was still fuller than usual, but the flow was fine. *I ought to check the riverbank more thoroughly, but the ground is a bit unstable from the rain, so I'd rather not risk it. I wonder how the chickens manage to get around so much. Is it because they run instead of walk? Or is it the way they walk?*

"I should probably check the other houses around here too..." Ideally, I should have torn them down before the rainy season. Leaving uninhabited homes standing was a bad idea—they could attract all kinds of undesirable animals.

"But that'd take money..." At the end of the day, that was what it came down to. *But still, if I'm gonna be living here, I should do something about them.*

"Maybe I'll try asking the previous owner." As with the vaccines, that was something to think about after the rainy season.

"I feel a bit lonely..."

Tama followed me around. She didn't stick as close to me as Yuma, but she wasn't distant either—she had a good sense of personal space.

"I gotta check the inside of the house. What about you, Tama? You can check the outside if you want." She brushed me off and tilted her head away. *My chickens must be really concerned about me, huh? Sorry for being so unreliable.*

"Thanks, Tama."

She brushed me off again, pretending not to listen. *She has a kind side to her. Could she be one of those so-called "tsunderes," I wonder.*

"Tama, are you a tsundere?"

She pecked me aggressively. *Wait a minute, why do you even know what tsundere means?! Was I actually right?*

I was still checking around the house when I received a message from Katsuragi-san.

"Excuse me, but would you happen to recognize this pattern? Tatsuki ate this snake, and I'm worried it might be venomous." The message had a picture of a snake tail—what remained of the snake—attached.

"Jeez... Seriously?"

I'm not a specialist or anything, you know. I decided to show the picture to Yumoto-san when he came by later. "I will check and let you know," I replied. "I'll get back to you this evening."

Our venomous snake troubles seemed far from over.

11. Mr. Popular and Can You Tell Snakes from Their Tails?

It was hard to identify it from the tail…let alone a *picture* of the tail. I had no luck trying to look it up on the internet, so I showed the image to Old Man Yumoto when he came that evening to drop off Pochi and Yuma.

"Hard to tell from just this. If it *was* venomous, isn't that bad news for the big lizard?"

"I wonder."

Yumoto-san said if it was weighing on her mind, she could try asking in the village tomorrow, and I relayed that to Katsuragi-san. I also told her to watch the dragon for anything unusual—just in case. *Though, on the other hand, my chickens ate a yamakagashi the other day and they were fine… Still, I wasn't actually watching them eat it, so maybe they just avoided the venomous parts.*

"I'll try asking at the village tomorrow morning," she replied. Because I had to take the chickens to the Yumotos in the morning, we decided to meet up there. I'd be going to Yumoto-san's house in the morning at the same time as her, and then after that, I'd go to Aikawa-san's house.

Now that I think of it, I'm pretty popular these days, aren't I? Heh. I felt some gazes on me. I looked over at the chickens—they were staring intently at me.

"Huh…?"

Pochi and Tama gave me the cold shoulder. Not Yuma, though…is what I would have liked to say, but she brushed me off too after a slight delay.

"Huuuuuuh?!"

That's so mean! That's so cruel! They don't love me! I thought at least Yuma would understand me. (*"Understand" what, exactly?*) *Sure, okay, I get it. It's not* me *who's popular. Yeah.*

The chickens hadn't made any racket last night, thankfully. I told them I'd be going to Aikawa-san's later, and Pochi volunteered to come along, meaning Tama and Yuma would be out on duty today. *Oh yeah, I heard they only found eggs yesterday. A lot more of*

those lying around than you'd think. They really must be multiplying. Though they might not necessarily be the eggs of venomous snakes.

I arrived at Yumoto-san's place before Katsuragi-san.

"Tama and Yuma today, huh? I'll be counting on you, girl power duo!" Yumoto-san seemed slightly happy about it. *Even if it's animals, I guess he'd rather be around girls.*

"Today's job is a little far from here. The girl from Loud Mountain is…not here yet. Tama, Yuma, you mind waiting a bit?"

Loud Mountain was what they called Katsuragi-san's mountain. The chickens just loitered around Yumoto-san, poking at the ground.

For chickens, nature was abundant with food. That saved me the effort of feeding them, but I made a point to at least prepare them a decent breakfast. For other meals, it depended.

"So, what's it like not having them around?" Yumoto-san asked.

"I'm not sure yet, honestly. I'm already used to having two of them out on patrol during the day."

"Just let me know if it becomes inconvenient for you. Though I reckon since it's just during the day, it shouldn't make such a huge difference."

"Okay…?" I couldn't quite see what he was getting at.

Soon enough, a truck came in. It was Katsuragi-san.

"Good morning! I'm sorry for being late!" Katsuragi-san exclaimed. She quickly hopped out of her truck hurriedly. *Business as usual.*

"Morning. No problem." Yumoto-san laughed.

I greeted her. "Good morning."

Katsuragi-san, still flustered, took out a plastic bottle with the top cut off. Inside it was a snake tail. She'd closed the bottle with plastic wrap and a thick rubber band. "This is it…" She showed us the bottle, slightly disgusted. *Yeah, this* is *kind of disgusting.*

Yumoto-san took it off her hands. "This is… Judging only from the pattern, I don't think it's a snake from around here. You mind if I keep this?"

"Please, go ahead! I would appreciate it if you could also dispose of it!"

"All right. Thanks for coming all the way here."

"No problem! I'm sorry I couldn't be of any help."

Yumoto-san shrugged. "Don't worry about it. Well then, I'm

heading out. Sorry for being a crappy host."

"Please, don't mind us. I will see you later." I saw Yumoto-san and the chickens off. Pochi was pacing around Yumoto-san, and his wife was working in the fields.

The dragon came out from the bed of Katsuragi-san's truck, probably wanting to stretch his body even if they weren't going to stay long. Thankfully, he seemed to be doing fine.

"Sano-san, do you have any plans for today?"

"I'm just about to go to the mountain over to the west."

"The mountain to the west… Aikawa-san, was it?"

"Yes." I kept some distance from her as we chatted. *Don't want to get closer than necessary to girls.*

"Do you…hang out often with him?"

"Yeah. Just yesterday, we went to the nearby town."

"Going to town together… Sounds nice…" she mumbled.

Should I be worried…? I hope not.

"No, stop… What am I saying…? I fall in love too easily. I should stay away from him…" Katsuragi-san muttered something or other under her breath. *I see, so even for someone who falls in love too easily, there's nothing that would make them fall in love with* me*. I see, I see.*

"Sano-san, do you have any plans for tomorrow?" she asked.

"Not really—other than dropping the chickens off, I guess…"

"I'll prepare a meal! Why don't you come visit?"

"Uh, okay…"

She's not into me at all, huh? Not that I mind. I don't, but still…this kind of sucks.

We went our separate ways, and I headed toward the western mountain with Pochi.

I don't really care if she doesn't consider me a potential love interest or doesn't see me as a man. Whatever. I do find her cute, I won't lie, but I have zero intention of trying anything with her. Really. Absolutely zero. (*What was that? "Repeating that just makes you sound suspicious," you say? Buzz off.*)

"Ah." On my way to the mountain, I realized something and stopped the truck. Pochi stared at me confused.

"Say, Pochi, you guys couldn't catch crayfish in the recent weather, right?"

I'd realized that I hadn't brought anything for Rin-san and Ten-

san. I thought about it and realized that with all the recent rain and the increased river level, I wouldn't have been able to catch crayfish, even if I hadn't forgotten. However, Pochi inched closer to me. *Huh? Is he telling me to go back?*

"What, are you saying you *can* catch them?"

"Catch!"

"Whaaaat?"

Pochi's face inched even closer. *Pochi, you're kind of scaring me. Especially those sharp, jagged teeth!*

"O-Okay, got it. Let's go back and catch some crayfish..." I gave in. Pochi reeled his face back. At least I got him to agree that he wouldn't get too carried away and would give up if the water level was too high to catch any. *Me and my big mouth.*

I messaged Aikawa-san, informing him that we'd be a little late, and then headed down to the river with a bucket in my hand and Pochi by my side.

As I'd expected, we weren't able to catch too many. *Well, yeah—not with a current* that *fast.* We were at least able to secure six or so of them, since there were just so many around here. *Seriously,* don't *release crayfish in the mountains. Or venomous snakes, for that matter.*

I gave Pochi a quick wash. It was already around noon when we left. I was thinking what a terrible waste of time all of that had been when we got to Aikawa-san's place.

Rin-san and Ten-san must have heard the sound of my truck's engine stopping—they came slithering toward us. Pochi skillfully opened his door, got out of the truck, and took position in front of my door. *I see that he can open it with no problem, but he still has trouble closing it. Well, the fact that he can open doors at all is already pretty freaky.*

"Hello, Rin-san, Ten-san. Do you mind if my chicken eats some of the bugs around here?"

"Okay."

"Don't mind."

Having received their permission, I gave Pochi the A-okay, but he still wouldn't leave my side. *You don't have to be so wary, you know.*

Just then, Aikawa-san came out of the house and greeted me with a smile. "Hello, Sano-san."

“Hello there. Sorry, Pochi insisted on trying to catch crayfish for... Ouch! Pochi, stop it!” I explained the reason we were late and got pecked by Pochi. It was like he was saying, “Stop blaming others!” *Right, sure, it was my own fault. Now quit it! That hurts!*

“Oh, I see...” Aikawa-san seemed somewhat surprised for some reason, then he broke into a smile. “Thank you for thinking of the snakes.”

“This was all we could catch...”

Aikawa-san peered into the bucket.

“With this weather, there’s not much you can do,” he replied. “More importantly, were you okay? You could get hurt.”

He’s worried *about us. No wonder he’s a hit with the ladies.*

“I’m okay. But yes, trying to catch them when the water level is higher than usual is a bad idea...”

“Indeed. Do you mind if I pay you a visit again sometime?” Aikawa-san asked.

“As long as it’s not tomorrow, sure.”

“Oh, do you have plans for tomorrow?”

“Uh... I was invited to Katsuragi-san’s place...”

“Quite the ladies’ man, huh?” He chuckled. *No, not at all. Especially not compared to you.* But his eyes weren’t laughing, for some reason. *Why? I thought you wanted to stay away from young women?*

“Oh, no, no. It’s the opposite,” I explained. “She probably feels at ease inviting me because she doesn’t even see me as a potential love interest.”

Aikawa-san tilted his head. “Is that how it works...?”

I handed the snakes the bucket.

“Sano, thanks.”

“Sano, nice person.”

They thanked me and crept closer. *Do you really like crayfish* that *much?* Pochi kept them at bay so they couldn’t get any closer. *Sorry, I’d like to think that I’ve gotten used to snakes, but huge ones are still a bit scary to me...*

We went inside. Aikawa-san was stylish as usual. The walls of his home were decorated with hydrangeas in bamboo cylinders. *Must be a lot of work to keep it up.*

For lunch, we started with pickled cucumbers with mustard.

“Oh? This is a lot milder than I expected...”

“It’s been a week since I pickled them, so the taste has gotten a lot milder.”

I see. He’s really attentive to details.

After the relish course, we had miso soup with komatsuna and fried tofu, multigrain rice, cold tofu, bamboo sprouts and other boiled vegetables, ginger pork, and more pickles. *Quite the lavish meal.*

“Whoa! That looks amazing!” I exclaimed. “Do you always cook this much?”

“Of course not. Only when I have people over.”



Come to think of it, Aikawa-san was a hunter, so I guess he has more guests during hunting season…?

"I'm usually all by myself from spring through summer, so it's nice to have someone come over to give me that extra motivation. Though my mountain *is* generally closed to other people."

"Gee, I don't even know what to say… Sorry for always imposing on you…"

He treats me like this, and all I bring him is a measly six *crayfish for Rin-san and Ten-san… What is wrong with me?*

"I'm very thankful to you, Sano-san. Please don't worry about that. Having you keep me company when I go to town means a lot more to me than you realize."

"But there's no need for me to go with you anymore, right?"

"Whaaat? Come on, don't be so cold," he said playfully.

Sure, I suppose I might as well keep him company if he invites me.

"You know, it seems Rin has taken a liking to Yuma-san. Maybe it's because they're both girls, but they got along really well when they were waiting for us in town."

"Is that so? Interspecies girl talk, huh? We should get together again, then."

Girl talk between a giant snake and a chicken. I'm curious and afraid at the same time…

"I'm glad your ordeal is over," I blurted out after a few moments of silence. *Is it really over?*

"Yes… I can finally live a normal life now… Though life in the mountains is pretty busy," Aikawa-san gave me a thin smile.

"It really is… I need to do something about all the abandoned houses on my mountains, and I also have to take the chickens to the vet in S-Town…"

"Vaccines, was it?"

"I still don't know if I can get them vaccines."

"They…certainly are, uh, *unusual* pets."

That goes for both of us.

I spent some time chatting with Aikawa-san and returned to my mountain later in the afternoon.

"We talked about a lot of stuff today…" *I didn't tell him about how I'm feeling about Katsuragi-san, though. Or rather, I pretty much forgot about it while I was there.*

"Meh. Whatever happens, happens…"

Yumoto-san came by to drop Tama and Yuma off that evening. Tomorrow, Pochi and Tama would be on duty.

***

Over the past two days, the chickens had patrolled an area with a lot of fields and exterminated snakes. If there weren't any, great, and if there were, they'd eaten them.

I feel like I've seen an idol do something similar on TV. It seems more respectful to the animals than simply getting rid of them. Though I guess that's a very human-centered way of thinking.

Today, Yuma and I were visiting Katsuragi-san's mountain. I stepped outside to find a gray, overcast sky that indicated it could rain at any moment. *Hopefully it doesn't—we spend all our time on the veranda when we go to Katsuragi-san's. Some light drizzle is not that bad though, and it even gives it a nice vibe.*

Her mountain was well-kept, since she had people from the village come over and maintain it. *The roads could use a little more attention, though.*

I brought her some rice crackers that I had lying around at home. *I've been getting more slovenly about presents. In Aikawa-san's case, I haven't even brought him any presents recently. Shame on me. The crayfish don't really count—I gotta get my act together.*

"Hello."

"Hello, Sano-san. Thanks for coming."

Katsuragi-san was working in the fields, as usual. *I gotta check mine too when I get home.* She held a basket full of vegetables—cucumbers, shishito peppers, peas, and the like. *Yum, shishito peppers.*

"Where's Tatsuki-san...?" I asked, looking for him. He was resting under a tree near the fields. "Hello there, Tatsuki-san. Is it okay if I let my chicken eat bugs and stuff around here?"

As usual, the dragon cracked open his eyes and gave a slight nod.

"Excuse me—I'll just go take care of this," Katsuragi-san said.

"Let me help." I took the basket from her and carried it to the house.

"Thank you. I'll make us some tea."

"I'd appreciate it."

I sat down on the veranda. Yuma stayed glued to me.

"Yuma, feel free to go play." She cocked her head and gave me a confused look. *Cute.* I reached out and petted her. Yuma's feathers were really clean, since we bathed together every day.

Not that Pochi and Tama are dirty. They take care of themselves in their own way, like bathing in sand or water, and I clean them myself when they get too dirty. Actually, is it even okay to wash chickens this often? Eh, they seem to be doing well enough, so it's probably fine.

Katsuragi-san came out with tea and snacks, plus a pig-shaped mosquito coil. *True—it's already that time of the year.*

"Thank you. Oh, also, I brought this for you." I handed her the crackers, which she accepted. I'd forgotten to give them to her when I'd arrived.

"Thank you. Please excuse me for a moment. I'll go make lunch."

"All right." *Wonder what's on the menu today.*

There was a gust of wind, which felt nice on my skin. I heard a light, airy sound from above me—the noise of a wind chime on the roof. *Mosquito coils and wind chimes. Sure feels like Japanese summer. Maybe I should get a wind chime for my veranda too—not that I have much time to wind down and enjoy the sound.*

The glass door opened from inside. "Sorry to keep you waiting," Katsuragi-san said breezily. It looked like we were having somen noodles today.

"That looks good," I remarked.

"I thought it'd be appropriate with the recent hot weather."

"Definitely agree. Thank you."

Other than the noodles, she brought shredded cucumbers, ham, omelet, perilla and myoga for seasoning, boiled shishito peppers, and peas. The noodles had a nice, smooth texture. *That reminds me, I think only Japan eats myoga.*

"This is really good..."

"Glad to hear it! I've got a lot of shishito peppers—would you like to take some with you?"

"Thank you. I'll take you up on that." *Fried shishito peppers are delicious. Even raw ones are pretty good.*

Some ways into the meal, Katsuragi-san blurted out, "Um, so...about that tail..."

"Oh, right, the snake. I haven't heard anything about it yet. I bet

they're still looking into it."

"It must be hard to tell from just the tail. Hopefully it's just a regular snake…"

"Let's hope that's the case."

As with last time, Yuma stood between Katsuragi-san and me, and there was always at least a meter of space separating us. *This distance feels just right.* Yuma chewed loudly on a cucumber Katsuragi-san gave her. *Do all chickens make this much noise when eating cucumbers?*

"Um, Sano-san…"

"Yes?" I could feel something out of the ordinary in her tone, which made me nervous. *Oh boy… What is it?*

"I've been living here for more than two years now."

"Yeah?"

"But I hadn't met Aikawa-san until recently."

"Is that so…?"

"Yes!"

I'm just gonna refuse if she asks me to hook her up with him or something. Although Aikawa-san's stalker problem was more or less sorted out, the trauma from that whole debacle still lingered.

"I'd heard about him, but I didn't know he was actually *that* handsome!"

"I… I see."

"Don't you agree?!"

Wait, what?

I answered honestly. "Uh, I guess so…? He does look a lot like that one idol, after all."

"Right?! I was all flustered the other day just being near him. I fall in love too easily, so I have to watch out. It was the same with my ex—he was a scumbag, but he was a real looker."

"Is that so?"

I see… So you're all about looks, huh? No, it's okay. I know that disqualifies me, but that doesn't depress me in the slightest! No ma'am…

"But I came here to get away from the old me! So…!"

"Yes?" *Where is she going with this?*

"Sano-san! Please allow me to watch over your bromance with Aikawa-san!"

I was speechless for a long moment. Then, I managed to

mumble, “What…?” *My* what*? What the heck is she blabbering about? Are you okay in the head?! Whoops, almost thought out loud there.* “Uh…?”

“Oh, please don’t get the wrong idea! I’m not a fujoshi or anything! It’s just…Aikawa-san seems to really enjoy your company. I’m a big fan of male friendships, you see.”

“Uh-huh…” If I was being honest, I had no idea what she was on about, but she seemed really excited to talk about it, so there must’ve been something to it. I didn’t intend to pursue it any further either.

“Well, yeah, we do meet up pretty often, I guess.”

“That’s nice. I’m jealous… Um… Could you tell me more about you and Aikawa-san?”

“There’s not really much to tell you about.”

Is it just me, or is Katsuragi-san getting closer to me than usual?

Yuma quickly stepped between us.

Whew, thanks.

“You go to town together, right?”

“Uh, yeah.” *But there’s nothing interesting I could tell her about, I think.* “Oh, right—the other day, I slept over at his mountain.”

“Tell me more!”

Katsuragi-san, you’re scaring me. But at least you seem to be enjoying yourself, so that’s nice. I told her about it without going into too much detail.

Before I left, she handed me a ton of shishito peppers. *Just how many of these did you plant?*

“Thank you! Please come again!” Katsuragi-san waved at me gleefully as she saw us off. *What was that all about?*

“Say, Yuma… What’s a fujoshi…?”

“I wonder…”

She looked really cute when she cocked her head. *Yup, Yuma’s the cutest. Anyway, that was one mentally taxing visit, let me tell you.*

I’d told Katsuragi-san about how I’d had too much to drink when I’d stayed over at Aikawa-san’s, and I couldn’t remember when I’d gone to sleep. For some reason, this was a big hit with her. *I don’t get it. I really don’t get women.*

Back at home, I checked my phone and found a message from Aikawa-san asking if he could come to my place tomorrow. Since I didn’t really have anything to do tomorrow besides dropping the

chickens off, I replied affirmatively.

I opened the fridge to check that I had enough food—I had plenty of vegetables, but not much meat. I'd head down to the village for shopping and also pick up the chickens while I was at it.

If I recall correctly, the last time Aikawa-san came to visit…was in the afternoon, so I didn't prepare anything. We just had some snacks.

"I should make us a proper meal tomorrow. Though I'm not sure anything I can make would count as 'proper.' I don't cook that much…" I was at a bit of a loss.

But maybe you don't need any fancy techniques or anything as long as the ingredients are of good quality. I called the chicken farm and was asked to sample their new product, which was supposedly packaged in a pouch and easy to prepare at home. *Lucky! Just what I needed.*

I first headed to the farm. Taking care not to let Yuma near the farm building, I stepped out of the truck. The couple running the farm asked me if I'd like to stay for a meal, but I declined, saying I'd already eaten. The old lady seemed a little disappointed. *Maybe I* should *stay and have something to eat?*

The new product they gave me was a whole dressed chicken, minus the head.

"Whoa… A whole chicken…"

Matsuyama-san explained that the chicken was stuffed with glutinous rice, jujube, chestnuts, and herbs. There was also soup.

"What was this dish called again?" Matsuyama-san asked his wife.

"Samgye-tang. It's a Korean dish."

"I see… Korean food, huh?" *I wonder if Aikawa-san has had this before.* "So, how much is it?"

"For now, just try it out and tell me what you think."

"But this is worth way more than, say, a thousand yen," I countered.

"It's okay," Matsuyama-san's wife assured me. "Getting to see your unusual chickens makes up for it. Besides, we want to get some opinions from youngsters."

Am I still a youngster? Well, I'm still in my twenties, so I suppose so.

I made a mental note to definitely bring them a nice present next time I came over. They handed me the chicken, a piece of paper explaining how to prepare it, and I was off on my way. I

stopped by the general store before heading to Yumoto-san's house.

There were a few kids at the general store who all stared wide-eyed at Yuma, and they reached out nervously to touch her. Yuma didn't seem to mind.

"What a huge chicken!"

"Be gentle with her, or you could get hurt," I warned one of them.

"Okay. Can I touch?"

"Sure, just let her know, and do it gently."

"Wow, so pretty!"

"Thanks."

The children were quite surprised at Yuma's size, but thankfully, they didn't seem to be afraid or feel threatened by her. I was glad they weren't judgmental. *But then again, this village in general is pretty tolerant, I feel.*

At the Yumotos, Pochi and Tama poked at the ground while they waited for me.

"Pochi, Tama, good job today," I said. "Let's go home."

Yumoto-san waved at me. "Hey, Shohei. Thanks for picking them up."

"I was already nearby—I needed to do some shopping. Also, would you mind selling me some vegetables?"

"What are you saying? Don't be a stranger! Just take 'em. The chickens caught three vipers today. If you ask the other folks, I'm sure they'll also be glad to spare you some vegetables."

"Three vipers... That's quite a lot."

The farmlands around here were fairly large, but three vipers was still a lot. Yumoto-san told me to hold on for a second and came back with a basket full of vegetables.

"This is for you. From the farmers."

"Whaaaat?" I got a huge load of seasonal vegetables. *I've definitely got to make something and put these to good use, don't I?*

"Please teach me how to cook!" I called out to Machiko-san.

She's not quite Doraemon, but she's just as dependable. I told her I had a lot of shishito peppers, and she taught me a recipe for Chinese food that used them. The recipe actually called for bell peppers, but she said you could substitute them for shishito without any problem. *Huh. I didn't know you could use oyster sauce*

in stir-fries.

Back at home, I made some preparations for the meal. “Whew… This should be enough,” I muttered. “Tomorrow’s Pochi and Yuma’s turn, right?”

Tama crept closer to me. A bit *too* close.

“What? What is it, Tama?”

“Aikawa?”

“Yeah, he’s coming over tomorrow.” *Man, now she doesn’t even bother hiding the fact that she can speak.*

“Business trip!”

“Huh?” I didn’t understand what she meant.

“Tama, business trip!”

“What?”

“Tama, business trip!”

Tama, please, you’re way too close. You’re scaring me with that sharp beak and those jagged teeth. Please don’t bite me.

“Oooh…” I finally began to understand what she was trying to communicate: She’d heard me say that Aikawa-san was coming over tomorrow, and so she probably wanted to go on a “business trip.” That is, she wanted to go to the village in Yuma’s stead. *Tama, are you seriously* that *scared of Rin-san?*

“Is it because the snakes will be here tomorrow?” Her sharp beak pecked my arm—it was made worse by the fact that I wasn’t wearing work clothes for protection. “Ow, hey! Stop! Okay! Okay, got it! Tomorrow, Pochi and Tama will be going to the village on business! I’ll be counting on you two!”

Tama raised her head sharply and looked at me condescendingly. *You know, Tama, I kind of wish you had a little less of the “tsun” and a bit more of the “dere.”*

“Yuma, is that all right with you?” I’d changed her plans without her consent, after all. Yuma, in contrast with a certain someone, came up to my side and cuddled with me. I was so moved by her kindness that I could’ve cried.

Anyway, that was it for my preparations to receive Aikawa-san tomorrow. *This should be enough…right?*

***

The next morning, I left Pochi and Tama in Yumoto-san’s care as

usual. He said he'd tried showing the snake tail to a few different people around the village, but no one had been sure about what it was—he would try taking it to the vet in S-Town tomorrow. *I guess he means Kimoto-san. Is his clinic open on Saturdays? If I can remember, I'll ask him when he comes to drop the chickens off.*

I went back to my mountain and tended to the fields. It was raining lightly. *I think Aikawa-san's snakes probably won't have any trouble getting around outside with rain this mild.*

I harvested cucumbers and komatsuna. The cucumbers became a salad, and I boiled the komatsuna. The main dish was samgye-tang. For other side dishes, the Chinese recipes I'd learned from Machiko-san were probably enough. I also went to check the river with Yuma. The water level was still pretty high, and even if it didn't rain during the day, we could always get heavy rain at night, so I couldn't be too optimistic about catching any crayfish.

"Might as well have the snakes go down to the river and catch some themselves…" I murmured. *That's probably why they're coming along.* After that, I spent some time pulling weeds and such until Aikawa-san's truck arrived.

"Hello, Sano-san. Shame about the weather."

"Hello, Aikawa-san. Yeah, I hate the dampness."

Rin-san and Ten-san getting out of the truck was quite the sight to behold. Ten-san was riding in the truck bed, of course.

"Is your truck all right?" I asked. "Both of them at once must be a pretty heavy load…"

"It's a bit of a problem actually. Luckily, I don't go out with Ten that much."

"I can see why."

Aikawa-san smiled at Yuma. "Yuma-san, was it? Do you mind if my snakes eat bugs and stuff?"

Yuma lowered her head slightly. *I guess she's saying it's okay. Also, I'm impressed he can tell the chickens apart.*

"Crayfiiish," the snakes chanted in unison. It was surprisingly wholesome.

Aikawa-san sighed. "You guys… Sorry, is it okay if we go see the river?"

"Well, the water level is considerably higher than usual, so it might be dangerous…"

"No worries there. Rin, Ten, he said it's okay."

The two snakes went slithering off toward the river. *Wait, two snakes? One snake and a lamia? One and a half snakes and half a person? Gah, this is confusing!*

"I'll go with you just to check. If there's no problem, we can leave them there and come back," I said.

We all went down to the river. Aikawa-san and I kept our distance, but the snakes seemed to enjoy bathing in the river. *True—I think I've heard that snakes can actually swim.* The river level was higher than usual, but even then, it was only about up to our torsos. And this wasn't downstream, so even if the water level rose, the current wouldn't be strong enough to sweep someone away. Rin-san and Ten-san dove into the river and caught crayfish in no time. *Which means there really must be a ton of them around if they can be caught that easily. That's pretty worrying.*

"Rin, Ten, I'll be at Sano-san's house."

"Okay," Rin-san answered. Ten-san was too busy diving his head into the river to look for more prey. I wasn't too sure how much they ate, but regardless, they were clearly capable of getting rid of the crayfish. *Hopefully we'll get more fish and such when the crayfish population goes down.*

On our way back, I told Aikawa-san about how I'd been to the chicken farm yesterday and they'd given me a sample of their samgye-tang.

"Samgye-tang, huh? Very nice. Well...other than the lingering smell of herbal medicine around the house..."

"Ah, right, I hadn't thought of that. I'd better have the ventilation running at full power."

Back at home, I headed to the kitchen. My house's kitchen was visible from the entrance and also from the living room if you left the sliding doors open. *I don't really mind. In fact, I like how open and spacious it feels.*

I served Aikawa-san some cucumber salad and tea while he waited.

"Come to think of it, Sano-san, this is the first time I'm eating your cooking."

"Please keep your expectations low. It's just an average single man's cooking."

"I'm looking forward to it."

"Come on! I even asked you to keep your expectations low."

I prepared a pan with the samgye-tang and started making the Chinese stir-fry I'd been taught yesterday. Apparently, the recipe worked out better if you deep-fried everything, but it still worked as a regular stir-fry, so that's what I went with. *I'm aware that I'm a bit sloppy.*

The ingredients were shishito peppers (which were originally supposed to be bell peppers), potatoes (since it was a stir-fry, I cut them into thin slices), and eggplant. I'd first fry each of them lightly before stir-frying it all together.

I fried ginger, garlic, and green onions until fragrant, then added oyster sauce, soy sauce, sugar, salt, and some starch dissolved in water, mixed it until it was consistent, and added the vegetables I'd fried earlier. I coated them well with the sauce, let it simmer for a bit, and that was it. You didn't have to let it simmer if you'd just deep-fried it all, but I didn't want to deal with all the oil. This dish was called disanxian.

"That smells really good. Hard to believe this is all vegetables," Aikawa-san said.

There was also boiled komatsuna. We clasped our hands together and dug in. *The samgye-tang was really a lifesaver.*

"Korean food and Chinese food are, uh, quite the combination, smell-wise..."

The meal was excellent, but the pungent smell started getting to us after we were done eating. I had to open all the windows.

"Do they sell this samgye-tang at the chicken farm?" asked Aikawa-san.

"It's still in the experimental phase. They said they were looking for feedback."

"I hope they can turn it into a product... Disanxian is also a great dish. Very nutritious, and it goes great with rice."

"Agreed."

I was glad and very relieved that Aikawa-san seemed to have enjoyed the meal. *This is a bit too much effort to do* every time*, though.*

"You were at Katsuragi-san's place yesterday, right?" he asked.

"That's right." *I'd rather not talk about that too much.* "She invites me over every now and then. Must be craving company."

"I can understand that. Living alone has its own merits, but...it is pretty lonely on your own. I guess that's why I ask you to hang

out with me so much."

"That's probably what it's like for Katsuragi-san too."

"I can relate." Aikawa-san laughed. "By the way, you were planning to tear down those abandoned houses, right?"

"Ah..." *That's a topic I'd rather not think about too much.* "Yes, I guess... Maybe not, like, *all* of them, but I don't want them to attract any weird animals. Even if I were to ask someone to do that for me, there's still a lot I'd have to get sorted."

If I wasn't mistaken, hiring someone to do it would set me back a million yen or so, which explained why so many mountains had abandoned houses still standing. I would have ignored them too if I wasn't actually living here, but seeing those empty buildings nearby kind of bothered me.

"Shall I reach out to my hunting buddies? If you give them a free pass to your mountain during hunting season, they'll probably be happy to help you with that."

"Hunting season is...late autumn through spring, right? I guess I'm fine with that—as long as they don't shoot my chickens, of course." That was my main concern.

"You could also let them have your *other* mountain and stay away from this one. It should probably be fine as long as you take care to stay away when there're people hunting."

He's got a point. "That's a good idea, yeah. What about you? What do you do during hunting season?"

"Since I've got my own mountain, I have more than enough space to hunt. There're plenty of hunters who don't own mountains though, and I let them hunt on my other one."

"I thought all hunters had their own mountains."

"There're also quite a few people who live near mountains or who got hunting licenses because they've had trouble with pests ruining their crops."

"Huh. So maybe I should go with your idea and let them hunt on my other mountain. Though it's a bit of a pain to get there." *Actually, does it even have an entrance? I know there aren't any roads.*

"You can get there through my other mountain, so I think that should be fine. Mine does have a gravel road, at least."

"I see."

"They're all locals. I bet they'll be pretty happy about it."

"I hope so... Well then, can you ask them about it? And also let

them know about my chickens."

"Sure, I'll try asking."

Of course, just letting them hunt on my mountain wasn't nearly enough to pay for their labor, so I'd still need to think of something else. Regardless, it would be a huge help to me. As long as I could get the houses torn down, I'd just need to deal with cutting the remains down to appropriate sizes and taking them to the garbage disposal site. Or, if pieces were still too big for the disposal site, hire someone to dispose of them for me.

I didn't know how it would turn out yet, but our talk had put me in a great mood. Aikawa-san and I seemed to have a lot in common, and our conversation just kept flowing. Before I realized it, it was almost evening already.

Wait, isn't it almost time for Yumoto-san to be here with the chickens?

"Aikawa-san... The chickens might be back soon..."

"Yumoto-san's coming to drop them off...?"

"Yes..."

We hurried outside. *I don't know about Ten-san, but we definitely need to make sure they don't see Rin-san.* Yumoto-san had previously said he wanted to have a look at Ten-san, so Aikawa-san would probably not mind. The problem was Rin-san—specifically, her lower half being seen by others. Luckily, Yuma was nearby. Aikawa-san and I looked at each other, nodded, and decided to ask Yuma to keep Rin-san away from the house.

"Yuma, Yumoto-san will be here soon. Make sure Rin-san doesn't come here! Also, can you bring Ten-san? Yumoto-san wants to see him!"

At first, Yuma cocked her head and looked confused.

I decided to clarify. "Keep Rin-san there! Bring only Ten-san here! Got it?"

"Got it!" She trotted off in the direction of the river. *Let's hope she actually* did *get it...*

"Amazing... You can talk to them..."

I hadn't thought much about it until now, but Aikawa-san was right—it was pretty unusual to be able to communicate this effectively with pets. *Yup, they're definitely not normal chickens.*

"Indeed..." Maybe I was taking the chickens for granted to a much greater degree than I'd thought.

I heard the roaring of an engine approaching. *That must be the old man and the chickens. Whew, that was a close one.* We both quietly breathed sighs of relief.

"Oh? I see Aikawa-kun from West Mountain is here too." (Oh, just to let you know, they call the mountain to the west of mine "West Mountain.")

"Yes, that's right. Thank you for always bringing them here, Yumoto-san."

Yumoto-san hopped out of his truck—Pochi and Yuma, who were riding in the bed, followed. It wasn't raining that much, but they were still pretty wet. I thought I'd better go back inside and bring them some towels, but the two chickens were looking around suspiciously.

"Is your girlfriend not with you today?" The old man asked Aikawa-san.

"I, uh, had a few things I asked her to take care of... Oh, by the way, my snake is here too."

"The huge one, right? So...where is he?"

Yumoto-san was visibly excited when he heard that Aikawa-san had brought his snake along, and he started looking around excitedly. He seemed like a curious child, and it would have been an amusing sight if not for our predicament.

"Yuma went to look for him, so they should be back soon." I told him the snake would be coming here so that he wouldn't be getting any ideas about snooping around the mountain, and that seemed to calm him down. Pochi and Yuma, on the other hand, came over and stood next to me. *Like I said, you don't always have to be so wary of Rin-san and Ten-san.*

"Pochi, Tama, come here. I'll dry you off." I was heading into the house when I heard a heavy dragging sound drawing near. Yuma came back, skipping lightly. *Looks like she was able to locate them.*

"Yuma, good job," I praised. I caught sight of a snake head peeking out from the direction of the river. Ten-san slithered loudly toward us. *Now that's right out of a horror movie. A small snake head in the distance that comes in your direction, growing larger and larger.*

"Whoa?! That's...quite something, all right." Yumoto-san was understandably surprised. He even took a step back, probably unconsciously.

"Ten, come here." Aikawa-san beckoned him over, and Ten-san

crept up close to him.

"This is the snake I'm keeping." Aikawa-san introduced his snake to Yumoto-san.

"J-Jeez... That's huge, all right... Looks pretty thick too. Just how big is it...?"

True. When you get a good look at him, he is *pretty thick. Could probably swallow me whole, even.*

"Well... I don't know the exact figures, but I think he's about four meters long," Aikawa-san replied.

"Must be pretty heavy too."

"Indeed—too heavy for me to lift. Even just his head is quite heavy."

As Aikawa-san said that, Ten-san rested his head on his shoulder. Aikawa-san quickly brushed him off. "Hey, stop it! That's dangerous."

"Looks like a nice, well-behaved snake. That's good. But still... Between your snakes and Shohei's chickens, what's going on with that stall...?"

Yes, and don't forget Katsuragi-san's dragon too.

"Aren't those festival stalls run by the villagers?"

"Well, some of them are, but most are outsiders who come here for the festival. It's all old folks around here, and we don't have the energy to spend a whole day standing in a stall."

"I see..."

It was a general trend all over Japan, but rural areas like this one were the most affected by the aging population. Young people gradually moved to the city for its conveniences and amenities. Of course, there was also a minor trend of people choosing to live out in the country, but still.

"Do the festivals around here have portable shrines?" Aikawa-san asked.

Yumoto-san shook his head. "As a regular thing, not really. It depends on the year. Let us know if you want to do one."

"So it's not compulsory..."

"Well, the gods wouldn't feel nice about being enshrined unwillingly, now would they?"

Good point.

"Ah, but that reminds me..." Yumoto-san turned to me. "Shohei, I'm on the committee for this year's festival, so you gotta help us

out if you can."

"Okay. Just let me know!" The Yumotos were always so nice to me—there was no way I could refuse a request from them. Yumoto-san said he'd let me know if he found out anything about the snake tail, and he went home in a merry mood. *Ah, I forgot to ask him about the vet. Eh, I guess I can just look it up.*

After seeing him off, Aikawa-san and I both sighed deeply. *Almost had a heart attack there.*

"It's a good thing you noticed, Sano-san."

"Oh, no... Sorry for spending so much time talking to him..."

We kept "Oh, no"-ing each other for a while. Pochi and Tama stared at us, befuddled.

"Ah! Almost forgot Rin-san."

"Yes, I should go get her." I had Pochi go fetch her in Aikawa-san's place. *Still, that was a really close call. Next time Aikawa-san comes over, I gotta make sure to tell Yumoto-san I'll go pick the chickens up myself.*

After Aikawa-san went home, Tama pecked me ferociously. Apparently, she really didn't want to run into Rin-san and Ten-san. *Why are you so scared of snakes, anyway? I mean, they* are *scary up close, but still.*

I called Matsuyama-san from the chicken farm to thank him for the samgye-tang, noting that it was delectable, but the herbal smell was a bit too strong; he said he'd look into what he could do about it. I also told him my guest loved it and would like to buy it when possible. He said he'd do some tweaking and give me a call so I could go pick it up. *I love how kind and generous everyone is around here.*

I received a call from Yumoto-san on Saturday night. Apparently, that tail might have belonged to a rattlesnake, but they weren't quite able to tell, so it was still just conjecture. *We're not supposed to have rattlesnakes in Japan, right? Damn, that's terrifying!* It was a good thing Tatsuki-san ate it before it could cause any harm. I debated whether to inform Katsuragi-san about this—I wouldn't want to put her on edge more than necessary.

The veterinarian from S-Town was collaborating with the police's investigation, and he had access to the list of what species the late pest control worker had owned. That didn't tell us anything about which snakes had been released in which areas

though, and he was also not allowed to share the list itself with other people, as it was considered key evidence. The only thing we could be sure of was that the man had been in the habit of taking the snakes he got rid of home with him, and thus he'd kept a lot of vipers and yamakagashi.

Really, though, what were they thinking releasing all those snakes into the neighboring fields and mountains? I understand he wasn't expecting to die or anything, but still…I wish he'd thought about what would happen to his pets after he was gone. They make good prey for my chickens, but they're living beings. Just think about it—they were raised in a cozy home, and then someone released them into the wild the instant their owner died. The snakes might actually be the biggest victims here.

"This is all a bit depressing…" I glanced over at the chickens. *What would happen to my adorable chickens in that situation?* Suddenly, I felt a bit like crying.

"Pochi, Tama, Yuma, don't worry! I'll make sure to live a long and healthy life, okay?!" I said to them with my arms spread. Pochi and Tama just gave me the cold shoulder. *Oh, come on now, aren't you being a bit too mean?*

Yuma, unlike them, tilted her head, came over by my side, and snuggled up to me.

"Yumaaaaa!" *You're the only one who understands my feelings!* Or so I thought in the spur of the moment, but actually, that wasn't quite true*. All three of them are my precious chickens. Pochi, Tama, you understand my feelings too, right? Right? Okay, I'm not* too *sure on this one.*



Pochi and Tama ran up and down the mountain, relieving the pent-up stress they'd accumulated over the week. *It's probably thanks to them that my house stays mostly safe from wild animals. I hear raccoon dogs and boars are a common sight, but I hardly see any.*

Yuma and I took our time checking the fields, the rivers, the roads, and such. I had those plastic fences in some spots between the asphalt and the ground, just to be safe. *This should help in case of a landslide.*

"Maybe I could use some netting too. And some guardrails."

The road was paved around the mountain, so even with a truck, there was always the risk of falling off. On the other hand, some spots were too narrow, and if you put anything else there, there wouldn't be enough space for a vehicle to pass. This required careful thought.

"Just some wire mesh would be nice. Or maybe guard cables." *Those that you string through a pole—you see them along highways.*

"This is my property, though—I'd need to buy them myself, right? Gah, more expenses." Still, it could mean the difference between life and death, so it was worth consideration.

It seemed there were still a lot of snakes around. Pochi came back with a viper.

"Yeah, sure, go ahead and eat it." *At least they ask every time.*

I messaged Katsuragi-san and Aikawa-san about the snake tail. As expected, the news sent Katsuragi-san into a panic.

"A rattlesnake? A *rattlesnake*? Oh my god! What do I do?! What do I do, Sano-san?!"

"Katsuragi-san, please calm down. You should be safe if you stay close to Tatsuki-san."

"R-R-R-Right! You're right! But still…"

"Humans are not that good at dealing with snakes. It's better to leave this to Tatsuki-san."

"Huh? Ah, yes, you're right! I'll tell Tatsuki! Thank you!"

She seemed to have finally calmed down a little. *I could go there and see if there's anything I can do, but honestly, I don't think I'd be of any use. The chickens, on the other hand,* might *be of use, but Katsuragi-san's mountain was Tatsuki-san's turf. I don't think it's a good idea to intrude, even at Katsuragi-san's request.*

I think Katsuragi-san is pretty cute, and she's got that something

about her that makes you want to help her and protect her. She's probably the type of person to be liked by everyone.

Everyone who doesn't have some personal issues of their own, that is…

"I… I have no more interest in dating or marriage or any of that crap. I…don't need any of that…" I muttered. *Regardless of whatever Katsuragi-san thinks of me.*

Aikawa-san thanked me for the warning and for Friday. *No need to thank me. Rin-san's not the only one with unusual circumstances.*

"I'm glad I've got you guys here with me…" I told him. *That's what enables me to keep going. And keep a positive outlook.*

The work schedule we'd organized for the chickens was halfway over. I hoped the rainy season would end without issues.

12. No Matter How I Look at It, There's Something Very Weird About My Chickens

The next week passed by, and nothing out of the ordinary occurred. It rained for about half the week, and the rest of the days were cloudy—at the foot of the mountain, that is. Up here in the mountains, it rained lightly just about every night.

The chickens were almost done with their job in the village. They were halfway through their last week when trouble arrived.

I happened to be in the village shopping. On that day, the chickens were supposed to be on patrol near the general store. *Maybe I'll go see how Pochi and Tama are doing at work…if I can find them.* I got on the truck with Yuma, drove for a bit, and parked near a rice paddy. I had Yuma stay in the car.

The paddy was relatively large, considering that this was a small village in the mountains. I was able to spot Pochi and Tama easily. "Hard at work, I see," I murmured. Then I noticed a few children playing next to Pochi. *Isn't that a dangerous spot? His tail could hit them at any—*

"Aaaaaahhhh!!!"

Just then, one of the children got caught by Pochi's tail and went flying into the rice paddy. *At least it's a paddy, so the kid probably isn't hurt or anything. Still, I should go check on him.*

The sudden shrill cry I heard next informed me that there had been someone else watching the whole thing. *Probably the landowner here.* Yuma and I ran over to the child.

"Hey, you all right?" I asked, pulling him up.

"Yeah, I'm okay! But mom is…"

The hems of my pants got covered in mud. *Hopefully, I can borrow a faucet here. At least the kid seems to be okay, judging from the smile on his face.* The other kids, presumably not wanting to get dirty, were all watching from a distance. *Understandable.*

"You over there!"

"Ah, I'm sorry about my chicken…"

The woman who'd shrieked and stood frozen in place a moment ago rushed over to us after I lifted the child. She looked relatively

young, but she wore a very intense expression.

"Are you the owner of that chicken?!"

"Y-Yes…" I replied nervously.

"Just what are you thinking, letting something that large roam around unsupervised?! I know he's here to get rid of the snakes, and I'm grateful for that, but I'm so scared that I can't get any work done on the fields!"

"E-Er… I think you should be safe as long as you keep your distance…" *Though he* does *have a pretty long reach thanks to the tail.*

"Well, why did my son get knocked down, then?!"

Uh, precisely because he didn't *keep his distance…* I was at a loss here. I glanced over at Yuma, who had an intimidating look in her eyes. *Please, I'm begging you, do* not *peck her.*

The child who'd fallen down stood up, covered in mud. "Mom, it was my fault!"

"You just stay quiet now!"

"Listen to me! It was my fault, 'cause I was playing next to Pochi-chan!"

"That's right, auntie! It's our fault! We didn't think about how long his tail is!"

"Sorry, Pochi-chan."

The children all stood up for Pochi. The girls snuck up to him and gave him tight hugs, which he just accepted stoically. *Heh, look at Casanova here…*

"B-But…it's still dangerous!" exclaimed the woman.

"I'm terribly sorry. I'll make sure he won't do it again," I assured her, bowing my head deeply. This kind of thing always ended with people blaming the animals—a sincere apology from me was probably the best way to settle things peacefully.

"Eh? What's up? Hey, Pochi, you playboy!"

"What's going on?"

As I was apologizing, Yumoto-san and a young man I didn't know came out of the house near the rice paddy. Yumoto-san grinned at the sight of Pochi being hugged by the girls, and the other man stared at me bowing, visibly confused by the situation.

"D-Dear!" The woman—that man's wife, it turned out—explained to the two of them what had transpired. The man and Yumoto-san seemed stumped for words.

“Anyway, Makoto, go over there and wash that dirt off,” the man said, pointing to a faucet. “Sano-san, sorry about that. Please feel free to wash yourself too.”

“Thank you.” I turned to the kid. “Makoto-kun, let’s go.”

“Okay. Thanks for earlier, mister!” The boy who’d fallen into the paddy smiled from ear to ear. We both washed the mud off at the faucet outside the house. Yuma also tagged along.

I could see that the discussion was heating up, with the woman, her husband, Yumoto-san, and the children all loudly arguing their positions. Makoto-kun seemed saddened by that.

“I’m sorry, mister,” said Makoto-kun. “It was my fault for playing near Pochi-chan…”

I smiled at him. “You’re not hurt, right?”

“Nope, I’m all right.”

“It’s all good, then. Just keep in mind that Pochi is working and avoid getting too close, okay?”

“Okay. Can I still say sorry to him?”

“Sure, just let him know you’re not hurt. He’s probably worried about you too.” Indeed, I’d noticed that Pochi had paid no mind to the girls hugging him—he’d kept looking over at Makoto-kun. *Such a good chicken.*

Makoto-kun nodded. “Thanks. I think mom babies me too much…”

“That’s just how mothers are. Plus, my chickens *are* pretty huge.”

“They really are. Where’d you get them?”

“Uh… A stall at the festival in spring.”

“Really?! I want one too! Do you think I can get one at the summer festival?”

“I wonder…”

We chatted as we washed the mud off our clothes. Makoto-kun was still wearing his clothes, but with today’s hot weather, a cold shower was just what he needed. Now he just had to change. Having soiled only the hems of my pants, I just washed them quickly here. I would give them a more thorough scrubbing at home.

Afterward, we joined the others, and the woman bowed her head to me.

“Please allow me to apologize for earlier.”

I didn't think she'd acted in a way that merited a public apology, so I was at a loss for a reaction.

"Please raise your head!" I insisted. "I should be the one to apologize. I'll be sure to give my chicken a good scolding…"

"No, Makoto was at fault here. We're the ones who asked to borrow your chickens, after all. I'm really sorry." This time it was the man who apologized. He bowed.

"Oh, no, no, it's all right. I understand that my chickens can be pretty scary due to their size. I'm just glad no one got hurt. Please raise your head as well."

Both parents had awkward looks on their faces when they stopped bowing.

"Hey, kiddos." Yumoto-san turned toward the children. "The chickens are at work here! Stay away from them when you're playing. They're checking for dangerous snakes and getting rid of 'em if they find any. It's dangerous if you don't stay away. Got it?"

"Got it!"

"Sorry, Pochi-chan!"

"Pochi-chan, let's play!"

"Tama-chan, here!"

Ah… Looks like some of them didn't *get it. Oh well. Kids will be kids. That's a good thing too.*

I went up to the couple. "It seems Makoto-kun doesn't have any injuries, but I'd recommend watching over him just in case."

"Thank you…"

"We're sorry…"

Both of them still looked embarrassed about the whole thing.

"Also, please let the children know not to get too close. You see, my chickens have unusually long tails…"

"Uh… Are chickens supposed to have tails like that?"

"Who knows…?"

After that, the topic shifted to what constituted a "normal chicken," and we spent some time discussing that, ultimately settling on the thesis that mine had probably undergone some sort of atavism. By the end, the woman was already laughing again, which relieved me.

It's normal for mothers to worry about their children. Even if she knows what they are and why they're here, it still must be frightening to have such massive chickens roaming around the farm. Maybe I

ought to have participated in the meetings too. This sort of thing could have happened anytime. Everyone's always so kind to me—I'd just taken it all for granted. I really need to be more attentive to the chickens…

"Yumoto-san."

"What?"

"Are you still holding meetings?"

"Next one's probably gonna be the last."

"Can I join?"

"Well, sure, I guess…" the old man said, a bit reluctantly.

"I'd like to join, then."

"Got it. I'll let everyone know."

After the whole commotion had settled down, one of the kids pulled me by the arm. "Hey, mister!"

"Hm? What's up?"

"Can we play with the chickens?"

I turned to the chickens, who all lowered their heads slightly. *That must mean it's okay.*

"Sure, if they're done patrolling…"

I looked over at Yumoto-san, who smiled and said, "Sure, that's enough for today."

"Yaaaay!" the children shouted in excitement. They went to play tag with Pochi. The girls were hugging Tama and Yuma. *Looks like the kids have taken quite a liking to them in my absence.*

"Let me in too!" Makoto-kun, in new clothes, ran over to Pochi and the kids who were playing tag.

Heh, probably the type of kid to come home with bruises often. I can see where the mother is coming from.

The couple had gone back inside. I was watching over the children with Yumoto-san. There were a number of younger families living in the area, and there were seven children gathered here—one from each household. *Though I'm sure they won't be the last.*

"It's nice having children around," I said.

"Yup, they're our greatest treasure. We gotta make sure they grow up strong and healthy."

The girls took Yuma and Tama to a spot where some weeds were growing. The two chickens were curiously watching the kids make something with grass.

“I had no idea my chickens were so popular with kids.”

“That’s ’cause you’re always cooped up in your mountain. The kids were scared at first, but you know, these are just big chickens. By the next day, they were already getting along fine. The chickens take good care of the kids too. I’m getting sick of being asked pretty much every day where to buy chickens like that.”

“I see…” I really had no idea. They always acted the same and patrolled the mountain after they got home from work.

“So, y’know, if the chickens are okay with it, we’d appreciate it if they still came to look at the farms once a week or so, even after their work is done. The kids would be happy about it too.”

“That’s true.” The chickens seemed to enjoy playing with the children as well. *I guess that might be nice every once in a while. Maybe not once a week, though.*

“Kyaaaah!”

Suddenly, I heard a shriek coming from the girls’ direction. I looked to see what had happened.

Yuma held a snake in her beak. Yumoto-san and I got worried and ran over to them.

“Ah, it’s just a rat snake. Just let it go,” Yumoto-san said. Yuma did as he told her.

“That was scary!”

“Thanks, Yuma-chan!” The girls were still slightly out of breath.

“No need to get so worked up about a rat snake,” Yumoto-san chided them.

“It’s still a snake, and snakes are scary!”

“It has no legs! That’s so creepy!”

The girls protested, leaving Yumoto-san in an uncomfortable position. *Looks like Old Man Yumoto’s no match for girls.* I laughed.

“You agree, right, mister?!”

This time, it was my turn. “Well, yeah. I have the chickens catch vipers for me too.”

“Really? There are vipers in the mountains?”

“Yup, a lot of them.”

“That’s scary!”

It really is. The mountains still had the same number of bugs, but there was a wider variety of animals.

“Why do you live in the mountains? You should come live down here too,” Makoto-kun said.

I paused for a moment, then replied, “Us grown-ups just have a lot going on.”

“Like ‘adult problems’?”

I bet he doesn’t even know what that means. It’s a pretty convenient term, to be sure. “Yep, that kind of stuff.”

“Ah, there’re the chickens!”

Where did these other children come from? I looked at Yumoto-san.

“The kids love the chickens,” he explained, “so they always come looking for ’em.” *Seems like a great enrichment activity, if anything.* “Maybe the school will ask to borrow them next.”

“Mr. Pochi and Ms. Tama, huh?” *For some reason, it doesn’t sound* that *weird. As their owner, however, I know this may be a bit selfish, but I’d like to let them stay on the mountain and run around as they please.*

This time of year, the days were getting longer and longer. Before I realized it, the sun was nearly setting. It seemed we’d spent a lot more time chatting away than I’d thought.

“Pochi, Tama, Yuma, we’re leaving!”

The children piped up.

“Whaaat, already?”

“Don’t go!”

I wanted to avoid driving after dark, so I had to ignore the children’s protests. *I need to get home before the sun sets.*

“Are they coming here again tomorrow?” I asked Yumoto-san.

“Yup, same area.”

“They’ll come back tomorrow!” I told the children.

“Okay!”

“Let’s play again, Pochi-chan!”

“See you tomorrow, Tama-chan!”

“You’re so cute, Yuma-chan!”

One of those isn’t like the others… Anyway, I drove back home with the chickens. It was interesting getting to see an unexpected side of their interactions with others.

“Say, do you guys want to keep working at the village?” I asked them later that night. They all cocked their heads. “Your work ends this week,” I explained. They lowered their heads, probably intending to say they were aware of that. “So, do you want to keep going? Or have you had enough?”

Yumoto-san had said that he'd been asked about the chickens—some people from neighboring villages had inquired because they'd like the chickens to help them out too. That would extend my chickens' work term, of course. Yumoto-san also said that they wouldn't be able to offer much in the way of payment, so I was free to refuse. *It's not about the money, though. I want to respect my chickens' decision.*

"Won't do!"

"Won't go!"

"Don't wanna!"

Surprisingly enough, all three refused.

"Huh? Why's that?" *They all seemed like they were having a lot of fun playing with the children.*

"Mountain!"

"Mountain!"

"Sano!"

The first two responses were from Pochi and Tama. And Yuma wanted to stay by my side, apparently. *This is so like them.* I chuckled.

The next day, Pochi and Tama were on duty. *I thought you two wanted to stay on the mountain...?*

"Are you okay with leaving the mountain?" I asked them. They both gave me the cold shoulder. *Really, guys, that hurts.*

I'd asked yesterday if it wasn't better to drop them off directly at the farm, but since Yumoto-san was the one running the whole operation, we'd decided it'd be better to leave them in his care, as before.

"Good morning." I showed up at the Yumotos' with the chickens in tow.

"Hey there, Shohei. Sleep well?"

"Yes, thankfully." After we went home, the chickens spent the rest of the day running up and down the mountain. In their own way, they were also taking care to make sure they got enough sleep.

"Yumoto-san, about what we discussed yesterday..." I informed him that the chickens weren't too enthusiastic about it.

"That's fine. It was just a suggestion—we gotta respect the chickens' wishes. I'll let them know."

Yumoto-san said I could leave the logistics to him. He would get in touch with the folks from the other villages and refuse their offers. *That's a relief.*

"So, Shohei… Are you sure you want to take part in the meeting?"

"Will that be a problem?" I asked.

Old Man Yumoto looked somewhat uncomfortable. "Well, you know… They're your chickens and all, so sure, it'd be great if you could also join. Just…keep in mind that it'll be a bunch of cranky old geezers."

"That's…"

"You can sit in, sure. Having you around might also help clear up any misunderstandings. You'd just better keep in mind that there might be people who like to run their mouths even when they have no idea what's going on. You gotta be prepared to hear things you don't wanna hear. If that sounds like a bad time to you, don't bother."

Yumoto-san is just too kind.

"It's all right… Well, not exactly, but still. I think I ought to participate at least once."

"Yeah, I guess so. Once is enough." Yumoto-san reluctantly agreed to let me sit in on the meeting. I was actually a bit excited to hear just what they were going to say to me. *No, I'm not a masochist or anything!*

The meetings were always scheduled for Saturday night, and they spent the whole night drinking and chatting. *I feel a little sorry for the old lady.* With that in mind, I had to decide what to do with the chickens for the night. *It's just one night—they'll probably be okay if I just leave the door open. Even so…*

I told Aikawa-san about it, and while he did offer to take care of them, I imagined Tama wasn't going to be pleased with that, plus I was afraid of what might happen if I left the chickens alone with the snakes for a whole night. *I don't want to start a war or anything.* I politely turned him down. *The other day? Well, I was there to mediate between the chickens and the snakes, so that was different.*

Basically, *I* was the one who didn't want to part with the chickens. *Yeah, I'm the lonely one. I know already. What about it?*

"Guys, I gotta go to Yumoto-san's Saturday night for a meeting, and I'm gonna be spending the night there. What about you? Do

you want to stay here on the mountain or go with me to his place? Or…”

The chickens exchanged looks and clucked at one another, probably discussing what to do.

“Together!”

“Mountain!”

“Together!”

“G-Got it… Thanks.”

It seemed Tama preferred to stay here, which meant I’d be taking Pochi and Yuma along. *Sorry, but please bear with me.*

I called Yumoto-san to inform him about this, and he said, “Yeah, sure, that’s actually a good idea. It’ll make things easier if they see the chickens.”

This happened on Friday night. Then on Saturday, at about three in the afternoon, I left Tama to take care of the house by herself and headed down to the village with Pochi and Yuma. It was already July, and you could feel the sudden jump in the temperature when you descended the mountain. *It really is a whole different environment up there.*

I was approached by a few children at the general store while I was shopping for something to bring to the meeting.

“Ah, it’s Pochi-chan! Pochi-chaaaan!”

The children immediately surrounded Pochi and Yuma. *They’re really popular, huh? Isn’t it too hot to hug them?*

“Could I have some frozen chicken?”

“Here you go. Thanks.”

I bought some chicken meat and called out to Pochi and Yuma, saying we were leaving. The children glared at me, but that was just how it was.

“Hey, mister, let us borrow the chickens!”

“Nah. They’re mine.” I knew I was being rather childish, but the chickens’ contract was over. *And no, pouting is not gonna make me change my mind.* Pochi and Yuma obeyed, and we went on our way.

At the Yumotos’, Pochi and Yuma headed to the fields. Lately, they’d developed the habit of ignoring the house itself and going around to look for something to nibble on.

“Hello there, Sho-chan,” said Machiko-san.

“Hello. I came a bit early—hopefully that’s not a problem. Oh,

and it looks like the chickens went over to the fields before I could stop them. I hope that's not a problem either..."

"It's all right. My, thank you for the present, as always." Her face beamed up when I handed her the frozen meat. *I get it. You can never have enough meat, after all.*

"Oh, he's here already?"

A bunch of old ladies came outside, one after another. *They must be here to help get everything ready for the meeting.*

"Good afternoon," I said.

"We haven't had any young men around in a while, have we?"

"Would you like some crackers?"

"Oh, um... Excuse me, I have to go watch my chickens, so..."

Feeling a bit intimidated by the old lady aura, I retreated outside. I'd come a bit earlier than planned, thinking I might be able to help with preparations, but it looked like that was not necessary.

"Chickens? Are you Sano-kun, perhaps?"

"Oh, so *he's* Sano-kun."

I could hear the women chattering as I walked away. Pochi and Yuma were near the fields, poking at something or other on the ground. *Probably found some bugs or something.* I spent a while just watching over the chickens absentmindedly until Yumoto-san came by to greet me.

"Hey, you should've let me know you were here already."

I scratched my head in embarrassment. *Sorry, but I'm not socially adept enough to be able to call out to him in that situation.*

"Er, uh..."

I stole a quick glance at the house. Yumoto-san followed my gaze. "Well, uh, yeah..." he mumbled. *He's not any match for them either, it seems.*

We spent some time watching over the chickens together. The fields were decently large, and the chickens at the other end looked pretty small from here. However, the mere fact that you could see them clearly from here, despite the distance and all the crops growing, was extraordinary. *Are they getting bigger again? Just how big are they gonna grow? Hopefully not big enough to burst through my ceiling. Pfft, right.*

After we'd spent a while there, the guests started coming in—the old folks who would be participating in tonight's meeting. The

property was large enough to fit everyone's trucks without feeling cramped. *Some of these guys are old enough to be my* grand*fathers.*

Akimoto-san, who'd previously helped me with the boar, came to greet us. "Yo, did the old lady kick you out?" he asked.

"Yeah, something like that," Yumoto-san replied nonchalantly.

"Hey, Sano-kun."

"Hello, Akimoto-san. Thanks again for your help."

"Don't worry about it. Like I said, let me know if you manage to catch another one. Oh, so those are the chickens who caught it, huh?"

"That's right."

"They're pretty huge, all right... Were they always that big?"

"They've, uh...gone through a growth spurt or two. They're already over a meter tall..."

"Now that's quite something. What's going on with them, I wonder."

After chatting for a while, we decided to go inside. I called out to the chickens. "Pochi, Yuma, we'll be in the house, okay?"

They both looked at me in acknowledgment, and I assumed it was probably okay to leave them there.

Most of the food was ready when we went inside. At Yumoto-san and Akimoto-san's behest, I sat down in the room with the tatami floor. They'd taken down the sliding doors separating the rooms to make space for everyone. The other men were already sitting down and waiting for Yumoto-san's signal to start the meeting.

Yumoto-san opened a can of beer and served me and Akimoto-san a glass. *Wait, I thought the person of lowest standing—that's me in this case—was supposed to serve the others? Well, it's a bit too late for that.*

"Sano-kun is joining us today. As you know, he's the one who dispatched the chickens. Anyway, cheers!"

Upon hearing Yumoto-san's rather haphazard greeting, everyone took a sip. *Pretty good. And now I really have no choice but to stay the night.*

Although they called it a "meeting," it seemed to me that this was really an excuse to gather, drink, and party. *That's one, two, three...over ten people in total, I think.* The women, after finishing off all the work, held a gathering of their own with food and drinks.

“How ’bout extending the contract? There’s a bunch of other folks who’d like their help,” one of the men—a senior with a head full of white—suggested.

However, Yumoto-san immediately rebuked him. “For the pittance they’re offering? Hah! No way. Tell ’em to figure it out on their own.”

“Money, money, money… It’s just a single day, for god’s sake!”

“So why not do it yourself for free?!”

Wait, wait, wait. Why are they already breaking out into a fight?

“Just think of it as, uh…what do they call it again? Volunteer work?”

“You know, the whole point of volunteer work is that you do it of your own volition! The chickens ain’t doing that!”

Yeah, I have to agree. I don’t think you can expect that much charity out of my chickens. Tama, for instance, would probably react to that suggestion with a glacial stare. I’m feeling cold just imagining it.

“But they’re pets!” insisted the old man. “They listen to whatever the owner says!”

Some of the other elderly men cheered him on. *Uh, that’s not really how it works.* I decided to prioritize the food so that I could enjoy it before it went cold.

“Eh? What’s that? Your dog doesn’t listen to you that much?”

This tempura is pretty fantastic. Gotta eat the sashimi while it’s still fresh too.

“How about it? Would you tell him to go to so-and-so’s farm and hunt venomous snakes? And that it’s his own business if he gets bitten?”

“Th-That’s not…”

“That’s how it is with venomous snakes and insects. You pay someone to get rid of ’em, or you do it yourself. So what’s the big idea? Who’s trying to get that work done for free?”

Did his wife make these pickles? They’re really good.

“Well, Sano-kun, I gotta say, you’re one cool customer…” Akimoto-san murmured to me with a smile. *You’re eating too, Akimoto-san.*

“Ah! Shohei, put some of that sashimi on my plate too!”

“Okay.”

Yumoto-san noticed that, at this rate, there wouldn’t be much left at the table for him. I set some food aside for him on his plate.

This should probably be enough.

"That kid's the owner, right? C-Come on, kid... Do it for the village's sake, won't you?"

I was put on the spot, but Yumoto-san shot him down again. "I told you, we can't have 'em working for free."

"I'm sorry, but I'll have to refuse," I replied with a smile.

"Wha...?!"

"You outsiders are always like this...!"

Remember, you're the man asking one such "outsider" for a favor. I straightened and faced him.

"I think my chickens have done a great job over the past month. They've got a lot of pent-up stress from work, and I want to give them some time to wind down and rest. I hope you will understand." *I don't even want to think about how they'd react if I asked them to keep patrolling the village.*

The old men were all speechless.

"You heard him. Just give up," said Yumoto-san. "They really *did* do a great job. Now it's up to us to stay on the lookout."

"What about the next village over? You should have heard from them."

"I declined that too. The chickens would have to sleep there," Yumoto-san explained.

"So you just decided that on your own..."

"You're the ones acting on your own. You're not the ones raising them. Have some common sense."

It seemed that these men were the ones who'd initially suggested that the chickens go help out at other villages. *I agree with Yumoto-san—that was indeed pretty selfish of them.*

"It's just a night or two, so what's the problem?!"

"Um, sorry, but the problem is that they make a lot of noise at night if they don't get enough exercise. It would be a big bother for the neighbors," I explained. *Plus, stress also affects sleep quality.*

"They're just chickens! What's the big deal about lending a couple of them...?"

I snapped. *What did you just say about my chickens, old man? I'll have you know they're the greatest, most special chickens in the whole world!*

"Ask them directly, then," I said. "They shouldn't mind going for a day if you can convince them."

“How am I supposed to talk to them?!”

By that logic, how do you expect me *to tell them what to do? If they can’t understand human language, I can’t tell them what to do either.*

“They’re outside—feel free to go look for them.”

“Don’t give me that crap! At least bring them here.” I looked at Yumoto-san, who just shrugged.

“You’re the ones who need a favor, right? So obviously you should go to them,” he said.

“You’ve always been like that! No respect for your elders!”

“Respect begets respect!”

The two started arguing again. *Uh, I know there’s a fair amount of distance between houses, but the windows are open. Won’t you think of the neighbors?*

Suddenly, I spotted Yuma from one of the windows.

“Yuma, want some meat?” She came closer when I beckoned her. *I know she’s standing on the veranda, but yup, she really* is *huge.* I picked out some fried pork for her. *Not* chicken, needless to say.

I noticed it had gotten oddly quiet. I turned back to find everyone—besides Yumoto-san, Akimoto-san, and others who’d already seen the chickens—staring in disbelief. *Well, yeah, that’s a natural reaction.*

I turned back to Yuma, opened the window screen, and gave her the meat. Yuma chewed on it with her sharp, jagged teeth and went trotting off.

“Come back when you’ve had enough, okay?” I called out to her and returned to my seat.

“Uh, Shohei… Is it just me, or did they get bigger?” asked Yumoto-san.

“I think they’ve grown a bit taller, yeah.”

“That tail looks like a dinosaur tail or something.”

The other men, who probably didn’t expect the chickens to be *that* big, remained silent. *Good job, Yuma!* I gave her a mental thumbs-up. The rest of the meeting was relatively peaceful, and we just ate, drank, and made merry.

Tonight’s meeting ended earlier than usual, I was told, and the old men went home in fumbling steps. *Are they going to be all right? Hopefully they don’t fall into a ditch or anything.*

Usually, a bunch of them would sleep over, but tonight, only a handful stayed behind. I was one of them, of course. Pochi and

Yuma stayed in the earthen-floor room. *They may be huge, but they're pretty fluffy and cute.*

"Pochi, Yuma, thanks for everything!" I thanked them from a distance, since they didn't like it when I got near them after drinking. Yuma was the one who'd been able to shut those people up. *I guess a picture really is worth a thousand words. Wait, that's not quite right…*

The old folks had been drinking pretty heavily, and they were already snoring loudly. I was also still lightheaded from the alcohol, so it didn't take long for me to fall asleep.

The next morning, I woke up earlier than I'd expected. I headed to the kitchen to have some water and ran into Yumoto-san there.

"Good morning."

"Hey. Did you sleep well?"

"Yes, thank you."

I walked out onto the veranda for no particular reason. Pochi and Yuma, who had apparently woken up a while ago—they'd eaten some vegetable scraps—were in the garden pecking away at the ground. *What a pleasant morning.*

"It's gotten pretty hot, huh?" Yumoto-san remarked.

"Yes, it gets quite hot without the rain."

We were almost through the rainy season. I had a lot to do after that, from taking the chickens to see the vet to resuming the usual weeding, checking the roads, and cleaning the graves. *It'll probably still be a while before I'm able to go get a look at my other mountain. Living in the mountains really is a lot of hard work. Oh yeah, I also need to do something about the abandoned houses.*

"You know, Shohei," Yumoto-san suddenly called out to me.

"Yes?"

"Well… It feels a bit weird for me to say this when I was the one dishing it out last night, but those geezers don't really mean any harm, y'know."

"I understand." *Really, I do.*

"It's just…as you get older and older, your mind gets more rigid and inflexible. One day you're 'with it' but then they change what 'it' is, and what you're with isn't 'it.' It wasn't that bad back when we still had a lot of young folks in the village, but there're fewer and fewer of them. And on top of that, we keep burdening the few

that’re still here. No wonder they all leave for the city…”

It’s a bit of a chicken-and-egg situation, but easier access to information is also probably a significant factor. Back in the day, information about what life was like in other places was scarce, but nowadays, that’s all trivial. There are more job opportunities in the city, and life is just more convenient in general. You also don’t have to participate in the local community if you don’t want to, and consequently, no one can try to force festival cleanup jobs on you “as a member of the community.” I agree that there’s not a lot that can be done about young people being attracted to this freer, more convenient lifestyle.

The older villagers couldn’t keep up with all this, and as a result, they were basically the only ones left. *It’s a real shame, but it’s not like there’s anything I can do about it.*

“Well, you know… I bought the mountain, so I’ll probably be here for a long time.”

“Right. You couldn’t keep those huge chickens in the city either.” Yumoto-san looked at the chickens and chortled.

That’s true, yeah. And the same goes for those huge snakes and that dragon. I suppose Aikawa-san and Katsuragi-san must also be intending to stay here for a long, long while.

“But still… How on earth did they get that big, anyway…?”

I have a hunch that I had something to do with it. A pet owner who’s a problem for his pets… Gosh, I feel sort of pathetic.

“I wonder…”

Yumoto-san let out a hearty laugh.

He’s right—at that size, I doubt I could take them with me to my hometown. I gotta figure out what to do with them when I go to visit grandpa’s grave. It’s a bit too far for a day trip… I’ll have to leave them alone for at least a night.

“My, it’s hot, isn’t it? Here, I brought you some chazuke.”

“Thank you very much.”

Machiko-san brought us a tray with some tea, chazuke, and pickles. I hadn’t had enough to drink to have a hangover, but the refreshing sourness of the pickled plum felt just right. *I hope I can also become this thoughtful someday.*

“Just let me know if you’d like more, okay?” she said and went back inside.

“Yumoto-san, how did you two meet?”

“Eh? What’s the matter, Shohei? Are you thinking of settling down too?” Yumoto-san grinned.

You’re teasing me, aren’t you?

“No… I think it’s still early for that. I was just thinking it must be nice to have such a kind and considerate wife…”

He gave me an odd look and glared at me. “I’m not letting you have her.”

“You don’t have to worry about that!!!”

What the heck are you saying, Yumoto-san? Besides, I bet she wasn’t like that at the beginning of your marriage. You both turned out this way after many years as a couple. That time spent together is the key.

Anyway, it’s freaking hot, even though it’s still pretty early. I’d better go home as soon as the booze wears off. I felt eyes on me and looked up to find Pochi and Yuma fixedly staring. *They probably want to go home too. Sorry. Just hang on a bit until the alcohol wears off.*

***

The air up here is much nicer. We were having atypically nice weather, so I opened every window in the house. I also did the laundry, though I wasn’t sure if I would be able to dry it outside. *I’ve got a clothes dryer, yeah, but drying them under the sunlight just feels so much nicer.* I put out the futon to dry too—I was already beat. *I hope that at least helps with the moisture a bit.*

Although I was totally sober again, it was still the next morning after staying overnight somewhere else. Sleeping at someone else’s house just wasn’t the same.

“That’s right. Starting tomorrow, the chickens don’t need to go to work anymore…” I wouldn’t be needing to drop them off every morning, so that was one less thing to worry about. *From now on, I can spend some time focusing on the mountain. The rainy season’s almost over, after all. I’ll have a lot to do after that. I wonder when I’ll have time to sit down on my veranda and relax.*

I got a message from Aikawa-san asking how the meeting went. *I was so relieved I forgot all about that, even though I was asking him for advice on the chickens. That’s pretty rude of me.*

“It was all right. I’ll tell you more about it some other time,” I

replied. I didn't want to talk to anyone else for the day.

I'd been given loads of vegetables as a reward for the chickens' hard work. There was still the money, which I'd receive separately—the veggies were just a token of the farmers' gratitude. I did think the gift might be too much for me to eat, but because I remembered I had three chickens with voracious appetites to help me get through them, I took home as much as I could.

"The rice is especially welcome." For vegetables, I had been managing to grow some cucumbers and komatsuna, but I had neither the infrastructure nor the know-how to grow my own rice. *Our ancestors who bent over backward to grow rice must have been really sick of the hunter-gatherer life.*

I'd gotten a lot of pickled vegetables too, so for lunch, I had only rice and pickles. The saltiness of the pickles soaking through my body felt great after all that work. *Pickles are handy as preserved food, but back in the day, when practically everyone was a manual laborer, this saltiness was probably indispensable.* Today, Tama stayed by my side while Pochi and Yuma went on patrol. *Good, go and move around as much as you want.*

Incidentally, yesterday when I came home, I found an especially filthy Tama. "Hey, Tama, what did you do last night when you were here all by yourself?" I asked her. She just tilted her head as if she didn't understand what I was saying. *Maybe I have to speak in clearer terms.*

"Did you sleep properly? You didn't spend all night playing on the mountain, right?"

She averted her gaze. *Hey, hold on now. What is this?*

"Tama? You did sleep in the house last night like you were supposed to, right? Surely you didn't play all night and then sleep until we came back. Right?"

When we'd gotten back, we'd found Tama lying down on the earthen floor—she'd been incredibly dirty. The first thing I'd done after getting home was give her a good wash. It was normal for them to come back dirty from patrol, but for some reason, every time I had Tama stay by herself overnight, she got much dirtier than usual. This had also happened last time when I stayed over at Aikawa-san's place, and I found it odd. *Just where was she running around to get* this *dirty?*

Tama tried to slip away. *Yep, something's fishy here.* I grabbed

her tightly so she couldn't run off.

"Tama! It's dangerous to play outside at night, even if you have good eyesight! Hey, don't run away!"

I was holding her pretty tightly, so she couldn't get away that easily. Tama tried to run off while I was still holding her. *H-Hey, she's going pretty fast. And that's with me holding her... Just how strong* is *she?*

"Tamaaaa, apologize!"

"Buzz off!"

"'Buzz off'? Where did you learn that?!" *Papa didn't raise you like that! Wait...*

Papa? Me?

Bad chicken! Whatever that means.

Tama ran around the house and the fields before finally shaking me off her in front of the entrance and running away.

"That's some serious strength and stamina, all right..."

I'll have to give her another scolding if she doesn't come back tonight. I brushed the dirt off my work clothes, then gazed at the house and surrounding area. *Such a pleasant sight. Other than all the bugs flying around. Or maybe that's part of what makes it pleasant.*

Oh yeah, I think I saw a giant hornet around here the other day. There might be more than one nest nearby, so that's another thing to watch out for on patrol, or it could be big trouble for us come autumn. I wonder if we have honey bees too. I can't really afford to get into beekeeping right now, but I do like the idea.

Yuma came over to me as I was checking the abandoned houses.

"Hm? Oh, Yuma, you're back. Are you done already?"

"Back!"

"Yup, yup! That's my Yuma—such a good girl."

It looked like she'd traded places with Tama. *That delinquent chicken! I'll make sure to give her an earful when she comes back.*

Yuma came over to appease me and cuddled up to my side. *Gaaah, Yuma's just too cute! She's my solace! What, you got a problem with that?!*

Pochi and Tama didn't come back until the sun had almost set.

Extra Chapter: Meanwhile, at the Yumotos'...

Two days after the meeting had taken place, some of the elderly villagers were gathered at the Yumoto residence again. The sky was a clear blue, signaling the coming end of the rainy season.

"Oh my, was there something happening today?"

Yumoto's wife, Machiko, instructed the guests to set the vegetables they had brought with them near the front door. Then, she began to make preparations for tea time. The visitors were shown into the nearby living room.

Yumoto was the first to speak. "So, what is it? Anything I can help you old folks with?"

Tea was served, and one of the elders replied, "Yumoto, what's the deal with those chickens?"

Yumoto shrugged. "Beats me. Shohei's pets, I guess?"

"Pets, you say? With that size?"

"Must be a mutation or something, then?" Yumoto replied dismissively. Truth be told, Yumoto himself was unable to glean the truth behind Sano's chickens, and he could only come up with conjectures—none of which he felt inclined to share with the elderly villagers.

"I see... I thought it must've been something a god around here left behind."

Yumoto was slightly fazed by the elder's suggestion, but he narrowly avoided showing it. The mountains in the vicinity were still home to various gods. Although they never revealed themselves, the locals could vaguely sense their presence.

"A god, you say...? Sure, I guess there're a few of 'em in the mountains around here..."

"Where did Sano-kun get the chickens from?"

Yumoto paused for a moment, then replied, "Says he bought some dyed chicks at a festival stall back in spring."

The elderly villagers let out muted breaths, as if that was enough to ascertain the facts. The villages in the area were occasionally home to mysterious happenings, which the villagers

understood as a natural part of life here.

"Who was it that suggested the spring festival again…?"

"I forget…"

The villagers shook their heads.

Generally, only the summer festival was held at the local Inari shrine, while festivals in other seasons had not been held for approximately a decade. Yet this year, someone had inexplicably suggested that they hold a festival in the cold of spring. Even more inexplicably, no one could remember *who* had suggested it.

"Maybe…it was one of the gods' ideas, and they did it for Sano-kun's sake," one of the villagers suggested jokingly. Yumoto actually found that to be a reasonable suggestion.

"Let Sano-kun know we're sorry, will you? And give him the vegetables we brought."

Yumoto snickered. "Hey, hey, you can just go and apologize yourselves, y'know."

"Bah. Too late for that. It's good to have someone play the bad guy, you see. And you can leave that to us."

The elderly villagers were prone to such behavior—their selfishness served to prevent others from being even more unreasonable. It was a thankless role, to be sure, but they were quite content with it.

"Well, you know… That's why all the young folks keep leaving," Yumoto pointed out.

"Hmph. All we need is someone young who can take us head-on. That Sano-kun looked pretty ordinary, but I was impressed he held his stance." The villager took a sip of his tea.

"Nothing like some tea on a hot day."

"Eh, I don't really get it," said Yumoto, who also—despite his words—took a sip.

"Let us know if anyone's giving Sano-kun trouble! Got it?" The elderly villagers excused themselves, leaving behind a large number of vegetables.

"Say, is that geezer one of those 'tsunderes' or something?" Yumoto asked his wife.

"There's no demand for tsundere old men. All these vegetables… What are we going to do?"

Machiko seemed troubled by the prospect of finding a place to store the vegetables. The idea she settled on was pickling

whatever could be pickled before giving them to Sano at a later date.

Extra Chapter: I Tried Bathing with Them

This happened about a week after I bought three dyed chicks.

Their necks were growing longer and longer, so I could see they were progressing from chicks into chickens.

I'd heard they were all roosters, but mine each had their own quirks.

With three of them, it was hard to get them to stay put in one place, and before I knew it, one was running around the earthen floor while another was pecking at the glass door. The last one was pretty quiet and docile—it stood by my side, tweeting and chirping.

I came up with some names for them: The blue-headed one who was running around was Pochi, the red one who liked to peck things was Tama, and the green one who liked to follow me around was Yuma. Their paint would eventually wear off, but it was easy to tell them apart from their behavior.

Pochi and Tama were the active type—they ran off outside as soon as I opened the door.

Unusually for March, it was snowing today, and the other side of the glass door looked all white.

"It's cold out. Stay inside, okay?" I opened the glass door. However, Pochi and Tama immediately went running outside.

"Aaaah! Pochi, Tama, are you okay?!"

Pochi and Tama had tripped over the snow and fallen headfirst. The snow was only a thin layer, so when I picked them up, they were covered in mud. They both had a bit of a grumpy expression.

"See, I told you not to go outside," I chided them and chuckled. *It's a lot of fun watching over them, and they're adorable too.*

It looked like I would have to stay inside for the day.

I filled a washbasin with water, adjusted the temperature, and took them to the earthen-floor room to clean them.

"They've gotten pretty big already, so maybe I can give them baths soon. It'll be easier if we can get in the bath together," I said as I washed them. *This paint is pretty hard to get off... Do I need to use soap? Eh, it's fine for now.*

I dried them off with a towel. They seemed to enjoy that. *Yup, I can see it on your faces. Let's keep it that way.*

I took them to the living room and put them under the kotatsu to warm them up. *They'll just get out if it's too hot, plus they seem to dislike getting dirty and always go to the earthen floor to poo. Pretty clever chicks, they are. That's a big help for me too, since I don't know anything about raising chickens.*

Only Yuma seemed to not be very good at that—she didn't manage to make it this time either. I saw her looking a bit embarrassed, so I wiped her and held her up.

"Yuma's a good girl. It's okay."

She chirped happily. *So cute.*

I felt I was being looked at. Turning back to Pochi and Tama, I saw that they were staring at me, though they brushed me off when our eyes met. *These two are pretty similar, and not in a good way. They're kind of cold... Well, they're still cute.*

I was still feeding them chick feed, though recently, they'd started eating leafy vegetables too.

"It's pretty cold tonight..."

By nightfall, the snow had already stopped. *It's spring, so it'll probably melt soon.* For some reason, it was actually quite warm when it snowed, but it got much colder after it stopped snowing. *What's the deal with snow?*

"Bath time, I guess."

Yuma came over to me while I was getting ready to take a bath. *Did something catch her eye?*

"Do you want to get in the bath with me, Yuma?" I asked, but she took off. *Guess not.* I started running the bath, but then she came back with Pochi and Tama in tow.

"Hm? You guys want to get in too? It's pretty hot, though."

I figured it would be all right if I left some cold water in the washbasin just in case. I put the three of them with me into the bath.

"Just a sec."

I washed my body, held them, and got into the bathtub just to check. Immediately, they began to cry out and flap around. *Crap, I thought it was cool enough, but it looks like it was still too hot for them.*



“H-Hold on!” I tried to put them in the washbasin, but they just wouldn’t stay still.

“Aaaah!”

And then, one of them fell into the bathtub.

“Waaaahh?!”

I put one of them in the washbasin, and another one fell into the bathtub. I picked up the two that were still in the bathtub, hastily put them in the washbasin, and then successively added hot and cold water to adjust the temperature. By the time the chicks had finally calmed down, I was already pretty exhausted.

“Th-That was close…” *You shouldn’t panic like that when you fall into hot water. I know it must have been scary for you guys, but you could have drowned.* I washed my face to help me calm down.

“Pochi, Tama, Yuma, sorry…”

After getting out of the bath and wiping them, Pochi and Tama had seemingly gone back to their usual selves—they went running off to the earthen-floor room. Their lizard-like tails were standing on end. *I really messed up there.* Yuma snuggled up to me after I wiped her. *Yuma was the only one who didn’t fall into the bathtub. I’m glad they were all okay.*

Back in the living room, I apologized to Pochi and Tama. *It really was a terrible idea to try to put them in the bathtub.* I gave them some water and candy, which they greedily wolfed down. Afterward, Pochi and Tama pecked me a ton, but I just put up with it. *That hurts. I’m really sorry.*

The next day, as usual, Pochi was running around, and Tama was pecking at stuff. *Good to see everything’s back to normal.* Yuma was also adorably following me around and chirping.

After the previous night, I thought that I’d had enough of trying to take them into the bath, but for some reason, Yuma started to bathe with me. *Looks like Yuma enjoys bathing, though I’m not sure if what she likes is cleanliness or just spending time with me.* Pochi and Tama, on the other hand, always stayed away from the bathroom.

Sometimes, I still tried inviting them to bathe with me, thinking they’d grown big enough that it wouldn’t be a problem, but they always refused. *Though I guess chickens are not supposed to bathe in the first place.* Sometimes they came home so dirty that I got the urge to force them to take a bath, but I knew from experience that it was a bad idea, so I endured it.

They say birds are forgetful, but it's looking like they have a better memory than I do.

We had these, shall we say, *accidents* every now and then, but I was living pretty peacefully.

Extra Chapter: The Big Chickens' Little Adventure

Pochi, Tama, and Yuma—the three huge chickens living on Brook Mountain—patrolled the land every day. Usually, two of them did this together while the other stayed with Sano, their owner. Sano owned Brook Mountain and the mountain behind it, as well as Pochi and the other chickens, but he was not exactly dependable. He would often be found crying out in pain when a bug hit him on the head, tripping up over the slightest thing, or cowering in fear over vipers—small venomous snakes. He was a big cause of concern for the chickens.

That being said, it's not as if the chickens held any feelings of mockery or contempt for him. Sano loved the chickens, and he strove to do his best in his own way. The chickens loved their clumsy owner as well.

"Hm? Pochi, Yuma, are you two heading out today?"

The three chickens answered Sano. "Going!"

"Staying!"

"Going!"

He nodded his head and smiled. "Do you mind if I go with you today? I won't stay with you the whole time."

"Sure!"

"What?"

"Sure!"

"Tama, you should come too—that way, we can all go together," Sano said with a smile. Tama brushed him off, as if to say, *Do as you please!* which drew an awkward laugh out of Sano. It seemed Tama had decided to watch over the house while Sano and the other chickens were away.

"Are you not coming with us, Tama?"

Sano tried asking several times, but Tama eventually got irritated and pecked him, at which point he finally gave up. Tama gestured something to Yuma with her eyes, and Yuma seemed to understand it.

"Going!"

“Staying!”

“Sano!”

“All right, got it. Tama, you can go out and play if you want.” Sano looked back at Tama with a concerned expression, while Pochi trotted off somewhere, and Tama urged Sano forward.

What a worrywart of an owner, the chickens thought, but they were quite fond of him.

While Sano was away, Tama was busy pacing around the house, catching and eating vipers and bees, and dealing with moles in the fields. There was a lot more to the mountain than Sano could see.

As for Sano and the other chickens, their outing was a peaceful one. Pochi led the way, while Yuma took care of the rearguard. Pochi took a detour to the eastern side of Brook Mountain and began to climb it, intending to patrol higher up in the mountain today. Naturally, they adjusted their pace to their owner and walked more slowly than usual, taking care to also pick a route that Sano could trek through comfortably.

The chickens were a lot more careful to accommodate Sano than he could imagine.

“Are you guys always climbing up here? This is rough…” Sano said, panting and laughing awkwardly. He was still doing his best to keep up with Pochi, who cocked his head. Pochi had taken care to pick a route that was easy to climb, and yet this was still too much for Sano. Just how weak was he? Pochi grew concerned.

Despite that, Sano persevered. However, today they weren’t able to climb any farther than that.

“Hm?”

To Pochi, not being able to reach a place he was always able to was an unusual feeling. He’d definitely been able to go there two days ago. There was a spot up ahead with a pool of spring water, and he wanted to show it to Sano, but it seemed it was not reachable today.

“Can’t go.”

“Not today.”

Yuma also tried, unsuccessfully, to find a way forward, and so they informed Sano of that.

“Eh? Well, I guess that sort of stuff happens sometimes.” Sano seemed puzzled, but he didn’t inquire any further.

This was a rather unusual mountain, and the chickens knew it

was also home to many unusual happenings. They were able to roam Brook Mountain, the mountain behind it, and the one to the north freely, but for some reason, that was not the case for the mountains to the east or west. They had attempted to brave their way onto Loud Mountain and West Mountain, but it was as if there were an invisible wall or barrier blocking the way.

That also seemed to be true for the giant lizard from Loud Mountain and the snakes from West Mountain, making it all the more confusing. However, oddly enough, that didn't happen when they were with Sano. Eventually, they'd just learned to accept it.

"We can't go up, so are we going down now?"

Pochi looked at Yuma, who nodded.

"Down."

"Down."

"Okay, then. Show me the way."

After a change of plans, Pochi began to descend the mountain. He was aware there were a few wild rabbits living on this side of the mountain farther down. He'd previously caught one and brought it to Sano, hoping it would make for good nourishment, but he'd been told to let it go. Still, just showing them to him should be no problem, he figured—he decided to take Sano there.

A little ways down the mountain, Pochi turned to Sano and said, "Shhh."

"Shhh?" Sano looked confused. His voice echoed rather loudly in the quiet of the mountain.

Pochi seemed slightly disappointed. He thought if you made that much noise, the rabbits wouldn't come out, and once again, he stopped and instructed Sano to stay quiet. This time, Sano understood what he meant. Pochi knew from watching TV that "shhh" was a way to signal to others to be silent. The living room in the house where they lived had a large TV, which the chickens could see from the earthen floor where they usually stayed. Occasionally, late at night, Yuma would turn on the TV and watch it in an attempt to learn the language Sano spoke, but that was a secret. Unlike Tama, who was a heavy sleeper, Pochi would sometimes wake up to the noise and join Yuma in watching TV.

Back to the main topic...

Pochi sat himself down. Sano thought he looked adorable in his feathery fluffiness, but naturally, this was unbeknownst to Pochi,

who simply waited for the rabbits to show themselves from behind the grass. There were many of them living here, so it wouldn't take too long to spot one of them if they stayed alert.

It must have been ten minutes or so, but to Pochi, it felt like an eternity. He was not a very patient chicken to begin with, though he didn't mind waiting for prey he could eat, such as boars or deer. However, waiting for a rabbit to show up just so he could show it to Sano was an entirely different story.

Sano did as he'd been told and stayed put.

Just when Pochi thought maybe they should try going somewhere else soon, they heard a rustling sound coming from the grass and spotted a brown rabbit. The rabbit twitched its nose, looking for any signs of danger nearby, and then went hopping away.

After the rabbit had gone out of sight, Yuma turned to Sano. "Rabbit," she said.

"Oh, I see... Pochi brought me here to show me that rabbit, right? Thanks."

Sano stood up, and Pochi followed, as if to confirm Sano's suggestion.

"Just don't hunt rabbits, okay?"

The chickens were already well aware of that. Pochi was just showing him around. He bemoaned Sano's lack of understanding and turned away from him.

"I didn't know there were rabbits here. I wonder if there's a nest nearby," Sano said nonchalantly. Pochi and Yuma exchanged stares. *I think we've already shown him around enough*, they thought to themselves.

"Sano," Yuma called out.

"Eh? What is it, Yuma?"

"Go home."

"Oh, right. I guess this is it for me today. Sorry for interrupting."

Pochi showed Sano the way to the nearest road.

"Thanks for today. Pochi, Yuma, I'm going home, so I'll be counting on you guys to patrol the mountain, okay?"

Pochi walked away, while Yuma stayed behind with Sano.

"Yuma? Aren't you going with Pochi?"

"Sano!"

Sano beamed at her. "I see. You want to go with me, huh? Well

then, let’s go back and let Tama know she can go play.” Sano gently stroked Yuma’s feathers.

***

Pochi slowly walked toward the back mountain.

Tama was probably going to join him soon. The chickens had a few specific places they’d designated as meeting spots—two on Brook Mountain and three on the mountain to the north—and they’d agreed to meet up there in case something happened.

Pochi knew Sano would tell Tama she could go out when he got home, so he decided to take a sand bath and clean off bugs from his body while he waited. When it was hot outside, it was inevitable that small bugs and such would get in between his feathers. If Tama or Yuma were here, they could peck at them and help him clean up, but when he was all by himself, he had to make do with sand or water.

Although Pochi didn’t like hot baths, he strove to keep himself neat and clean.

After bathing in sand for a while, Pochi headed toward the meeting spot on the northern side of the back mountain. Tama hadn’t arrived yet. Without anyone tending to this part of the mountain, the vegetation had grown quite dense. The view was clearer if you went farther north to the other mountain, but that was actually the result of deer eating the trees.

Hunting was not his goal today, so he didn’t intend to go looking for deer. However, it would be a different story if he spotted them on this mountain or on Brook Mountain.

After he’d spent a while pecking at the ground eating grass and bugs, Tama came running. They were going over to the northern mountain.

Sano had no idea, but the chickens often ventured beyond the two mountains that he owned. It was no wonder patrolling farmland wasn’t enough to get rid of their pent-up energy, no matter how much they did it. Although, naturally, the chickens weren’t entirely familiar with all of Sano’s land either. They simply followed their natural curiosity and roamed the land freely.

The mountain to the north was not part of Sano’s property, so the chickens understood that they should avoid hunting there—

they contented themselves with bugs and grass. The mountain to the northeast had much of its mountainside exposed, probably due to deer, but that was none of Pochi's or Tama's concern.

There was a pond behind the northern mountain—it was one of their favorite spots. It was just the right size and depth for them, making it perfect for bathing.

Upon reaching the area with shallow spring water, all the creatures who had been there drinking ran away—not only boars and deer, but also monkeys, raccoons, and many other kinds of animals would often come to drink. However, that was also none of Pochi's or Tama's concern.

The two chickens picked a spot that was relatively abundant with water, drank their fill, and bathed. Suddenly, feeling a gaze fixed on them, they turned back to find a creature with a dark body. Pochi knew from watching TV that it was what they called a bear.

"Kwaaaah! Kwakwakwaaaaaahh!" Pochi stood tall and clucked menacingly at the bear, who fled upon hearing his ferocious cry. The chickens had no intention of hunting bears—unless, of course, one showed up on Sano's property. The reason was simple: Sano was deathly afraid of bears.

"I wonder if we get bears here. Gosh, I hope not. That'd be scary." Sano had said this once—he even shook in fear whenever bears showed up on the TV.

"Bear?"

"Scary?"

"Hunt?"

The chickens tried asking if Sano would like them to deal with bears, but he shook his head violently.

"No, no, no... What are you saying? That's incredibly dangerous. Don't even think about it. Look, I know you guys are pretty strong, but we're talking about *bears*. I'm more concerned with your well-being than I am scared of bears."

As far as Pochi was concerned, these bears didn't look strong at all, but Sano had told them to stay away, so he did as he was told and left them alone...as long as they weren't on Sano's property.

At least one of the chickens stayed by Sano's side the entire time while they were on the mountain. The chickens were determined to protect him at all costs.

After they'd spent a while patrolling the mountain to the north, the sun began to go down. The chickens thought it was about time to return, and they headed home, lazily pecking at the ground on their way.

***

"Whoa! You're all dirty again today..." Sano let out a strained laugh when he saw Pochi and Tama. After bathing in sand and water and running all over the mountains, the two chickens were covered in grass, leaves, dirt, and such, and their feathers were all disheveled.

"Hold on a sec."

Sano went inside, brought a large washbasin, and filled it. After adjusting the temperature, he gave Pochi and Tama a thorough wash.

Taking care of the chickens was a lot of work, but it was only natural for Sano, and he didn't really mind it, despite his groaning.

"Where do you even go to get this filthy? Did you guys go to the other mountain at the back?"

"Back!"

"Back!"

"Stop it! That sounds like you're telling me to go away." Sano chuckled as he filled the washbasin and cleaned them. He then wiped them with a towel, and by the time they went inside, it was already pitch dark outside.

"There's a beautiful starry sky tonight," Sano muttered. For some reason, Pochi felt a tinge of loneliness in his voice, but he knew comforting his owner during times like these was someone else's duty.

Yuma, who was standing next to Sano, snuggled up to him.

"Thanks for everything, Yuma."

The chickens each had their own role and understood it. They were always doing their best for their dear owner's sake.

"What should I feed you today? Maybe some natto yogurt? That should be okay every once in a while, I think." Sano browsed his phone while he prepared food for the chickens. Today, it was leafy vegetables and cooked pork.

He was not the most dependable owner, to be sure, but the

chickens could tell he was also doing his best.

As they chowed down on the food Sano had prepared for them, the chickens thought vaguely about where they should patrol tomorrow.

The end.

Afterword

Nice to meet you, or nice to see you again! My name is Asagi.

Thank you for reading *Long Story Short, I'm Living in the Mountains*. This is a story I originally wrote for a different publisher's contest. In 2021, I managed to win the Reader's Choice award in that contest, but unfortunately, I wasn't able to have it made into a book. Back then, I was still undecided on what to do about it as I continued to serialize it on the internet, but then my friend Totetsu told me, "Asagi-san, I think your work would be a good fit for Kakuyomu." I tried reposting *Long Story Short* on there, and that was ultimately what led to me receiving an offer from Kadokawa and being able to put these huge chickens in a book! (*Hey, what about the protagonist?!*)

I would like to express my sincere thanks to Totetsu-san, who recommended Kakuyomu to me; Y-san from Kadokawa Books' Editorial Department, who approached me; the illustrator Shino-sama, who brought the chickens to life wonderfully (and not only the chickens, of course! Katsuragi-san is so cute, she made my heart skip a beat!); all the readers who have been following this story since when I was publishing it on a different platform; all the readers who discovered this story on Kakuyomu; and everyone involved in the making and publishing of this book.

Of course, I'm also very thankful to my family, who always watched over me warmly, despite the occasional complaint that "mommy's working again today."

They haven't been made into books yet, but I have also published four works related to *Long Story Short* on Kakuyomu, some of which are already finished. Please check them out on Kakuyomu if you are interested.

Now then, *Long Story Short* has a modern fantasy setting, but it seems there are a few readers under the impression that it takes place in the real world due to how naturally the chickens and other fantastical creatures blend in.

Unfortunately, in the real world, there aren't any chickens this big, or any huge snakes who also look like beautiful ladies, or any

dragons who can understand human speech! Please be careful not to get too rash and buy yourself a mountain on an impulse. And even if you do, you won't find any dyed chicks who grow huge at the nearby village's spring festival! (*Crying!*)

Also, *Long Story Short* has no romance elements. Y-san, my editor, is also saying that "Sano-kun's wife is Yuma-chan!" so I would not expect any such developments from the ostensible heroine, Katsuragi-san. As for Katsuragi-san herself, she should be able to find a wonderful partner eventually! (*Heeey!*)

How big will the chickens grow? What will become of Katsuragi-san's woes? I hope to see you again in the next volume and find out together.

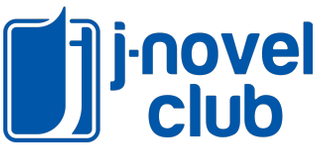
(*Hey, Sano here! You're forgetting the protagonist!!!*)

Thank you very much!

Asagi


"Yuma, let's go flower viewing."
"Flower?" she repeated.
I gave Yuma some of the vegetables; after eating them, she exclaimed, "Flower!"
"Yuma?"
"Flower!"
She inched closer to me. Wait, does she think these vegetables are the flowers I'm talking about?
"Yuma, I meant those flowers over there," I told her, pointing at the yae-zakura. "We're eating and drinking while enjoying the view."
She tilted her head again, then looked back at me and said, "Flower!" again. Ha ha, now you've got it.
Long Story Short, I'm Living in the Mountains


Yuma
A kind and cuddly hen. Her presence is a solace for Sano.
Sano Shohei
Former office worker. After his engagement ended badly, he abandoned his life in the city, became a recluse, and bought a mountain.
Tama
A strict hen who acts like an older sister. She keeps her undependable owner in check.
Pochi
A bold and brash rooster with an attitude. He can hold his own against wild boars.



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Long Story Short, I’m Living in the Mountains: Volume 1
by Asagi

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