
By the Grace of the Gods
7
Roy
Illust. Ririnra


The Duke's cat-eared maid is getting married! Her groom-to-be is none other than...
Lulunese
By the Grace of the Gods 7


Serge Morgan
Orest Moulton
Reinhart Jamil
Pioro Saionji
Takebayashi Ryoma
The friendly neighborhood slave-trading business?!


Ox's physical and magical hands, each wielding a sword with devastating blows, generated breezes that blew past Ryoma's cheeks. Ox's flurry continued, unleashing three or four swings during every beat of combat, each of them potentially lethal. Ryoma was dodging and parrying all of them like a leaf in the wind, striking back during the few openings that Ox allowed.
"Hrah!"

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Chapter 5 Episode 1: Fay's Strength

Ryoma's Side

Two weeks passed after my rescue of Pedro. Fay and I were on our way to Gaunago to meet up with Serge and to visit the Jamil family, but I wanted to take a detour, so we entered a dark forest.

"Sorry for dragging you into this," I said.

"Don't sweat it," Fay answered. "Right now I'm your bodyguard. If you want to visit your old house, then I've got no qualms about tagging along. I'm used to treading ground like this anyway."

I led the way, but Fay didn't stray far behind. He was quick on his feet and I could tell he was used to walking through nature. That was to be expected from an ex-assassin.

"That's good to hear. Were you trained in that?"

"Yes, but also, my country doesn't have as many paved roads as this one does. Roads make travel easier, but they also help enemy soldiers invade the nation more easily. I posed as a traveling merchant and visited many small villages for that role, and it was always like walking through this forest. Only big cities were different."

That reminded me of how I'd never asked about Fay's country before. I heard that it was at war and a dangerous place to be, but nothing more. I hired Fay over half a year ago and never even asked him. But considering his former job, maybe it was sensible that I didn't.

"Would you mind if I asked you about yourself, Fay? I'm sure there are things you don't want to talk about."

"I'll tell you anything you want, as long as you don't go public with it. You already know I was an assassin."

He was so open to the idea that it made me rather uncomfortable. "You don't have to keep any secrets or anything?"

“There’s no country to tell me not to share them anymore, so I can tell you. But any important information I have is either no longer useful, or it’s been stolen by an opposing army. With that in mind, maybe leaking the information to an enemy of that enemy would help obstruct them. I actually have allies back in my country who want to do that.”

“Interesting,” I said. I would have asked a question, but had no idea where to start.

“How much do you know about my country?”

“I know it’s called the Gilmarese Empire, that it’s a big country located northeast of the Rifall Kingdom, and that it’s dangerous because of an ongoing civil war. That’s about it.”

“I can add more info to that, then.”

According to Fay, the Gilmarese Empire was founded long ago by a human with tremendous combat abilities. They united all the villages and the most powerful clans in the north of our continent by force to form a great nation. There was no historical documentation which stated the name or origins of the first emperor, nor anything that would indicate the time of the country’s founding, so there were many mysteries. Each of the factions in the civil war told their own history and claimed that their own leader was descended from the emperor. Evidently, war wasn’t the only issue this country had.

“Back when I lived there, the Empire was split into territories governed by the Win family to the south, the Tuan family to the northwest, the Bi-Gwang family to the northeast, and the Shu family in the middle. There were smaller conflicts as well, but the major battles were waged between these four.”

“Which one are you and Lilyn from?”

“We worked for the Win family. They had many assassins like us in their service, and divided us into a few different organizations which served different roles. One would stay in enemy territory for long periods of time to steal information, while another would hunt down and kill agents of other families in key cities. We traveled between enemy and friendly territory to investigate and deliver information, and receive information from the other organizations. And if we ever found insurgents in the Win family’s territory, we killed them. We

had to travel a lot, so my whole organization also worked as traveling merchants to avoid suspicion."

I listened with fascination to his story until he seemed to recall something important. "Oh, that's right, Boss. I forgot to mention something. During the interview when you hired us, I said that Lilyn looks much more like her mother. Do you remember?"

"Yes. Why do you ask?"

"I lied. We acted like father and daughter, but we were just assassins in the same squad. We're not related," he admitted. I couldn't have cared less, but maybe this was important to them. "We've been playing those parts for over a decade, so she's like a real daughter to me. It's hard to fully explain it all, but since you know our background anyway, I thought it might be nice to tell you that."

Fay further explained that the Win family gathered children whose parents died in the war or abandoned them to have one less mouth to feed into a facility where they were trained to be assassins. Lilyn was one of those children.

"You may think that training children as assassins is beyond reproach, but it was normal in my country. They lived better lives than the children who weren't taken in. Those children couldn't survive at all."

Lilyn was found to have talent as an assassin, and she was placed under Fay's command. The facility also trained soldiers, civil officials, and more. It gave them only so many options for their future, but it did save the lives of the children.

The conversation came to an abrupt stop, but not because of the dark subject matter. "Someone's up ahead," Fay said. There were numerous footprints on the ground.

"They're wearing shoes, so they must be human. Since the footprints weren't washed away by the rain in the morning, I'd guess they came through here less than twelve hours ago."

"I count ten to fifteen of them. Too many to be hunters. They're bandits, no doubt. What should we do?"

“There’s a river a little further ahead; that may be where they’re headed. My old home is up ahead in the same direction.”

“That sounds like trouble,” Fay said, though he didn’t seem the least bit bothered. He said nothing more, leaving the decision to me.

“One option would be to change direction and head toward the road,” I thought aloud. I had planned to spend the night in the cavern house, but avoiding the bandits would require a change of plans. If we did that, the sun would set before we got to the road. And as someone who once lived in this forest, I had another idea. “If they’re bandits, I’d like to subjugate them. Will you help?”

“Of course. Wait here, Boss. I’ll go scout the area. They can’t be far.”

I could probably trust this to Fay. He could probably track down someone in secret better than I could. Personally, I couldn’t even have guessed that they weren’t far away. I wanted to know how he came to that conclusion, but decided to ask him later.

“Thanks, but don’t do anything too risky.”

“You can count on me.”

Before the words were out of his mouth, he got moving surprisingly quietly. I heard nothing but the sound of the wind against the leaves as he disappeared behind the trees ahead.

■ ■ ■

Fay returned about an hour later.

“Welcome back,” I said, and heard the grass rustle behind me.

“You knew I was here?”

“I told the metal slimes that form my weapon to inform me when any weapons approach. They eat metal and know when it’s nearby. I figured it would be worth asking them, in case any bandits were around.”

“If that’s all, then you couldn’t have known whether it was me or not.”

I had to wonder why he snuck up behind me in the first place. If not for my

slimes, I would have taken longer to notice. Now I saw firsthand proof that Fay was a pro. Only now did I realize how lucky I was to have him as a guard at my laundromat.

“So, how was it?” I asked.

“There are fifteen of them setting up camp next to a cliff. It’s probably the place you mentioned. They were sitting around a campfire discussing their plans for tomorrow, and I happened to overhear them, so I can confirm they’re bandits. Four of them are magicians, three are archers, and the rest wield melee weapons like swords and spears. Their equipment is relatively clean and they’re well-balanced, but none of them are that strong. They do seem to have plenty of experience, however. They seem to have procured information from somewhere, and they even know about the guards for the carriage they’re targeting. They have plans for everything from when they attack to when they flee, so if we don’t do something, I think the carriage will be in great danger.”

“I see. Can we beat them on our own?”

“If we wait until a bit later, when I can hide in complete darkness, I could take them all out on my own. I’ve used situations like this to train young recruits in the past. The two of us together will be more than enough. It’ll be over in no time.”

We settled on subjugating the bandits. To learn for future reference, I let the pro come up with the strategy.

“Boss, we’ll use this,” he said, handing me a pocket watch from the Dinome Magic Item Workshop. They were expensive but convenient, so we ordered one each for all the employees. Mine had a slime etched into it.

“First, I’ll lead the way to a spot where they won’t detect us,” Fay explained. “Then you’ll wait fifteen minutes before showing yourself to the enemy. If they find you instead, that won’t change the next steps. Fight if they attack right away, but if you can talk to them, tell them you’re a new adventurer who went on a quest to pick some herbs and got lost. I’ll use those fifteen minutes to try and get to the opposite side, so while you’re distracting them, I’ll take down the magicians from behind. Assassination is my specialty, after all; combat, not so much. We’ll make it quick, alright?”

“Understood.”

If we both wanted to make the most of our skills, it made sense for me to serve as a distraction. I thought about that until the time came for the plan to start.

“Excuse me! Is anybody there?!” I asked, stepping out of the darkness.

“Who’s there?” one of the bandits shouted. They looked not only toward me but warily checked all around them. They had to be fairly used to this. “A kid?”

“What, it’s a kid?” another bandit said.

“Nothing out of the ordinary here! I just got lost!”

“What, you an adventurer or something?”

“Yes, I took my first job today. I was all excited to go pick some herbs, but somehow I ended up here.”

“Sounds rough, kid.”

“Hey, come get some rest over here,” one bandit said with a chuckle.

As I played dumb and approached them, they seemed to let their guard down due to my childlike appearance. But it didn’t look like they were planning to give me directions either. They nonchalantly reached for their weapons, but before they could grab them, the four bandits furthest in the back suddenly collapsed. It reminded me of when a famous detective would start his deductions in a certain popular anime.

One of the men turned to his allies, sealing his fate. I drew my blade and sliced the man’s neck in one quick motion.

“An enemy?!”

“Gwah!”

“Uhn...”

Next, I stabbed one’s throat, then swept with my blade. I aimed for lethal blows, always targeting whoever was closest.

“Little shit!” one bandit roared and lunged at me with his knife, but I dodged it by a hair’s breadth and pierced him through the heart. That was four down on

my end too.

I sensed magical energy and heard Fay chant, “Yan.” He and a few of the bandits were swallowed up by rising smoke. It wasn’t carried by the wind, so it didn’t get in my way. This was my first time seeing Fay cast magic. I wasn’t familiar with the incantation he used, but this was probably Smoke, a poison-elemental spell. The caster himself was inside the smoke, however, so it couldn’t have been poisonous.

I heard cries and shouts from inside the pillar of smoke. Once the men crawling out from the smoke were slain, the forest went quiet less than thirty seconds after the battle began. The smoke cleared up and revealed the men lying on the ground, and Fay holding a bloody straight sword. I could guess what took place behind the smoke.

“I’m done, Boss.”

“Impressive work.”

But now that I saw his skill, I felt like I wasn’t paying him enough. I decided to talk to Carme about raising his income when I got back.



Chapter 5 Episode 2: First Time Drinking at Home

“Boss, you’d be a good assassin yourself,” Fay told me after my slimes and I finished cleaning up the mess.

“What makes you say that?”

“You have plenty of the essential skills for assassination. It doesn’t hurt to be strong, but strength alone isn’t enough.”

“So you’re saying those skills are more important in assassination than strength is?”

“Yes. Back when our business was facing some obstruction, you left out some medicine that you made yourself. You know about both poison and medicine, don’t you? That’s important for an assassin. And you just had your slimes clean everything up. Disposing of corpses and cleaning the blood off clothes and weapons is also important. You also carried yourself well before the fight, and did an admirable job hiding.”

Then Fay seemed to realize something. “Never mind. I don’t know if you would be a good fit, but you could become a good assassin if you wanted. That’s all I wanted to say,” he concluded. It was just meant to be a compliment, apparently. “I’ve gotten quite familiar with this country’s language, but I don’t always put things in the best of ways.”

“Learning other languages is hard. I understand.”

I used to have to do business with foreign companies, and the language barrier was always a problem. Making small talk unrelated to work was especially difficult. And all this talk of language reminded me of something.

“Was that spell you used from the Gilmarese Empire?”

“Yan, you mean? It means smoke, and yes, it’s a poison spell.”

As I thought, it was the same as the Smoke spell from this country, only in another language. Fay told me that he could use a little poison and wind magic,

and that putting up a smokescreen to blind the enemy and kill them from within it was his favorite tactic.

When I was cleaning away the corpses, I noticed that the four bandits in the smoke were stabbed in the back in vital spots through gaps in their armor. For the four magicians, he tossed poison needles from behind a tree, and the metal luster of the needles was obscured. He killed all eight of them with one blow each. It was pretty ruthless, but he wiped them out as quickly as some video game protagonist.

“I said the incantation to draw their attention, but normally I would stay silent,” Fay said.

“You don’t use incantations?”

I practiced casting spells without incantations in my free time, but it had a low chance of working. Plus, if it did work, the spells were much weaker than usual, so I had yet to try it in an actual fight. I wondered if Fay could give me some pointers.

“Oh, I don’t know if we need to stand around talking out here,” I said. My home was right nearby. I collapsed the cliffside with earth magic and opened the entrance to my old home.

“Interesting, so this is your old house?” Fay said, fascinated as I led him inside.

“This place brings back memories. Seems dusty, though.”

Uninhabited houses can normally deteriorate quickly, but I’d sealed off the entrance, so it wasn’t that different from when I left it. I felt a lot of nostalgia thanks to how unchanged it was, but a lot of dust had piled up and some spiders had gotten in somehow, having made webs on the ceiling. But my slimes could make quick work of all of that. I cleaned up one of the rooms so we could have a place to rest.

My sticky, poison, acid, healing, scavenger, and cleaner slimes—all the slimes who lived here with me—seemed to have memories of the place. They independently crawled around to the locations they frequented before. They looked ready to relax, but maybe that was also because of the fight from earlier. I brought enough food for all of them too, so they were probably full for

the day.

Fay and I decided to take it easy as well. I prepared some drinks and snacks, then decided to ask him about silent incantations again.

“If you want to use magic without incantations, you should start by using the same spell repeatedly,” he said. “I first learned to conceal myself and wield a weapon, then learned how to handle poison and drugs. I have continued to practice these skills as I gained experience. I never used magic much for assassinations. Drugs and tools were a greater priority. I’m not a magic expert, so it’s hard for me to offer advice.”

“Can you tell me about poison and drugs, then? You used poison with those needles, and a truth serum back when we were dealing with hoodlums. Just where do you get these from?”

“I make them myself, for the most part. You pay me and give me time off, so I buy the materials from shops in town or go outside town to find them. We traveled many lands on our job, so we have knowledge of medicinal plants from all over. That includes this country to an extent.”

That made sense, but I was wondering one thing. “Fay, if you need these things for your job, I can pay for it,” I offered. I didn’t want my employees to have to spend their own money for their job.

“I don’t need them, but I keep making them just to make sure my skills stay sharp,” he said. I guess he considered it private training, or a hobby of sorts.

“It does help my business if my guards are keeping their skills up to snuff. I don’t think there’s any reason for me not to help with that. It’s fine if you and Lilyn want to keep this knowledge a secret, but if not, I’d like to talk to Carme about it when we get back.”

“That would benefit us too. As far as why we have these skills, you can say that we were trained as combat medics. Medicine is very expensive in my country after so many years of war. Common citizens can’t use it, and fake medicine is commonplace. But combat medics would possess this knowledge. It shouldn’t be any cause for suspicion.”

“Understood.”

Fay still wanted to keep his past life a secret, and understandably so. Japanese fiction has no shortage of ninjas who don't really do ninja-type things, but I figured assassins actually do a lot of dirty work.

"Do you ever miss your old job?" I asked. "I'd love to keep you as an employee for as long as possible, personally."

"I suppose I do, in a way. I was an assassin for a long time. I trained a lot and killed a lot of people. That's something I can't put behind me. But I have no intention of returning to my country to serve them. All because of the final order we received."

"Can you tell me about that?"

"Sure. Our final instructions were to evacuate the people of our territory to a safe place. But our orders are written in code, and sometimes they shouldn't be taken literally. The actual final order was for us to flee the country, rather than die in vain. The trajectory of the conflict was clear by that point, and there would have been no sense in getting ourselves killed for it. The Win family treated my organization well, and they told us to live on in the end. Their leader was a good person. So Lilyn and I fled the country while helping as many people as possible."

"And that's when you came to Rifall?"

"Yes, we managed to enter the country and came to Gimul in search of work. Then that guildmaster found out our secret at a glance."

"Oh, Glissela."

"We ultimately convinced her we weren't acting as spies and got her to help us find work, but that was a shock. I thought I might have to stay on the run for life."

"That woman is something else. Should I take this to mean you don't plan to quit any time soon?"

"Yes, I'm happy to keep working for you."

"And I'm happy to have you. Thank you for being so open to answering my questions, too. Now, it's about time for dinner," I said, opening my Item Box.

“Would you like a drink?”

“Sounds good,” Fay answered eagerly. This was my first time drinking with an employee at my laundromat. If it didn’t conflict with anyone’s schedules, I thought drinking with everyone for New Year’s might be nice.

Chapter 5 Episode 3: Reunion 1

After three days of a largely peaceful journey, we finally reached Gaunago. But as soon as we got there, a new problem arose at the gate.

“Let me ask you again,” the guard said. “Your names are Ryoma and Fay, and you traveled here from Gimul for what reason?”

“I’m a manager of a business, and the Jamil family has granted me an audience.”

“I’m his bodyguard and servant.”

“I see. You say you didn’t take the road from Keleban, but crossed through the Forest of Gana and killed fifteen bandits you found while you were there. Is this correct?”

“Yes.”

“I think most people would take the road. Why choose to traverse the forest when that’s more difficult?”

“I used to live there and I was feeling nostalgic, so I wanted to visit my old home. I also work as an adventurer, so I’m comfortable with walking through forests, and I thought it would be faster than going around.”

“I see. But Fay, you don’t seem to be an adventurer.”

“I served time as a soldier in my home country. That’s when I learned to traverse forests and serve as a guard.”

“So, you’re a soldier from Gilmar.”

“An ex-soldier.”

“I see, I see...”

This had been going on ever since they took us into the guard station for questioning. It was the same set of questions over and over. They treated us kindly, but this was still an interrogation. I had been through my fair share of interrogations on Earth, so I knew they found us suspicious immediately.

But admittedly, I thought they would have let us go by now. If they just needed to confirm we killed those bandits to pay us our reward, we would have been done by now. I didn't know why we seemed so suspicious just because one of us lived in the forest for three years and the other was an ex-soldier. Well, maybe Fay was suspicious, but me? The crystal was coming up blue, too. I just wanted to be done.

I heard someone walk up to the door from outside. "Yo, don't mind me. So, this is where—Oh!" the man said as he entered. It was Hughes, one of the Jamil family's guards who brought about my leaving the forest. "Yo, Ryoma! Long time no see!"

"It's nice to see you again!"

"Good thing you remembered to call me. Let me handle this."

Hughes mentioned that I could get in touch with him by mentioning him at the guard station before we parted ways, and he was apparently telling the truth. I wasn't expecting him to show up in the middle of an interrogation, though.

"Hughes, what are you doing here?" the interrogator asked.

"Yo, Swanson! Working hard as always, eh?"

"If you know I'm in the middle of work, then go—Hey! Give that back!"

Hughes swiftly snatched the paper the man was writing on and gave it a read. "Oh, Swanson, this is what's bugging you, right? This is all true, I guarantee it. Remember back in spring when I almost died?"

"When you were attending to the Jamil family?"

"Yeah, and he's the one who saved my life."

"That still doesn't explain why he was living in a forest for three years."

"It's complicated. Not like he was working for bandits or anything. Reinhart could tell you the same thing. Just let them through; they really are visiting the Jamil family. They were invited as guests more than anything, though."

"Very well, then. Don't forget the reward money."

That seemed kind of aggressive, but I was free to go. “Thank you, Hughes,” I said.

“We’ll talk later. Let’s get out of here before he changes his mind. Here, take the reward money.”

“Oh, right. Here’s your bag, Fay.”

“I’d like you to store it with your space magic. It would just be more to carry, and I have enough money on hand for the moment.”

“Got it, I’ll put it away.”

We followed Hughes out of the guard station. The sun had already set, and the stars were bright.

“What a disaster, eh?” Hughes asked with a grin, like he could finally let loose.

“No kidding. He was just doing his job, though.”

“Glad you get it. He’s not a bad guy, but he’s stubborn about anything he finds the least bit sketchy. Works to catch criminals that the crystal can’t sort out, though.”

Hughes spoke in support of the man, but I was more curious about how the crystal could fail. “Is there a way to trick the crystal?”

“Don’t know if I’d say that, but those things aren’t meant for finding criminals in the first place. Can’t uncover every crime that way.”

“What are they for, then?”

“The church makes them to see if someone’s broken any of their commandments. Murder, kidnapping, sexual assault, burglary, bodily harm, these are all things that defy the teachings of the gods, so the crystals pick up on those. There are things that are acceptable to the gods but not to the law, though. Like smuggling, for example. Possessing illegal contraband or transporting goods without permission is obviously illegal, but because of rules that humans made later surrounding stuff we forbid or find dangerous. So the crystals don’t react to those crimes.”

I didn’t know about that flaw, but being able to confirm some serious crimes was still pretty useful. That seemed like it could act as a deterrent for those

crimes too. Anyway, I was just following Hughes and didn't know where we were actually going. When I asked him, he came to an abrupt stop.

"Oh, sorry, I just wanted to get out of there fast. So where are we going?" he said. He was always kind of sloppy. But he was still a good person, of course. He didn't seem to have any destination.

"Do you know of that weirdly named inn, "I Like Horses"? I'm supposed to meet with someone from the Morgan Trading Company there, then go to visit the Jamil family within the next few days."

"I know that place! It's run by this guy who loves horse racing. Guy likes horses so much that he just named his business that. You don't want to bring up horses around him, believe me. He'll talk your ear off."

It sounded like Hughes knew this person. He seemed amused. He knew the way there too, leading me down a narrow back alley. As we passed through, a bunch of people chatted him up.

"Oh, if it isn't Hughes?"

"What brings you here so late?!"

"Hey! I'm on the job!"

"Why walk around here for your job?"

"Sounds like you're slacking off to me. Have a drink!"

"Oh Hughes, how about you drink at my place tonight?"

"I'll make it worth your while."

"Uh, I appreciate the offer, but I need to take these two somewhere. I'll come back later."

"Who's the kid? Don't tell me you have a secret kid!"

"What?! Who's the mom?!"

"He ain't my kid!"

"Hahahaha, I believe it! He doesn't look a thing like you!"

"Looks too smart to be your kid!"

“And he looks kind of nice, too!”

“No way he could be Hughes’s kid!”

“What a bunch of drunks!”

“Oh, hello there, Hughes. Come by my store sometime. I’ll give you some tea.”

“What, the old lady from the general store is here? I’ll do that, just include some tea cakes.”

“I’ll be waiting. You’ll have to pay for the tea cakes, though.”

“Everyone seems to know Hughes,” I said. “And not just because he lives around here, if I had to guess.”

“He’s a good man,” said Fay. “You can tell these people trust him.”

We walked past the noisy yet peaceful street corner and came across a big stable attached to a much smaller inn.

“This is I Like Horses,” Hughes said. “The guy I mentioned probably isn’t here right now. Hey, Missus, you here?!”

Hughes casually walked inside. I followed, and the front counter was right by the entrance. An equally casual response came from the other side of it. “Yes, hello, Hughes! What is it?”

“I brought you a guest.”

“Good evening, I’m Ryoma Takebayashi from Bamboo Forest. I made a reservation through someone from the Morgan Trading Company.”

“And I’m his bodyguard, Fay.”

“Oh, I heard about you from Serge. There are two rooms reserved for you, but first, write your names in the inn registry. What are your plans for dinner? It’s already dinner time, and Serge is in the cafeteria right now. Also tomorrow there’s...”

She seemed to be an impatient person, asking a rapid series of questions that I answered as I wrote in the registry. I decided to have dinner there. I needed to greet Serge.

“Ryoma, I’m heading back to the estate,” Hughes said.

“Oh, already?”

“Yeah, I’d like to eat with you and talk about things, but I’ve got work left to do.”

“That’s too bad, but I get it. Thanks for taking time out of your busy schedule for me.”

“Well, you’ll be coming to the estate soon, so we can talk then. There’s a ton I’d like to say. See you later!”

“Take care! Well, he’s gone.”

Hughes ran like the wind. I had to wonder what he wanted to tell me.

“He’s always been like that,” the woman said.

I laughed awkwardly. “Oh, done filling this out.”

“Me too,” said Fay.

“Thanks; here are your keys. Go up the stairs and to the end of the hall on the right to find your rooms. You can get food at the cafeteria over there.” She pointed to the stairs and the hallway to the cafeteria, but I was distracted by all the decorations. There were horseshoes and mounted horse heads on display. “Wondering what that’s about, aren’t you?”

“I think they look lovely.”

“You don’t need to try and flatter me! It’s my husband who buys all this junk! The second floor has all sorts of ornaments and paintings too. I just don’t know what he sees in it all.” Apparently her husband was a hardcore horse fanatic.

“Boss, if you’re going to greet your acquaintance, I think you should change clothes first.”

“Good idea. I’ll be back for dinner right after I get changed.”

“Got it, I’ll have something ready for you,” the woman said.

■ ■ ■

I went to the cafeteria after I got changed.

“It looks busy,” I remarked to Fay.

“Judging by their attire, they’re all merchants.”

“The stable must be full too. Oh, there he is.”

Among the merchants from a variety of regions, I saw Serge at a table by the wall. He was eating with somebody, probably a man. He had black hair and looked kind of familiar. Upon closer inspection, it seemed to be Pioro.

“Serge, Pioro,” I said.

“Oh!” Serge exclaimed.

“If it isn’t Ryoma! It’s been so long!” cried Pioro. It was him after all.

“It’s nice to see you again. I know we’ve written to each other occasionally, but I think this is our first meeting in person in half a year.”

“We just kept missing each other. Thanks for that deal with Weizen, by the way. Now we have another supplier for wheat and new products.”

“Save your thanks for the villagers.”

I kept my voice low, as if I were up to something, but only because it would be odd to overhear some random kid speaking to the heads of two major companies. But they both answered me with familiarity, drawing the curiosity of the guests around us.

“Who the heck’s that kid?”

“No idea. Maybe some noble?”

“No way would a noble kid come here.”

“Could be the heir to some big business, then.”

I heard these comments amid the chitchat of the other merchants. I felt their eyes on me too. It felt like when I first went to the adventurer’s guild. Except these were merchants instead of adventurers, and this was an inn instead of a guild, but other than that, pretty similar.

“Now come take a seat, you two,” Serge said.

We sat down and ordered dinner. Fay introduced himself to Serge and Pioro,

and we had a lively conversation, picking subjects that wouldn't have to be kept a secret from anyone who might be listening. Eventually we discussed our journey here.

"You were stopped at the gate? That must have been a nuisance," Serge said.

"They were just doing their job; I can't complain. They had heavier security than other cities I've been to; I'm guessing because the duke's estate is here."

"Many other nobles live here as well. They're stricter about security than most. They used the crystal on you, I presume."

"Yes. With other cities, I just had to show my guild card to get through."

Gaunago always did the crystal test upon entry. The fact that I defeated those bandits was proven when we touched it, at which point they took us to another room.

"Those crystals are scarce magic items, so most towns will only use them on people without identification, or to confirm that bandits were slain," Serge explained. "Items break after continued use, and replacing those is supposed to be difficult."

"Are they expensive? Considering how many towns use them, I'd think there are plenty out there."

"The price is one thing, but getting permission from the church takes time. Those magic items are said to be created under the command of the gods by artisans who receive divine revelations. More can be made, but they can't easily be produced for sale. One can only be attained for just reasons, such as town security; nobles must also grant permission, and donations have to be made to the church in addition to the price of the magic item itself. If not for that, I would have liked to own one myself," Serge said with a disappointed sigh. I could see why; I wanted one too.

"By the way, Ryoma, you say the two of you beat those bandits by yourselves?" Pioro asked. "There were a decent number of them, weren't there?"

"Fay helped a lot. He beat eight of them on his own," I said. The guests at the tables next to us heard that and quieted down.

“You beat seven of them. I only took out one more than that because I got the first strike,” Fay pointed out. I heard some uncomfortable murmuring behind me. Did they want to get on this topic to keep the people around us in check, or what? It was a fun conversation, but not the best subject to discuss over dinner.

Chapter 5 Episode 4: Reunion 2

The next day, at a few minutes past noon, I was in a rocky carriage.

“I didn’t think I’d get to see the Jamil family again so soon,” I said.

“Carme wrote to me when you left town,” Serge replied. “He stated your plans and the expected date of arrival, and I told the duke’s family. They told me that we could come today if it suited our schedules. I’m a bit surprised about it myself.”

“Normally you probably couldn’t schedule time with them so easily,” said Pioro.

“Probably not.” I had promised to meet up with Serge within three days, so I wanted to come a little early, but didn’t expect to visit the Jamil family right away.

“I’m sure they just can’t wait to see you.”

“That’s the only reason I can think of,” Serge said. I laughed awkwardly; knowing how kind they were, maybe that was actually true. I was glad they still cared about me after we parted ways.

“This part of town looks different,” I noted. The carriage was slowly climbing uphill. The higher we went, the fewer small shops and houses I saw, replaced by large businesses and restaurants.

“We’re nearing the noble district. Not quite so many people around here,” Pioro explained.

“This town is composed of a small hill surrounded by a plain,” Serge added. “And higher on the hill are the more expensive neighborhoods and stores. But don’t let it make you feel too tense. It’s called the noble district, but somewhat affluent commoners live here too, and they don’t restrict entry to anybody.”

“Well, we wouldn’t go wandering around here without a reason, either. We’re heading straight to the Jamil place, so nothing to worry about there. Their estate’s up on the peak of the hill.”

“I could have imagined,” I said. “I wonder what it’s like. It’d have to be big, considering who they are.” I imagined something like a castle in a certain magic kingdom.

“Calm down, you’ll see it soon enough,” said Pioro.

“Enjoy the anticipation,” said Serge.

Then they both said, “By the way,” at once, seemingly by accident. They argued over who should start until Serge was ultimately the one to do it. “Ryoma, I must comment on your clothes.”

I was wearing the navy blue suit I got from the tailor in Gimul. It was made exactly as I ordered it, so I was personally quite satisfied with the outfit.

“Is it too plain?” I asked. The tailor and all my employees were also underwhelmed when they saw me wearing it.

“Pretty plain, yeah. Won’t be seen as an insult, though,” said Pioro.

“You could have done something more flashy,” said Serge.

From my perspective, their outfits were absurdly gaudy. Pioro was wearing a shirt covered in frilly lace and a coat with some slits that showed off brightly colored cloth underneath. As for Serge, well, the cloth looked expensive, but the design of the clothes was relatively normal. Though he also had a ruffled collar around his neck, and a feathered beret in his lap that he’d presumably put on when we got out. After the tailor showed me so many clothes like that, it shouldn’t have come as a surprise that it was popular. The fact that these two were wearing it wasn’t strange, but I preferred the suit.

“I took a liking to this design, though. And it’s easy to move around in,” I said.

“I see. It’s good to have preferences, especially when it comes to clothes,” said Serge.

“If you just chase the trends, you don’t typically get many compliments for your fashion sense,” said Pioro.

“I wouldn’t say I’m that confident in my fashion sense,” I said with a laugh.

“Oh, but you look quite refined,” Serge argued. “Those materials are top-class, and it was tailored well. I would actually like to have one myself. Where

did you buy it?”

“A tailor on the west side of Gimul. Take a right at the fifth corner off the main street.”

“That store? I heard they were still new, but it sounds like you’ve discovered a fine business.”

“Carme found it for me. I got all the clothes I needed without any hassles, thanks to him.”

“I see. Does that include your necktie pin?”

“The jewel is an heirloom from my grandmother. They took it to the most trustworthy and talented craftsman they know.”

The stand of the necktie pin had many layers of golden thread representing vines, and in the middle of it was a flower surrounding the big diamond. It wasn’t so extravagant as something that displayed countless jewels, but the craftsman made it work.

“It’s certainly wonderfully made. This detail could only have been achieved by a craftsman with some degree of talent in metal magic.”

“If anyone could have guessed that, it’d be you, Serge. They did mention that when they gave it to me.”

Metal magic was a nickname for a combination of earth and fire magic which was used for working with metal. It was harder to work with multiple elements at once, and using magic for crafting demanded a lot of precision, so some high-level skills were utilized to produce this. At least, that’s all according to the tailor, who told me all of this with bright eyes. Skilled metal magic users had a tendency to be approached by the mint bureau or other national organizations, so they were seldom unemployed.

“Never did I hear that such a craftsman was in Gimul,” said Serge. “I would absolutely love to meet them.”

“I was thinking of buying something for the wife, myself,” said Pioro.

“Oh, to celebrate your anniversary? I’m sure Clana will be delighted.”

My conversation with them went swimmingly. While the subject matter was

expanding, the carriage reached level ground.

“It looks like we’ve reached the top,” said Serge. “Let’s prepare to disembark.”

“I can already see the estate from the window,” said Pioro.

“Where?” I asked. He pointed to the window on the right, but all I saw was a tall wall built from stone. Actually, it looked like the wall of a castle. “Serge, Pioro, you call this an estate? Not a castle?”

I tried to look at it from other angles to get a fuller image, but it just looked like a castle. It wasn’t as white, beautiful, or fantastical as the one in the previously mentioned magic kingdom, though. The tallest wall had guards stationed around it, and I could see the tops of towers sticking out above the wall like chess pieces. It seemed much more like a fortress.

The carriage changed directions and headed toward the gate where the guards stood. “I’m Serge Morgan, president of the Morgan Trading Company, and I come with two visitors. The coachman and the two in the back seats are servants. The luggage is a modest gift for His Excellency. I request permission to pass.”

“We have been waiting for you. Please proceed to the estate. Someone will guide you once you arrive.”

I thought the security would be stricter, but they were surprisingly quick to let us in. As the carriage got moving again, I noticed something. “What could that be?”

“Is something the matter?” Serge asked.

“I just felt something odd.”

“You mean the barrier?” Pioro asked. “There’s a space magic spell up for keeping criminals out.”

“A barrier?”

“I’ve heard that if you’re sensitive to magic, you may experience an uncomfortable sensation as you pass through,” Serge said. “The Jamil estate uses magic items and their own personal barrier mages to deploy many layers

of barriers.” Still, I had experience with barrier magic, and I’d never felt anything like this. “At any rate, we’re almost there.”

I checked my clothes one last time and got myself in order.

■ ■ ■

“Good work,” I said to Serge’s coachman, then got off the carriage.

The first thing that drew my eye was the line of twenty servants who stood there to greet us, men on one side and women on the other. They moved to both sides to let us through and bowed as we passed. I saw scenes like this in manga and the like all the time, but I never dreamed that I’d experience it myself.

What was more surprising was the building beyond. It looked like a fortress from the outside, but from here I could see there was a lovely Western-style mansion. The wall and towers made me think of a fortress, but the estate itself looked almost like a palace. It was made of gray stone that looked ancient, but well taken care of. There were no signs of any dirt. In fact, it felt tasteful and historical.

“Welcome,” one of the butlers said. Presumably he held the highest position among the servants.

He said that we would first be led to a waiting room to meet with the Jamil family. Fay and the other two servants would be made to wait in a different room. Our gifts were to be taken to be checked. Once they were confirmed to be safe, they would be returned to the waiting room before the meeting began.

“This way, please,” a maid said. We followed behind her. “Wait here for just a little while.”

There were two familiar women in the waiting room. “Araune? And Lilian?” I said.

“It’s been some time, Master Ryoma,” said Araune.

“We have been waiting for you. I’m glad to see you’re in good health,” said Lilian.

The maid looked to them, confused as to why they knew me. “They did a lot

for me in the past," I explained to her.

"Is that so? In any case, I must be going. If you need anything, please tell them," the maid said before she left. I felt a bit relieved.

"Would you like something to drink?"

"We have water, tea, fruit juice, and some light alcohol."

"I think I'd like some fruit juice," said Serge.

"Tea for me," said Pioro.

"I'll take water, please," I said.

Araune and Lilian felt perfectly natural in this environment.

"Here you are."

"Thank you," I said, taking a sip of some water. It was cold and refreshing.

"What, are you nervous?" Pioro asked me.

"Of course."

I thought it was a little strange myself, but it wasn't the meeting with the Jamil family that had me so anxious. Rather, this was my first time visiting a noble's mansion. And as the leader of a business, I felt like I had to conduct myself with some level of dignity. In my past life, though, I was never anything more than an employee. I was still new at this leadership position, and it stressed me out at times to have to play the part. But if I tried to act too self-important, I would only aggravate people.

The proper conduct to show on occasions like these was rather vague to me. It was always clear enough in other situations, depending on the setting and the positions of others around you, but in these situations I would have to change my conduct depending on the mood in the room and the personality of whoever I had to talk to. They say you should just watch how the other person is acting and approach them with confidence, but when I tried that in the past, I would get told I was being disrespectful, or arrogant, or prideful, for some reason. Then I would try to be more careful, and I'd get told I was acting too servile, or uncomfortably humble. I had no idea how to satisfy people.

“Master Ryoma? Are you okay?” Serge asked with some strange frustration mixed in. Maybe he was still bothered by my suit.

“Yes, I’m just a little nervous.”

“Really? Your eyes looked dead,” said Pioro.

“As long as you aren’t sick. You don’t have to be so anxious,” said Serge. “If anything happens, Pioro and I will assist you. But as far as I’ve ever seen from you, you won’t need the help.”

Araune and Lilian also said I looked calm enough, especially compared to some other guests. I appreciated their support and hoped to meet their expectations.

We chatted for a while, with the two maids joining in to help take my mind off things. The conversation centered around them, actually. We talked about how we met, what we’d been doing since we parted ways, and recent news about coworkers getting married. The variety of topics helped us pass the time.

Chapter 5 Episode 5: Reunion 3

“We’re ready for you,” a new maid announced as she came to the room. Thanks to Araune and Lilian, I felt much more relaxed. It was finally time to see the Jamil family. “Let’s get going.”

We followed the maid. She seemed to be a cat beastkin, and her beautiful, furry tail waved around in front of my face. I carried a box full of gifts through the hallway decorated with vases and paintings which I could only imagine the worth of.

“Here we are,” the maid said and stopped outside a white door, looking to us to see if we were ready. When we showed that we were, she pushed the door open.

“Welcome, Ryoma!” Elise said the moment she saw me.

The room had a large window that let plentiful sunlight in. Elise was waving to me, surrounded by tons of houseplants. She sounded as friendly as ever, much to my delight. But because of that, I completely forgot all the proper formalities. Thankfully that was only for a moment, but it didn’t matter.

“We’re glad you’re here. Let’s skip all the stuffy formalities. Come, have a seat,” Duke Reinhart said. He was standing next to Elise.



“You heard him, Master Ryoma,” Serge said with a chuckle. “Let’s go.”

“Right,” I said. It seemed that all my practice was for nothing. “I’m glad I get to see you again.”

“We’re glad to see you too,” said Elise. “We know from your letters that you’ve been in good health, but it’s best when you get to see someone in person.”

“I worried about whether you’ve been handling life in the city well,” said Reinhart.

“Serge, Pioro, and many others have been helping me.”

The conversation began amicably. Reinhart and Elise greeted Serge and Pioro as well. The maids prepared our tea and teacakes in the meantime, then left the five of us alone.

“This tea is delicious,” I remarked.

“I’m glad you like it,” Elise said. “It’s my favorite brand. Have some tea cakes too.”

“Thank you. By the way, if you don’t mind me asking, where is Reinbach today? I was hoping to see him too.”

“Father?”

“He ditched us,” Reinhart said bitterly.

“Ditched you?”

“A lot of people want to meet with us around this time of year, you see. And most of them simply don’t wish to engage with us the way you do. Some just want to meet with us out of respect, I suppose, but most have ulterior motives. Father didn’t want to put up with it, so he ran off to the Firedrake Mountains and took Sebas with him. He complained that we rely too much on them.”

I’d heard from Taylor about the Firedrake Mountains before. It was the dangerous zone where Reinbach made a contract with a divine beast. An ordinary merchant couldn’t easily go there to greet him.

“I see. That’s too bad,” I said.

“When he gets back, I’ll tell him that you wanted to see him. I’m sure he’ll be happy to hear that.”

As the chat got more lively, it came time to give the gifts.

“I’ll start, if I may,” Serge said, taking a small box off the stand attached to his chair and placing it on the table. The box had a porcelain-like sheen, but it smelled like wood. It was completely adorned with decorative string, giving it a classy look. “This is the latest version of the music boxes that my company started to sell this summer. I asked Fletch Merlin, the famous composer, to do the song. The box is made of the highest grade of rockskin wood from Banand. Not only that, but this pure white wood is the rarest variety.”

“A music box? I’ve been hearing a lot about those lately,” said Reinhart.

“From the Dinome Workshop, right? They’re quite famous,” said Elise.

“Yes, and the core parts of this one were handled by the Dinome Workshop’s most talented artisan.”

“It looks pretty, too. I can see it being a conversation starter at parties.”

“This type isn’t for sale, but we do get many orders for the music boxes we do sell.”

There are music box museums in Japan too, so maybe some people got fanatical about these things.

Next was Pioro. After a brief preamble, he took out a box that I was surprised to see. “This is chocolate made from cacao from Bluwanart.”

I bought chocolate every time I craved some in my past life, but this was my first time seeing it in this world. Pioro went on about how he got good beans for this and it was the best chocolate in years, but I didn’t care. I had every intention of asking Pioro if I could buy some later.

Then it was finally my turn. “Here’s what I brought,” I said.

I set some deodorizing fluid on the table, as well as a stab-proof shirt made from sticky slime thread. I wanted to pick something that made sense coming from a laundromat. Regarding the shirt, I gave them the explanation I got from Darson at Tigger Armory and gave them my impressions from using it myself to

talk it up.

“So it’s effective armor, but also light enough for anyone to wear?” Elise asked. “It looks like you could use this material for the lining of clothes, too.”

“If it’s relatively cheap stab-proof material that’s comparable to metal spider thread, maybe it would be good for our army,” Reinhart said.

That said, however, it also took a while to manufacture, and it wasn’t effective against blunt impacts. If the enemy used enhancing magic or qi, it might not necessarily stop all blades. I had to make that clear to them.

“Even so, it’s worth considering the idea,” Reinhart said. “It takes a lot of time and money to train a single soldier, and giving them all even one piece of equipment comes at a great cost on top of that. So if we could give them good equipment and expect them to return safely from battles, it will be well worth it. Assuming we find them effective enough for the cost, of course.”

“If you’re even willing to think about it, it’d make me happy as the creator.”

“I’ll give you an answer at a later date. I know I would like at least one per member of the family, and I can tell you the measurements later.”

“And this is deodorizing fluid, right? From your store?” Elise asked.

“Yes, it’s the same as what’s sold at my store.”

The demand for deodorizing fluid had been going up as of late. Some customers were clearly buying more than they could use on their own. I heard about this in a report from the Lenaf branch and had them investigate whether they were being bought and resold. I learned last week that they were being brought to the Jamil estate, so I decided to include some among my gifts. In addition to the sample I presented here, I handed a fair amount off to the maids.

“Thanks. Our servants love this stuff. We’ve had so many guests lately, and the smell of their perfume gets into all our clothes and furniture.”

“If you wrote me a letter asking for some, I would’ve been happy to send it anytime.”

“We go through a ton of it, so I would’ve felt bad about that. I feel like you’d

give us anything for free if we asked for it.”

“Well, I won’t say I wouldn’t. Since you’ve bought so much, I’ll at least include a bonus for you from now on.”

It was a product from our store, so I couldn’t just go giving it all away for free. Plus we had other customers to sell to as well. But it was true that I wasn’t that stingy about it personally, so I smiled gently.

“Serge, Pioro, Ryoma, thank you for the wonderful gifts. I’d like to pay you back by inviting you to dinner tonight, if you don’t have any other plans,” Reinhart said.

Nobles were visited by many merchants around this time of year, so they couldn’t spend too long speaking with any individual one. Merchants knew this, so they would come meet with nobles in groups the way we did. It wasn’t a time for especially deep conversation, but if the nobles wished to spend more time with the merchants, they would invite them to dinner. If the merchants garnered their interest with their gifts and their brief conversation, and curried favor with them during dinner, they could even get a chance to stay the night. That was the implicitly understood goal of merchants when they visited nobles, as Carme explained to me over these last two weeks.

“I will gladly join you for dinner,” I answered promptly, as did Pioro and Serge.

“Good, I’ll tell the chef. By the way, Ryoma,” Reinhart said before I could leave the room. I looked to Pioro and Serge to see if they knew what he wanted, but they didn’t seem to. “Weren’t you good at making figurines and such?”

“I do remember being told that I was,” I said, remembering the days before we parted ways in Gimul.

“And you can make statues of the gods too?”

“I do that sometimes. Do you need divine statues?”

“Yes. We need statues of Lulutia, Kufo, and Wilieris. They should be human-sized, or a little bigger than that. We can pay ten small gold coins per statue. Could you do that for us?”

“I see. Are they for the wedding?”

Lulutia had dominion over love, *i.e.* human relationships, while Kufo had dominion over life, and Wilieris dominion over the land. They blessed the health of couples and the birth of new life, so they were prayed to during weddings.

“Exactly,” said Reinhart. “I’m sure you’ve heard about it already, but we’ll be using these grounds to hold a wedding.”

“The bride is a girl who’s worked hard for our family for a long time,” said Elise.

“She wasn’t even going to have a ceremony herself, was she?”

“Right.”

I’d heard about this from Araune in the waiting room. There was a maid who had been serving the Jamil family for a long time and took her job seriously, garnering everyone’s trust. But she was so focused on her job that she’d never had a relationship, and she was starting to grow older. That’s what everyone thought, at least, but last month she suddenly announced that she had gotten engaged.

However, her only friends were servants at this estate. Their schedules were arranged such that they couldn’t all make it to a wedding without causing trouble for the Jamil family. She could have instead put the expenses of the wedding toward future savings and gotten married anyway, but she insisted on a wedding. The way Araune talked about her, she sounded like a mother concerned about her workaholic daughter.

“She does good work, but she prioritizes her job far too greatly over herself,” said Elise.

“Since she wasn’t going to be able to hold a wedding any time soon, we decided to hold a surprise one here at the estate for her,” said Reinhart. “Many of her coworkers want the chance to congratulate her as well. Serge, Pioro? If you could also help with the decorations and food, it would be appreciated.”

The two merchants smiled and agreed to cooperate. I wanted to pitch in too, but I wasn’t so sure about it. “You want me to make the statues for such an important celebration?” I asked. This would be a memory that lasted forever for

the couple, so I wanted to ensure I was the right man for the job.

“It’ll be fine,” Reinhart said with a smile. “They actually ended up hearing about the plans, so we’re asking for their opinion as we make preparations at this point. They both said they’d be happy with your statues.”

“Why not talk to her if you’re worried about it? She wants to talk to you too,” Elise suggested, then rang a bell on the table.

“You called?” the cat-eared maid asked as she entered the room.

“We were just talking about your wedding, Lulunese.”

“Huh?”

Now that I looked at this maid again, she had sharp eyes and glasses that made her look like a working woman or a secretary. She certainly had a serious demeanor, but when she heard mention of her wedding, she blushed a little. I could see her being popular with men, and wouldn’t have been surprised if her fiance drew a lot of envy.

“Thank you for all you’re doing for us,” the maid said to Elise.

“It’s nothing. We asked Ryoma to make the divine statues for the wedding. That’s fine with you, right?”

“My fiance speaks highly of Master Takebayashi’s talents, and we’re quite indebted to him. He always insists on having Master Takebayashi make the statues, and I would be glad to have something made with more heart than what we could find on the market. As long as it’s not too much to ask, of course.”

“Not at all!” I said. “If it’d make you happy, by all means let me do it. But does your fiance know me? And how are you indebted to me?”

Lulunese cocked her head. “Did he not tell you? You just saw him yesterday.”

“Yesterday?”

“Yes. He was always saying how he’d tell you next time he saw you, and he did say he took you to the inn last night.”

Reinhart and Elise commented on how they thought it was all explained to me

already in the background, but they sounded strangely distant. If he was indebted to me, knew I could make statues, saw me yesterday, and took me to the inn, it all pointed to one man.

“You mean it’s Hughes?!”

“Yes, it certainly is,” the cat-eared beauty said, blushing even more.

Hughes was nice, but I was surprised to hear he’d be with someone like this. They were within the same age range, but I couldn’t see them getting married. And while I was happy for him, it was kind of vexing to see, as someone who’d never managed to get married myself. I could only feel conflicted as my meeting with the Jamil family drew to a close.

Chapter 5 Episode 6: Reunion 4

I went back to the inn that night to pack up my things and cancel my stay, then returned to the estate. Reinhart and Elise were seeing other guests at the time, so we were shown to our rooms.

The guest room was like a suite in a famous luxury hotel I once saw on TV during my life on Earth. I was surprised by the size of the room when I first entered, but then I was also shown an additional two doors to the left and right. The initial room was the living room, while the one on the right was the bathroom. The door on the left led to a bedroom, so I was getting three rooms all to myself.

And furthermore, there was always a maid standing by in another room, whom I could call on at any time. They seemed to pick maids who I knew, so it was always Araune, Lilian, or Lulunese. I honestly couldn't have appreciated it more, but the maids told me that the same level of hospitality was given to all the guests. Maybe the culture was different here, or maybe this was just the power of wealth.

Someone knocked on the door. "Come in!" I said.

"Excuse me, Master Takebayashi," Lulunese said. "My fiance and three of his coworkers would like to see you, if you wouldn't mind."

"I'll talk to them. Let them inside."

"As you wish."

Lulunese waved her tail and elegantly walked away. I waited at the entrance until she returned a few minutes later with Hughes, Camil, Jill, and Zeph, looking no different from when I first met them. They greeted me and asked how I was doing.

"I'm glad to see you three again," I said.

"Hey, you leaving me out?" Hughes complained.

"I just saw you yesterday, Hughes. Why didn't you mention your wedding yesterday, by the way?"

“Look, I was gonna tell you at first, but getting you to the inn ate up a lot of time. If I just dropped the news that I was getting married right before I headed off, that would’ve been kind of awkward, right?”

“I suppose that would have been startling.”

“Not only that, but, well, I’m only able to get married now because of how you saved me that time before. I wanted to thank you properly once I got the chance to tell you about it,” he explained. He seemed to be acting subtly different.

“I suppose even Hughes will get a little introspective after a near-death experience,” said Jill.

“Must’ve been what got him to confess to her,” said Camil.

“Hey, shut up,” Hughes stammered.

“Don’t think there’s much use hiding it now, but I think that’s enough, you two,” Zeph said. “At least show some tact for her, if not Hughes.”

“I don’t mind,” Lulunese said nonchalantly as she stood aside by the open door. Maybe she was trying to keep a straight face out of pride as a maid, but she was blushing. She seemed to have trouble with discussion of this subject.

“Come have a seat, everyone,” I offered. “We can talk inside.”

“Right! Don’t mind if I do,” said Hughes.

“I’ll see myself out, then,” said Lulunese.

The four of them sat on the couch in the living room. I forgot that I had been using the table there.

“Sorry about the mess.”

“It’s fine, we came on short notice anyway.”

“No problem!”

“What’s this washtub for, though?”

“Looks like it’s full of sand.”

“This room’s so luxurious that it kind of makes me uncomfortable, so I’ve

been making this," I said. The tub stuck out like a sore thumb against the opulence of the room, but I was using it to make a stone figure. It wasn't done yet and looked quite ugly, but it was just a test run for a god statue. "There's also this one, this one, and this one..."

"That's a lot!"

"It's full of the damn things."

"I wanted to finalize the designs for the statues before I actually make the final products."

"You're always so good with the details."

"Looks like all of them are smiling, though."

"When you line them up, you can clearly see the distinct moods between them."

"You couldn't have been here for more than a few hours, but you've already made this many?"

"These are just test runs for figuring out the designs, so I just made one simple mold and packed it with sand to solidify it with magic, and I mass-produce featureless figures with it. I add the details after that."

Lulunese came in with drinks for all of us. I cleared some space on the table.

"I have come bearing drinks," she said.

"Thank you. Would you like to stay and talk, Lulunese? Tell me which one of these figures you like. I'll take your opinion into account when I make the real things."

"As you wish."

Lulunese stoically sat next to Hughes and scanned her eyes over the statues.

"This one looks pretty fun," Hughes said and picked out a Lulutia statue with a wide smile.

"I don't dislike it, but I think weddings should have something a bit more majestic. Like this," Lulunese said and picked up a statue with a serious expression.

The disagreement started a hushed discussion between them. It didn’t sound too thorny, but it was hard to get a word in. It almost sounded like they were flirting.



“This again?”

“Subtlety went out the window with them ever since they announced the marriage.”

“This is just how they’ve been all the time lately.”

Two of the coworkers looked at the couple and sighed, while Camil whispered an explanation to me as usual.

“Are people jealous of them?”

“More so of Hughes.”

“Lulunese was popular with the single men who work here.”

“People are happy for her, but most of the men we work with don’t have much luck with women, so that doesn’t inspire much goodwill toward Hughes.”

Much like how I felt when I heard about Lulunese’s marriage, it sounded like a lot of people were envious.

“Well, it’s settled down a lot recently. The jealousy is still focused on Hughes, but it’s little more than gentle teasing. People always liked him, and his lifestyle has changed a lot since he announced his engagement.”

“He’s been drinking less, and he started trying to get a promotion about a week ago.”

Intrigued, I asked Jill for more details. Hughes was first introduced to me as an escort, but his official job was as a security guard for the Jamil family. He spent most of his time guarding the Jamil estate, but sometimes attended to the family when they went out. There were many ranks and roles that security guards fit into, and while Hughes had been performing well ever since he was first hired, back when he used to be an adventurer, he was not very accepting of getting a promotion.

“They’ve talked before about putting him in a slightly higher position, but he always just said it’d be a pain. Now that he’s getting married, though, he’s asking for a promotion himself. Man, you never know how a person might change.”

“I see. Do you think he’ll be able to get a promotion? Considering all the times he’s turned one down.”

“Oh, that won’t be a problem. He’s been training for office work, so he can get one. If he does well enough there, he should be able to move up to some extent; enough for a salary that can support a family, at least. His history of rejecting promotions has had some effect, though. That, and his instructor’s jealousy has made his training somewhat rough. It would’ve been easy if he just trained for this gradually over time, but now his laziness is all coming back to bite him.”

“Hughes just hates writing reports and stuff.”

Jill had a nasty smile. It didn’t sound like they viewed him coldly, though. It was nice to see that Hughes didn’t have to work in the kind of environment I did on Earth.

“What’ve you all been talking about while we were discussing these statues?” Hughes asked. “Ryoma, what’s with that weirdly warm expression?”

“Oh, nothing,” I said. I was just happy for him. “Is there anything you need besides the statues?” I figured maybe they needed gifts or something else as well. I’d never taken part in a wedding before, so I was curious.

“Well, we already have gifts for all the guests, so nothing to worry about there. Was there anything else? I think we’ve got most of what we need, right?”

“Thankfully the servants have been helping us, so there’s nothing in particular I can think of,” Lulunese said. “Would you like to join our planning session? It will start after the servants are done with their work, so it will be rather late.”

Representatives of the servants, guards, and all other departments gathered each night to discuss wedding preparations. That sounded like a good place to ask all about the wedding, so I was quick to accept their invitation.

If their coworkers would go that far for them, they must have loved these two. I wondered what happened right after I died. It must have been hard for the landlady to rent out a room someone had died in. I guess Tabuchi would have been sad, and maybe some other people, but my boss probably didn’t give a crap. He would’ve just been mad that my work wasn’t getting done. I had to

feel bad for whoever got my work. As for everyone else, I couldn't imagine they had much of a reaction. Back when I was technically in some leadership position, they hated any attempt at guidance that I gave. Compared to my experiences, it was incredible that these two could be so loved at work.

"You're really lucky to have great coworkers. Don't take them for granted," I said.

"What are you, our dad or something?! Seriously, what?!" Hughes cried.

"Why are you being so protective of us, Master Ryoma?" Lulunese asked.

"He doesn't sound like he's joking, either."

"It's almost uncanny how sincere he is."

"What's up with you, Ryoma?"

That strangely good-natured mood in the room hung around until another maid came to announce that dinner was ready.

Chapter 5 Episode 7: An Activity Report over Tea

For dinner, Serge, Pioro, Reinhart, Elise, and I all chatted and enjoyed delicious cooking and drinks. I had done a lot over the last year, and these were all busy people, so we never ran out of material to discuss. After dinner was over, we had tea together and continued the conversation.

“I knew about the waterproof cloth, but you were involved in the rest of those as well?” asked Reinhart.

“Ryoma came up with the music boxes as well?” asked Elise.

“Yes, and the Morgan Trading Company’s fame has grown even further thanks to him,” said Serge. “Pioro, I believe it’s been similar for you, yes?”

“You mean with the barley tea? It’s been gaining popularity as a new luxury item. I was only going to start expanding sales of it next year, but it’s been doing well as a test product. I’m thankful that Ryoma told me where I could get the ingredients and everything.”

“I’m glad to hear it’s going well. The ingredients come from the hometown of some of my employees, luckily.”

“Glad that you shared some of that luck with me. Luck’s not something you can achieve through hard work.”

I didn’t often feel unlucky in this world, and if I did, it was only mild misfortune. I had blessings from many of the gods and met with them frequently, so I could consider myself insanely lucky based on that alone. If I had a Luck skill, like in a video game, it would likely be maxed out.

“I heard that Weizen was struggling due to its location, but maybe it could prosper in the future thanks to your company,” said Reinhart.

“If the village is open to it, I would be happy for the Saionji Trading Company to keep buying their crops. As far as barley tea production goes, I’m thinking about supplying all the necessary manpower, tools, and facilities by next year.”

“So the village will produce more crops, use some for manufacturing barley tea, and sell it through the Saionji Trading Company? I hope that goes well. I’ll offer whatever I can for support.”

“That is most reassuring to hear, Your Excellency.”

Throughout the casual conversation, I felt the occasional discomfort. I couldn’t guess how many implications were hidden behind their words. When it came time for me to talk, I just gave an entirely ordinary rundown of recent events. That included the state of the abandoned mine and recent news about my slimes.

“I recently made contracts with a weed slime and stone slime. These are slimes that can camouflage themselves as weeds and stones, and I’ve been having them reproduce. Their food is easy to acquire, and they reproduce quickly, but you’d never be able to tell them apart from their food if you didn’t already know. They seem to copy the local weeds and stones that they absorb in order to blend in with the scenery, and I’ve been thinking about whether I can use this trait to help with security at the mine. I could multiply these two slimes in great numbers and place them all around the mine, then use taming magic to sense any intruders who pass by them. Unfortunately, while they reproduce quickly, I still don’t have enough of them. For now I’m testing them out in a few of the eastern tunnels, where monsters have been dwelling relatively often over the last few months. But based on experiments I’ve done with my limour birds, I should be able to detect the number of intruders and their positions as long as I’m within close enough range of my slimes. I feel they could serve as perfectly good watchmen in the future.”

“Always putting your slimes to the utmost use, eh?” said Reinhart. “If you can know the number and location of intruders before they see you, it sounds like you could set some traps.”

“This would be the best way to use slimes as security, I suppose. I have my familiars watch the garden, and they’ll attack any suspicious characters on sight. It’s interesting how different familiars can be,” Elise said with a smile.

Elise’s familiars were all wolf monsters, and while the one she showed me before was docile enough, it was also enormous enough for her to sit on.

Intruders to their estate could only blame themselves, I guess. Still, I could only imagine the bloodbath that took place when they were spotted. Not like I was keen on seeing it anyway, but I sure wasn't about to stroll into the garden without asking first now.

"How has your business been?" Reinhart asked.

"Pretty good. Maybe it's something to do with how cold and wet it's been lately, but more people have been coming to us saying that they've been having trouble drying their laundry. It feels like we break our highest daily business record on a regular basis now."

"I can imagine," Elise said. "The servants have it harder around this time of year, too."

Reinhart and Elise were as eager listeners as ever, as were Serge and Pioro. It made me want to describe everything down to the last detail. I talked about the summer festival and my training with the adventurer's guild. I also talked about the troupe of performers, the new head of the public offices, my acquaintances at the guild, and everyone else I met. The four of them smiled warmly as they listened to my stories intently.

But when I mentioned my interest in going to the Sea of Trees of Syrus, they fell silent. The more I talked about it, the more worried they seemed to look. After I described my rescue of Pedro the other day, they all looked conflicted.

"Ryoma, from the look on your face, I think you already know what we want to tell you," Reinhart said.

"Yes, more or less."

"Then I'll get straight to the point. I don't recommend ever hiring felons, not even former felons. Yes, some commit crimes because they can't find employment and need to get food somehow. I have no doubt that some would no longer need to commit crimes if they had jobs. But there's no reason that you personally have to be the one to give that to them, and I doubt there would be much use in it. The world views felons harshly, whether they later change their ways or not."

"I'm sure you mean well, but it's very risky," said Elise. "Not everyone will

understand that you want to help prevent future crimes by hiring them. You could put your business in danger just when it's getting off the ground."

"I agree," said Serge. "The risk is high, and I don't see what reward you can expect from it. At best, you'll be seen as eccentric. At worst, you may be suspected of plotting something by hiring all these criminals, however well-intentioned you may be."

"Unfortunately, that's just how society is," said Pioro.

"Well, that's more or less what I expected to hear. Especially after I talked to Carme about it."

"You've already spoken to Carme?" Serge asked.

"He has plenty of business knowledge and experience, and he's always happy to listen to me, so I go to him for help a lot."

"You're so set on this that a trusted subordinate's opposition didn't change your mind? Why?" Pioro questioned me in a somewhat firm tone.

"I had the idea after that experience with the bandits, but honestly, I'm not so sure myself. If I had to give a reason, I guess you could say I just want to."

"What?"

Pioro couldn't seem to understand me. The other three were also stunned and disappointed.

"Now hold on, Ryoma," Reinhart said. "You *want* to? Is that all? Again, this would be a huge risk with no reward. It's a bigger burden than any individual can handle."

"Well, I'm just telling you how I feel."

They and Carme all said the same thing, and it made sense. Hiring former felons and rehabilitating them wouldn't meaningfully change society if only one person was doing it. Such policies were put in place sometimes on Earth, but those were enacted by the Japanese government, and that country has a much greater population and many more resources than this one. If I was the only one executing this idea in this world, it wouldn't change much of anything. It would be like a drop in the ocean; I had a lot to lose if I tried, as they correctly

pointed out. That was the rational thing to think.

But I couldn't change how I felt. It was tough to fully comprehend my own feelings, surprisingly so, but reflecting on my life since coming to this world, this seemed like the natural course of action.

"How should I put this? Well, you know how I lived in the Forest of Gana before I came to the city, right?" I asked; they nodded in response. "My life there was long, tedious, and not very fun, so I won't describe it in detail, but it was pretty strenuous." The four of them, especially Reinhart and Elise, all frowned like they'd swallowed something bitter. "But I lived in the forest because I got fed up with dealing with people, and I figured I would live freely there."

I didn't want to join human society, so I lived a self-sufficient life alone. Eventually, I took interest in slimes and researched them. Over time, I became curious about what was outside. That was when the duke's family came, and I left the forest.

"Even after I left the forest, I was interested in being an adventurer. I wanted to live on my own away from you so I could re-train myself, and I opened a business to be sure I had money to live on in case anything happened. But I was negative about the idea of expanding the business."

The gods told me to live freely, so I took an easygoing attitude and did whatever I felt like doing. This was how I'd lived my life ever since coming to this world; it was the only thing I felt I could confidently say.

"So when I decided I wanted to do that, I thought about how I could do it. That's pretty much it. Oh, but I'm not saying I'll do this at any cost and rush to make it happen right away. I'd just like to see things improve at least a little before I die. Is that childish of me?"

"How's that possibly childish?!" cried Pioro.

"Maybe it's childish to say you just do what you want, but it doesn't sound like it coming from you, Ryoma," said Elise.

"It sounds to me like you're thinking very much about the future," said Reinhart.

“I almost forgot that you’re still eleven. You act well above your age at times,” said Serge.

Thankfully, we were able to lighten up again and get back to enjoying the tea.

“Whatever I plan on doing, I’m not just going to abruptly change the course of my business. And I’d like to discuss any plans with all of you in advance,” I said. They were willing to listen to me, and it seemed like they might lend a hand, so I thought it was worth asking. But they gave me the most shocked looks I’d seen all day. Perhaps I said something strange?

Chapter 5 Episode 8: Mild Growth?

“Hold on, Ryoma, were you planning to ask for our assistance when you execute this plan?” Reinhart asked.

“Well, yes, that was the idea. I considered the possibility that you would say no, of course, in which case I would live with it. But you’ve always been good to me, so I thought maybe you’d at least listen,” I explained, wondering if I’d expected too much.

“Oh, no! We can at least hear you out.”

“We thought you would try to do everything yourself,” Elise said.

That would be ridiculous. Some things would never be possible on my own. I may have said that I would do this, but I never said I’d do it alone. I’d want to do it even if I had to, but it would be risky. I needed at least some base of support to get this going. Serge and Pioro were both the presidents of big companies, so they had plenty of knowledge, negotiation skills, wealth, and connections. Reinhart was a policymaker, and he held the greatest authority in the Duchy of Jamil. Elise also seemed to have a similar degree of influence, so I couldn’t ask for better partners. They were always looking out for me anyway, and I appreciated it when they supplied me with the common knowledge I lacked. I always planned to ask them about this first.

“This was always the plan?” Serge asked. “My subordinate told you the same thing we did, so I wasn’t expecting that.”

“You thought I’d try to do it all myself?”

“You do have a tendency to go down that road. Whatever your idea was, I was worried that you’d just try to charge right into it,” Reinhart said.

The other three agreed with Reinhart. I didn’t realize I gave off that image, but it was somewhat hard to deny it.

“Have you learned to rely on others when you need to?” Reinhart continued. “At any rate, I’m glad you chose us to ask. I do think you have interesting ideas. I wouldn’t hear your opinions from anyone else, at least. I think you see things a

bit differently than we do. The plans you come up with may sometimes be seen as odd and get rejected because of it. But such perspectives are important. If you hear the same opinions for too long, it becomes hard to think outside the box. Despite all we've said, we'd appreciate it if you continued to share your opinions with us in the future."

The other three didn't seem to disagree. Of course, they probably couldn't always help in cases where it would be disadvantageous, or if they had other obligations. But they weren't just laughing off my ideas either.

"I can't tell you that our response will always be favorable, though," Reinhart said.

"Of course."

They were content to hear me out, but they probably needed something to gain from helping if I wanted to convince them. I thought about that a bit before too, so I took this chance to tell them about it.

"Oh? It sounds like you have a plan," Serge said. "Perhaps we should brace ourselves." His tone was casual, but his mood changed a bit. It was like when we talked about selling music boxes before. I decided to brace myself as well.

"It's nothing complex enough to be called a plan, but a lot of what I've discovered through my slime research may be advantageous to all of you, so I thought I might share that information."

"You always find a way to bring the conversation back to slimes, don't you?" said Elise with a smile. The mood was easing up.

I decided to start with Serge. This wasn't anything new, but it was about the waterproof cloth we had been selling since the spring. "I looked into how well-received the waterproof cloth is, and sales still seem to be on the rise," I said.

"Most of the customers we had before were traveling merchants and delivery people, but the rain gear is becoming popular with regular customers nowadays," Serge replied.

I had seen quite a few people with that rain gear around Gimul, plus I knew that the Morgan Trading Company was asking for even more waterproof cloth from me with each order. My sticky slimes did most of the work for that, so I

was still keeping up, but it was, to be frank, time-consuming.

“What would you think about the idea of building a factory to help keep up with the ever-increasing demand?” I suggested.

In other words, I was transferring control of the production of waterproof cloth over to him. The sticky slimes could soak the cloth in fluid on their own, but workers would be needed to prepare, dry, and ship the cloth. If I wanted more employees, I needed to create more jobs first.

“I can provide the sticky slimes you’ll need for it.”

“And the more employees we have, the more we can produce, right? It’s certainly true that the demand for waterproof cloth keeps growing. It would help to increase production, for preparation’s sake.”

Serge was taken somewhat off guard, but didn’t have as much of a problem with this as the previous topic. I would have probably needed to keep ramping up production myself anyway, and I didn’t mind if Serge and the Morgan Trading Company ran the factory. But as the person providing the slimes, I did want a portion of the profits and to be the advisor on slime management and usage. I could use the money to expand my laundromat in the future.

“So, who’s in charge of hiring?” Serge asked.

“I think you can do that. And don’t feel like you have to hire former felons. I’m sure such a sudden and aggressive change would create chaos and friction, so my two goals right now are to acquire funds to expand and stabilize my business, and to create employment opportunities. There are people in the slums who want to work, but can’t find jobs. I think it’d be great if you could hire them.”

“Well, I could consider hiring them if they’re just poor, not criminals,” Serge said. Construction and factory jobs always seemed to be relatively lax about who they hired, so I figured he would find that acceptable. “I’ll look into how plausible the idea is. We can discuss the scale of the operation, the compensation for the slimes, and how to handle them another time.”

“Thank you.”

Serge’s response was favorable. That was a good sign. Next, I had a

suggestion for Reinhart. This wasn't new either, but I presented the idea of using scavenger slimes to process the garbage cities produce.

"Trash processing is a public project. It's an important source of income for those in the slums. Wouldn't you be taking that away from them?" he asked.

"I thought about that, but after an investigation in Gimul, I found that there's more trash per day than the citizens of the slums can collect."

The people of the slums were proactive about collecting garbage for money, but they couldn't deliver all the trash that came from everyone in the city. They also had to hire workers from outside the slums for the rest of it. My first job after becoming an adventurer, when I had to deal with the dump next to Miya's house, was one such case, and there still seemed to be similar areas all around the city.

"It would also provide better ways to dispose of the garbage. I believe some animal corpses are incinerated and buried, which uses a fair amount of manpower and fuel. You'll need a tamer to oversee the work, but if you used scavenger slimes, it'd eliminate the fuel costs. Reducing the number of employees working on disposal would increase the number who can collect trash."

Scavenger slimes also had the Nutrient Reduction skill, for processing the garbage into fertilizer. I had been growing food with it for a long time and it never had negative health effects, plus it took some of the burden of using wood magic off of me. It was good fertilizer, which also had the side effect of magicifying plants sometimes, but that also happened with magic fertilizers. Even overusing regular fertilizer could hinder growth, so it was always a matter of using the right amount. As long as you did that, it could be used for farming and even sold on the market.

"The income from that could be used to pay the workers who handle trash processing. But there's no guarantee that it'll sell. Honestly, this proposal still has too many uncertain elements."

"I suppose. Could you give me some of that fertilizer? I'd like to show it to our gardener, who's an expert on plants, fertilizers, and medicine. That might give us some valuable input."

Thus, I decided to give Reinhart some scavenger slime fertilizer. That settled the discussion for now. I could wait until hearing this gardener's opinion of the fertilizer, then give them time to think about it.

Next, I told Pioro about how I used scavenger slime fertilizer to produce running mushes in great numbers. I also told him that I was doing research on how to cultivate edible mushrooms without letting them magicify. I heard that stable mushroom cultivation would be one step toward making a fortune, so I thought he would be interested.

"Ryoma, is that true?" he asked.

"Yes. They all turn into running mushes right now, so I can't cultivate ordinary mushrooms, but I think I'm headed in the right direction. I showed Glissela a basket of running mushes as proof, by the way. You can ask her about it if you want, or I could use space magic to show them to you myself."

"I'll take your word for it. I have no reason to think you're joking." He was interested, but looked rather exasperated as well.

Next was Elise. "A former slime researcher that I employ recently found that cleaner slimes have some beautifying effects," I told her.

"Beautifying? That's fascinating."

"Yes. I think this could be popular with women."

The cleaner slimes could remove dead skin, or make the skin drier, depending on the individual's age and the kind of skin they had. Still, I figured some additional care could compensate for that. My knowledge of medicine told me that there were a number of magic beauty products, and from what I heard the other day, the medicine was too expensive in the Gilmarese Empire, so they developed techniques like acupuncture and massages to treat the body. I was no expert on beauty products, but I sometimes overheard women in my old workplace passionately researching them. I didn't really understand why they took it so seriously, but then again, I knew better than to look down on a woman in pursuit of beauty.

"So if you put together slimes, medicine, foreign techniques, and more all for the pursuit of beauty, don't you think it'd work out?"

“This is terribly interesting.”

My idea here was still kind of vague, but Elise’s reaction wasn’t bad. Noblewomen had a tendency to buy beauty products like their lives depended on it, so if this worked out, it could make a killing. Especially if I could make good connections with some noblewomen.

“Ryoma, that’s quite the fearsome idea for someone your age to have,” said Reinhart.

“It’s remarkable that you know how to capture a lady’s heart,” said Serge.

“And a lot of noblemen have to bow to their wives,” said Pioro.

“Quite the schemer,” said Elise.

“Well, it’s honestly more of a side idea I have,” I said. It was fun to think about, but it seemed a bit too high-risk and high-reward. Women are strong and depending on the situation, they can be a really fearsome bunch. I learned that in my past life. “I’m just saying that it’s a possibility.”

“Aw, and just when I was getting excited about it. Well, ask me for advice if you ever want to go through with it.” She didn’t push me any further than that, but didn’t hide her interest.

“Well, at any rate, it sounds like you’re full of ideas,” Reinhart said, redirecting the conversation.

“There’s just a lot of things that interest me.” There was plenty more I could say about slimes, including some more useful information.

“You don’t mind telling us all this for nothing, do you?”

“Hey, it’s not like I can do everything myself.” Once I learned that slime X could do Y, I was already 80% satisfied. I figured it would be better to give that information to people I trusted, rather than just keep it to myself.

“I thought you’d be more reluctant to tell us.”

“I don’t see why I should hide anything from any of you.”

“You should be at least a bit more protective,” said Elise. “I hope you’re careful not to be tricked by any suspicious characters. Still, we’re always willing

to hear you out."

"We'll do that for free," said Serge.

"Especially if there's money in it for us," said Pioro.

As the night grew later and the conversation ended, I got the feeling that they were worried about me for different reasons from before. Oh, and I forgot to tell them about bloody slime serums. That was the best idea of all.

Chapter 5 Episode 9: Parental Love

Lulunese came to get me around midnight. “Master Takebayashi, it’s time for the meeting,” she said.

“Thank you,” I replied, and proceeded to get myself prepared. “Sorry for the wait, I’m ready to go now.”

“You don’t mind staying up this late?”

“I’ll be fine. I used to go hunting at night, and sometimes I find myself staying up all night doing research for fun. Thanks for the concern, though.”

The room I was staying in had slimes crawling all about. My limour birds were staying in a stable exclusively for messenger bird monsters. While I’d waited for the meeting, I read magic tomes from the estate’s library that had been suggested to me. Lulunese had provided everything I needed without any mistakes.

“It is nothing. Feel free to ask anytime you wish. Now, shall we go?” she said.

There were glowing magic items on the walls. It was dim, but at least bright enough to walk through comfortably.

“Lulunese, may I ask a question?”

“Yes, anything you wish.”

“Thank you. I just felt something strange, so I was wondering if there are a lot of barriers around here.”

“Barriers? There are barrier mages who put up several barriers for security purposes, but there aren’t any in this area.”

Despite that, I’d felt a strange discomfort several times since leaving the room, especially around corners and doorways. It felt like something was watching me. When I described the vague feeling I had, Lulunese seemed to recall something. She stopped and turned around to face me.

“That may be the house fairies,” she said.

“House fairies?” I’d heard that fairies were considered monsters, and it was

possible to employ them. “There are fairies in this estate?”

“Fairies typically live in nature, but on rare occasions they do dwell in old buildings. Repairs are done on this estate as necessary, but it’s actually quite old, and I hear that fairies are spotted here sometimes,” she said matter-of-factly, then resumed walking.

“Does that happen often?”

“Well, the young mistress lived here until some months ago. I believe those with more magical energy will have an easier time spotting them. She and her servants spoke about sightings of them fairly often, and I have seen them a few times myself. I also hear that when foreign visitors or rare goods arrive at the estate, they gather around out of curiosity.”

It sounded like house fairies posed no threat to the inhabitants of the house, and they were actually more like guardian spirits. If one were to draw a comparison to Japanese mythology, they were probably closest to a zashiki-warashi.

“And these fairies are in this estate?” I asked. My discomfort disappeared.

“Fairies of any sort seldom show themselves around humans, and they hide if you try to find them. The young mistress and her maids searched for them many times, but never found them.”

“I see.”

“I would try not to worry too much about the fairies. If you come across as fun to tease, I’m told that they may start to play tricks on you.”

I would have loved to see some real fairies, but it sounded like it would be better to forget the matter for now. The conversation continued until we reached the meeting place.

“Excuse me?” I said at the door, but got no response. I thought maybe nobody else was there yet, but then I saw Hughes. He was sitting still at the round table in the middle of the room, resting his head in his arm. It looked like he’d been the first to arrive, but maybe he was feeling sick. He seemed kind of fatigued. Actually, he may have been sleeping. When I took a few steps toward him, I could hear him snore.

“More of the usual, I see,” Lulunese said.

“This isn’t a new occurrence, I gather?”

“He has been like this practically every night in recent days.”

His promotion training that I’d heard about in the afternoon must have been exhausting. He didn’t seem to have a problem earning the trust and respect of the other guards, but the massive increase in work seemed to have gotten to him. He reminded me of a student cramming for exams.

“I’m glad he’s taking his future with me seriously, but I worry for his well-being,” Lulunese said. She looked around the room for a blanket to put on him. Her concern warmed my heart, but then I heard the door open behind me.

“Oh?”

“Ah, I’m sorry,” I said, turning around to see a middle-aged man about to enter the room with a basket that gave off a delicious aroma. “Who are you?”

“Bartz, this is Master Takebayashi. He saved Hughes’s life, and he’s making statues of the gods for us,” said Lulunese.

“Oh, right, he was going to join the meeting. My name is Bartz, and I’m the chef here.”

“I’m Ryoma Takebayashi. It’s nice to meet you. Thanks for dinner, by the way; it was delicious.”

“Oh, I’m glad to hear you enjoyed it.”

There was something about him that made me feel a bit nostalgic. He had a mild-mannered attitude and didn’t seem to take himself too seriously. While he didn’t seem especially tall, he was hunched over in a way that made him appear especially short and timid. Time had put wrinkles on his face and thinned out his hair. He looked like a father who didn’t seem to belong with his family or with his company.

“Thank you for coming again today,” Lulunese said.

“Oh, no. Anything to make my daughter’s big day the best it could be.”

“Daughter?” I asked. Lulunese didn’t seem to be the same race as Bartz.

“Bartz has taken care of me since I was young. In my mind, he’s always been like a real father.”

Bartz seemed to notice I had questions, so he explained himself. “Her parents were a maid and a guard who lived here. Back when I was an apprentice, they helped me out a lot. I wanted to return the favor, so I started to look after her, and at some point I began to think of her as my own daughter.”

“My parents both died from work-related accidents when I was young. Master Reinbach didn’t want to leave me on my own, so he allowed me to live at the estate as an apprentice maid. My coworkers are also like family to me.”

“Oh, I didn’t realize,” I said.

I did think it was a bit peculiar how the estate was being used for a maid’s wedding, but now it made a little more sense. Lulunese also said that she used to be playmates with Reinhart, and she’d previously served Elise after her own marriage. She was raised in this estate, and her experiences, talents, and loyalty were held in such high regard that she was tasked with important duties.

“She was too young to do any work at first, and now she’s old enough to marry,” said Bartz.

“You always say that I have everyone to thank for assisting me back then.”

“I think every servant who’s been here for a while feels the same way about you.” Lulunese turned a bit red. “Master Takebayashi—”

“Oh, just call me Ryoma.”

Guest or not, I wanted to have a normal conversation with them. As long as I was helping with the wedding, I wanted them to relax around me. They had to act a certain way for their job, but they could at least drop it for these meetings.

Bartz nodded and said, “Ryoma, I hear that you know Hughes.”

“Yes, I wouldn’t say I’ve known him for very long, but he’s done a lot for me.”

“Yeah? In that case, I want you to be his ally. It’s not that we dislike him, or oppose his wedding, or anything of the sort, but it seems like we’ll have to be hard on him,” he said with a bitter yet warm expression, setting the basket on the table. Hughes groaned. “Oh, did I wake you up?”

“Dang, did I fall asleep? Bartz, has the meeting started?”

“Of course not. We can’t very well hold the meeting while the groom is asleep.”

“Fair enough. Wait, Ryoma and Lulunese are here too?”

“We’ve been here for a while.”

“Good evening.”

“Finally noticed them, have you?” Bartz said. “This is no way for the groom to act. If you do anything to make Lulunese cry, I’m going to lose even more of my hair to stress. I’ve got enough of a hang-up about that already. Maybe I’ll put some hair growth formula in your food while I’m cooking.”

“Oh, you better not! Y’know, you don’t have to try and act nasty with me. You’ve been doing this for a while and it’s getting annoying. Like I’d even want to make her cry.”

“Let’s hope that never happens.”

He didn’t seem like the sort of person who would say this, but his feelings seemed to be complicated. I’d never been a parent, so I couldn’t understand how he felt. Everyone had their own feelings. I watched them and Lulunese from a short distance to see how it played out. More people started to gather, and the meeting finally began.

Chapter 5 Episode 10: About the Unspeakable Meeting

“What are you going to do now, Ryoma?” Reinhart asked me the next morning during breakfast. I already knew my answer to that question.

“I think I’ll look for house demolition work at the adventurer’s guild.”

“House demolition? Glad to hear you’re intending to work, but why that?”

It all began at last night’s meeting. This was the first meeting I’d attended, so they had started by going over their plans and reviewing their current progress. Once they were done going over everything, Hughes had suggested helping to set up some things for the wedding site.

“It’s being held in the back garden, and it’s an elf-style wedding, right? The maids should be able to set that up on their own,” said Reinhart.

“It is an elf-style wedding, but we’re constructing a human-style church in the middle of the grounds,” said Elise.

“Why, though?”

“Everyone was confused when that got brought up last night too,” I said. To explain it, I wanted to make sure I understood the types of weddings and their features. “So, just so we’re on the same page, human-style weddings involve going to a church, and swearing a vow in front of family, friends, and clergy, right? And the wedding reception can vary depending on income, but it’s separate from the ceremony, right?” I asked. Everyone at the table nodded. “And elf-style weddings, by contrast, set up a stage in any space that’s large enough, place tables with food around it, and use an elder or someone of high status in place of the clergy. You still make the vow in front of friends and family, but after that, everyone starts the banquet right away.”

There were an increasing number of elves living in human cities, but from ancient times, elves lived in small settlements located out in nature. People in such an environment all tend to know each other, so they naturally developed a custom of celebrating weddings with the whole village. While they were called

elf-style weddings, human peasant villages typically held these sorts of weddings as well. And as mentioned earlier by Elise, Hughes and Lulunese's wedding was also going to be elf-style. But in this case, that was due to the number of guests, so that more friends could watch the wedding. They wanted everyone to be able to enjoy the banquet. Most importantly, though, Lulunese just wanted an elf-style wedding.

"She said she was interested in human-style weddings as well, but she definitely wanted an elf-style wedding."

"She could've been more up-front about what she wanted," said Elise.

"Well, she is more the reserved type," said Reinhart.

She was also quiet, but Hughes had seemed to notice what she wanted and made the suggestion at a meeting. Others at the meeting argued that it couldn't be done at first, but when they learned that it was Lulunese's heartfelt desire, they started to consider it. Then, Hughes said he would ask for my help. He knew that I'd built my laundromat in less than a week, so he thought I could make it possible. And he claimed that I would do it for free if he just asked. I suppose it was just a strength of his that he figured he could just come right out and say that.

Later, Lulunese got the sense that hiding her feelings was a weakness of hers, and appreciated how Hughes picked up on this. Then they got all romantic, drawing the ire and jealousy of others at the meeting, mostly directed toward Hughes. But this was a success for Hughes, so while they were getting fed up, they tolerated it. Some of the men were so frustrated that it seemed like they might cry blood.

"I don't even feel like talking about what happened anymore, so I'll leave out the rest," I said. "But after discussing it, we decided to have a church-style stage. I think it's going to be big enough to hold my god statues, the bride and groom, and whoever's acting as the clergy. The entrance should be big enough to see what's going on from the outside. I think it'll take about as much work as building a break spot with a roof in a park, or a small hut. The gardener and the guards are offering to help, so once the design is settled, it should be ready in a day or two."

“Knowing what you’ve accomplished, I’m sure it won’t take long,” said Reinhart.

“I also wanted to see the sights around town and check out the guild, so hopefully there are some jobs available where I can get some of the necessary resources.”

I wanted to see if there were any jobs, and if I got those out of the way early, I planned to visit the church and get a solid idea of how the god statues should look. Hughes said he would pay for the resources himself, since he was making the request, but there were plenty of other ways he could spend that money. I wanted him to save his funds where possible. Thankfully, he didn’t seem to mind if it was made of recycled materials.

“You’ll be back by dinner, won’t you?” Elise asked. She didn’t seem to want me to work too hard.

“Yes, I’ll have dinner here again tonight,” I answered. That was my plan anyway, but she didn’t seem to completely trust me.

■ ■ ■

After breakfast, I was riding in a carriage. Elise wanted me to take the carriage if I was going out, but it seemed odd for an adventurer to ride to the guild in a carriage bearing the crest of the duke’s family. I tried to decline, but she was pushy. In the end, I decided to ride it until I was at least out of the noble district.

“I feel like Elise wasn’t this protective before.”

“Her daughter is living away from her. Maybe she’s feeling lonely,” Fay replied. He was staying in a room with Serge and Pioro’s servants, and when I went out, he naturally came along.

“You think she is?”

“No good parent wants to be away from their child. They can go too far with it, but for nobles, traveling by carriage is normal.”

I suppose it was something like sending a child off in a car to go take lessons somewhere.

“Wait, you knew that Elia started going to school?”

“The duke and duchess brought it up when they summoned me yesterday.”

“Huh?!”

“They knew what my old job was, and wanted to make sure there were no issues. When they heard I had a daughter, we mostly just spoke about our own daughters.”

“I see.”

They were good people, but the Jamil family were still nobles. It was normal for them to be wary of suspicious people in their territory, and to seek out information like that. Glissela knew about his former job and ended up finding a job for him, so she probably reported it back then. But I didn’t think the Jamil family would meet with Fay in person, let alone tell him about their daughter.

“I’m glad it all worked out,” I said.

“They even gave me written identification and a letter of recommendation to the adventurer’s guild. Did the same for Lilyn, too. They only want me to look after your businesses in return for that.”

“That’s awfully generous of them.”

Fay took out a piece of high-grade paper. The sealing wax on it featured the same crest that this carriage had.

“Now that you have that, why not register with the adventurer’s guild?” I suggested. “I probably can’t bring you along on the jobs I take.”

These documents would probably greatly reduce the restriction they experienced as foreigners. I gave them carte blanche so long as they were working at the laundromat, but if they ever wanted to quit, it would be nice for them to have options. And since he was given these personally, it was probably hard for him to dismiss the idea.

“Yes, we could live normal lives whenever we wish with these. I’ll make good use of the opportunity and go register.”

He seemed a little hesitant, but he still decided to do it. Maybe it would be nice to take a job together with the two of them when I had the chance.

“Oh, I just remembered something. Did you get the feeling you were being

watched yesterday?”

When I mentioned the house fairies Lulunese told me about, he seemed to clue into what I meant.

“I thought I was being spied on for sure.”

“Me too. That’s what anyone would think, I guess.”

The fairies were doing it of their own accord, but come to think of it, maybe it could be called spying.

“Fairies that watch over a house, though? That’s a new one. There were fairies who brought misfortune upon the owners of the house in my country. They would show up whenever inhabitants of the house died in horrific ways. They say that’s when they’re born.”

“Those are fairies? Not evil spirits or undead monsters or something?”

“In my country, they’re both called gwi. Like the term monster, it lumps many things together, so maybe they are the same. To fend these gwi off, I believed they used what your language would call necromancy. They had that magic, so that’s what they used.”

“Sounds like they’re evil spirits or something.”

I wasn’t familiar with this magic, so I was curious. Our conversation kept going until the carriage came to a stop.

Chapter 5 Episode 11: Hobbies, Practical Use, and the Unexpected

“Boss! Got a new recruit here!”

“Nice, bring ’em on over!”

They sounded like bandits. After Fay registered at the adventurer’s guild, I parted ways with him and accepted a demolition job at the reception desk that looked optimal. After that, I went to the site of the job, and the man in charge furrowed his brow at me.

“What’s a scrawny kid like you doing here?” he said. I looked like a kid, so I was used to this.

“Good morning, I’m an adventurer,” I said, then showed him the request sheet and my guild card.

“Oh, you’re the one who took the job. It’ll be simple enough, but—Huh? You look pretty young, but you’re D Rank, eh?”

“Yes! I’m confident in my strength, and I know earth magic as well.”

“A mage, eh? Guess that works. So as far as your payment, what do you mean you want these materials? You saying you want to take the wreckage? Taking the standard reward money?”

I was glad I could get right to the point. Something about the mood here brought back memories. “Of course, but I’d also like to take as much of the wreckage as I can. As far as transportation goes, I can also use space magic, so I’ll do it myself.”

“Then take whatever you want, I don’t mind. Hey! Take this kid out back!”

“Thank you!”

Thankfully he didn’t need much convincing, just like the people at the guild told me. His whole job was demolishing buildings, and he hired other businesses to deal with the debris once he was done. I took the payment in advance, and it was that much less he’d end up having to pay other businesses.

It honestly didn't seem like he expected that much from me, but I was being paid by commission, so he had nothing to lose.

"Alright, here we are! It's all you now."

The young man led me to the place opposite where I was. It was just like the boss described, but nobody else was there. There was a large building, with one wall having a few meters' worth of decay on it, but that was all.

"There's no one else here at the moment, but this is where we have a job for mages."

"The others are elsewhere, then?"

"I'm told that using magic takes focus, and if you were to get tired out and run out of magical energy, they'd just get in the way."

It was true that if I pushed my magic to its limit, I would probably become too tired to stand. On top of that, a construction site is far from an ideal place to flake out.

"You'll get paid for as much as you can do, so no sweat if you get worn out at some point. Just tear down the wall of this building and the rest of what's on these grounds. Don't damage the roads or the other buildings. The only other thing I can tell you is to watch out for falling objects. I'll leave this for you just in case," the man said and left a large hammer leaning against a wall that was still intact. "You can take a break if you want, but if you're an adventurer, I'd like to see some guts."

After that, he went back. It seemed like a bad idea to leave a single amateur alone and out of sight, but according to the person at the guild, he never had enough workers on hand. Plus, his instructions were kind of sloppy to boot. All the same, I got to work.

I opened my Dimension Home to call my metal slimes out, and ordered them to transform. I put them on my head with a thick towel in between to serve as a helmet. I keenly felt the convenience of the metal and iron slimes and how much they had grown as I reaffirmed the importance of wearing a helmet on a construction site.

On that note, I hadn't seen anyone working in helmets since I got here. None

of the workers I saw had helmets, so I thought maybe developing some of those, along with safety boots and whatnot, would be worth considering; I could use materials from sticky slimes for those. But that could wait for later.

I cast Break Rock on the wall. Pieces of it fell away, leaving a hole forty centimeters wide. Part of it reached all the way through to the other side, but that part was only ten centimeters wide. It was all I could do with the magical energy I had; a smaller hole than expected. Maybe this wall used that anti-earth magic paint I had heard about at some point. If so, I figured it could be prudent to increase my magical energy a little bit.

I cast Break Rock again with more power than before, leaving a bigger hole than last time. But now it seemed a little inefficient. The debris from the wall fell to my feet, where it turned to sand. That was fine for destroying the wall, but I didn't need to break it down to such small bits. I just needed it in chunks small enough to carry, like the workers out front with hammers were doing. I decided to improve on this.

I limited my magic's range to a line instead of a wide area, running from the top of the wall to the ground. I cast Break Rock again, my magical energy seeping through the wall and causing sand to fall from it, as though the wall was packed with sand. After the sand fell, a groove covered in two-centimeter bumps remained.

"Success! I broke through to the other side again by using the same amount of magical energy. Now I can cut this into appropriately sized chunks."

But the bumps that the magic created were kind of odd. I thought it would be perfectly straight, but I evidently couldn't control the spell as well as I thought. I tried it again, imagining that I was cutting with a katana. I kept calm and cautiously controlled my magical energy. To help my imagination, I gave the spell a new name.

"Let's go with Stone Cutter, then."

The second cast created a groove about half the width of the last one, and the cut was smoother. I would have liked it narrower than that, but I could deal with that later. Those two casts had created something of a pillar from part of the wall, so now it was time to break that apart. I imagined the pillar filling with

cracks to put another new spin on the Break Rock spell.

“Crack!” I chanted. “Alright! Another success!”

Cracks shot through the pillar like lightning, and it broke into medium-sized pieces that fell to the ground with a loud boom. Earth magic seemed to offer a lot of freedom in its usage. Part of it was probably down to how familiar I’d become with it by now, but it was also easy for me to utilize it in the precise way I wanted.

Another idea came to mind, so I decided to give it a shot, since I was kind of enjoying myself. My idea was to make the sort of big crater that you would see in manga and the like, after someone suffers or delivers a major attack. Naming the spell Wall Break, I sent the most magical energy yet into the wall and letting it spread throughout. Deep cracks that resembled spider webs appeared, and the wall began to crumble. Now it only needed a bit of prodding to come down.

Having gotten the exact results I imagined, I quickly proceeded with my work. This spell left a hole about two meters in diameter. Considering the first attempt was forty centimeters, this was a big jump. I was using more magical energy now, but even so, this was more efficient considering the area of effect. One more cast of this spell would almost entirely bring the wall down.

“What the hell?!”

“Hm?!”

Just as I was feeling content with my magic, the man from before approached me.

“Hello! Is something wrong?”

“I heard something loud and decided to pop in. Did you do this?”

“Yes! I did it my way! What do you think?”

“You’re a surprisingly talented mage.”

“Thank you! I happen to be pretty good at earth magic, and I’m told I have as much magical energy as a court magician.”

“Well, it looks like you’re doing fine, so keep it up. I don’t really know the rest of your instructions, so I’ll go get the boss for you.”

“Got it!”

I got the boss’s approval to do the job my way, then continued to destroy the wall. I finished around noon, packed my Dimension Home full of debris, and cheerily went on my way. Just before I left, the boss asked if he could hire me, but I politely declined. Then I returned to the adventurer’s guild to meet up with Fay.

“You sure are strong, Mister!”

“Um, would you be interested in joining our party?”

“I have a job already, so I’m afraid not,” Fay said. “I appreciate the invitation, though.”

“Aw, well, are you single?”

“I have a daughter your age!”

Fay was being doted on by some beautiful adventurers.

“Damn, if only I’d talked to them a bit sooner!”

“Where the hell did this guy come from?!”

“Um, I’m sorry, did something happen?”

I asked some male adventurers glaring at Fay about what had happened. It sounded like Fay had accepted and completed some request after he registered, then reported it at the reception desk. Around the same time, a party of female adventurers who were starting to gain fame around town were at the counter next to him.

“Then a group that’s famous for their philandering came in. Seemed like they were here to pick up a bunch of chicks after work, too.”

When they saw the female adventurers, they wouldn’t leave them alone. The men were lustful and drunk, but stronger than the women. The girl at the reception desk tried to stop them, but the men wouldn’t listen. Fay saw them and interrupted, upsetting the men. They picked a fight with Fay, but he restrained them all, leading to the current situation. He was like some kind of protagonist.

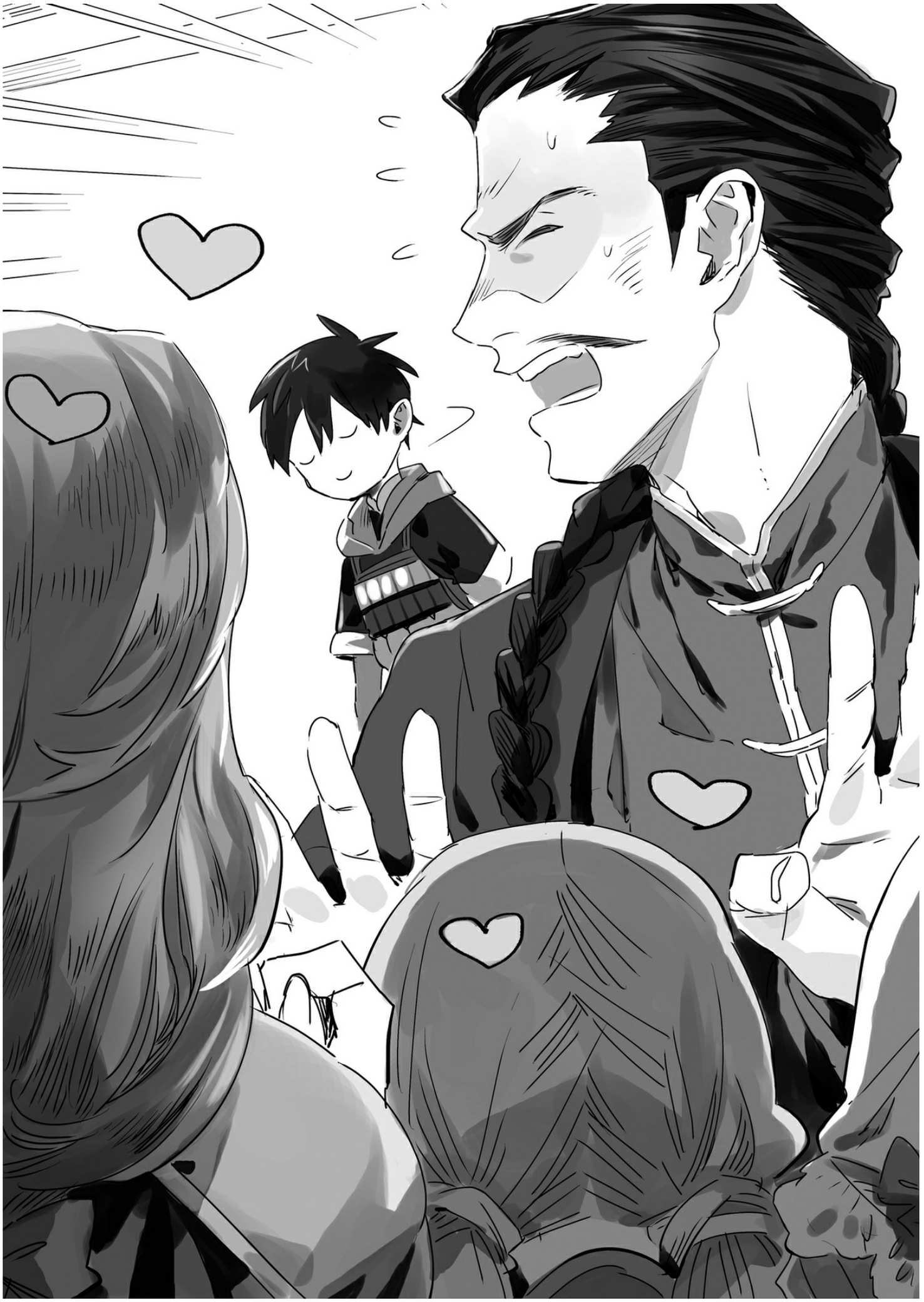
“Oh, Boss!” he said. “Help me out! Why are you just watching from over there?!”

He spotted me. I didn’t know what was going on to start with, so to be honest, I didn’t know what I should have said. Also, the women’s eyes were pretty terrifying. They were looking at me like carnivorous predators.

“I’m sorry, could you wait a moment?” I said. “I have to report on my own job. Besides, I don’t know how to deal with women either.”

“Boss! Boss!!!”

Reporting on the request you took was absolutely required for adventurers. I told Fay to wait until I was done and hoped he would have done something about the women by the time I was as I hurried to the counter.



Chapter 5 Episode 12: For a Tired Body

“Master Ryoma!”

After the situation at the adventurer’s guild was under control, we returned to the Jamil estate. Chief Maid Araune stopped me with a grave look on her face.

“What’s wrong?”

“There’s a problem with Lulunese’s wedding. I’m sorry to bother you when you just got back, but can you spare me some time?”

“Of course, if there’s anything I can do to help.”

I had no idea about what had happened, but I followed Araune. Eventually, I heard a lot of voices. It sounded like an argument was underway.

“I’m sorry you had to hear that,” Araune said and tossed the door open. “Girls, what nonsense are you shouting about?! We can hear you out in the hall!” The women instantly went quiet, but at the same time, Araune’s expression hardened. “Elise? You’re here?”

“Hello!”

“Oh, Ryoma! You’re back?”

“Hello, I heard you wanted to talk about the wedding, if now is a good time.”

“Of course. This way, please.”

“I’ll prepare a seat for you.”

“I have to make tea.”

“I’ll get some tea cakes.”

The maids busily ran around, further muddling the mood in the room. Then the meeting started up again.

“Araune, you said you wanted to talk to me?” I said.

“Yes, it’s about the wedding site. Here.”

She showed me five familiar pieces of paper with the designs I provided for

reference at last night's meeting. I never got married myself, but when I was approaching the age of forty, most of my old classmates had. I was often sent invitations and wedding photos, so I drew my designs based on memories of those. I thought they were received well, but maybe I was wrong.

"There were a lot of opinions about those pictures," Araune said. Next, I was given a list of requests to change some part or other of my designs. "I want you to sort these suggestions out into things you could do and things you couldn't."

"Understood."

One request was to set up a bell tower for the wedding. Depending on the location, that would be possible. Another was to create stone pavement at the wedding site. This would also be possible. Decorating the walls and pillars would be possible, but depending on the amount and the decorations in question, it could be hard for the guests to actually see the wedding.

■ ■ ■

"Alright, Araune, I'm done."

"Thank you. I'll use this to make a summary of the demands for the wedding."

There were a lot of questions, but the basics were settled. I could start work on this tomorrow.

"Good work, Ryoma."

"Uh, thanks...?"

Going through the list took more time than I expected. The servants in the room were entirely different from when I first arrived. Only Araune and Elise had stayed.

"How much time has passed?"

"About two hours, I think. Would you like something to eat?"

"Thank you, but I took a break to have a tea cake. Incidentally, what brings you here?"

Elise's ever-present smile faded. "A guest whom I hoped not to see has suddenly come, so I'm hiding away."

“I didn’t know there was such a person.”

“Unfortunately, there is.”

I was curious about who this person was, but Elise seemed uncomfortable, so I changed the topic.

“That sounds tough. Is it exhausting having to deal with guests every day?”

“Yes, but it’s my job, so I can’t complain too much. I wish I could go to a spa.”

“A spa, eh? You like those?”

“Do you know about how my father-in-law controls a territory called the Firedrake Mountains?”

“Oh, I heard about that from Mr. Smit. He once formed a contract with a divine beast and gained some privileges and rewards.”

“Right, that. One reward he received was the Firedrake Mountains, in which there’s now a hot spring town. I used to go there all the time. The spa there was relaxing and very good for the constitution.”

“Sounds nice. I’d love to visit there sometime. How’s the water there?”

I was a little curious. I wondered if there were any fantasy elements to this hot spring town.

“I don’t know enough about water quality to say, but it’s quite bubbly, and makes your body really warm and red the moment you go in.”

If it was bubbly, maybe it was a carbonated spring. It didn’t sound like it had any magical effects or anything. That was a little disappointing, but maybe I could make some sort of bath bomb with revitalizing effects. I offered that as a suggestion.

“I can go into a hot spring too?” Elise asked. She was more interested than I expected. Her eyes were shining.

“I can actually make bath salts that’d make bathwater similar to hot spring water, provided I have the materials.”

The materials I needed for bath bombs were baking soda and citric acid. If I added a bit of cornstarch to that and sprayed it all to dampen it a bit and shape

it, then let it dry, it would be complete. I could also add perfume oil to that, but the baking soda and citric acid alone would produce carbon dioxide. I could make baking soda from salt, or from the caustic soda I was feeding my acid slimes that were waiting to evolve. Citric acid could be extracted from certain fruits by using alchemy, but to make sure it was safe, the fruit had to be good enough quality to be edible.

“Yes...as long as I have the materials, it shouldn’t be a problem.”

“Are these bath bombs you mention one of the secret beauty products you talked about yesterday?”

“I don’t know if it’s anything worth being a secret, but it’d be nice to have.”

“What do you need? I’ll get whatever you can, provided it’s within my purview.”

“In that case, can you have a basket of lamons brought to my room? And if I could get some of the mumiteau that’s used for baking bread, and some nice plant oil that’s not too bad for the skin, I can also make something called a sugar scrub.”

“Got it, I’ll have those prepared right away. Araune, you heard him.”

“Yes, of course. A basket of lamons, mumiteau, and plant oil, was it? I can get them from the kitchen. Please wait in your room, Master Ryoma.”

“How long will it take to make?”

“The sugar scrub can be made as soon as I get the materials; you just mix them together. I’ll have to appraise and test the bath bombs to be sure they’re safe, but I think thirty minutes will be plenty of time.”

“Got it. I’m looking forward to it.”

Thus, I decided to make bath bombs and a sugar scrub entirely in the spirit of goodwill.

“Say, did you hear that?”

“Most certainly. He mentioned something about secret beauty products?”

Just before I left the room, I overheard the maids. I figured it really wasn’t

anything special, so I didn’t anticipate the chaos at the Jamil estate that was to come.

Chapter 5 Episode 13: The Second Day's Conversation

After dinner I went to the same parlor as last night, where again Reinhart, Elise, Serge, and Pioro had gathered.

"Sorry I took so long."

"It's understandable; you were feeding your slimes."

"You have so many slimes of so many types that it must be difficult."

"Speaking of which, how many types do you have now?"

"Nineteen, with about four waiting to evolve."

"I hear you have tens of thousands in total. It must be hard to take care of them all."

"I feed all those of a given type at the same time, so it's actually not that bad. Reinhart, thank you for the slime food. It helped a lot."

"Honestly, many of our departments are grateful that you took their garbage off their hands. Feel free to ask for more whenever you're staying here."

I answered everyone's questions as I sat next to Elise.

"Now that Ryoma's here, let's continue from where we left off yesterday. Well, normally I would say as much, but first, there are two things I want to ask. We got some messages, you see."

I wondered if there was some sort of problem. Reinhart suddenly went somber, and Elise handed us some documents. I flipped through them and saw portraits, criminal charges, and reward listings.

"Wanted posters, and..."

"Half of this is information about damage known to have been done by bandits in our territory. I happened to get a report about it during work today. You three travel between towns a lot, so I thought you might like to know."

"Much appreciated."

Information on the safety of roads could mean life or death for a merchant. Serge and Pioro thanked them as well and read through the documents with zeal. But I was more curious about the wanted posters.

“Now that I take a closer look, the reward money differs a lot by person.”

The pay could be anywhere from ten small gold coins to hundreds for the same criminal offense, and there were even bounties as high as two platinum coins. When I asked why, Reinhart kindly explained.

“The reward money is decided based on the damage done and the danger involved, but sometimes the nobles or merchants who were harmed will raise the bounty themselves. The ones with platinum coins as rewards are a band of burglars who steal jewels. They’re pretty famous.”

Since they only stole jewels, the cost of the harm they did was immensely high. They not only incurred the wrath of the jewel merchants, but also the nobles who served as their clients. So that was why the reward money on their heads was so inflated.

“They don’t commit crimes often, but when they do, they’re well-prepared and very cautious. They also seem to have a number of skilled users of space magic, so they escape fast and they’re hard to track down. Their targets have guards, of course, but they’ve succeeded in their crimes many times, so they must have a fair bit of talent. I haven’t heard of them targeting anyone who was on their own, but be careful, Ryoma.”

“Understood; thank you for the warning.”

He was probably talking about the diamond I was wearing on my suit yesterday. He didn’t say anything about it, but he must have known what it was.

“Now, next up, I wanted to talk about the scavenger slime fertilizer you offered us yesterday. We’ve gotten a report about that.”

“Oh, really? That was pretty fast,” Elise said.

“I agree. Was one day enough to determine whether it’s safe?” I asked.

“Yeah, about that, Ryoma. Do you know about the Earth Goddess Forest?”

The Earth Goddess part made me think of Wilieris, but I hadn't heard of the forest.

"So you haven't heard of it? There's a country in the east called Altura that our head gardener is from. The Earth Goddess Forest is a holy land that their people worship, and he says that the soil there is similar to that fertilizer."

"Huh?" I wasn't expecting that.

"It contains tons of magical energy, and it's highly compatible with wood magic. Using too much turns plants into monsters. The effects are exactly the same, but the scavenger slime fertilizer isn't nearly as powerful."

Altura collected some soil from Earth Goddess Forest every few years, mixed it with ordinary soil to reduce the effects, and used it as special fertilizer. It seemed to be a ritual where they shared the blessings of the holy forest.

"Then by doing the same thing as that ritual, the scavenger slime fertilizer could safely be used?"

"That's what the head gardener says. I'll have him use the fertilizer and see what happens, but it seems to be perfectly usable. But he had some concerns about how it was like something people worship."

"One is soil from holy land and one was produced inside a slime. I personally can't see them as being alike at all, but I suppose they might sound that way to some."

"He might say it's unacceptable and all, too. People get pretty extreme when it comes to their faith sometimes."

"I think he can be convinced that it's a separate thing, but if it were to be put on sale in the future, that's probably something to think about."

These were unexpected concerns with the fertilizer, but it was good to know that now instead of later.

"That's all from me," said Reinhart.

"Then may I go next?" said Elise in a much better mood than Reinhart, probably because of this afternoon.

"Elise, I notice you've been strangely giddy since dinner."

“Yes! You see, Ryoma made bath bombs and sugar scrub for me! That perked me right up!”

Elise started to talk about how she felt using both.

“Is this about yesterday’s beauty product discussion? Medicine that can turn a bath into a spa is fascinating.”

“Ryoma, is your skin-cleaning medicine that effective?”

“It depends on the person.”

“I want more of both! All you have to do for the bath bombs is put them in the bath, and it warms the body way more than regular bathwater. And just rubbing the sugar scrub on your skin changes how moist it is!”

Seeing Elise talk about this reminded me of something. Both products felt like everyday items after continued use, but they were certainly impressive on the first use. The first time I used a sugar scrub back on Earth, I was surprised myself. I honestly had no interest in beauty products, but I didn’t want to waste something I was given. Even then, I thought it was pretty nice the first time I used it. When I talked about it at work, I got laughed at for how out of character it was coming from me.

“What I made at noon was produced in the most simple way possible. If I used different types of oil and aromas, I think I could make it even better.”

By adjusting the amount of baking soda and citric acid in the bath bombs, I could also make the bath slightly acidic or alkalized to make it easier to remove dead skin and clean out pores. Alkali water is effective at neutralizing sweat and odors, so it’s a great ally of middle-aged men. The slight acidity of the citric acid has rejuvenating effects, treats inflammation, and kills odors in a different way. Human skin is slightly acidic, so it’s more gentle on the skin than alkali water. Which to use depends on one’s constitution, skin, and mood. There were many other ways to improve it too by use of medicinal herbs and seasonal plants.

“That sounds wonderful!”

“It even works on that old people smell, eh? Maybe I should try it out.”

“Pioro, that’s something you’re worried about?”

“Imbecile! I’m not that old yet! But, you know, I feel like the wife sort of implied something about that the other day.”

“Hahaha, well, with Elise so enthusiastically singing its praises, I’m sure it’s wonderful.”

“Indeed. Master Ryoma, may we try those bath bombs and sugar scrubs as well?”

“You’re more than welcome to. I still have materials left from this afternoon, so I’ll make some and have it sent to your rooms later.”


BATH
BOMB
SUGARSCRUB

Thus, Elise's discussion of beauty products concluded. Now it was time for me to talk about what I couldn't get to yesterday, but everyone suddenly started to adjust their posture.

"What are you doing?"

"Getting ready for another bombshell, like what you said about running mushes yesterday."

"I can't wait to hear what's coming. I'm almost afraid to hear it."

"We've all been steeling ourselves for this."

"I'm ready, Ryoma. Tell us everything."

With all the pressure now on me, I felt as though I had to deliver.

"Then I'll talk about another use for slimes."

I overcame the strange tension and described the bloody slime serums. I started with a simple explanation on what serums and antibodies were, and about when I was instructing new adventurers and a bloody slime accidentally consumed poison. Then I talked about how it was cured, its Poison Resistance skill leveled up, and its blood and antibodies were combined. I even told them about how I extracted the antibodies and tested them on animals. The four of them looked at me seriously.

"Sounds like I was right to mentally prepare myself," Reinhart said, setting the other three off too.

"So these things you call antibodies are related to the Poison Resistance and Disease Resistance skills, and you can use bloody slimes to make antidotes from them? I'm no expert on medicine, but I can tell that's extremely valuable."

"For sure. Even if it came from snake poison, it sounds like this could work for other poisons down the line too. As for whether this is all true, I guess there's no reason to doubt you at this point."

"Ryoma has nothing to gain from lying to us about this. Maybe it'd be funny if he were lying after all this, though."

"Honestly, I don't know what to do with all this information myself."

I discovered the antibodies in bloody slimes, extracted serums, and investigated the effects. It was fun experimenting meticulously with them by myself, but that wasn't an effective use of them. But if I introduced them to the world, it would be too much for one child to handle.

"I actually still have more to say."

"There's more?"

"I became aware of the antibodies and serums after the Poison Resistance skill leveled up."

"I see! So they didn't learn it, but rather, they leveled up. In other words, that bloody slime already had antibodies for poisons other than bush snake poison."

"Reinhart is right. It wasn't me who evolved the first bloody slime in the first place, since I bought it from an adventurer, and it had the Poison and Disease Resistance skills from the start."

After I noticed the antibodies, I used the Appraisal spell to check for other antibodies.

"I found a number of antibodies, one of which was for cursed wounds."

The four of them sighed or looked up at the ceiling, each expressing their exhaustion in a different way. It was to be expected. Cursed wounds were an illness that appeared suddenly after injuries. It didn't matter how big the wound was or where it was inflicted. It caused curse-like symptoms to abruptly start showing up. Nothing happened for the first few days after the wound was inflicted, but eventually, the limbs and face would start to feel numb. It would cause one to lose control of their body, as if possessed by a demon. They would violently spasm, and sometimes bend their backs to the point that they broke their spines. The victim could do nothing to stop it of their own will, but they were still conscious the whole time, so they had to endure the pain as they thrashed until they died. The death rate from the illness was extremely high.

In other words, it was what we called tetanus on Earth. It killed people even in modern Japan where we had serums, but this country had no effective treatment at all. As such, tetanus was seen as an incurable curse and feared by everyone regardless of their wealth. Now the chance to cure it was right in front

of them. The value of that was immeasurable.

“Was it really cursed wound antibodies? Not to doubt your word, but all the same.”

“I used Appraisal, so there’s no question. Cursed wounds can occur anywhere, so naturally the cause of it could be found anywhere too.”

Tetanus bacteria is known for being commonly found in soil. The bloody slime probably picked it up from some soil somewhere.

“But Ryoma, wouldn’t it have to take in the poison and survive to produce the antibodies? Cursed wounds have a high death rate, so how was the bloody slime fine?”

“One possibility is that it didn’t take in too much of the disease, and it couldn’t reproduce inside the slime like it could in the human body, so little poison was produced and the slime could ultimately endure it. Another possibility is that it’s because the main symptom of cursed wounds is muscle spasms, and bloody slimes have no muscles or nervous system. They’re made of blood, so maybe it wouldn’t do much to them. Anyway, humans and bloody slimes have very different body structures, so I think it took advantage of that. But unfortunately, I can’t say anything for sure.”

“Right, that makes sense.”

“I already saw a lot of value in a new method of medicine production, but if this means you can even create a cure for cursed wounds, well...that’s wonderful, but also dangerous.”

“It’s a big find, to say the least. If some unscrupulous character learns about it, you could be targeted. In fact, for sure you’ll be targeted. Medical guilds and research institutes will never let up.”

“Probably. You can’t trust research institutes too much, either.”

We were stumped on how to handle the serums. For a while, there was no sound except the sipping of tea and chewing of tea cakes.

“Ryoma,” Reinhart said to break the silence.

“Yes?”

He looked at me with more sincerity than he ever had before, and sat up straight. “How would you like to be our family’s technician?”

Chapter 5 Episode 14: Invitation

“I understand that you hate being put in restrictive positions. I won’t force you to do anything,” Reinhart said just after he’d made the offer. “I take it that’s the reason you aren’t serving some other noble, either. But if they catch wind of how much you know about serums and such, many nobles will want you as a servant, whether you like it or not. You know that, right?”

I nodded. The cure for cursed wounds alone would be widely sought after were society to learn of it. There would be merchants and nobles who would want to sell it for a high price. Unfortunately, it would be no surprise if someone did something drastic to steal the rights to the medicine.

“If such a thing came to pass, we would like to assist you. But under the current state of affairs, it would be difficult,” Reinhart said.

While I was treated well by the Jamil family, I was still a commoner. I wasn’t even their retainer; I was just some kid they took some interest in. But even that was enough to keep people from messing with me too much. Nobody wanted to have a family as powerful as the Jamils as their enemy. I was just an adventurer, an owner of a small business, and the manager of an abandoned mine. I had some odd ideas before too, but none of that was worth the risk of going after me.

“Still, if you can create a cure for cursed wounds, that would change everything,” Reinhart continued. “We may wield a lot of power, but it’s not impossible to defy us.”

I worried that there could be some sort of plot against me. Elise seemed to guess what I was thinking and bitterly smiled. “You probably aren’t wrong, Ryoma, but it’s more simple than that,” she said. “I mean, you have the right to do whatever you want with your business, right? But if you tried to do something too self-serving with it, there would be people who’d try to stop you. It would depend on what it is, and maybe you’d get away with it once or twice, but eventually you could lose the trust of the people around you. It’s like that. We have a lot of power, but we can’t just wield that power whenever we want.

But if you were our technician, we could tell them you're not interested and reject their attempts to recruit you. If we tried that without employing you in some way, they'd just argue back. We'll have to come up with some good reason to grant you that position, of course, and I don't think it'll be simple. But it'll be worth it."

If we acted like this conversation never happened and kept the serums a secret, maybe there wouldn't be a problem, but I would have to live the rest of my life in fear that someone would find out. And as knowledge of the bloody slime serums spread and research picked up steam, they would discover that the serums could cure other diseases as well. I couldn't predict how great an impact the serums would have, but they could save a lot of lives. To hide them away would be unfortunate, to say the least.

"Can you tell me a bit about what serving as a technician would entail?" I asked. "How would my life change if I agreed?"

"Well, a technician is a technical expert who serves a noble," Reinhart explained. "They only have to work when their services are requested. They may be asked either to use their expertise personally or to provide consultation. Aside from that, they're afforded a fair amount of freedom. A lot of talented technicians are picky in ways that are hard to understand, you see. For example, we have a medical technician who lives and works in the estate, but we also have a blacksmithing technician who runs a workshop and store in the middle-class district. On paper, they strictly serve us, but we don't want to stifle their talents by keeping them all to ourselves."

As long as they could get in contact with me, I wouldn't even have to live in this city. "Could I keep living at the mine and working out of Gimul?" I asked.

"Yeah, I'm sure we can always send letters to your store. I'd like you to inform us in advance if you're ever going to be away from Gimul for a long time, but that's all I would ask. You already send us letters regularly, so I can't imagine that will be a problem. I'm thinking of making you a third-class technician. That's the lowest rank, but it will give you the most freedom. And all technicians, regardless of rank, serve me personally for the most part. You won't have to take orders from other technicians that way."

“Could you tell me more?” Specifically, I wanted to know what a third-class technician was, and what it would mean for me to serve Reinhart personally. If they only served him for the most part, presumably there were exceptions.

“Third-class technicians are the lowest rank, followed by second-and first-class technicians,” Elise said. “Your rank is determined by your history and accomplishments before becoming a technician, as well as the accomplishments and contributions to the family that employs you after becoming a technician. That rank has a substantial effect on how you’re treated. Technicians of all ranks receive job security and research funding, but for third-class technicians, that’s all they get. Second-class technicians are provided with employees and a place to perform their experiments. If necessary, they could also be given a few guards. First-class technicians have the right to lead a whole squad.”

“It would be no exaggeration to call a first-class technician’s knowledge and techniques hot property,” Reinhart added. “Protecting those technicians and their research facilities requires a fair number of guards.”

“Incidentally, as far as accomplishments go, I’d say your cure for cursed wounds is good enough cause to make you a first-class technician,” said Pioro. “But first-class technicians have a lot of fame and influence, which could put a burden on you. With that in mind, third-class might be better for you.”

According to Serge and Pioro, the specific conditions of employment for any given technician differed based on their particular expertise. That gave technicians more freedom than other roles, which seemed to be one reason that Reinhart suggested it to me.

As for the question of who I had to serve, each field of expertise had multiple technicians who could sometimes form teacher-student relationships, and sometimes a teacher and their student would be hired as technicians concurrently. All I had to do was not form such a relationship.

“Most of the time you’d be doing work for us as a technician, I probably won’t be around,” Reinhart said. “I’ll send a representative in my stead at those times, but you won’t be working for that representative. You talk to them as equals, offer your own opinion, and if you disapprove of them, you can make a direct

appeal to me."

"This doesn't sound like a bad deal, to be honest. It sounds great for me, but I take it that I won't be able to keep living life as usual."

"I'm afraid not. First of all, technicians must prove that they're worthy of their position once every few years. You'll have to present that your research has produced something useful, or use your expertise to help our territory."

I'd already presented my cure for cursed wounds, so there was no problem hiring me as a technician. But depending on my future work, it was possible that I could be stripped of my role and the authority it offered.

"Makes sense," I said.

"Considering the magnitude of your accomplishments, maybe we could delay those evaluations for you, but we pay you with the taxpayers' money, after all. You have to provide something in return. I'm sure you'll be more than capable of keeping your job, but just remember that some work will be expected of you. We won't make any unreasonable requests of you, of course, so you may continue your current work. But you will probably become busier, and it may take time away from one of your other jobs."

"And there's one other thing," Reinhart said gravely. "If you're going to be our technician, you have to tell us where you learned your skills and from whom. It will be kept a secret from outsiders, but understand that we may have to provide some of this information to other departments."

It felt like the temperature in the room precipitously dropped. All four of them went stiff.

"Is there anything else?" I asked.

"No, not in particular. Simply becoming a third-class technician should limit how many invitations you get from other nobles. If you want, I can share your name with as few of my servants as possible. You should be free to work however you wish, as long as your research gets results. Knights have to train every day and serve in wars as needed, but technicians have no such obligations."

Not having to serve in the military sounded like a big plus to me. The country

seemed to be at peace now, but there was no telling if something might happen a decade or two down the line. If a war did start, I was glad that I could choose not to fight in it.

The rest was all favorable to me as well. Nearly anyone who became a technician for the Jamil family would be moving up in the world pretty significantly, especially for a commoner. I was also offered incredible conditions even compared to the average technician, so I would think that the average person wouldn't hesitate to take this opportunity. I didn't know about anyone else, but maybe I was in the minority for needing to think about it.

"Well, I know this was sudden," Reinhart said as I quietly thought about it. "I'm sure it would be hard for you to answer me right away, so could you take some time to think about it? The cure for cursed wounds isn't complete yet anyway, is it?"

"I've only tested it on animals. I don't know whether it would work on humans yet."

"Then there's no need to rush. I want to hire you as a technician because of the value of your serums and the effect that will have on you. If you don't introduce them to the world, then there's still time. We can limit all discussion of these matters to this place and wait until you're ready, if you would prefer."

"I agree with that," said Elise. "I'd love to have you as a technician for us, but this decision will have a big effect on your life going forward. It would be a big decision even for an adult, so you should think about it long and hard."

"I agree as well," said Serge. "Not only do you have the serums, but the results of your slime research could be turned into new products. You can get all of that sorted out, and you'll still have time afterward. I often forget it when I talk to you, but you aren't even fifteen yet."

"I'm thinking the same thing," said Pioro. "Technicians are usually talented craftsmen with years of experience, or they got top marks at the school in the capital or a research institute. They're typically in their twenties at minimum. I know you've got skills, but you're too young compared to those people. A boy just over the age of ten becoming a technician for the Jamil family? Serums or no serums, that could end up starting a few rumors."

“Now that you mention it, I suppose that would draw some attention for how unusual it is. He could probably protect himself, but yeah...” Reinhart said, his voice getting quieter and quieter. Elise looked at him like she wondered how he didn’t realize it. Serge and Pioro drank their lukewarm tea and smiled. The air that felt cold a moment ago had warmed up again. “But remember something, Ryoma.”

“Yes?”

“Be careful what you tell people,” Reinhart said as he avoided his wife’s gaze. “We’re the first ones you told about the serums, right? You discovered the cursed wound serum on a trip with many adventurers around, and it’s been a long time since then, but I presume you kept it a secret because you knew it would be dangerous to share with the wrong person. You haven’t even mentioned it in your letters.”

“Of course not. I figured someone else might end up reading them.”

“I’m glad you understand. I thought you could be a bit too generous when it comes to sharing your skills and your knowledge.”

“I know that sharing isn’t always the best idea,” I said, but noticed that Elise, Serge, and even Pioro didn’t look convinced. They must have thought I was awfully careless. I didn’t obsess over every little thing, I guess, but I thought I was reasonably cautious. We all smiled awkwardly, with nobody able to strongly deny what I said.

“Oh, I forgot to tell you something,” Reinhart said. “I believe we have a full list of requests from the servants regarding Hughes and Lulunese’s wedding.”

“Got it. I’ll start constructing everything tomorrow.”

“How many workers will you need?”

“Anyone who’s good at physical labor and has time on their hands can help. I’d like to build everything from the foundation up, so there should be enough work for everyone.”

“Sounds good,” Elise said. “If it’s physical labor you need, can work start in the afternoon? The guards will be done with their training by then.”

“That would be fine, thank you.”

We put the previous topic aside and continued the discussion like nothing had happened. They were considering my feelings by giving me time to think, presumably. I just hoped they didn’t think of me as reckless.

Chapter 5 Episode 15: Info Leak

“I’m so sorry about what happened after our discussion yesterday,” Reinhart told me first thing in the morning.

The four of us from last night got together to eat. Also present were five exhausted girls in maid uniforms. They looked to be about middle school-aged and stood against the wall, seeming like they might cry at any moment. To each side of them were the head maids, Araune and Lilian. They looked stern, like jailers taking inmates to the gallows. The mood in the room was somber.

“I’m sorry, can you tell me what’s going on again?”

“They stole the secret medicine you developed, or maybe the recipe for it, and used it without permission.”

They twitched, and their pale faces grew paler. The rightmost girl was on the verge of tears.

“Was it the sugar scrub they used?”

“Right.”

This all happened because of the sugar scrubs I talked about yesterday. I guess it was partially my fault for mentioning them. These girls had overheard the recipe for sugar scrubs from their coworkers while they were on break, acquired all the materials, and tried to make them on their own. The problem was that details on sugar scrubs were distorted before reaching them, like a game of telephone, so they just thought that mixing mumiteau and plant oil together and rubbing it on their skin would do the trick.

These maids had been doing the laundry for all the servants for a long time. Despite their young appearance, the skin on their hands looked dry and cracked. With their hands like that and the information they obtained, they must have thought it was worth a try. But the elder servants found out about it, and now we were talking about stolen recipes. The servants of nobles were contractually forbidden from leaking or using information they learned from their employers or their guests. The sugar scrubs were a product introduced by

a guest, and while these girls didn't know that, they still broke this rule. The servants who told them about sugar scrubs were being investigated as well.

"They have sullied the good name of the family they serve, and must be punished accordingly."

If a family had servants that would leak information, nobody would trust them with secrets. Their actions were inappropriate for a servant and did harm to the relationship between the family and their guests. It didn't matter what I said. That seemed to be what Araune was implying.

She didn't say what the punishment would entail, but judging by how the girls were acting, I could imagine it was pretty hefty. I didn't know if they were about to get fired, or something even worse, but I didn't feel good about it.

"Reinhart, I understand. I'm the one who talked about sugar scrubs in front of the servants, but it seems like that isn't important. Since I'm one of the victims, do you mind if I ask some questions?"

"Not at all."

"Then is it possible for me to make some demands with regards to this?"

"As their employer, I can't just let you ask anything of them, but feel free to tell me what you want."

"Well, first I'd like to mention that punishing them doesn't do anything for me."

"We could pay you compensation, though."

"I don't need compensation from you. It was the maids who wronged me, so they're the ones who should pay. And as far as the sugar scrubs are concerned, I don't think they're currently worth selling anyway. They could lead to a product I can sell down the line, but not right now."

Even the sugar brushes on the shelves on Earth would use different sorts of sugar and oil, add spices, and more to improve the product through research. What I made yesterday only used what was readily available, producing a simple mix of sugar and oil. To be honest, it was a low-quality product. It would be one thing to make it for my own use, but I couldn't accept money from

others for it.

“Taking all of that into account, I want them to make up for their crime with their own work.”

“Hm, in what way?”

“Testing my medicine. Human experimentation, so to speak.”

The five girls looked to be in despair, but when Reinhart looked away, they relaxed.

“Could you tell me more?”

“Like I said before, I couldn’t call the current sugar scrubs a salable product. But I could turn them into something worth selling by using these girls to test the effects. I’ll ask for their impressions and improve the product accordingly. For the experiments, they’ll only have to use it on their limbs and face. This will only last for as long as I’m staying in town, if that’s fine with you.”

“If that’s how you want them to recompense you, then that’s what we’ll do. I’d also like to give them some harsh education to teach them how to behave as servants, if you wouldn’t mind.”

“Do whatever you like.”

“Good, then I accept your demands. Araune, you heard him. Take these girls away. Make sure they understand what they’re in for by the time we’re done with breakfast.”

“As you wish. Master Ryoma, thank you for your generosity.”

The maids left the room.

“I’m sorry I made you do all that,” Reinhart said once they were gone. He sounded far less firm than a moment ago.

“I’d like to say it was nothing much, but it was actually a little stressful.”

“My apologies. Alas, when you’re in a position like mine, sometimes you have to be strict.”

“I’m sure you do. Personally, I don’t like having to play the bad guy like that. Not like I’m any good at it anyway.” Thinking about what was said, I wondered if

any of it sounded strange.

“Hahaha, no need to be so humble,” said Serge.

“It’s not like those girls did nothing wrong. You had to say something, or who knows what they would’ve done next? You at least gave them a chance to pay you back, so I say that’s enough,” said Pioro.

The merchants swiftly jumped in to offer their support, but I wasn’t sure how I’d helped the girls, or what the worst-case scenario would have been for them. I didn’t know much about employing servants, so I asked for details. I was given a rundown on the types of maids.

- House maids: in charge of cleaning and overseeing the estate.
- Parlor maids: serve and tend to guests.
- Kitchen maids: do chores in the kitchen.
- Laundry maids: only do laundry.

And depending on the house, there were also:

- Stillroom maids: in charge of tea and teacakes.
- Scullery maids: in charge of washing dishes and cleaning the kitchen.
- Chambermaids: in charge of bedrooms and bathrooms.

There seemed to be even more specific types of maids as well; the newest maids were typically given the roles which involved the least contact with the heads of the household.

“Servants are only human, and things can happen, so the jobs that bring them close to us and the guests are only taken by those from families who have served us for generations, or by servants who have served us for long enough to earn our trust, like Araune and Lulunese.”

The five maids from before, on the other hand, were laundry maids; they only handled the servants’ clothes because they were recently-hired commoners. They were hired from the merchant’s guild when some extra help was needed.

“They would normally have been fired on the spot for breaking their contracts, in which case they would be unlikely to be hired as servants by

another family ever again," said Elise. "We would have to report it to the guild, so I think it'd give them a hard time finding any work. Depending on the situation and the type of information that gets leaked, they could also be charged with other crimes." It sounded like that would ruin their lives.

"At any rate, I'll have them help with your product development until it's time for you to go home. When they aren't busy with that, we'll make sure they understand what they've done. Araune is sincerely angry with them, so she can handle that. If it still doesn't seem like they're taking their job seriously after that, they'll be fired. If they are penitent enough, we'll continue to employ them until their contracts are up. If they complete their contracts, they shouldn't have any particular problems going forward. We'll decide whether to renew their contracts if they perform well, once the situation has been sorted out."

"Well, I'm just glad I'm not ruining a bunch of young girls' lives."

"That's a weird thing for you to say."

"Young? I think they're all older than you are."

"Fair enough!" I said and laughed uncomfortably. "Speaking of, you all tried my bath bombs and sugar scrubs last night, didn't you? What did you think?"

"Oh, right!" said Serge. "Those bath bombs were great! They warmed me to the core like no ordinary bath could. I wouldn't say the sugar scrub was bad either, but I do feel like it could use some work."

"Let's talk about that while we eat," said Reinhart.

It was a more exhausting morning than usual, but eventually we finally got around to eating.

Chapter 5 Episode 16: Preparing the Experiment

“Here we are.”

After breakfast, Lulunese brought me to the courtyard intended for people to practice their magic in. The first thing that caught my eye was the wall erected around the courtyard the size of a modest park, painted in aggressively eye-catching purple. There was nothing above the courtyard to obscure the sky, nor any pavement on the ground.

From one end of the courtyard, a woman with an elegant glide in her step approached with two maids in tow.

“Thank you for coming, Ryoma.”

“I hope I didn’t keep you waiting, Ma’am.”

When it came to work, all I had on my agenda was the wedding venue construction in the afternoon. I had decided to use my downtime in the morning to improve my sugar scrubs...when Elise decided to join me. Apparently, she’d kept her day open from the start, in order to get some R&R. I didn’t deny the importance of a day off, but her eagerness to observe seemed rather premature.

“I haven’t even gotten the experiment ready yet,” I clarified to her. “I have to start with the farm work, anyway.”

“I want to see *how* you prepare,” she countered. “That said, what do you think? I’m quite proud of our courtyard.”

“Very spacious. I won’t be worried about using magic out here.” Well, except for one thing...

“The walls?” Lulunese astutely prompted.

“Was it that obvious?”

“You’ve glanced over at them a few times now.”

“In that case... May I ask why they’re painted such a vibrant color?”

With a smile, she gave me an answer. “They’re treated with a special coating that resists fire and ice spells, as well as drastic changes in humidity. The young mistress used to practice magic here before attending the academy. The coating was done to improve her safety while practicing.”

“One time, Elia put such excessive energy into her fire magic that she melted a brick wall. I’ve kept the coating on ever since, just to be safe.”

Elia’s best elements were fire and ice... That made sense. I made a mental note to myself that, given enough magical energy, a spell could produce that much heat.

“I see.”

“This is a private area reserved for our family, so you can make use of it whenever you want, Ryoma. You can use space magic in here too... It’s such a shame that we’ve hardly used this place after Elia went off to school,” Elise added wistfully.

“Thanks, I’ll definitely take you up on that.” With a quick warning, I began working. “Dimension Home.” From the white hole that materialized in the air, I summoned a hundred each of sticky slimes and scavenger slimes.

“You sure have a lot of those things,” Elise remarked.

“I’ve never seen this many before...” Lulunese chimed in.

I thought she had seen this many during a feeding before, though... Maybe I had them bundled into bigs and kings that time. The maids who had accompanied Elise seemed just as shocked as she was. At any rate, I had to get to work.

“First off...Break Rock.” I used magic on a fifty-by-fifty meter square of the ground to make it a decent depth. “Alright, scavengers!” I lined up the scavenger slimes in the outline of the square, each one fifty centimeters apart. “Same as always — take it away.” At my command, the scavengers all jumped into action. Each of them began taking in sand from in front of them, regurgitating it out of the other end, slithering forward, and repeating the process.



“Are they tilling the land?” Elise asked.

“That’s right. At first, I was having the scavengers spit out the fertilizer, and then tilled the ground myself. But this process was so useful that I’d find myself doing the same thing throughout the day. I eventually grew tired of it, so now I soften the soil with earth, then have them mix in the fertilizer internally.” The scavengers, who crept forward in perfect union, started to leave behind ridges of moist, well-fertilized soil in their wake. “Some time after I began asking them to do this task, the scavengers even learned a skill called Tillage.”

“I haven’t heard of that one before.”

“It looks like it’s focused on plowing and tilling the soil like this. They probably learned it because I only had them mixing soil and fertilizer, without any sowing or watering.”

“They would have learned the Farming skill if they had done everything.”

“Right,” I answered Elise. “In the same way, the sticky slimes learned a skill called Seeding.” I handed out the Dante’s Seeds I produced from the Item Box to the sticky slimes. They adeptly received them, molding the upper half of their bodies like bowls, and carried them to the ridges that the scavengers had tilled. In a single file of one sticky per ridge, they each used their tentacles to plant the seeds one by one in fluid motions that showed mastery in their craft. While the slimes, as was their nature, moved rather slowly, the sowing process was far more efficient than doing it all myself.

“I never thought slimes could farm...” One of Elise’s handmaidens blurted out. “Oh, pardon me.”

“It may come as a surprise, but slimes can learn tasks quite well. They just can’t do much in the way of heavy lifting.” Another annoying task on the farm was weeding. While most slimes ate weeds, the weed slimes that preferred to eat them were best suited for the task, since they ingested the weeds down to the roots without me having to command them. If I left them alone, they’d start secreting fluids with weed seeds or roots to start growing them all over the soil (as their next meal or protection), but that was the only thing I had to look out for.

“Acid slimes can do simple carpentry on command, for example. And the drunk slimes began taking after me, internally fermenting wine.”

“We’re still talking about...slimes, right?”

“Of course.” After I took the extra step of increasing the proof of the alcohol produced by the drunk slimes’ refinement and feeding them wine I had fermented for fun, they had started wanting fresh fruit as well as alcohol... Meanwhile, the variety of fruit was declining at the stores and prices were increasing as winter approached.

Despite my explanation...

“Ryoma is *very* compatible with slimes,” Elise paraphrased.

“I don’t think that explains anything...”

“They don’t seem like slimes at all...”

The maids seemed as befuddled as before...or perhaps more so.

“Master Takebayashi, the others have arrived.”

“Oh, thank you.” I only realized after Lulunese told me about a large number of maids, but... “That’s quite the crowd, isn’t it?” The group was closer to two dozen than five, in addition to five or six men dressed in butler’s uniforms... What was going on?

“Only five of them have created sugar scrubs, but those who had leaked the information to the girls must be joining us too. The housekeeper had mentioned that this was a good opportunity to whip the slacker servants back into shape.”

Right... Araune seemed seriously annoyed, unlike me... “Well, I can’t complain about having more testers.”

Meanwhile, I spotted some kind of leader among the servants, who seemed to be commanding the group. He was exceptionally tall, his head sticking clean above the crowd. He had a face like a gorill—I mean, a warrior. He looked exceptionally buff, with wide shoulders, thick biceps, and enormous upper-body muscles nearly bursting through his...maid’s outfit? I made eye contact... This individual started approaching me. “Who is that, Miss Lulunese...?”

“Libiola. *She* is highly trusted by the other servants, as well as by the master and mistress. She is an ape beastkin, and while she is female, her stature and profile may seem rather masculine.”

“An ape beastkin, I see. A pleasure to meet you, Miss Libiola.”

“Likewise. I was tasked by our housekeeper Araune with their re-training. I will be keeping an eye on them during the experiment. My apologies for dropping in like this.” Libiola had arrived, with her long stride, just as Lulunese had finished answering my question. She had introduced herself with a delicate bow... Even so, I had a feeling that I should be particularly careful not to cross her.

“It’s nothing,” I replied with careful etiquette. “Well, if you don’t mind, could I have you assist me in the experiment?”

“I am at your command.”

First, I decided to have her set up a workspace to create the sugar scrubs. Since the servants seemed to have brought the ingredients, I went over the steps of the experiment while they set up a space for work & storage some distance away from the patch of farm soil, where they began organizing the materials. “As for the ingredients...”

“Here’s the list.”

“Thank you.” Incredibly, they had brought seven varieties of vegetable oil alone, and a whopping repertoire of twenty varieties of scented oils! I could hardly believe I had only asked for them that same morning...

“We already had a decent amount of scented oils, since servants who deal with guests wear them as perfume.”

“All the same, I appreciate it.”

“So, Ryoma. What sort of experiments are you going to conduct with them?”

I considered Elise’s question before answering, “Let’s see... I have the luxury of choice when it comes to ingredients, but I think I’ll use the seven vegetable oils, plus the Dante that’ll be ready later, with just two or three of the most common scented oils.”

“You only want two or three?”

“Yes. The scented oils can be complicated when I start combining too many fragrances and adjusting their ratios. For today, I want to see the texture after mixing mumiteau with the vegetable and scented oils. And since I have so many volunteers, I would like to have them pose as customers, and find out their responses and market demands.”

I had asked them to help me with the experiment that morning, but I was practically a complete greenhorn when it came to beauty products. Even though I had no experience with this specific market, I knew that products wouldn’t sell without accompanying demand; it was basic economic theory.

“I’d love to compare the ingredients with their reaction and why they...” I noticed that a few of the younger maids were muttering to themselves about how difficult it sounded. “Let me put it this way, then. Just something like ‘I have dry skin, so I want more moisture.’ No need to make it complicated. Be honest and selfish about what you want from each product, and write them down after each use. That’s all.” I wanted to use the most common requests as guideposts for future products.

“Thank you, Master Takebayashi... You three! If there’s something you don’t understand, come and ask! Don’t stand about trying to *eavesdrop*! Even if you can’t tell when you may speak to Master Takebayashi or not, we can answer your questions!”

“S-Sorry!” The girls all jumped in startled unison.

“I apologize. Evidently, the girls haven’t learned their manners yet.”

“Their training is none of my business, of course, but please give them enough slack so they don’t get overly tired too soon.” Eight vegetable oils and three scented oils alone would make twenty-four combinations; just testing those would take quite a bit of time. On top of that, I had heard that the coarseness of the sugar changed the feel of the scrub, so I wanted to try versions with a finer texture.

At any rate, now I’d taken my first big step toward creating a line of sugar scrub products! Not that I ever expected it to become such a grand ordeal, though...

Chapter 5 Episode 17: Experiment Results and Noble Cooking “It’s almost lunchtime,” Lulunese muttered, after we’d collected a good amount of data through experimentation.

“Already? Maybe we should call it a day, then. I figure they’ll have that to worry about.”

“Understood.” Lulunese turned to relay the message to the group.

As I watched them pack up the courtyard, I noticed that Elise looked rather despondent. “Are you all right, Ma’am?”

“Oh, Ryoma. Yes, of course,” she answered in her usual tone.

It didn’t seem like she was trying to hide any ailment. Was the expression I saw from her just my imagination? “Your spirits seemed a bit low. I was worried that you weren’t feeling well.”

“How considerate of you... But it’s no big deal. It’s just about lunch...” Lunch? My confusion must have been written all over my face, as she continued with a chuckle.

“You’ll recall that in winter, especially during New Year’s, high society is in season. I attend many parties of all sizes each year, and often dine with strangers. But to tell you the truth... Their dishes are simply abhorrent.”

“Now that you mention it...” It felt like it had been eons ago, but it was actually barely even a year since we’d held a party to celebrate the opening of my shop. “You told me something similar back then. About how noble cooking’s awful flavor is in direct proportion to how expensive it is.” When they gave my cooking such high praise, I had commented that the ducal family must have eaten better food than mine often enough, only to be met with a strong denial. Of course, everything I’d had since coming to the manor was both delicious and luxurious...

“Party food isn’t the same...” Elise explained. “Some families primarily dine on

them, insisting that they're true noble food... But I, or rather, *we* don't subscribe to that line of thinking. So we eat normal dishes most of the time. Even when we have guests, we weigh both options depending on whom we're hosting."

I see. Evidently, it was safe to assume that the two types of cooking were of completely different culinary genres. "I assume you mentioned it now because you're having 'high society' dishes for lunch today."

"That's right. We have to decide what meals to serve when we host parties, and we're already invited to many gatherings as it is. We can't very well *not* touch the dishes served to us, so we try to get accustomed to those dishes again when winter comes around... Are you interested in them?"

"I'd be lying if I said I weren't..." The dishes which Elise seemed to adamantly despise were the ones which struck my curiosity. That being said, I was sure that high society dishes would cost more than their usual meals. I was tempted to ask for a plate, just for curiosity's sake...

"I don't recommend it, but if you want to try a dish... No, really. I *do not* recommend it, but I'm sure there's at least an extra serving in the kitchen they've cooked for tasting. I would just need to give the head chef the word, although I cannot emphasize enough how much I don't recommend doing so."

"If you don't mind..." My curiosity had gotten the better of me.

"I shall see you later, then. I'll send someone for you once it's ready."

I looked around the courtyard to find that it had been neatly packed up behind my back.

■ ■ ■

Lunchtime came around.

"Hello, Ryoma," Reinhart said. "How was your experiment?"

"Very insightful, all thanks to your help." I went on to report the results to Reinhart as we talked, waiting for the dish to be served. "The results from this morning pointed me in a direction I want to take the products in."

Considering how my "volunteers" had ended up there, I had been concerned

that they would be hesitant to share their opinion, but they were surprisingly open to sharing their thoughts with me. There were two responses that were particularly prevalent among the volunteers: the desire for a strongly scented scrub, and for an unscented scrub. The number of people who expressed each opinion were nearly identical. I was a bit surprised, since I hadn't doubted whether I had to scent the scrubs until I got the results.

I dug into the demographics of each response and found that the strongly scented sugar scrubs were mostly requested by the working-class female servants. On the other hand, the unscented scrubs were wanted by the men, a small portion of the female servants, Elise, Lulunese, Libiola, and Elise's two handmaidens, who were generally of higher status.

I asked the volunteers to explain their request, and the women who wanted scented scrubs explained that scented oils were a luxury which many of them couldn't easily afford. Some of the oils were downright unobtainable for the working-class women, giving the scrub a certain extravagance. Thirdly, they hoped that the scent would linger on them after using the product. Scented oils were quite a luxury for them; in fact, they opined that they felt rejuvenated after I'd mixed a single drop of it in the scrub. They then emphasized that any lingering scent on their body was a great bonus.

One particularly open individual had suggested some surprising uses, such as tempting men after taking a bath. She was soon scolded by Libiola for going into risqué details that, according to her, no child should ever be made to hear, but I defended that maid as if my life depended on it. That was probably the most exhausting part of the whole experiment for me.

"Sounds like even more work than I'd expected..."

"I think their opinions were very helpful when it comes to product design."

"That's good to hear. So why did the others want unscented ones?"

"A few different reasons. While they were a minority among the larger volunteer pool, most of the men stated that they simply dislike scented oils."

"Ah, I can see that. Make-up doesn't really smell nice to me."

That was something we could both agree on.

“Women, on the other hand, want to be beautiful for their men...” Elise muttered.

“I know you work hard on your make-up, of course,” Reinhart swiftly responded. I couldn’t read from Elise’s expression whether he had made the correct response.

I continued explaining. “Some of their reasons were work-related too. For example, those who work in the kitchen expressed that strongly scented scrubs would impede upon their work, or lead to them getting reprimanded by their boss. I imagine that the ladies of higher status already use scented oils day-to-day, since they told me that they usually wear an oil of their choosing, so they wanted a scentless sugar scrub to use while bathing which wouldn’t clash with their own scent. One of the kitchen maids mentioned that she wanted a scented scrub, but would prefer to use the unscented ones because of her work... It was very eye-opening to hear how opinions varied so much according to one’s occupation and status. Not to mention I just found it all quite interesting.”

I already had a general direction in mind for my products; I would market strongly scented scrubs to the working-class women, while I would stick with unscented or lightly scented ones to the others. Personally, I was hoping that I could use the excretions of deodorant slimes to develop the unscented scrub.

Deodorant slimes came from cleaner slimes after evolving them by feeding them charcoal. While there were variations to the deodorizing fluids, I knew that they were all black and included minuscule charcoal particles. I’d also verified that those properties lasted, even when the slimes were mixed into others. Extra-fine charcoal might have cleansing properties in addition to the deodorizing abilities.

Though I might have gotten carried away... “Uh, sorry for rambling.”

“No need to apologize. It’s certainly quite interesting. Plus, I find it impressive how you’ve thought all of this through from a single experiment.”

“Everyone’s been wonderfully cooperative. Plus, I hadn’t done something like this in a while, so I ended up having fun.” I still made an effort to research slimes here and there, but after leaving the forest and opening my shop...

“Since I left the forest, there’s been so much more that I’ve learned, and more responsibilities as well. I feel like I have fewer opportunities to concentrate on one thing... Oh, but I don’t regret leaving the forest, though... Meeting all of you, and everything that led up to me being here are all good memories now. I have no complaints about my current situation.” I had rushed the last bit, making sure to get it out before the moment was lost, and Elise and Reinhart seemed to pick up on my desperation as they wore gentle smiles... I felt a bit embarrassed, somehow.

“Excuse me.”

“Yes, finally!” I was relieved from the atmosphere of silent pity. The other two at my table, however, were clearly beginning to lose their spirits, despite their best attempts to conceal it...

“We have an albon salad today, then a beef soup...” Bahtz, the head chef, had brought out the plates himself, perhaps because they were high society dishes. Backed by the concise description of each item on today’s menu, the maids quietly served the room.

Then came the moment of truth—my first taste of genuine noble cooking. I kept my cool. Taking my cue from my tablemates, I started with the salad... It tasted alright, a bit like avocado. The flavor profile was a bit different, but it was a good salad. Nothing unusual as far as I’d noticed, other than the sprinkle of gold dust.

“This is a good salad. You can really taste the albon.”

“I heard we had a good year for albon. Nutritious and in season. This plate alone would cost ten small gold coins, at the very least.”

Ten?! Ten small gold coins, just for this little dish?! No one could have gotten more than four or five bites (or two mouthfuls if they were hungry) from that dish. So this meant my first bite was worth two small gold coins? *How expensive can these foods get?!*

“Are you all right, Ryoma?”

“Oh, yes. It was delicious. I was just a bit surprised by the price.”

“That’s good to hear. But the price is in line with food served at noble parties.

And all the guests are served, of course.”

“How many guests are typically invited to a party?”

“I don’t know... It all depends, but we’re talking hundreds.”

Ten gold coins for a salad...times a hundred. I couldn’t imagine being responsible for all of that.

“It’s not every day I get to see you flustered.”

“Don’t tease him so, Elise.”

Was she teasing me?

“Were you kidding?”

“Not at all.”

“I see your point, Ryoma,” Reinhart interjected. “In a way, though, it’s a noble’s duty to spend money on parties. That’s how the economy turns.”

That was fine and all, but the price tag was just too high for me to comprehend...

Before I knew it, my salad was gone, especially since I had kept up with my tablemates. As I couldn’t help but think that I should have savored it a little more, the soup was served. A beef stew with hot peppers, I was told. It had a dangerous-looking color, but I felt a twinge of nostalgia looking at it...

The instant I put a spoonful in my mouth, a stabbing sensation spread through my mouth. Then, I remembered... It was as hot as those ‘Whatever Challenge’ meals where it’s free if you finish it all within an hour!

Reinhart choked on his sip. “Pardon me...” Meanwhile, Elise seemed too overwhelmed to speak.

“Are you two all right?” I asked.

“Yes, I’d simply forgotten how much of a punch it packs... And you, Ryoma?” Reinhart seemed surprised at how nonchalant I was.

I took another spoonful. “I could totally finish this.” My boss had forced me to do those spicy challenges in my previous life, after all... Besides, the soup had more than extreme spice.

“The spice is the first thing that comes at you, but I can taste the savory beef broth after a while. It’s delicious.”

That made it quite distinct from dishes that were just spicy for the sake of it, to prevent people from eating it all. While the soup was spicy, it still tasted like the chef wanted me to enjoy it. I guess it would have been tough on somebody not as good with spicy foods, but I could totally handle it!

It was a small serving to begin with, so my bowl was emptied rather quickly. I had finished the soup without touching my glass of water, which seemed to perplex the maid who was standing by with a full pitcher.

“Now that’s what it’s all about...” Bahtz said. “Didn’t think you’d notice the flavor under the spice. At noble parties it’s all about the dishes that use the more expensive foods or spices. There’s the traditional spice scale of one to ten peppers, but I sometimes wonder who would ever eat something so spicy that it’s uncomfortable to eat.”

One to ten peppers... just like they had in modern restaurants. *Coincidence or not, nobody in their right mind could call that ‘traditional.’ Talking to you, past-traveler!*

“Even so, I wanted those with enough daring to savor the dish. And now I feel like my efforts were worth it. Thank you.” Bahtz’s gratitude made me wonder... Was a dish like this not palatable to the majority of the population? “Probably not, unless you’re a noble who eats this sort of dish on a daily basis. If you’re working-class, you can hardly use any spices to begin with, so the flavor might be too strong. It’s kind of funny for me to say this, but I’m impressed you could finish it.”

“I’ve had something like this before,” I vaguely explained.

“That’s right,” Reinhart chimed in. “Spices grow in your homeland, don’t they?”

“Yes, yes. We had plenty of black and red peppers.”

“In your homeland, you say...” Bahtz dug in. “I’d like to hear more about them sometime, if you’re not too busy. Might help out for the next time I want to make something that uses a lot of spices but still has flavor.”

“I’m certainly not an expert, but I’d be happy to share what I know.”

That concluded my conversation with the head chef. Having saved face by playing along with that misunderstanding, I moved onto the next dish, still surprised that the Japanese culture (if one could call it that) of super-spicy dishes had been carried on in this world as a noble tradition.

“Roast beef, with caccao reduction.”

The sauce was terribly bitter. It vaguely resembled a chocolate sauce with no sweetness or smoothness whatsoever; the flavor was similar to straight cacao.

After finishing all of the other dishes, I learned that a traditional noble dinner included not only dishes that were super spicy and super bitter, but super sour and super sweet, too. If I could have sent one phrase back in time...I would have gone with “less is more.”

Chapter 5 Episode 18: Considerate Colleagues?

One afternoon, I was walking through the woods that grew through the grounds, along a path that had been cleared of branches and trimmed of tall grass just enough to walk through. While I was still on the grounds, this area seemed to have been kept as natural as possible. Every now and again, I would sense a creature lurking...and see a wolf-like monster stare at me from a distance before trotting off unbothered.

"Is that the mistress' familiar?" I asked Lulunese, who had been leading the way.

"Most likely," she answered. "Most wolf-like monsters around here, especially those who seem curious about us, are Mistress' familiars on patrol. Of course, there's a chance it may be one of the servants' familiars that happened to walk by. In any case, I have notified the security chief about our plans for the day, so they won't attack us."

Glad to hear. I wondered if many servants of the ducal family were also tamers.

"The lords and lady of Jamil have always been tamers, but they have an environment suitable for the familiars to roam in. Since they open these grounds to the servants and their familiars, I'm sure it's an environment suited for those who study taming magic... Take a look over there, for example."

We had reached the end of the path to find a rectangular clearing. The ground was coated in thick grass and wild-looking flowers, and a large lake spread out to the left of us. The clearing was as spacious as a school gymnasium, making for plenty of room for the familiars to run around or play in.

Lulunese pointed to the center of the lake, where a moss-covered, nearly cone-shaped island floated. Was there anything on the island?

"That may look like an island, but that's actually a monster called a floatland tortoise."

"Figures..."

She went on to explain that floatland tortoises had a swim bladder, allowing them to remain floating on the surface. They ate bugs and small fish, and had sharp teeth and a powerful jaw to gnaw through the bones of their prey. However, they apparently had a very gentle nature, and one could climb on their backs as long as they were of an adequate size.

“That one is contracted by the head chef, Bahtz. He let me ride on its back when I was little.”

“Ride... Well, I am interested in familiars that help with transportation. Is it comfortable to ride on its back?”

“You can ride on a floatland tortoise, but it mostly just floats, so it won’t help you get anywhere. It can capsize if it loses its balance too. I do recall enjoying that as a child.”

So it’s like a living balloon... I realized it was about time to start my work.

“Already? He isn’t here yet.”

“Just going to get set up a little bit. That should make it easier for our volunteers too. Nothing too difficult.”

Before setting up the wedding venue, I wanted to prepare for it. Specifically...

“Dimension Home.”

I enlisted the help of my slimes yet again. *I’ll just have the weed slimes clean up the grass!*

Strength in numbers prevailed in no time, and the plot for the wedding venue became cleanly weeded.

As preparations continued and volunteers began to show up here and there...

“Ryoma!”

I turned to Camil’s voice to find Zeph and Jill with him, holding Hughes, who seemed groggy for some reason, up by his arms. I was happy to see the four musketeers, but... “What happened? You look rather pale. Are you all right?” I watched Hughes feebly shake his head as he clasped his mouth and panted through his hand. “Too nauseous to talk?” His expression was enough confirmation.

“Whoa! Don’t blow up on me now.”

“Zeph, let’s just roll him next to that tree.” They swiftly sprang to action, and actually sent Hughes rolling into the shade of a tree. I might have been concerned if Lulunese hadn’t ran over to him right away.

“So... What happened? Did he overwork himself while studying for that promotion?”

“No. This is completely unrelated.”

“He didn’t mean anything by it... But he said something to a lady that lacked, well, *decorum*, and got a fist for his trouble.”

“It’s not an uncommon occurrence,” Camil countered.

“I see... But a punch messed him up that much?”

“Yeah... He crossed the wrong woman today.”

“You’ve met Libiola?”

“The ape beastkin? She helped me with my experiment before lunch.”

“Then I’m sure you can imagine. It was her. Of course, not only is she built very well, she’s properly trained in hand-to-hand combat.”

“There are places where men like us aren’t allowed entry. She takes care of guard duty in those locations. She’s one of the best, if not *the* best, female guards.”

“Her punch was so fast I lost sight of her fist for an instant. Got him clean in the sternum...”

“Oh, wow...” So she had swung at Hughes, full force, going straight for the kill... What could Hughes have possibly said to her? I glanced over to him to see Lulunese gingerly taking care of him. And while the pair seemed oblivious to them, the male volunteers were watching them with a glare. I could sympathize with them.

“Shall we let them be and get started, then? I don’t think everyone’s here quite yet, though.”

“That’s probably for the best.”

“I’ll go talk to the people coming in now.”

“In that case, please ask them to gather around that corner over there so I can explain what to do.”

“The spot with the mound of sand, right? I’m on it!”

“I’ll go with him.”

“I...won’t be needed there, it seems,” Camil said. “Can you use an extra pair of hands for preparations? Just let me know if I can do anything.”

“There is something I have in mind for you...”

Our work had begun.

“The first thing I would like you all to do is pave the ground where the reception will take place. The area has already been dug down and outlined with bricks, so make sure to stay in that square. There, you’ll see mounds of dirt throughout the area. Take some from a mound, flatten it over the ground, and even out the surface with this tool here. Please make the earth even with the markings on the bricks around the perimeter. Start working near an edge and work your way in.”

With Jill’s assistance, I demonstrated the process to the volunteers. After flattening a patch of dirt large enough for someone to take a few steps on it, I said, “Once the ground is ready, lay down these stone pavers.” The pavers looked like a combination of H-shaped blocks, which I had conceptualized as a single object, crafting them through earth magic, knowing that most of the volunteers would be unfamiliar with this type of work. They were a bit cumbersome at 3 meters by 3 meters, but that would allow us to quickly lay out the floor of the reception space after the ground was flattened. The drawback was their weight, but most of the volunteers, since they were guards, seemed pretty muscular.

“I would like you to leave no gaps between the pavers, except where there will be a block-sized gap between a set. Here, I would like you to place one of these blocks. This will neatly fill the gap and connect the pavers.”

“Hey, this seems easier than I thought.”

“Spread the dirt and lay down the pavers.”

“You sure that’s all you want us to do?”

“This will do nicely,” I reassured them. Taking on too many tasks would take up more time, not to mention make things more difficult once we would have to restore this place after the wedding. In lieu of laying down additional material, I had solidified the ground somewhat with an earth spell. The ceremony and reception would last a day. I figured the structure would last for a week without trouble, accounting for any preparations and cleanup.

“I’ve also prepared levels over here. Please be careful to keep the dirt and pavers even throughout. A lip can be a trip hazard after a few drinks, and a significant tilt can make plates and glasses slide off of tables. It may seem like a simple task, but it’s up to your workmanship to ensure that everyone can enjoy the reception!”

“So it’s up to us to make a good party, huh?”

“He’s got our attention now.”

“That’s the spirit. And one more thing. I would like to fill the gaps between the green bricks and pavers by trimming the same brick as before. If anyone here can use earth magic, I would like you to help me with this...”

“Allow me. I’m a member of the magic squad. I specialize in barrier magic, but I can use my fair share of earth magic, as well.”

“I can too.”

“Same for me!”

Two voices called from beyond the wall of muscular men. The group parted, and a slender man and woman came up to me, as well as a few others from around the pool of volunteers. I noticed that Camil was with them, and judging from the title ‘magic squad...’

“So you’re magic specialists! Thank you so much! This is amazing!”

My flattering, albeit a bit overblown, show of gratitude was met with quiet and somewhat satisfied chuckles from members of the magic squad. “Now...if the mages could step aside over here, I’ll have more things to go over with you.

Everyone else, please jump right into your work."

"Alright boys, let's do it!" Jill called, to which the men responded enthusiastically. Meanwhile, Camil had grouped the members of the magic squad together. Zeph had begun telling some late arrivals which groups to join. Once the three members I was acquainted with jumped in to manage the crowd, work progressed rather smoothly.

And meanwhile, as for the two stars of the show...

"I'll help."

"Oh, Hughes. Your gut feeling okay?"

"Don't let us keep you lovebirds apart."

"You know what? Go back to her, now!"

"You realize we're all jealous, right?!"

"Women can get cold feet, too!"

"Yeah, are you outta your mind? You never get to work when it matters!"

"If you cause any trouble for Miss Lulunese, your ass is grass..."

"Go talk it over. It's not too late to change your mind, you know?"

"Just go already!"

"Get away from us, you traitor!"

"Wait a minute," Hughes protested, "don't you th-mmf!"

"Excuse me, but could you take him away?"

I didn't know whether they were really jealous or just concerned, but only that they had knocked out Hughes yet again to manufacture themselves some alone time. He went on to spend time with his betrothed, spending what must have been a heavenly yet torturous afternoon with most gazes piercing him from a distance. Everyone seemed to be close friends, but I had no idea why they each had to be so aggressive...

Chapter 5 Episode 19: Moulton Slave Trading Company The next day...

“What a lovely day... Maybe it’s because I haven’t left my room in a while. It seems brighter, somehow.”

Reinhart savored the small patch of sunlight that came out as they walked from the first entrance to the carriage. As annoyed as he was by the event, I couldn’t help but think of how busy Reinhart must have been. Which reminded me...

“Are you sure about this? It’s a huge help for me, but I feel bad having you waste your day off on me.”

“I’m happy to help you out. To be honest, I haven’t been able to relax during my days off anyway. I used to spend a lot of my time off playing with or teaching Elia, but now that she’s at the academy...I’ve caught myself working on my days off out of sheer boredom.”

“Mr. Reinhart... Not that I have room to talk, but...”

“Yes, I know... I think I’m beginning to understand how you feel now.”

More collateral damage caused by Elia’s attending the academy... *Everyone was worried about Elia before she left, but now I’m beginning to think that the parents were the ones who needed help.* In any case, I did appreciate the company, and definitely wanted to prevent Reinhart from becoming a full-blown workaholic. That being said...

“Are we going to a dangerous establishment?” I asked.

“No, not dangerous. But I would hesitate to send you alone, Master Ryoma...”

“The place itself is fine. Its representative, on the other hand...”

Serge, Pioro and Fay were joining me and Reinhart. We were headed for the Moulton Slave Trading Company. After some discussion the previous night, I had decided to work on construction during the afternoon. I had mentioned the Company as a way to kill time in the morning. As soon as I did, these three

practically insisted on coming along.

I pointed out that Fay alone could be an adult coming with me, but that didn't seem to be the issue. Accordingly, Serge had only given me the information to provide me with a safe option if I were ever in need of such services, not that he was in favor of coming here... It was clear that something had happened at this establishment before, and he was hesitant to tell me.

"Something wrong with the owner?"

"Yeah. I mean, you don't have to worry about being ripped off or anything. You can trust him when it comes to doing business, and that's his one good quality."

"It's only been a few years since he took over the business, but he has kept the good things about his predecessor's business model, and has made improvements where needed. In particular, his talent for judging one's *character* is something else. Definitely more talented than any of us, and I dare say he's on the same level as the Guildmaster."

I was reminded of the elderly lady who served as master of the Gimul business guild.

"He sounds like a very talented businessman."

"He is. And that may be why..."

"Those with genius talents are hard for ordinary people to understand, I suppose. Long story short, he's an eccentric one."

"Says a lot of sketchy things too. I wouldn't want Elia to be in the same room with him."

Elia...? Putting all the verbal cues together, I wondered... Was this guy a ped—No. I won't judge him until we've met.

"Pardon my interruption," the coachman called, informing us that we were nearly there.

As we were preparing to get out, the carriage slowed down and went through a large gate. While it didn't quite compare to the Duke's manor, the expansive grounds, the size of the building, and its exterior all exuded picture-perfect

nobility.

We climbed out of the carriage, and a clerk dressed like a butler immediately approached us. My three companions wore a bitter expression.

“Duke. Mr. Serge of the Morgan Trading company, and Mr. Pioro of the Saionji company. Welcome.”

“Nice to see you, Orest.”

“Why’re you working out front? Don’t you have a business to manage?”

“I appreciate your concern, sir. Of course I don’t neglect my managerial duties, but it’s vital for me to oversee how each department of the company operates. I trust you will concur?” The man coolly countered.

He must have been the company bigwig, but he was much younger than I had expected. He might have even been in his mid-twenties. He had a clean, handsome look that reminded me of a stereotypical start-up CEO.

“Such a wonderful surprise, to receive a visit from such wonderful company as yours...” He added, and his eyes set on me. “Forgive me. My name is Orest Moulton, president of the company.”

“Thank you, sir. I’m Ryoma Takebayashi.”

“Mr. Takebayashi. Pleasure to make your acquaintance.”

He didn’t seem out of the ordinary to me. He treated a kid like me with the same respect as the Duke and a major businessman...which might have been strange in its own right, come to think of it. But I still didn’t see why the three were so bitter about the man. Meanwhile, he suggested that we should continue our conversation in a more comfortable setting. With a call to Fay, who hadn’t had a chance to join the conversation, we entered the establishment.

The interior of the building was also as extravagant as a noble’s manor, but there were many chairs and reception counters in the entrance hall; it was set up like a post office, or a city clerk’s office. There were about five people already in the lobby, but none of them looked like nobles, or even like they had wealth approaching that of nobles...

“Might this have been out of line with your expectations?” Orest asked with a polite chuckle.

“Honestly, it is. Partially because this doesn’t look like any shop I’ve ever been in, but I was expecting a slave market to be more...dark and grimy.”

“Unfortunately, some businesses are far smaller, and abysmally maintained. At the end of the day, the slaves are human beings too. And from a business perspective, we need our products to be in impeccable health. That’s why the Moulton company provides comfortable, clean rooms to our slaves and keeps them well-fed, in addition to maintaining a full-time medical staff to ensure their health.” He went on to explain that in order to provide those things to the slaves, they had to expand their business. They simply needed more rooms. “Of course, most of our shops are not as extravagant as this one. The building once belonged to a noble, who put the manor up for sale. My father bought it and made some renovations to it.”

“I see.” *So my initial impression wasn’t off the mark.*

“This way, please.”

We were shown to a room with a simple rectangular table and about a dozen chairs. It seemed to be of an ideal size, considering how some of the slaves could be called upon to join any clients in the room. Seeing how Orest showed me to the chair opposite his own, he already seemed to recognize that I was going to be his customer for today. He had focused much of his attention on me on our way up to the room too.

It’s anyone’s guess how he managed to figure it out before we said anything... The man did seem as astute as the description I’d heard.

Quite casually, Orest rang a bell placed on the desk, and told the woman who emerged from a neighboring room to bring us some drinks. The entire interaction was ridiculously smooth.

“Now, Mr. Takebayashi... What kind of slaves may I interest you in?”

“Well...” I explained about the business I was running, and that I was looking for security personnel. “I need someone who can look after themselves, and they must be trustworthy. And since I have my business to see to...”

“I understand,” Orest chimed in. “You may find a short-term hire through the Adventurer’s Guild, but a long-term fit may be hard to come by.”

Adventurers who knew what they were doing could usually make more money through monster hunting than by taking on a civilian job. Some might accept a temp position, and I didn’t expect finding someone with adequate prowess, and who happened to be considering retiring from adventuring, was going to be easy.

“First and foremost, I’m looking for someone with honorable character. Of course, any strength in combat would be a bonus, but as long as they have the basics down, I can have our person in charge of security here, Fay, train them to a certain extent.” I wanted to see the character and skill of the slave for myself, and consider their price. Carme had given me permission to make a deal on the spot if they had someone exceptional to offer us. Given what we were looking for, I doubted that it would come to that.

“Character first...” Moulton stood, grabbing a pile of documents from the shelf behind him, and placed a bookmark in it before bringing it to us. “Thank you for your patience. We keep books on all of our slaves. Please pick a few candidates from our list of those with combat skills.”

We were made to select a few from their ‘resume’ before moving on to interviews. He had given us the book right-side-up, where each page included the slave’s name, sex, race, and experience, as well as each of their skills and their respective level.

“These are very detailed...”

“The value of a slave depends highly on what kind of work they can produce, as well as the knowledge or skills they possess. Slaves are required to show their status board. We look at that information and price them accordingly. From what you’ve mentioned to me, Mr. Takebayashi, I recommend the ones around... here. Slaves who hold level 2 or 3 combat skills. We can narrow our range down to those who have highly-rated character and personality.”

“I see the prices fluctuate quite a bit, even among those with similar skill sets.”

“Some slaves have sold themselves to repay a debt. As slave traders, we must

pay their lenders their entire debt upon completing the transaction."

So their price had to at least be greater than the amount of debt they had incurred, in order for them to turn a profit on those slaves.

"Precisely, sir," Moulton confirmed.

Thanks to the well-organized papers and Moulton's thorough explanation, my first slave transaction was going rather smoothly. *Why are Reinhart and the others still so apprehensive of Moulton, anyway?*

Chapter 5 Episode 20: The Beast Within

Selecting our candidates took no time at all, owing to the meticulous organization of their "resumes" that allowed us to pick out those that met our requirements through little more than a cursory skim. That being said...even though we had only pulled out those that strictly met our requirements, we were still left with a pool of over fifty candidates. I would have loved to narrow them down more...

"If I may be frank...they're all very similar." Most of them had tried and failed to make a career out of adventuring. Otherwise, they had accumulated debt from some terrible mistake.

"Most people in the world who have combat skills are adventurers. Some have experience as bodyguards, but they only acquired that position through proving their mettle as adventurers."

"I see..." I muttered. I was stumped on figuring out the next criteria to narrow them down. "Any ideas, Mr. Fay?"

"Tough one..."

"Have you ever had anyone work under you?"

"Sure. But I've never had a choice in the matter like this. I just trained the ones that came. Those who don't listen, aren't cut out, or are inconsiderate won't be there at the end."

"Is that so...?" I wondered if they wouldn't be there because those attitudes were quelled during training, or... I decided not to dwell on it, and concentrate

on the task at hand.

I expected a little bit of sugarcoating when it came to the descriptions of the candidates' personalities, but assumed that they would be more or less accurate. The customer was sure to find out sooner or later if a slave was oversold to them, and I doubted that a business which stooped to that level would earn the approval of Reinhart and the others. I was looking for someone to guard the shop, after all, so I decided to focus on combat strength, first and foremost. Just by selecting the candidates with scores of three in combat skills, we narrowed the pool down to twelve candidates. "Looks like differences in a single level can narrow them down a lot."

Moulton chuckled. *Did I say something funny?*

"Pardon me," he said. "True, skill levels are increased through considerable training and experience. Increasing a skill by a single level usually takes a few years, and they become exponentially more difficult to raise. At a certain point, it could take decades of pursuit to reach the next level. Therefore, the difference in skill level signifies a clear-cut difference in their prowess. At the very least, if fighters with equal weapons faced off *mano a mano*, the one with the higher skill level would most likely emerge victorious. Of course..." I didn't grasp what he meant by this follow-up for a second. "The difference between levels 2 and 3 must seem insignificant to you, Mr. Takebayashi."

"What do you mean...?" I asked, and a thin smile stretched across his face. At the same time, I sensed the tension rise among the rest of my team.

"You are also an adventurer, Mr. Takebayashi. A highly talented one at that. Not that I was ever that great at fighting... To be truthful, I have been looking into you for a while now."

"Looking into me, you say? I suppose my name's gotten around, then." It didn't seem like Moulton had anything to hide based on unprompted admission. "May I ask why you went through the trouble?"

"I have several reasons. For one, these three gentlemen, as well as Lady Glissela, have become your patrons. Any businessman with a certain degree of influence has heard that much, as that information is being subtly passed around through the Merchant's Guild. Secondly, you were someone whom I

wanted to keep an eye on, for the sake of my business. Your slime-based cleaning business is rather unusual... Unprecedented, rather. Starting any business, with or without precedence, can be risky. Our *inventory* includes quite a few individuals who had failed to start their own business."

Apparently, this was why he kept one eye on new, eye-catching, or declining businesses. He added that he didn't really expect me to fall too far, given my backers...

"My third reason is simple; you piqued my interest. Who is Ryoma Takebayashi? Examining your connections and new business was only a part of searching for an answer." I felt the most pressure from the third reason, despite it being the most straightforward.

"After research, you think that level 2 or 3 ones are no match for me?"

"I'm certain of it. You first began revealing your strength when you took on a hunt in the northern mine... I heard you joined in with an army of extremely rare slimes that wield weapons. Despite it being your first hunt on record, you joined an E-rank team. The previous day, you had single-handedly taken on a sinister group of adventurers who decided to pick on a child. One of them—a C-rank, at that—was taken down by you in the blink of an eye. Oh, you must be wondering how I got all the details... That C-rank adventurer found his way to me. He was registered as a criminal slave—sentenced to slavery as punishment for his crimes."

"I wasn't aware of that. Small world..."

"Indeed, it is... He was sent to a coal mine soon after registration, but I had a chance to speak with him in the few days he was here. When I asked him to describe his defeat, he said that he didn't know what had happened, and that he had been defeated before he knew it. His Skill Board showed a level 3 Battle Axe skill. I'm generalizing, but that means he was a confident fighter. Considering that he was taken out in an instant, you were far more skilled than him. No amount of underestimation on his part could account for that. In fact, a mere victory against this man was an assurance of your skill set, to a considerable point. Oh, which reminds me of another story..."

Excitedly, he continued to retell one account after another. Most of them

were rumors from Gimul, but he included the story of the festival and how I played instructor for the new recruits. Apparently, I had made quite a name for myself as the adventurer with weird slimes...

"I also heard that you dabble in bounty hunting. You've bested the infamous Melzen of the Red Lance, not to mention your victory against a group of fifteen knaves. Oh, yes. Mr. Fay was with you for that one. I've heard you're quite the fighter yourself, Mr. Fay."

I wouldn't have been surprised if this stalker of mine knew what I'd had for breakfast that morning. I cleared my throat rather theatrically.

"Oh! Pardon my rambling. Once I get started..."

"I can't say I'm not impressed by your thorough research..."

"Not nearly as thorough as I would prefer. All I was able to gather were accounts postdating your first accomplishment in Gimul. All I managed to find out about your life prior to that was that you were living, almost in hiding, in the Forest of Gana. There are no traces of you before that, as if you simply materialized into the forest one day. I have much to learn."

He would have blown my socks off if he had traced me further back than that. Was this the side of Moulton that Reinhart and the others were concerned about...?

"I simply loved listening to the slaves and customers, ever since I was a mere child... Men or women, children or elders. Human or beastkin, elves, dwarves, dragonewts... Those from all walks of life, and all species. We are all different in so many ways. What goes through their minds? How have they lived their lives? I can't help but want to *learn* about them... Oh, some people have inferred a sexual implication when I say this, but that is unfounded, I assure you. Not that I discriminate against anyone I sleep with based on gender or race."

Who the hell asked you?! And why did he bother clarifying the "sexual implication" bit?! I mean, there wasn't much I could say about consensual relationships among legal adults... I guess one could say he was fine with anyone (or anything). Come to think of it, I shouldn't have been surprised with any sexual preference, given my familiarity with the fetishes prevalent in modern Japan. From cat ears (and other animal-type ears) to French maids and

tsunderes, these were all commonplace. Digging a little deeper, one would find plenty of material to do with cross-dressing or straight-up BL, and I once even saw a fetish that involved robot girls. Personally, I had nothing against any sexual preference or orientation. I mean, I'd have to politely turn down anyone who had their eyes on me in *that* manner, but live and let live, I say.

Orest Moulton...he's all right. I had reached a conclusion in my mind. Was it this side of him that my team was worried about? I was struggling to get a read on him...

"If I may continue to be candid...what are your combat skill levels, Mr. Takebayashi?"

"It's not your job to find out everything about Ryoma, is it, Orest? He isn't a slave," Pioro, who usually maintained a happy-go-lucky attitude, declared with solemnity. True, asking that question wasn't exactly professional of him...

"Thank you, Mr. Pioro, but it's all right." There was something about Orest... I had the impression that he was simply curious, and never shied away from satisfying his curiosity. I didn't get the feeling that he was sussing out intel to use against me or anything. His mask was off; in fact, he'd practically tossed it out the window, but now that he had revealed what was underneath...

I felt a strange sense of familiarity, unlike when I thought he was just a polite young man. "Putting my own feelings aside, he wouldn't do anything to lose your good graces." Maybe it was my own curiosity taking control, but I wanted to put myself out there a little. I turned to Moulton, and showed him some of my stats. "My mains are sword mastery and unarmed combat, both at level 7."

The room fell silent, and the tension in the air turned palpable, mostly because of the three adults who must have been feeling like they were co-parents to me. They were all waiting in silence, while Serge alone was sweating bullets. Fay, sitting next to me, sipped his tea without a care in the world.

Moulton was staring at me with surprise, having been taken aback by either my stats themselves or my cavalier attitude toward sharing them with him, but his interest and excitement were getting the better of him.

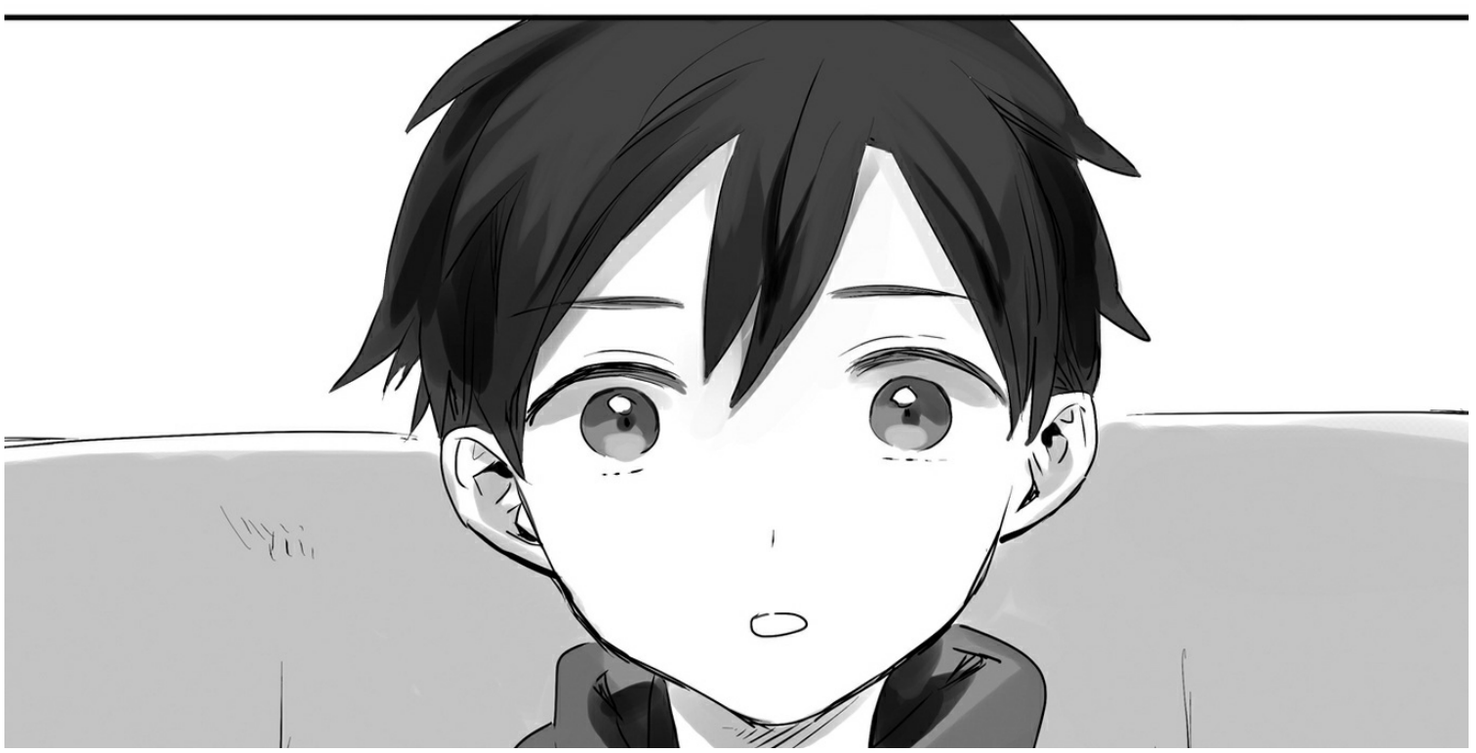
"Level 7? I hadn't expected them to be that high."

“I could just be kidding, you know.”

He chuckled. “You can say some frightening things with a straight face.”

We stared at each other without relenting. How was he going to take this?





Would he take my word for it, or call me out as a liar? I certainly wasn't telling any lies, so I just stood there calmly.

"I assure you, regardless of any financial backers, I would never misuse any of my clients' personal information. Besides, I may very well be the one who gets burned if I were to try anything," he added in an amused tone, still completely comfortable with himself. "In that case, I'm sure level 2 and 3 individuals seem inadequate." He was apparently taking my claim seriously, but he also looked more concerned than he had been all meeting.

"Is something wrong?"

"Excuse me for a moment..." He stood up and soon returned with a new bundle of papers. "I must point out that the slaves on this list are distinct from our usual lineup."

"How so?"

"Unlike those on our main registry, these may be unable to perform manual labor. They may be too old or too young. Many of them can't utilize their full potential because of an injury or illness. I don't usually recommend anyone from this list to clients, but I do have one slave in here who is a level 5 swordsman." Orest flipped through the pages as he talked, turning the file my way after opening it to the page of the slave in question. "Ox Roade, aged 37. He is an ox beastkin with a level 5 skill in dual-wielding..."

His stats were impressive, but the document also described in detail the reason he was on this particular registry. Apparently, he was raised in an orphanage until the age of fifteen, when he entered a training center for gladiators, who fought each other for show. He quickly became successful, and spent his twenties as a famous gladiator. Early in his thirties, he had won a top-tier tournament... Then he wounded his left hand in a match. The injury itself seemed minor, until the pain worsened, forcing Ox to amputate it at the wrist. There was an annotation that described ox beastkin as a burly and muscular race. Gladiating was a popular career choice for them; many ox beastkin gladiators could wield heavy armor and weapons with ease. Ox had specialized in dual blading, a style that leaned toward quick flurries of two swords, but he didn't waste his strength, either. His specially made, extra-heavy pair of swords

allowed him to unleash devastating onslaughts of exceptional power and speed...

“A one-handed dual-blader. Naturally, he can’t fight like he used to. But, he can still swing one sword, and has bested another slave with level 3 skills. His background as a gladiator means that he has plenty of combat experience. In fact, I usually have him train with other slaves skilled in combat. I’m sure he can be of assistance to your instruction, Mr. Fay.”

That might do the trick for a shop guard. If he can teach tactics, this could be an investment... But I found myself looking at the note that said he had a strong attachment to his swordsmanship. And his price was 8 million sutes, marked up from the rest on the list. What was that about? I asked Orest directly about it.

“It must be an expression of pride, in some way. He’d made a living out of nothing but his swords. Even after losing a hand, he still trains every day. His dire request is to be sold to a master who needs a good swordsman. And before the amputation, he had bought some time to look for an alternative treatment by applying a rare magical medicine.”

“Bought some time... Halter?”

“You’re familiar with it. That’s correct.”

Halter was a magical medicine that, as its name suggested, halted wounds from worsening. Instead of disinfecting or healing the wound, it simply maintained the wound as it was, as if time was frozen for it. As mysterious as it was, it did exist in this world...though it came with a very high price tag.

“He had considerable savings after his career as a famous gladiator. He couldn’t let it go, even after he’d spent all of his savings on the medicine. He racked up loans, which led him here. He’d sold his estate and everything in it as well, except for his swords.”

“He didn’t sell them?”

“Yes. He adamantly refused to. I’ve tried to convince him otherwise, but he threatens to choose death over letting go of them.”

“That’s extreme...” I was starting to get a little nervous, but I had the feeling that maybe he’d be a good guard.

“He may be stubborn when it comes to his swords, but he is rather reasonable otherwise. We have observed through his training of some of our slaves that he has the sense of responsibility to perform tasks assigned to him to the best of his abilities. As for the price, of course I’ll take into consideration that this is your first transaction with us, Mr. Takebayashi, not to mention the recommendations of these valued customers. In addition, we do offer installment plans. In any case, there will be no charge until you’ve signed a contract. Why don’t you keep him as one of your candidates and see how things go?”

“I’ll take you up on that.” We were going to see the others in person anyway. Another candidate couldn’t hurt, but I wanted to circle back to narrowing down the general pool a bit more.

“How to narrow down your candidates... If I may be blunt, you should choose women who are ready and willing to engage in sexual activity,” Moulton said with all sincerity, which knocked the wind out of my sails.

“I’m sorry, we’re not looking for a slave to—”

“Which is precisely why I have mentioned it, Master Takebayashi! In fact, I don’t recommend purchasing a slave to anyone who is only looking for sexual companionship. With that kind of money, one should simply go to a brothel, which is much safer and less messy. There are some women who, in attempts to repay their debt and regain their freedom as soon as possible, reluctantly agree to provide sexual services. But they have a tendency to become reckless upon being purchased, and to be violent when push comes to shove. Not that all female slaves have this tendency, but these women do not have the resolve to sell themselves to that length. On the other hand, women with proper resolve have most often worked at a brothel to repay their debts before entering slavery. Moneylenders tend to be more lenient to those borrowers, and it often isn’t impossible for them to completely repay their debts on a prostitute’s pay. Not to be crass, but some people don’t care how the woman looks as long as she’s good between the sheets, and the lenders are better off if they can get a steady income of interest payments.”

I just sat there listening. I thought he was joking, but Moulton had jumped into a passionate monologue. His tone kept jumping from one extreme to

another.

“Orest. Don’t you think it’s a little too early to introduce such a topic to Ryoma?”

“This is a perfectly serious topic when it comes to the process of purchasing a slave, especially considering this will be Mr. Takebayashi’s first slave. Even if something were to happen in the future, when he enters a *sensitive* stage of his life, there won’t be any repercussions, legally speaking, as long as he has the enslavement contract. Of course, Mr. Takebayashi seems mature for his age already, and I doubt that he would ever use his position to make advances on women... But there have been scandals where those who worked alongside the slave had dipped their quill in the company’s ink, so to speak. While I don’t recommend purchasing a slave for the primary purpose of sexual exploitation, I must strongly recommend that you choose a slave with clear expectations of that nature, in order to prevent any legal scandals,” Moulton fervently continued.

Even as Serge and Pioro joined in, Moulton remained in his position, flip-flopping between earnestness and aloofness. He continued to mix in comments amidst our deadpan conversation to knock us off of our feet.

It was painfully clear from his sober stare, which betrayed his teasing tone, that he was trying to get a reaction out of me all along...

Chapter 5 Episode 21: The History of Slavery, and the Footsteps of the One Who Came before

“Please wait here while I gather up the candidates you’ve requested. And this booklet outlines general information and warnings regarding your new slave. Please feel free to keep a copy for yourself.” Moulton left after placing the booklet before us, having narrowed down the candidate pool some more.

When the door closed shut, the air in the room relaxed at once.

“Well...we survived that,” Serge said, and the others chimed in.

“He was quite a character,” I said.

“He’s...not a bad guy, deep down.”

“Just hard to deal with.”

“It never ceases to amaze me how brazen he can be in the company of all of us.”

“When he wasn’t looking at you, he was looking at me,” Fay admitted. *So that’s why he didn’t say much during the meeting...*

“I didn’t expect to have been inspected so closely. Did he do the same to all of you?”

“He hasn’t dug into my life like that, but I think we’ve all had a similar experience with him, like the bit about...choosing a slave who is willing to engage sexually. He gave me that spiel, too. In front of my wife, no less...”

“He did the same to me while my wife *and* daughter were in the room. The way they looked at me after that... Especially Miyabi and her icy stare after

she's looked into things..."

"I'm not sure whether his bad habit of asking questions to get a rise out of people at every turn had built his keen eye for character, or vice versa... The previous chairman, his father, often expressed that he felt conflicted about his son. As I've mentioned before, there's no doubt as to his business prowess. Worst of all is that he astutely drives everybody to the verge of snapping."

Accordingly, Orest never went as far as to ruin a business relationship with his attitude, judging his customers to see if they needed any follow-up to mend the relationship. That would require an incredible sense of social balance. *No way I could pull off that same stunt; I'd surely drive my shop out of business in no time.*

"Don't sweat it. I can't do it, either," Pioro chimed in.

"He's simply squandering his talents. There's no need or benefit in trying to imitate *that*."

A Japanese adage came to mind: *There's a thin line between a moron and a genius.*

"Let's take advantage of this time and rest up for a bit."

"I second that."

"Then why don't we get some drinks?" Pioro rang the bell, asking the lady who stepped in for some drinks.

I decided that I might as well read up on the booklet provided to me. The first page contained an overview of slavery. In contrast to my first impression, slaves were guaranteed some human rights in this world. They lost their right to choose their occupation, but could request some conditions for their master to abide by. They were also automatically granted the right to food, clothes, and shelter, as well as adequate treatment for any injury or illness and reasonable time off. That much concurred with what I had expected through some research I had done before coming here; it was basically the same as hiring a normal employee.

What caught my interest was the old system of slavery, established in a certain nation before the current system was in place, as well as the history of

the transition from the old to new system of slavery. This was definitely worth reading into...

The old system of slavery was more of what I had expected before, where owners ignored the rights of the enslaved. It all began when a new law was enacted in a country that no longer existed at the time of me reading the booklet. There had always been slavery and laws regarding it, but they had drastically varied depending on the region. What had standardized and dramatically worsened the treatment of slaves was the implementation of the unemployment tax. At the time, this nation had assigned labor as one of the civic duties of its citizens, just like modern-day Japan. I didn't know if that was because of anyone who came from Japan before me, but neither Japan nor this country had enacted this law as a means to force its citizens to labor.

That all changed with the enactment of the unemployment tax. It was said to have been implemented with the intention of improving the country's productivity and wealth as a whole. Being jobless was not evil, and no one would be arrested for it, but any citizen not working was neglecting their civic duty. The government requested extra taxes in exchange for their shortcomings...

The decree had brought much suffering to the nation's people. They simply needed to work to escape the tax, but anyone in the family who was willing but unable to work would become dead weight. Then, anyone who couldn't pay the unemployment tax was sentenced to forced labor as slaves.

After the implementation of the unemployment tax, business owners had an unexpected surge of power. People wanted jobs not just for the income, but to avoid the oppressive tax and enslavement, which increased demand for jobs. What was more, those who had jobs feared losing them. Gradually, more and more business owners began realizing that they could afford to worsen conditions for their workers, further oppressing the lives of the employed workers. Meanwhile, the upper classes bribed the lawmakers, who were nobles and clergymen. With lawmaking monopolized by the aristocracy, conditions never improved for the citizens. Power continued to be consolidated, and any existing checks and balances were lost as more and more laws were enacted to make the rich even richer at the expense of the employed and enslaved.

Then it got good. Naturally, such an oppressive system led to a flurry of outraged workers and the emergence of a rebellion willing to change the country, by force if necessary. Long story short, the rebellion took over the nation in a successful coup d'état... The one who led the rebellion was apparently a man with dark hair and dark eyes, who could take on a battalion on his own and controlled the entirety of the battlefield with his intelligence. This was the part that got me wondering if I was in the same boat as him; dark hair and dark eyes may be a dime a dozen, but when coupled with those kinds of descriptions...

To top it off, the man apparently became chancellor to the nation's ruler, devoting much of his time to stabilizing the nation and improving the lives of slaves, which led to the establishment of the current slavery system. For some reason, there was little evidence left of the man himself, except that his birth was clearly documented; he was born to slave parents.

However, the booklet continued, *upon examination of other documentation from the time, it is difficult to believe that a child born of slavery was raised with any training in combat or military strategy. The consensus among historians is that his humble origin was fabricated to garner sympathy among the working class and slaves of the nation, and that the man was actually a member of the aristocracy who joined the rebellion in pursuit of justice...* If he was from my world, his origins in slavery could still make sense.

"You seem enthralled by that piece of literature," Reinhart called. "Is it that interesting?"

I looked up to find the woman from earlier in the room again. "Any refills for your drinks?"

"Oh, thank you," I answered. "Some of these historical accounts are quite fascinating."

"Now I'm remembering how that part of the history of the slavery system was written into an epic. Sorry to interrupt."

"No, thanks for the heads-up." I hadn't heard the woman come in.

I paraphrased the parts I found interesting to Reinhart as I took my second cup of tea, then returned to my reading.

After a successful rebellion, he had strived to improve the treatment of slaves. Apparently there were many who called for the abolishment of the entire system, but that would have crumbled his nation, since it had built its economy on the expectation of producing and exploiting slaves without any rights. That would also lead to the dismantling of all jobs related to slavery. Not everyone who participated in the old system of slavery were criminals; some of them were forced to take part in order to protect the livelihoods of their own families.

Another issue was what the freed slaves would do. Without a single coin to their name, they would lose even the bare minimum that was guaranteed to them through their enslavement—clothes, food, and shelter. How were they supposed to survive with nothing to their name? While the abolishment of slavery would have freed all slaves for the time being, it would have also triggered widespread confusion and conflict. The leader of the rebellion argued that thoughtless abolishment would only be turning a blind eye to all of the damage that slavery had done. That was why he opposed abolishment, but devoted his remaining days to drastically improving the treatment of slaves. His nation fell shortly after his death, but the new system of slavery, along with the cruel flaws and history of the old system, spread throughout the neighboring nations, prospering as the foundation of the current system of slavery.

The booklet only briefly outlined the most noteworthy points in history. *Further research should tell me even more... And I might even learn more about it by asking Gain and the other gods.* What stuck with me the most was the incredible life this man had lived, surely filled with struggle and anguish for him to have accomplished so much... Far beyond what I could have imagined, living my cozy little life.

I hid my face with the booklet, and offered my thoughts to the Man Who Came Before.

Chapter 5 Episode 22: The Interview

“Thank you for your patience.”

Moulton had returned to the room with Ox Roade and the nine other candidates we had selected. Perhaps out of consideration for our safety, no one was carrying a weapon, or wearing any clothing thick enough to conceal one. The other nine candidates consisted of some humans and beastkin. One of them was another ox beastkin, but Roade exuded an aura distinct from the rest; his numerous faint scars all over his well-built physique, coupled with his glinting eyes, completed a perfectly intimidating look...

While I doubted that this was his intention, I would have expected the faint of heart to be terrified by his presence. The horns protruding from his head were smaller than I had expected, only slightly peeking out of his hair that had been kept short for visibility. Combined with his intimidating presence, he looked more like a Japanese horned devil than an ox right now. I felt bad for the rest of the lot... But they already couldn’t match up to Ox.

The interview was conducted in two groups of five, Ox being in the second group. He was seated toward the back of the second group on a chair that seemed a bit too small for him.

“Please, ask them whatever you like,” Moulton encouraged.

We started by just asking their names, but they were already eager to sell themselves at every chance while still waiting for their turn. Being “bought” was their first step toward freedom, after all. Seeing how entertained the CEO looked in the corner of the room, he might have whispered something in their ears before leading them in.

After a while, I realized that this was basically my first time conducting an interview in this world. When I first hired Fay and the others, all of the other applicants had resigned for some reason. After that, all of my new hires were through some sort of connection, so I’d pretty much never dealt with a group of interviewees. I had some experience in corporate interviews in my previous life at the office, but this seemed like a different game altogether. The furious sales

pitches were one thing, but...

“I entered the training center established by the famous adventurer Berveos on his dying year, and have earned the third rank of Bervean swordcraft...”

“Right... I only have my status board to show for any skill or prowess, but I’ve always adventured on the frontlines and survived this far. So...”

“I will not let you down! Pick me, please!”

There was no hiding anyone’s eloquence in this style of interview. Back in Japan, three-quarters of the interviewees sounded like they were reciting a how-to book verbatim, and about one in ten tried too hard to stand out, or stood out in the wrong way. It was a good day if 10% of the interviewees felt distinct from the rest. Everyone from kids straight out of college to the middle-aged career changer tended to hammer out interview do’s and don’ts at workshops, so their tactics were nearly identical. Even those who weren’t as eloquent fit the bill. Maybe the less eloquent they were, the more they relied on by-the-book tactics?

Anyway, everyone had practiced their spiel to death, so even their ideas were one and the same. It didn’t help that the company I worked for was thoroughly run-of-the-mill without a single unique thing about any of the job openings, nor a reason to compel any applicant to make it their first choice. I’d felt no point in asking questions like “what made you apply?”

In that sense, none of the candidates currently in front of me had any special reason for wanting to be bought by me. Without a choice in their career, they might have been enthusiastic about gaining a job, but not about working for my shop in particular. The big difference was that this world had no internet. Even if they’d had some sort of workshop or class for prospective interviewees, it wasn’t as easy to learn how to interview in this world. Maybe that was why they mostly used their own words to express how much they wanted it. It really did show how well some could talk compared to others, but I personally liked this method better. Much more clear-cut than trying to filter out the riffraff.

“Thank you,” I announced, having them switch with the second group of five after a while. They too erupted in a battle of sales pitches, but Ox Roade... He spoke the least out of all of them, and unabashedly stared at us like he was

evaluating his potential master. While he did seem eager to be chosen, he had a different approach from the others. “Are there any questions?” I asked him.

“I want a position that lets me use my sword. But you might have noticed that I don’t have my left hand. What’s more, I’m not cheap, thanks to my debt. Would you still buy me?”

“You would be more than adequate as a guard for my shop, I’m sure. As for your price, I would like to see how well you can swing your sword first...” I turned to Moulton. “We can do that, right?”

“Of course.” Apparently, he had reserved the courtyard for precisely that purpose. I only had to tell him which candidates I wanted to see in action, and he would gather them in the courtyard, their weapon of choice in hand.

We decided to talk over what the try-out would consist of after the slaves left the room. Once I sorted it out with Moulton, Ox fell silent, as if he had said everything he needed to... Maybe he was already starting to mentally prepare for the try-out.

“Thank you again.” I dismissed them from the interview. After the ten candidates left the room, I asked around for input.

“That Ox Roade certainly grabbed my attention.”

“I think the papers aren’t lying; he’s almost certainly the best fighter of them all.”

“He sure looked the part... But he’s one stubborn bull.”

“How to put this... He’s like a general; loyal to strength and combat. I think you can trust him.”

I pretty much agreed with that. While he seemed a bit stoic, I was sure that he had the prowess to make up for it. My first impression of him was that he was rather like an artisan who dedicated his life to a single craft, but I could understand Fay’s impression of a military general too.

And so...

“Are we playing right into your hands if we’re seriously considering him?”

Orest smiled so brightly his teeth seemed to sparkle. “I simply showcased the

best of my slaves.” Despite this reassurance, I couldn’t help but feel like the other nine candidates were there to prop Ox up. “Speaking of, Mr. Takebayashi, what did you have in mind for the trial?”

“What do you normally do?”

“Usually, customers request an exhibition between the slaves or against someone they had brought with them. I’ve been requested on occasion to have them fight some sort of monster.”

I had a light bulb moment. When I shared it with the group, the CEO with a passion for people-watching jumped right in with an exclamation of “Ooh, how fun!”

The other adults chimed in.

“Hm. That will be a continuation of the interview, in a sense.”

“We’ll see how they handle themselves. Do what you want, Ryoma.”

“I understand what you’re trying to say. I feel like it won’t wrap up as cleanly as you think...”

“I have a bad feeling about this...”

The CEO swooped in to convince the two who were skeptical of the idea, and we settled on implementing my idea.

“We do have staff on deck ready with recovery magic, so don’t worry about any injuries,” he added.

Chapter 5 Episode 23: Three Choices

???'s Side

Ryoma and his party arrived at the courtyard, led by the president of the Moulton company himself. As a renovated noble manor, the shop hosted a spacious courtyard. One might even describe it as barren. The courtyard, which must have once housed a luscious garden, had been turned into a flat field of dirt. A brick wall stood in the center, around targets used by the slaves to demonstrate their prowess in magic or archery. While a few seats were placed near the door that led back into the manor, there was certainly plenty of space for slaves to run around with their weapons drawn. Ten slaves already stood in a line before the row of seats.

As soon as Ryoma and the others took their seats, Moulton announced the task for the trial.

"I will have each of you demonstrate your prowess in combat shortly...against these valued customers themselves." Glances were shot toward the group, mostly to Fay, as Moulton continued.

"You have three choices as to your opponent. First, Mr. Fay, sitting over there. He is a former soldier of Gilmar, currently working as the chief of security for a shop. If anyone is purchased today, you will be working for him."

The slaves remained calm, having expected this much, and only seemed curious about the other two options. "The second is Mr. Ryoma Takebayashi, your potential master and the owner of the shop I just mentioned. Do not underestimate him for his young age, as Mr. Takebayashi is a D-rank adventurer." A few surprised mutters could be heard from the lineup. D-rank adventurers were not rare by any means, but judging from Ryoma's looks, they would have been impressed if he was an E-rank.

"And the third...will be three slimes, all of them Mr. Takebayashi's familiars."

"Slimes?!"

"You can't be serious..."

Some of the slaves almost seemed insulted at the idea, but as Moulton raised his hand and ordered them to settle down, they swiftly obeyed.

“Now, as I mentioned at the beginning, you have three choices for your opponent. Therefore, you can simply avoid choosing any opponent you feel is beneath you. All you need to do is choose one of the three options I’ve mentioned, and show your strength in a match.”

At the end of the day, the slaves seemed to understand, this wasn’t much different from their usual trials. Finally, Moulton turned to Ryoma.

“Well...” Ryoma began, “You will be evaluated by your performance during the match, but I expect that a victory will work more in your favor than a defeat. That being said, if you defeat an opponent too easily, you may miss out on valuable time to showcase your worth. Keep that in mind, and demonstrate how you will be able to work with us. And be forewarned that my slimes are evolved, advanced species.”

“Now, I will have you retreat into the waiting room for the time being. You will have five minutes to choose your opponent, and then I will call you one-by-one to start your match.”

As soon as the door shut behind the last of the slaves, Moulton grinned. “Now, who shall they choose...? I can hardly wait.”

“You’re not even trying anymore, are you...?”

“Oops. I must have been too excited after your brilliant suggestion, Mr. Takebayashi.”

“Don’t blame me for it,” Ryoma chuckled.

The four adults ignored the exchange, as if they couldn’t be bothered to show a reaction to every little thing Moulton said.

“So, we gave them multiple choices, and told them that a victory helps their chances. This will be a good test for them to evaluate their opponents.”

“I was thinking, I don’t know who’s going to come to my shop. A drunk stumbling in is one thing, but I’ve seen some people who looked like they’ve fought for a living before... Personally, though, I want to see how they’ll act

with their potential employment in mind. The try-out itself is not as important."

"Yes, I see... I wonder how many will notice... You have quite the scheming side, Mr. Takebayashi."

"What? I *am* a D-rank, after all."

"And you know full well that your appearance, rank, and true strength are all on completely separate levels."

As Ryoma alone dutifully engaged in conversation with the giddy Moulton, five minutes passed.

"What did they say?"

"Three chose the slimes, five chose you, Mr. Takebayashi, and three chose Mr. Fay."

"Let's proceed as planned. Let's start one-by-one from those who chose the least popular option."

"Understood."

Moulton gave a command to one of his employees as Ryoma produced three slimes from his Dimension Home and placed them on one of the marks on the ground before covering them with a large cloth.

Then, the first candidate emerged with a dulled blade in hand. He walked up to the five without hesitation.

"Before we begin, please give us a word or two about the match, including why you chose the slimes."

"Yes, Sir! I chose an opponent I was sure I could defeat!"

"Thank you for being straightforward. On your guard, please."

Young and energetic, nothing wrong with that, Ryoma thought. *Points added for choosing what he thinks is the sure-fire option. Don't really want someone who'll take a huge risk protecting my shop. I don't need anyone too adventurous, since I need them to protect the non-combat-oriented employees. Of course, there may be a time when I need them to risk their life, but it's certainly not now. The problem is, what made him think that the slimes were the*

sure bet? Probably just the fact that they're slimes. I did let them know they were advanced species, and still... Great enthusiasm, but he doesn't back it up with logic. He's been a cheerful guy throughout and makes a good first impression. He'd probably get along with the other employees. He wouldn't have a problem with customer service, either... Well, too bad.

Once the candidate reached a position sufficiently far from Ryoma's party, Ryoma paused his internal evaluation to give the signal, and the slimes came crawling out from under the fabric.

"What...?" The man's gaze shifted a bit in the presence of the slimes. Three metal slimes glimmered in the sunshine beating down from the clear sky, outside of their routine of serving as Ryoma's blade and sheath.

"Hm. He's thinking about his next move."

"No duh. He's a swordsman. Can't use a lick of magic, according to his papers."

"Not a good combo when it's you and your weapon facing down globs of metal. I don't see a way out for him. How's he going to deal a finishing blow?"

"None of the other candidates are skilled in magic either." Moulton chuckled. "You did say a victory would help their chances, but you didn't say that you'd give them a chance. Well, is that why a victory would mean more?"

"Stop making me sound like I'm some sort of con man... I just thought I'd test how much the metal slimes have improved in combat, not just as weapons."

"Not really helping your case there, Ryoma... But you did write to me about metal slimes before. If what you told me is true, I'm afraid this won't be much of a match."

The six observers continued their discussion, as the candidate showed his first sign of trepidation when one of the employees raised his hand, poised to commence the exhibition. Once the match began, it played out as Reinhart had feared.

"Begin!"

At the very instant of the employee's call, the three metal slimes snapped into

action. One rolled straight toward the candidate, charging into him as it left a cloud of dust. While he was surprised by the slime charging as fast as a full-grown man, he calmly blocked it with his shield. However, metal slimes were hunks of metal as dense as a bowling ball. With the kind of speed that the slime displayed, it could easily generate enough force to shake him through his shield. The man braced his shield for a moment, allowing the other two slimes to surround him on either side and begin a chain of unending attacks.

The trio of slimes took turns attacking him from all directions. While the man was managing to hold off the attacks for the moment, the slimes had made their bodies wheel-shaped, further increasing their velocity. It didn’t seem like the situation was getting any better for the first candidate.



“What am I even watching right now...?”

“What can I say, those are some quick slimes.”

“With their rigidity, density, and speed...one bad hit could kill him.”

“Did you know about this, Duke?”

“Ryoma’s letter had included descriptions of the metal slime. But I’ve not seen one in person until now. Each slime can move quite fast on its own... Are you giving them commands, Ryoma?”

“I am not. I’ve trained the slimes to surround their opponent and make continuous attacks as a team when fighting alone. It’s a good training exercise for me as well, if I throw in more slimes.”

“One more thing. How many metal slimes did you have?”

“I’m keeping the number down to two hundred by adjusting the amount of food; it keeps them healthy while not giving them enough nutrition to divide. I also have an identical number of iron slimes who can do the same things as the metal slime... Why do you ask?”

Reinhart scratched his head, taken aback. “I was expecting something quite unusual ever since you mentioned your use of slimes... But just three of them are taking on a level 3 swordsman in a favorable matchup. I’m impressed. Creativity and training can make quite a big difference, it seems.”

Metal slimes, as he had admitted, were given to Ryoma by Reinhart himself. The duke seemed particularly amazed by the metal slimes’ performance because they had once been something he knew well.

Ryoma, apparently taking the comment as a compliment, answered with an uncharacteristic boast. “Some of it was dumb luck, but the slimes have worked really hard. I’m taking on more work outside of adventuring with the shop and all, but I’ve kept up with training to better both myself and the slimes, as an adventurer and his familiars.”

Ryoma always dealt with any task at the shop, events out in town, and any little day-to-day favors with politeness and friendliness. Recently, he had begun to notice that those around him were apparently beginning to forget that he

was an adventurer. While he had to admit that he was doing less adventuring than before, he still considered that to be his career, and his shop as a side business. Doing favors for those in town was just his way of being a good neighbor.

The regulars of his shop, though, had the opposite impression of him. As a result, adventurers who were familiar with him through the Adventurer's Guild seemed concerned for the business of his shop, and whenever he ran into the regulars of his shop in town, they were almost always surprised to find that he was an adventurer.

Many people had asked him why he bothered taking on adventuring work at all; Ryoma couldn't deny that he was working less and less as an adventurer, and that he was doing so of his own volition. He didn't consider this state of affairs to be horribly unmanageable, but he did find himself thinking about it quite often. Was his situation a mere manifestation of his adolescent emotions? No one could say for sure right now, but the topic of conversation quickly turned to Ryoma's hobby.

"There's still much to improve. With a little more time, I think I can make some additional refinements."

"Refinements?"

"They're wheel-shaped now, but I'm training them to become thinner and sharper. I'm not having them do it now for safety's sake, but using them as a sword has gotten them used to turning into blades. The problem is changing into a blade while moving, or continuing movement in the circular blade form. They often fall over, get derailed, or lose speed, which drastically weakens their attack power. But even in their current state, they are able to cut through a brittle cave mantis, and they once gave a horned rabbit a deep cut down to the bone during a hunt. It took some time, but I've gotten them to the point where they can fight without direction, as you can see. With more training and stability, I think the metal slime can grow even stronger."

"It's only natural to want to improve as an adventurer and train your familiars, I suppose..."

"I shudder to imagine how far you'll go..."

“Ryoma, you need to tell me if they ever get out of hand.”

“Take it easy, Chief.”

The adults all gave Ryoma a look of mixed emotions, with the exception of Moulton, who let out an amused chuckle. “You’re as intriguing as the rumors suggested...”

The match concluded soon after, when the metal slime knocked down the man’s shield, sword, and then finally the man himself. Ryoma was reminded of a certain trio of stars as he observed the metal slimes’ teamwork.

Chapter 5 Episode 24: The Ex-gladiator and What the Slave Merchant Was Hiding *???'s Side*

"Not fair..." The first candidate muttered in disappointment as he returned through the door from the courtyard.

"Hey, wasn't he the guy who...?"

"Picked the slimes? Yeah, no mistaking it... Don't tell me he lost?"

The other slaves became animated at the sight of the man's return. One of the employees, perhaps in an attempt to keep what awaited the remaining candidates outside as much of a surprise as possible, showed the first challenger out of the waiting room.

By the looks of it, he lost. Even if he had technically won, he certainly didn't think he fought well. Slimes, eh... I've never faced any in the coliseum, but some advanced species are evidently more powerful or difficult to deal with. Ox Roade, having watched the first candidate walk past in silence, decided to not dwell on the thought any further. While he couldn't deny some degree of curiosity about the matter, he didn't sign up to fight the slimes. Instead of fruitless speculation, he thought of the boy he was about to battle. *Four adults, each with a unique aura about them—a noble, two businessmen, and another one who's clearly seen too many battles to be a businessman. And then, the sole child among them... He was the hardest to read out of that bunch.*

While most considered brute force to be the only requirement for a gladiator, that alone did not get fighters far up the ranks. Popularity spoke volumes when it came to gladiating, with spectators often placing bets on their favorite gladiator. Crowd appeal and the number of matches they played directly influenced their play. No matter how fierce a fighter was, no gladiator would be considered as a household fighter without stardom to their name. Only once a gladiator achieved both strength and popularity did they mark their name in history.

Ox, as someone who had climbed close to the top of such an industry, had trained one particular non-combative skill through his years of gladiating—a

good eye for character. It was something he had in common with the president of the very slave trader aiming to sell him as a product. His career of countless battles, glowing popularity, and establishing connections with nobles and merchants had helped him acquire this skill. He began to see aspects of his opponent's character in each step or swing of their sword. It was an intuition that he had developed through decades of challenging himself. It led to him sensing every one of his opponent's movements in mind or body, elevating his swordcraft as a result.

I kept honing that intuition, and my dual blading reached level 5 once I was into my thirties. Even after losing a hand, Ox Roade still prided his own ability with swords. A close second was probably his intuition, which had earned his confidence over the years. But now his intuition failed him when it came to Ryoma. *Who is he...? He certainly looks like a child, but he was entirely comfortable among the adults, as if he was their age...like equals. But more than anything...he's strong. The foreign man beside him seemed to have seen a fair share of combat, but that kid... Well, no sense dwelling on it any further. All I can do is show my strength with my swords, no matter who I'm facing.*

More candidates returned one by one, all looking dispirited. Ox Roade watched them out of the corner of his eye, clasping his pair of sheathed swords, concentrating.

When the ninth slave returned, Ox quietly stood, placing his swords by his sides. "Just to be sure... I am allowed to use these, right?"

"President's orders. He told me the clients are allowing it."

"It's not just one of his games?"

"I understand your skepticism. Apparently, the president was the one who suggested it, but this fight's as real as they come. I double-checked with the client a couple of matches ago and he thinks you'll perform better with weapons you're familiar with."

"Glad to hear... I appreciate your consideration," Ox said, emptying his mind of thoughts not concerned with the battle ahead, just as he used to before stepping into the grand coliseum. With powerful strides, he proudly walked out into the courtyard.

“Thank you for your patience,” Ryoma welcomed him, still standing at the starting position of the combat area.

This fight will be anything but easy, Ox acknowledged. Ryoma was standing there as calm as could be, despite having fought four candidates in a row already. He had only one question to ask of his opponent.

“Why did you choose me?”

“It doesn’t matter who my opponent is. I will show you the way of my sword.” Ox’s simple answer implied that he was only going to speak more with his sword from this point on. He had already taken his position at the mark opposite Ryoma.

“Ready when you are, then,” Ryoma announced, having accepted Ox’s response. Ryoma drew his slime sword.

Ox astutely sensed a change about Ryoma. *He can cut with that sword on the draw if anyone’s in his range.* Ryoma had done nothing but unsheathe his sword, and Ox was already adjusting his estimation of his opponent. He, too, drew one of his swords with his right hand—the only one he had.

Ox’s sword was of a matte gray, stone-like color; it was much thicker than most blades, and obviously quite durable. Its shape resembled that of a machete or a butcher’s knife. Ryoma was reminded of a seax blade he had seen in his previous life. Both fighters used energy mediation effortlessly to strengthen their entire bodies.

“Begin!”

First blood! Ox closed in on Ryoma, unleashing a vertical slice. Ryoma met the swing with his sword, making a confident parry. As a loud clang echoed through the courtyard, the fighters put some distance between each other, as if out of mutual respect.

Ryoma, for one, was astonished by how fast Ox could move given his enormous stature, and even more so by the immense force with which he’d swung his blade. Ox had earned his silent respect. He imagined how much time and effort the man must have spent to wield the pair of extremely heavy swords (which had contributed greatly to generating such a force for the attack)

at the same time, given that he only had one hand now.

Ox had a similar impression. *Not a scratch on his weapon,* he noticed. *Even without his energy, the attack would have been parried by technique alone.* Ox's swords were made from refined heavy stone, an ore unique to this world. In addition to its rock-like color, it was more durable than steel and heavier than lead. Specially made to be wielded by a highly trained and energy-boosted ox beastkin, the sword was almost too heavy for an ordinary man to even hold aloft, let alone wield. Multiplied by the velocity at which Ox swung his sword, its incredible mass generated catastrophic damage. If Ryoma had parried less than perfectly, his weapon would not have withstood the exchange. Ox's intuition had allowed him to catch on to all of this in a matter of seconds. *No wonder the other candidates came back acting like that. Those who took him at face value must have been horror-struck. Is this all Moulton's idea? That weasel.*

Albeit with a partial misunderstanding—one that Mr. Moulton had definitely earned—Ox was now sure of Ryoma's strength. *I have no chance of winning,* he thought. *Not with one sword...* With a detached estimation of their strengths, he still stepped forward. Ox roared and leaped toward Ryoma. So what if he had lost a hand, or knew that he stood no chance against Ryoma? Neither of those was a reason for Ox to lay down his sword. He had survived numerous battles where he was disadvantaged or faced against those stronger than him. Each time, he fought against the odds with every fiber of his being.

Ryoma felt Ox's roar, along with the man's force of will that seemed to epitomize the life he had lived. With the swing of his mighty sword that he had put his whole life into, Ox managed to force Ryoma to take a step back.

In a split second, Ox let out another roar as his sword cut through the air, flying at Ryoma's face. While Ryoma knocked down the blade that had come much too close for comfort, Ox drew his other sword. As if to demonstrate his style of wielding two monstrous swords in quick succession, the pair of blades closed in on Ryoma.

"Ryoma!" Reinhart called, a moment too late for his warning to have any effect, while the two merchants were unable to even react.

The two fighters had clashed for an instant.

“No need to worry. Our boss is all right,” Fay noted with a hint of relief in his tone. The fighters disengaged for a moment before jumping into a furious back-and-forth of the blade.

“What’s happening now...?” Serge muttered. “One of his swords is...”

“Floating in mid-air!” Pioro finished. Indeed, one of Ox’s swords was floating at a set distance from Ox’s stub, as if it was being held by an invisible hand.

“Kinesis, most likely,” Reinhart explained. “Neutral magic that uses magic energy to move objects. He must have cast it without an incantation, using it in place of his left hand. He had just made an opening by throwing his sword, forcing Ryoma to knock it down. Not only that, but he retrieved the sword, keeping the momentum and swinging upward. Magic has a little more reach than a physical hand.”

“Boss deflected the thrown sword, stepping toward Ox and attacking to stop his feet and right sword. He dodged the left sword from the ground with a lean. Don’t think the boss expected the second sword to come into play. Sweet reflexes.”

Even as they commented on what had just happened, the match continued at full speed. Ox’s physical and magical hands, each wielding a sword with devastating blows, generated breezes that blew past Ryoma’s cheeks. Ox’s flurry continued, unleashing three or four swings during every beat of combat, each of them potentially lethal. Ryoma was dodging and parrying all of them like a leaf in the wind, striking back during the few openings that Ox allowed.

“Oh... How incredible...! Truly sublime!”

“Sorry to interrupt your little *show*, Orest,” Reinhart interjected. “But you owe us some explanations.” Serge and Pioro silently joined into the accusation by glaring at the slave trader.

“Explanations?” He innocently parroted. “I have merely recommended slaves that I think are suitable for my clients, the same as I always do.”

“Don’t you think you’ve left out some of the details from your recommendation?”

“You didn’t say anything about dual-wielding with magic, at the very least.”

“I recall disclosing that he was obsessed with swordcraft, and that he could no longer dual wield like he used to after losing a hand... Perhaps I was insufficiently clear,” Moulton said without a hint of guilt. “As you’ve illustrated, Duke, he is using the neutral magic Kinesis. And as you all surely know, beastkin, in exchange for their powerful physique, hold little magical energy within them, making magic an unfavorable tactic. He, of course, is no exception. He’s giving his all against Mr. Takebayashi... But he can’t keep that up for three minutes. Plus, his swordcraft isn’t as good as it used to be before he lost his hand. Once he runs out of magical energy, he won’t even be able to stand, let alone fight. Medicine can only do so much, and taking medicine mid-combat isn’t always practical...” Moulton went on to explain that Ox really couldn’t dual wield like he used to, and that he had only achieved a fighting style even remotely resembling his original through the use of magic incompatible with him, out of his sheer obsession with the sword.

“I see,” Reinhart said. “Then what’s your end goal? He may have some baggage, but given all that context, I find it hard to believe that you haven’t had any potential buyers take an interest in him before.”

“As I’ve maintained from the beginning of our meeting, I think that he is a perfect fit for Mr. Takebayashi. Ox won’t complain as long as he works somewhere he can use his swords, especially if his employer is stronger than him. But more than anything...” Moulton paused theatrically. “Mr. Takebayashi has far too few equals.”

Reinhart widened his eyes in surprise, as did Serge and Pioro.

“The more I learn about him, the more curious I become,” Moulton continued. “His mindset is one thing... But his abilities are so far advanced beyond his age. I’m sure he has friends who are equals in a social sense, like any one of you. But there aren’t too many individuals out there with skills comparable to his, especially regarding combat. My research shows that he occasionally spends time with children of similar age in the slums, but I’ve also heard that he acts more like a tutor to them. What do you think that sort of thing does to a child his age?”

“Are you telling me...you’ve been concerned for Ryoma’s emotional development all along?” Reinhart asked incredulously.

“He is at a difficult age. Ideally, he would have a rival his own age, but one can’t expect to come across *two* children of his age and skill level. The best I could do was allow him to consider having someone with at least a similar strength and thirst for improvement in his life, even as a slave.”

“I never thought I’d hear something like that from you, Orest.”

“So you weren’t just teasing Ryoma to get a rise out of him?”

“My! That is most uncalled for! I certainly enjoy watching people, but I have no intention of sabotaging the healthy development of any child. In fact, I want children to cherish all the experiences and happiness that time will soon take away from them,” Moulton declared with all sincerity.

“I see... I apologize for doubting your intentions.”

“Of course, I wouldn’t mind making him a regular so I can observe him more closely.”

“The truth comes out, eh?! See if I ever have sympathy for you again!”

“Orest, you’re a real...”

“Just...don’t overdo it, all right?”

As the three adults finally expressed their grievances and exasperation, Fay, the designated observer of the match, finally called a stop to it.

Chapter 5 Episode 25: Sympathetic Ryoma

Ryoma's Side Once the tryouts had wrapped up, I knew right away who I was going to pick.

"Welcome aboard, Mr. Roade."

"I'll give the job my all. And Master, please call me Ox."

Ox Roade. His strength in combat was on another level from the rest. It seemed like he had a stubborn side, but his stoicism was actually reassuring. I had asked the others for their input, too, but they were all in agreement. As a slave sold to pay off his debt, his only personal effects were the pair of swords on his belt and a few sets of clothes. When I came back after allowing my magical energy to recover post-match, he had already finished packing. We were informed that we could take Ox with us immediately if we paid for him, so we settled that straight away with a payment method that resembled a personal cheque. Apparently, there was no need to rush him out of there (and I was only squatting at the Duke's myself), so I was only going to pay a little extra to keep him there for a few more nights and pick him up on my way back to Gimul...

"He can stay at my place as a servant. Let's go home already." Reinhart's offer had settled it.

We returned to the carriage, and everyone but me, including Fay and Ox, climbed inside.

"How about a relaxing cup of tea to commemorate a well-negotiated deal?" Moulton asked.

"Go relax yourself, then," Pioro cut in.

"It was worth a try. Oh, well... Mr. Takebayashi, if you are ever in need of another slave, please stop by anytime. Even if you simply wish to kill an afternoon with pleasant conversation."

I gave an obliging chuckle. "I know where to find you, Mr. Moulton."

“Oh, I almost forgot! Please call me Orest. Let us be frank, Mr. Ryoma. Don’t you think honorifics are such a hindrance to friendship?”

He didn’t even *try* to hide how blunt he was... Not that I particularly minded.

“All right, Orest. I’ll come by some time.”

“I’ll be looking forward to it, and I’ll surely have some *attractive* deals for you. I would give you the spiel, but before the *adults* scorn me for it...” Orest handed me a pamphlet.

He was so smooth with the hand off that I took it without thinking. *He had this ready the whole time?*

With a quick thanks, I climbed into the carriage and took the open seat between Fay and Ox. With our carriage full, the coachman took off as though he couldn’t wait to get out of there. I watched Orest see us off, beaming as he shrank into the distance.

The adults sitting opposite me let out a uniform sigh.

“Thank you all for coming along.”

“I didn’t have anything better to do,” Reinhart chuckled.

“We couldn’t have let you come alone.”

“I’m sure you see why, Master Takebayashi...”

It really was a huge help that they tagged along. If I had encountered *him* without any allies or prior knowledge, I would have danced like a puppet the whole time I was there. “Like you said, Mr. Serge, he may not be malicious, but he is quite certainly hard to handle.”

Reinhart had also mentioned this, but Orest knew exactly the right moments to push or pull, socially speaking. He had taken me by surprise during some points in conversation, and even made me almost irritated at others, but never crossed my line of intolerance where I would have shouted or been enraged. Then he’d throw in a compliment or brush off a question...

At the end of the day, I stopped caring. I felt like he played this mind game with everyone he interacted with, fine-tuning his tactics depending on who he was dealing with. It was exhausting, and I got where everyone was coming

from, but I couldn't totally dislike the man. *He might have fun with someone hating him, if it came to that.*

"Yeah, I'd say you're right. Got all that from your first visit, huh?"

"I don't think I would have been as collected on my own, but you were there to be a buffer between us... And I couldn't help but find a part of his character relatable."

"You and Orest? I can't see that..."

"Agreed."

"Not that we have similar personalities or anything, but we have a similar approach to our interests."

Whenever I find a new slime, I put it next to all sorts of things to see what it likes and doesn't like, including poison if it comes to that.

Even if a slime bit me, I wouldn't get mad at it. In fact, I would be curious as to how it bit me, and what sorts of powers that it could evolve. I just didn't get the appeal of doing the same thing to humans, since I was never that interested in them. "Kind of felt like we had a similar way of tackling things."

"Oh..."

"That's what you meant..."

"That makes sense..."

They seemed to accept that explanation, including Fay, who sat silently beside Ox. Ox himself didn't seem to catch on, since he didn't know how much I liked slimes...

Oh no. It can't be comfortable to be thrown into a group of strangers having a conversation you have no understanding of. "I'm sorry, I totally kept you out of the loop."

"Don't worry about me," Ox said, to my relief.

With our introductions already out of the way, though, I wanted to discuss what came next. I was going to stay at the duke's house for at least another three days, so I wanted Fay to give him the rundown about the shop, especially

when it came to security. I hoped that he'd also get me to help with setting up the wedding venue. He was strong enough to swing that sword all over the place single-handedly, and I definitely could have used muscles like his.

"And one more thing," I added. "If you're willing, of course, I would like you to help me experiment with a new kind of medicine."

"Medicine?"

I gave him the spiel about my grandmother teaching me knowledge about medicines and how to make them, explaining that I was quite proficient at it... Then I told him that I wanted to test a magic recovery one, but not a fast-acting one like those sold at the store. This was a longer-lasting potion, which slowly and steadily regenerated the user's magic. I had been thinking about Ox's tactic of using magic to wield his second sword to make up for his lost hand. While we couldn't do anything about him having less magical energy because of his race, it seemed like a waste not to come up with a way to improve upon that tactic. He didn't have enough magical energy to fight for long, and even before he was completely out, running low on magical energy alone caused him to rapidly lose precision in his movements. As a result, Ox was always in a kill or be killed situation, which led me to the idea of long-lasting magic recovery. The concept itself was included in the knowledge that had been passed down to me.

"Magical energy regenerates when you rest, so most situations that call for a recovery potion call for fast-acting ones, like in mid-combat, or to supplement healing magic being cast to heal someone severely injured. On the other hand, I've been told there are people with a condition called magic leakage, who slowly lose their magical energy without using any magic. While researching a cure for this condition, they apparently developed a medicine that continuously recovers small amounts of magical energy over a longer time. The symptoms of low magical energy could be fixed with a fast-acting recovery, but a long-lasting one can prevent those symptoms from showing altogether. I only have the knowledge and have never made such medicines myself, but I've heard that adjusting the ingredients for it can allow me to change how long it lasts or how much magical energy it heals. I'm wondering if we can make up for the magic you expended on your fighting style with the amount this potion could recover."

“Is that possible?”

“It’s just a guess, but I think it could certainly help you in training. Considering how long it lasted in the match, it looked like you were using your second sword solely based on your memory from the days when you still had your left hand, rather than having any real practice under your belt with magic...”

Ox nodded. “That’s correct. A few minutes before sleep was the best I could do. I couldn’t hope to train longer, or consume medicine that wasn’t exactly a necessity. I was grateful to have any real training time at all. But wouldn’t this new medicine become a financial burden for you, Master? They can’t be cheap to make.”

“Oh, don’t worry about that.” I could use the running mush I’d been steadily growing to preserve bacteria. Those were supposed to be luxury materials, so I could only sell off so much through the guildmaster. To be honest, they were beginning to pile up. “The crafting of and experimentation with medicine will help me improve... And I’m better off than most, financially speaking. You wouldn’t have been an option for me otherwise.”

“Indeed. I see my concerns were unfounded.”

“I may have to watch my pocketbook for a bit, but I won’t have to change my lifestyle. If this medicine will allow you to maximize your potential, that will reassure me more than saving on the cost of it. If you still want to repay me somehow, I would love to learn the technique of casting magic without incantations.”

“I learned it by accident, but I would gladly oblige. Please use me in your experiments.” Twisting his large stature in the cramped carriage, Ox bowed to me.

I’d been secretly practicing casting magic without incantations, based on what my street performer friends (Maiya and Sorio the sword-dancers, to be exact) had taught me, but I was struggling to see any progress. Aside from the business of my shop, I remembered that Gimul had started an expansion project, a coliseum being one of the main attractions of the new town. I remembered that because I’d collected materials for the project. If I could tweak that medicine right and get Ox up to shape, I wouldn’t mind him

resuming his career as a gladiator.

I'd feel the safest when he's guarding the shop, but I want my workplace to encourage the passions of my employees. During one of my small talks with Orest, he had mentioned that some nobles even purchased slaves with the very intent of making them into gladiators. If Ox wanted to do it, I would get my money's worth that way.

I explained to Ox that I'd chosen him with that backup plan in mind.

"I never expected to be treated with such kindness after becoming a slave." With a mix of what looked like a smile and teary eyes, Ox kept thanking me, and I kept accepting. Although I couldn't help but think that he should be thanking Orest more than me.



“Why thank *him*?” Ox asked.

“I guess that reaction says a lot about how you got along with him... But he did recommend you, and I’d bet that he knew all about this medicinal project and my background as well.”

Magic leakage and long-lasting magical energy potions were rare, but he was at least a second-generation slave trader. Assuming he liked people as much as I liked slimes, he’d likely used his position to interact with countless people, day after day. I wouldn’t have been surprised if he’d come across at least one person with magic leakage, or someone with knowledge of the kind of medicine I was working on. Even if that wasn’t the case, Orest knew about Ox’s technique, and I believed that exploring ideas to improve that tactic alone could lead him to long-lasting magic recovery potions.

“He pretended not to know, in order to keep you close as part of the ‘problematic inventory’... Since he did sell you to me, he probably did that so he’d get a buyer he approved of.” Like Ox pointed out, making medicine to give to a slave would be a strict expense. Not just in terms of materials, either; anyone who didn’t know how to make them may have to make a special order for it. Knowing how much Ox could look after himself with just one hand, I wondered if any other buyer would have been willing to spend the money and time on him. That would have been such a waste of Ox’s talent. If anyone had treated one of my slimes that way, I would have been outraged. If I was in the position to choose who to give my slimes to, I would make sure to never let anyone who would waste their talents even lay a finger on them.

“You must really like slimes, Master... I’ve never been compared to a slime before,” Ox muttered. The rest of the carriage chuckled, but I was beginning to understand why Orest was so selective of who was going to buy Ox.

I, for one, had some knowledge of medicine, and I didn’t even hide that. Besides, I was apparently quite well-known in Gimul for treating my employees well.

Some merchants thought I was too soft on my workers, or that I was too wasteful, but those criticisms only supported how well each employee was treated. Orest, who had boasted about how much research he’d done on me,

would have known that, of course.

“I can’t be too sure... But take the innocent conversation about the slave-gladiators, for example. I feel like he was nudging me in this direction with little insinuations all the way.”

How much did he know? The more I wondered, the less malice I saw in him... But continuing to think about him wasn’t doing me any favors. “I think I’m starting to understand how you feel...” The adults in the carriage gave me the same look a support group would give to a newcomer.

Chapter 5 Episode 26: Bonding

That night...

“And then we took our leave. Now that I’ve gone through it, it seemed a lot longer than a few hours.”

“Oh, I’m so sorry.”

For the fourth time that night, I had recounted the events of the day, this time to Elise. She seemed understanding and familiar with Orest’s character. The conversation was beginning to drift to another topic when I realized something, after all this time. “Um... Do you all...”

“Yes?” Reinhart prompted.

“This may seem like an awkward question... But do *all* of you try not to talk about my past?” Time froze in the room, as everyone’s expressions turned very stony. *Figures...*

“What made you think that?” Reinhart asked bluntly.

The thought had first occurred to me when Orest had asked me various things at the Moulton Company. Whenever Orest tried to discuss my past, one of the three adults there interrupted. Even when I asked to become a technician, the room felt heavy (I thought they were about to tell me some other downside to the gig) before he would just ask how I acquired my knowledge and skills. They had imagined some particular backstory for me after seeing how high my pain tolerance was. I’d always felt their care to sidestep the topic, and Gain said that people would normally keep from asking about them. After all this time, it took today’s encounter for me to finally realize that maybe they were taking the matter of my past more seriously than me.

“Um... I appreciate the thought, but I don’t think it’s bothering me as much as it is all of you.”

“You sure? You’re not just saying that?” Pioro asked.

“Yes, I’m not downplaying it or anything. Of course, I don’t enjoy being interrogated, but if it’s with people I can trust like you, regardless of my

position...”

In fact, the Gods had gone through the trouble of whipping up a backstory for me. Not mentioning it myself might have worsened their misunderstanding, but as far as I was concerned, they could have asked me any time.

“I’m sorry to put you on the spot... But if I didn’t bring it up now, I thought I’d lose the chance...” *Now that I’ve noticed, I don’t want them to continue feeling bad for me when I could simply tell them...* It was still a fabricated backstory, of course, but I just wanted to reassure them.

“It’s fine, Ryoma. No need for you to apologize,” Reinhart stated.

“Indeed. We were a bit dramatic, weren’t we?” Serge chimed in, and the room filled up with forced chuckles. How awkward.

Elise cleared her throat. “Well, then, Ryoma. I would like to hear your story, at least as much of it as you are comfortable telling us. Like your grandparents who raised you, for example.”

“Of course.” I prepared my status board and visualized two titles I had never shown anyone before. “Nothing special; this was back in my village. They raised me, helping me study and teaching me how to fight. But I’ve been told they were rather famous outside of the village. These might explain things.” I handed Elise the status board, and she let out a gasp before she even took it. Once she did, she covered her face with her free hand.

“Elise?” Her husband asked.

“Just take a look...” She handed the board off to Reinhart, who had a similar reaction. Then the card was passed to Serge, followed by Pioro.

“S-Sage’s Apprentice?!”

“Champion’s Apprentice?! For real?!”

“It says it right there, doesn’t it...?” I’d heard that they were supposed to be famous, but watching their reaction made me realize that they were a *really* big deal. It took some time for the four of them to calm down, after managing to deduce who had raised me from those two titles.

Reinhart sighed. “Ryoma... Have you shown this to anybody else?”

“No, you’re the first to see it.”

“Good...” He answered in blatant relief, clearly with the unspoken signal that I shouldn’t be waving said titles around.

“Judging by your reactions, I feel like that would cause quite a stir if it got out.”

“Damn right it would,” Pioro exclaimed. “Don’t tell me you don’t know about *who* those two were?”

“I had some inclinations while they taught me that they were extraordinary people... But they were never the type to brag about that, or flaunt any stories.” I explained that I only considered them an elderly couple who were slightly stronger and more knowledgeable than most.

“It makes sense now,” Reinhart nodded. “This makes things quite clear indeed.”

“Their humility didn’t do you any favors, in this case,” his wife chimed in.

“No wonder you got all sorts of information in there... And no wonder you’re such an ass-kicker.”

“With those two being your only frame of reference in a secluded environment, no one could blame you for not recognizing your own talents.”

The four adults all sighed again for the umpteenth time this evening, looking rather exhausted. They went on to list some of the numerous legends they had heard of the old couple.

According to them, my grandmother, the Sage Meria, was a brilliant woman who excelled in most fields of study, but especially in medicine and magic. She had attended the academy in the capital, having published many theses and research papers from that young age; each field of academia contained a sect of “Merian” scholars, and her studies were still highly praised to this day.

My grandfather, the Champion Tigral, had never lost a match to anyone his age, even before receiving any training. He began hunting monsters at age seven, and set out looking for those stronger than him to seek their tutelage. With talent and dedication, he quickly grew to outclass each master. By the

time of his death, the legend he left behind was that no weapon could withstand his full strength, and that he always destroyed his own weapons. While this story was unverified, the fact remained that he was a blacksmith, and an excellent one at that; any one of his pieces would fetch the price of a decently sized house.

In any case, the adults spent the rest of tea time talking about how highly regarded they were, and how they were on another level from your average fighter or scholar. It was interesting to me, since I got to hear a lot more details than what I was told before, and I was grateful for that, since I was going to visit where they had lived. Besides, I felt closer to those in the room for being able to talk about my past. That being said...

“Just so I’m clear... If someone with nefarious intentions finds out about this, then...”

“You’ll be in danger.”

“They’ll come after you.”

“I’ve said this a bunch over the past few days, but those in power can’t get enough knowledge and skills.”

“Your history of studying under those two alone has great value.”

I wondered if Gain and the others made up this backstory because they thought I could get away with anything if I just said I studied under those two. As I walked back to my room, I resolved to ask them about that the next time I saw them.

■ ■ ■

The next day arrived, and as I started my fifth day in the Duke’s residence, I was getting used to the extravagance of my room.

Apparently, the servants were getting used to me as well. “Oh, Master Takebayashi, the head chef was looking for you just now. He wanted to know if you were available to attend a tasting for wedding food offerings around noon.”

“Thank you. I would love to be there.”

“Hey! Are you going to finish up the venue this afternoon? I heard some guys

arguing whether it was going to be finished today or tomorrow."

"We finished the foundation yesterday, and I think the upper half will be mostly done today. But we still need to decorate, so it won't be completely finished until that's out of the way."

When walking through the manor, I was being spoken to much more often. Up until now, although we had been preparing the wedding together, the servants had always kept a distance appropriate for a guest. While they still maintained a threshold of professionalism, I felt a little closer to them.

"The experiment you began the other day is doing wonders," Lulunese said. "The way you dealt with the girls who were almost dismissed spread through the grapevine, along with rumblings of your kindness. I've also heard them say that they feel like they can ask you anything."

Ask me anything...? Wasn't that a normal thing for most people? On second thought, I recognized that many people wouldn't share my sentiment. *What does normal mean, anyway?* "I'm just glad they're not afraid of me."

We casually walked to the magic training grounds, where the experiment to improve the sugar scrubs was already underway. I spotted Fay and Ox near the corner.

"Thanks for waiting," I called to the volunteers who had gathered in the courtyard. It was time to start the sugar scrub experiment.

"Now then, we tried combinations of scented oils last time, but I wanted to focus on improving the scrub itself. Which oil to use, how fine the mumiteau particles should be, and so on. Compare two samples under the same conditions, and make note of anything you notice, no matter how insignificant."

I called Ox and Fay over. Those who worked for the Duke, especially those who had worked under Fay, were very diligent, so I felt safe delegating supervision to them. If all I needed to do was collect feedback, I didn't have to be involved every step of the way; ergo, I'd decided to multitask by starting to prepare the crafting process of magic potions for Ox. With the wedding approaching quickly, I wanted to be as efficient as possible.

"Thank you for waiting."

“I’ve brought my weapons and status board as you’ve asked, Master.”

“And a supply of magic potions as well.”

“Thank you.” The best way to fine-tune the magic potion to Ox was to balance out the potion’s recovery amount with Ox’s expenditure of magic while wielding his sword. If the potion was too ineffective, his magic would run out eventually, but if the potion recovered too much magic too quickly, Ox would become overmagicked by the excess magical energy. To find the right balance, I needed to find out how much magical energy he stored, and how much of it he spent every second. Lucky for us, the status board showed the exact numerical value of that person’s magical energy.

I explained all of this to Ox and had him show me his status board. “Your magical energy count is...315. I’m not sure if that’s less or more than I’d expected.” I had heard that even those who mainly used physical weapons could cast sufficient supplementary spells with a magic count of about 500.

“I never used to rely on magic... This is all I have, after I trained myself as much as I possibly could once I’d lost my hand. I doubt that this is a significant amount.”

The lower his total magic count was, the easier it was for him to OD on the potions. I would have to start low and scale the potions up. “Well, let’s just see how long you can keep up that spell for now. Miss Lulunese, do you have the watch?”

“Right here,” she said, producing a magical item in the shape of a pocket watch. I tasked her with keeping the time, and handed the status board to Fay.

“I’m told that magic expenditure is affected by one’s mental state. We’ll measure this repeatedly and find the mean value. Later on, I’d like to explore different scenarios as well. But let’s start with a full-force match.”

“Understood!” Ox obliged.

We continued measuring Ox’s magical endurance until noon. The sugar scrub testers had evidently been sneaking glances our way. I felt bad about how Libiola had to run around reprimanding them. No surprise that all the commotion would have made them curious...

Chapter 5 Episode 27: Wedding Venue Completed

“Right, and with that...”

“It’s finished!”

All of us erupted in a cheer; it was the fifth evening, and we had finally finished the wedding venue. There was already a plaza and foundation for the reception venue, but we’d added a chapel for the ceremony, as well as a bell tower that would toll in celebration. The chapel was actually more like a gazebo, its oval roof being supported by pillars. It might have looked like an open clam, but we decided that opening the structure up this way would allow the guests to see the altar more clearly. I had also colored a pane of hardening fluid to make it resemble a stained glass window. During the day, it would help natural light illuminate the couple and the divine statues. Of course, there were no attendees or statues now, but the sunset created a contrast of color on the structure’s beige walls which made it look majestic, especially considering how quickly we set it up. The maids would start bringing in any tools or decorations needed for the ceremony, and the statues which had been in development night after night were almost ready to be brought in. The place would be even more impressive on the big day.

Just as I was wondering if there was anything else I had to do...

“Ryoma! Thanks for the awesome venue!”

“Hughes?!”

He picked me right up while I was looking over the venue. Before I knew it, the other security volunteers had joined in, collectively tossing me in the air for no reason.

“Um... Why are you doing this?”

“Because we can!”

Did anyone wonder whether they should have? It seemed like the whole crowd was hyped up. “We’re done for the day, aren’t we?”

“Yes, but—”

“Oh yeah! Let’s go get *hammered*, boys!”

The crowd erupted in cheers once again, still tossing me up in the air.



They've already got alcohol on the brain? Just as I had gained more air time than any of the previous tosses...

"Not on my watch, you won't," a chilly female voice spoke, which left no hands to catch me.

"Oof!"

"Master Ryoma!"

"Dang it!"

"You all right?!"

"Are you hurt, kid?!"

"I'm fine. I'm technically an adventurer, after all." Despite my surprise, I'd managed to stick the landing. I looked up to find the men, who also looked surprised, and Araune the housekeeper. She must have been the one whose voice I'd just heard. I could see Lulunese and Libiola behind her.

"Are you hurt, Master Ryoma?" Araune asked.

"No, I'm completely fine."

"Thank goodness... I evidently picked a bad time to speak up. My apologies."

"Oh, no, it's nothing." What was she trying to say, anyway?

"Now, as I was saying. It's all fine for you all to go out drinking, but not with Master Ryoma."

"C-Come on, Miss Araune. Ryoma's got protection from the God of Wine, so he can hold his liquor just fine. Can't we return the favor for him, since he's been working so hard for us?"

"Drinking is one thing, but getting 'hammered' is quite different. If all of you decide to disappear into the night, will Master Ryoma have to walk home alone in the pitch darkness? Will the bartender even let him come in with you?"

"W-Well..."

"If I may... I don't think it's a good idea."

"Even you, Lulunese..."

It sounded like Hughes was trying to take me out to a party, but now that Lulunese had joined the protest, things weren't looking too hot for him. Personally, I didn't mind tagging along, but I figured it wouldn't be a good look if I did. Then, Libiola crouched down like she wanted to tell me something.

"Aren't they just talking about going out for drinks?" I asked.

"Even if it starts out that way, they'll start doing more than drinking before long. There are just two days left before the wedding, after all." Apparently the date had something to do with it, but it wasn't clicking with me. Libiola seemed to have guessed as much, so she continued explaining.

"Both the bride and groom spend the night before the wedding with their respective families. That's why tonight is their last night being 'single.' The bride and the women can have fun drinking as well, but the men, well..."

"It's all right, Miss Libiola. I think I know where you're going with this..." So they were going to hit up more *"mature"* establishments, especially after getting some drinks in at the bar. Probably zero chance of me sneaking into a place like that, not that I ever wanted to try. I'd never even patronized a place like that during my life in Japan.

"Sorry. I shouldn't have made a lady explain something like that."

"No apologies necessary, Sir. You caught on before I had to say it..."

I had been so removed from those things that it had completely slipped my mind. Making a lady explain to me that the men were trying to take me to a brothel? That's borderline sexual harassment for sure. *Note to self, be more careful.*

Ultimately, though, if that was the plan they had in mind, then... "Sorry, Hughes. I appreciate the thought, but..."

There was no way I could go. I'd have loved to celebrate with them, but if I ended up getting them in trouble by being there, that'd really dampen their spirits. They'd already shown me their gratitude, so I wanted them to go on and have fun without feeling bad for me. So I just apologized to Hughes, and he finally relented.

"All right. But as far as I'm concerned, I owe you a drink. Hell, alcohol's fair

game at the wedding.”

“In that case, I’ll happily tag along until you’ve drunk yourself under the table.”

“Oh, now you’re talkin’! That oughta be fun!” His spirits seemed to leap right back up at my offer, and he set off out into town. As for the others, they started throwing someone in the air again as they disappeared into the distance. Perhaps that was a common method of celebration around these parts.

Meanwhile, Lulunese was staring in the direction the men had set off toward. I was actually surprised that she let him off the hook, knowing exactly what kind of establishment they were going to. *I always figured most women must hate even the thought of their partners hitting up a brothel...* I wondered whether I should say something.

“Miss Libiola, the inner machinations of the female mind truly do elude me...”

“I don’t think anyone expects you to understand.” She went on to console me, if I could call it that, saying she would be concerned for a child’s well-being if he was thoroughly acquainted with the female mind.

Lulunese seemed to hear our conversation, and said, “I understand that men like to have a sense of camaraderie, and that they have the urge to visit such establishments. In any case, this will be his *last* such excursion for *the rest of his life*, so I shan’t be one to complain.”

“I see.” That was a rather strenuous emphasis... But she blushed, adding that she had no intention of becoming nor letting him become single again, the strawberry shade of her cheeks steadily ripening... But who was I to meddle in their marriage? I just had a feeling that Hughes might have relinquished the pants for the rest of his life.

■ ■ ■

That evening, we met for tea as usual, where the topic of conversation had carried over from the previous day.

“Anything we want you to do?”

“Is there anything you can think of?” I asked the party around the table. After

seeing how gravely they had been considering my background, I wondered if there was anything they were holding back. I was able to talk to them so easily, so I didn't want them to keep anything from me for my sake. They would never pressure me into anything anyway, and I could always decide whether I can handle it or not after hearing them out. Of course, I'd want them to be careful with confidential info, but they were well aware of that. I explained all of this to them, and they shared a chuckle.

"There's something we want to request of you..." Serge parroted.

"Ryoma, don't go saying that to other nobles," Pioro added.

"He's right," Elise chimed in. "Someone nefarious may jump at the opportunity to demand money from you or ask something impossible of you. I know it's because you trust us, though."

"A lot of people won't say no to us even if they wanted to," Reinhart said. "We can't really be vocal about our problems, because they can sneak in an opportunity to manipulate us somehow... But I don't see a problem in telling you, Ryoma."

Each of them seemed to accept my request in their own way. I waited for a few minutes, but no requests came my way.

"Hmm... I think I've made much more than I've put in with the waterproof fabric, metal, music boxes..." Serge muttered.

"Same goes for me," Pioro agreed. "The mushroom farm alone would have covered it. If it takes off, I'd owe you some favors. But if you're twisting my arm about it... Oh, remember how you drained some game using bloody slime? I'd like to learn more about that."

In that case, maybe he could help me multiply my bloody slime. Now was the time to do it, especially because of their important role when it came to plasma. I wanted to increase their numbers before anyone figured out how valuable they were; currently, I still only had nine of them, since they didn't multiply so well.

"If word gets around, wars would be fought over them," Serge commented.

Elise nodded in agreement. "Literal wars, quite possibly."

“If we can increase the supply, we may be able to keep the demand low enough for us to step in and keep things peaceful.”

“And having them kept in multiple locations would minimize the risk of losing all of them through some sort of freak accident. Most importantly, I trust Pioro. We have a store branch over in Lenaf, so it won’t be hard to communicate.”

“That’s a huge responsibility... Why don’t you lend me some bloody slimes ‘for draining game,’ just to test the waters? I want to know how much of a game-changer they’ll be, and what I’d need to prepare. I’m sure there’s a bunch you were able to teach me about keeping them, too.”

“Right. Let’s not rush into it, and take our time talking this over.” And so we set that topic aside for now.

Just as I was wondering if they were going to mention anything else, Reinhart quietly spoke up. “Could you possibly open a branch of the laundry service here in Gaunago?”

“No problem. I’m training people with the idea of setting up more branches, and that’s why I increased security. I’ll have to look into where we can build one... But may I ask why?”

“I might have told you this before, but the house of Jamil, from my father’s time as the duke, has been working on improving the environment of our land, particularly to prevent the spread of diseases.”

Come to think of it, Reinbach was outraged when that disease came out of the septic tank. Not that anyone shouldn’t have been.

“I’ve been told that the most important aspect of preventing ailments is to keep oneself clean. You’ve mentioned something like that too, didn’t you, Ryoma? Something about airborne and contact illnesses.”

“I remember that. It was shortly after we first met. That was barely even a year ago, too; kinda hard to believe that.”

“Right. I was curious how you’d gained such knowledge, but it all made sense when you told us yesterday how you’ve received Lady Meria’s tutelage. If she too had emphasized the importance of personal hygiene, I concluded that inviting you to open a branch in our town would lead to decreasing the chances

of diseases breaking out. I've heard wonderful things about your business; not only can the common citizen keep themselves clean for a reasonable price, but there is no heavy labor involved either. Even men who usually tend to not pay too much mind to their cleanliness frequent your establishment; perhaps they are your best customers. If it helps prevent diseases on top of that, I couldn't ask for anything better."

That made sense. For the sake of his land and his people, he wanted to keep an eye on it close to him, sort of like a trial... Now I was thinking about what I could do to aid him in that goal.

Then I wondered what kind of mature establishment Hughes had gone to. What if I spread a rumor that the ladies preferred men who kept themselves clean? I didn't know how much of an effect that would have, but I thought the clientele of such establishments must have some sort of want for female attention. Besides, I assumed that those who ran those establishments must have had a preference for clean customers, even if just to lower the risk of their employees contracting diseases. Plus, I had nothing to lose from gaining more clients.

Come to think of it, those establishments must produce more dirty laundry than most other places. I've had people running ordinary inns come in for a recurring contract, but I don't have any contracts with those mature establishments yet... At least, I didn't think I did; if I did, there weren't many of them. I could see myself making some cold calls to get things rolling. Or did I want to set up a shop dedicated to those businesses? In modern Japan, such establishments were usually run by the yakuza, so I started tallying up the forces I had available to me to defend.

"Ryoma?"

"Yes?! Sorry, I was lost in my thoughts."

"Well, if it's too much for you to handle, then..."

"No, I was just mulling over how to go about running the new location."

"Oh, I see. I trust your business decisions, of course, but there's no need to go the extra mile just for my sake. I just want to see how your service would impact the area."

It didn’t seem like I had to worry too much about this request either. We decided that I should talk it over with Carme before hammering down any of the details. I was ready to hear the next request when Reinhart added, “I have a great spot in mind for your location here. You may see nobles or their servants as customers, and I could recommend someone who can train your staff to interact with that clientele...”

“There’s a newly invented magical item that can help adventurers when they camp,” Serge jumped in. “Would you like to try one? I’d love to hear what you think after you’ve...”

“I’ve got your back when it comes to food, Ryoma,” Pioro piped up. “We may have travel rations, but you have the Dimension Home, so...”

“I’m raising sprint rabbits to feed my familiars, since they multiply so quickly. They can turn into quite a pest, so you need to train with the Tamers’ Guild to handle them, but...”

Before I knew it, they were all talking about helping me out again. I was very grateful, of course, but it left me at a loss as to when I could turn the discussion back to me helping them out... But their generosity made me feel all warm and fuzzy, so who was I to complain?

Chapter 5 Episode 28: Bad Timing

“Sweet!”

The next day, I was shaking with excitement early in the morning. Incredibly, I’d woken up to find that one of the sticky slimes had evolved! Casting Appraisal, I was greeted with this info:

Latex Slime Skills: Mucus Production 6, Harden 1, Fusion 1, Physical Attack Resistance 2, Jump 1, Consume 4, Absorption 4, Split 3

What was I looking at...? Evidently, it was a “latex slime.” The word “latex” immediately brought to mind the white, sticky substance secreted from rubber trees. In fact, the slime seemed to be the spitting image of latex itself. I had been feeding this slime Dante’s Stalk. Latex, *i.e.* the ingredient itself as used to make rubber, was mostly taken from rubber trees, but it could be secreted from other plants, most notably the dandelion. Dante shared some similarities with dandelions on Earth. While I couldn’t be sure until I performed some experiments, I thought it most likely that the slime would act exactly like the latex I expected. There was a good chance I could make rubber out of this slime’s excretion.

Unfortunately, the ability of the slime itself had drastically fallen. *Compared to when it was a sticky slime, its Physical Attack Resistance, Consume, and Absorption went up a level, but Jump dropped 2 levels. Strong Sticky Solution, Hardening Solution, Sticky String Shot, Staff Mastery, and Seed Sowing are all completely gone...*

I’d never seen anything like this happen before. Was this evolution an outlier, or was that the case for all of the others I’d seen so far? Was it normal for their abilities to fluctuate and even change over evolution? The latex slime, in any case, had evolved from a gelatin-like sticky slime. Maybe because it had gained more water mass; I couldn’t tell for sure.

At any rate, this was the first one that had evolved to a latex slime. *I’m gonna need more data and research...!*

Some time had passed since I found out that a portion of the sticky slimes

preferred Dante's Stalk. It was possible that the amount of latex in the stalk was minuscule, which gave them only a small amount per meal...

"Good morning, Master Takebayashi."

Wait, was it already late enough in the morning to have visitors?

"Master Takebayashi?"

"Uh, good morning! Please, come in!" I called through the door, and Lulunese quietly came in.

"Good morning. Breakfast is ready... Is something the matter?"

"No, not at all. One of my slimes evolved, and I kinda lost track of time examining it. I'll be out soon." Sadly, I would have to wait until after breakfast to resume studying this slime...

I quickly prettied myself up and came down for breakfast.

"You look delighted this morning." Reinhart started.

"Perhaps something serendipitous happened to him," his wife added.

"Knowing Ryoma, it's gotta be something to do with slimes," said Pioro.

"Perhaps one of them has evolved?"

They totally saw through me... Was I really that easy to read? "You'd be correct. One of my sticky slimes evolved into a latex slime."

"Latex slime... Another new species?" Reinhart asked.

Elise answered in part, "It's not a common advanced species, at the very least."

"Can this one do anything special?"

"It only secretes mucus for now, but if this mucus is the substance I think it is, it could be a ubiquitous material for all sorts of things." I wondered if rubber existed in this world. Come to think of it, I couldn't recall seeing anything made out of rubber here, even though I'd encountered some things that felt rubbery to the touch, like an armor made of grell frog hide...

I shared my curiosity with the group, and Serge spoke up. "If I may... I believe

you are talking about gwum, Master Ryoma.” He told me about a port at the end of the continent to the far south; beyond the port was a cluster of islands. By sailing for a month or two, stopping at those islands along the way for supplies, one would reach another continent. Unlike the one we were on, the climate there was tropical, with temperate weather and an entirely different culture. Rubber trees did like high temperature and humidity, after all.

“Gwum is exactly as you’ve described, Master Ryoma—a type of hardened sap. I’ve heard that this land is ripe with such trees. However, the continent has placed an embargo on both the tree and its sap. There is almost no chance we could find any of it here.”

I remembered how rubber trees would only grow near the Amazon river, and once its utility was recognized and people started calling it “black gold,” Britain held a monopoly on it for a while... The likelihood that gwum and rubber were the same thing climbed further.

“That said, I don’t think that material is as useful as you seem to think, Master Ryoma...”

“Really?”

“It can be made into children’s toys, simple containers, and used to waterproof fabric, if I recall, but it is not a durable substance; it is prone to melting or tearing.”

Wait a minute... That sounded like natural, raw latex. Were they not adding any sulfur or carbon? People only figured out how useful rubber was after they figured out how to vulcanize it... And that drove its price up and led to a monopoly. And yet in this world, it’s already monopolized without any good use for it? Something didn’t seem right; I said as much to them.

“The people of that continent have an important use of gwum rooted in their culture, so most of their supply seems to be dedicated to that.”

I’d just realized that Serge was skirting around what that use was, exactly... Was it wise to keep asking?

“Considering your age... Well, with your knowledge in medicine, Master Ryoma, I’m sure you are already aware of this use, as well as its necessity. But

let us speak of it after breakfast," he concluded and we enjoyed small talk for the rest of the meal.

■ ■ ■

After breakfast, I asked Serge what he was talking about as he was leaving, and he simply stated, "Contraception."

"Oh, that explains it..." It certainly would have been tactless to talk about that over breakfast, let alone in Elise's presence.

"The people of that continent are quite sexually open; there are villages around the continent that have their own culture of polygamy, in any combination. Many regions see the act itself as a rite to adulthood, as well. I once traveled across the sea in my younger days, following an adventurous impulse, and I was certainly taken aback by the difference in culture. Both men and women wore much less clothing than we do, and out in the countryside, many walked around the streets practically naked."

Many myths on Earth were sexual in nature too. I wasn't all that surprised to learn a place like that existed. Of course, with sexual liberty came certain risks.

"They would engage in intimacy much more frequently, in addition to any rituals that involved it. I've heard that, back in the day, there were many issues caused by it. Diseases, for one, and women bearing children *through* their maturing rite. With the use of gwum contraception, those issues have died down. Unfortunately, some who don't understand their culture describe the southern people as savages. But, at the very least, they have better awareness and knowledge when it comes to sexually transmitted diseases and contraception."

In this nation, contraception was mostly done through medicine, for both sexes. If the drug was of poor quality or used incorrectly, the side effects weren't pretty. On the other hand, gwum contraceptives were much safer, and they were even being exported here as a luxury item for nobles.

"I see..." There were some diverse cultures in this world. It was quite interesting to hear stories of other countries.

Then, Serge asked me a question. "Is this 'rubber' you mentioned something

similar, Master Ryoma?”

“They’re both made from the same latex, I believe. You can think of rubber as gwum which is processed for wider applications.”

Serge made an intrigued sound, and I asked if the embargo in the south would be an issue. “The embargo only applies to exporting the tree or its seeds from the southern continent; it has no bearing on how you use the mucus of a slime in this continent.”

Looks like I was in the clear to start experimenting. “I’ll see if I can make rubber out of latex slime mucus, then.”

“Please let me know if you have any other questions I may be able to answer. I’m looking forward to seeing the end result.”

I thanked the smiling Serge for indulging me, and parted ways.

Now, let’s get cracking! I wondered if I could get some lamons if I stopped by the kitchen. If not, I was sure that diluting the acid of an acid slime could help me make organic rubber. That much, I could multitask with the sugar scrub research before noon. But what about the sulfur I needed to adjust its durability and resilience...? I could extract carbon from coal, but maybe I’d have to resort to alchemy in order to— “Master Takebayashi!” A maid stopped me in my tracks in a rather frantic manner.

“Good morning. Is something wrong?”

“Something about the pond by the wedding venue... I was told to find you as quickly as possible.”

“Pond...? I wonder what that could mean. Thanks, I’ll head over there now. Oh, but before I go, could you tell Miss Libiola that I’m going to check on the venue? This might take a while.”

“Understood, sir.”

After her confirmation, I turned toward the venue. What was going on?

■ ■ ■

Just as the venue came into view in the distance through the trees... Something was off. Something damp and rank, unlike anything I had ever

smelled before, invaded my nostrils on the wings of a gentle breeze. Like some sort of rotten vegetation...

The smell intensified with every step I took toward the venue. Soon, I came to a reddened lake and a crowd gathered at the edge of it, composed of the leaders of each department involved in the wedding, as well as Reinhart and Elise.

“Sorry I took so long!”

“Hey, Ryoma. Good to see you,” answered Bahtz, the head chef, with a very concerned expression.

“What happened to the lake?”

The man who had attended the meetings as a representative of the gardeners pointed to something.

“See for yourself.”

A plant with string-thin roots, adorned with sea-grape-like bunches; it was a brighter shade of red than the lake water, with the same pungent stink coming from it. Not exactly the sort of vegetation you’d want growing in your backyard.

“It’s a water plant called a venoblum. This thing stores up nutrients through spring, summer, and fall, before multiplying like crazy on a winter’s day. It happens every year, but looks like they had an early season.”

“They couldn’t have waited a few more days...?”

“Are they really going to get married with *this* thing around...?”

I could hear some concerned murmurs from the crowd, and I couldn’t blame them. The blood-red lake looked like something out of a cheesy horror movie poster, and it wasn’t doing wonders in terms of juxtaposition for the church I’d built, either; it’d probably look derelict next to this scenery. Worst of all, who would want to eat with this rotten stench stinging their nostrils?

“Can’t we do anything about it?”

“We can block off the water at its source and drain the lake. Getting rid of all of the venoblum after that would get everything back to normal. But just draining the water alone would take me a whole day. I’d need at least five days

to get everything back to normal, including the river flow.”

The wedding would either have to go on under these circumstances or be postponed. Disappointment seeped through the crowd upon hearing the expert opinion. But I still had hope.

“I think we can still pull this off. I’ve got a cunning plan.” All eyes were fixated on me. And among them, only Reinhart and Elise seemed to clue into what that cunning plan was.

“Let me guess, Ryoma. Slimes, right? Not like there’s much else you can use, is there?”

“Bingo.”

The gardener had estimated five days of work to drain the lake, remove the vegetation, and restore the water, if performed by manpower alone and in that order. What if I made slimes take in the water, the plants, and any other grime that was left? What if I used a whole flood of slimes? That was likely to save us some time, at the very least. We were still within the Duke’s residence too. Everyone here was an old member who had served the dukedom for ages, which meant I could trust them. They wouldn’t share my secret even if I let out slimes bigger than big.

“Dimension Home.” First off, I called out three king scavenger slimes that I had enlarged.

“Whoa!”

“What are those gigantic slimes?!”

“They’re too big to even be big slimes... He’s contracted big slimes?”

As the confused workers watched in shock, I ordered the slimes to go into the lake. The king scavenger slimes slowly sank into the water, proceeding to the center of the lake and making large waves. While the lake had a large surface area, it was shallow enough for the top of the king scavenger slimes to remain over the water as they slithered on the bottom, which would still be seven feet or so.

“Put a little more distance between you... That’ll do! Now keep your bodies

flat, so you have more surface area...”

Activate Gluttony!

The water above the slimes began to ripple until small whirls appeared. “The slimes seem fine, so I’ll make them take in the water and plants in the lake.”

“Will it be ready by the ceremony tomorrow, Ryoma?”

“I won’t know until it’s done, but I have a lot more slimes where they came from. I’ll leave the lake to the king scavengers. I’ll take care of things upstream and downstream with other slimes to get this done. Nothing’s impossible if you just give it a try!”

“Not sure I follow, but I’ll go and close the watergate upstream!”

“Then let’s move ahead with decorations as planned...under the assumption that the ceremony will take place tomorrow!”

The eyes of Bahtz, the gardener, and the other team leaders lit up again. Though I wouldn’t have any time today for research thanks to this, Hughes and Lulunese were more important to me. Cleaning and deodorizing were my specialties! Ultimately, the process continued late into the night...

Extra Story: Before the Press Release *Tabuchi's Side* "Tabuchi, another round! Go on, crack 'em!"

"Whoops...!"

The landlady, Urami, and I, who'd hardly known each other before tonight, had gotten carried away telling old stories of the director, while in the process of putting the contents of Urami's home bar to good use.

"Eating takeout's classic bachelor shit, wouldn't you agree?"

"I know it's not healthy, but I can't help it. Especially when all I've got in the fridge is booze and junk food."

"Well, that's all well and good while you're still young, but that all goes out the window once you're married."

"Ha! Like that'll ever happen."

While we were joking around like that, the doorbell rang.

"Hmm? Who could that be...? No one ever visits me. Excuse me a moment," Urami stood and went to answer his door.

"You're too young to play the old bachelor, y'know. You remind me of Takebayashi. Aren't there any girls at the office you have your eyes on?"

"Our company's a bit too crazy for that right now. Anyone with free time's a bear trap, so there's nothing I can... What's up, Urami?"

Urami had returned with a man I didn't recognize. He was a little older than the director, clad in a pretty sharp suit that looked quite expensive, whether it was tailor-made or brand name merch.

"What are you doing in his apartment, dad?!"

"Huh? Oh, Kenji. What are *you* doing here?"

"Mom asked me to stop by."

“You’re the landlady’s son?”

“I guess so. He apparently left saying he’d be right back, so his son came looking for him.”

“Ah, we kind of got on a roll.”

Then, Kenji turned to us. “I apologize for my father’s intrusion.”

“Oh, no. I was the one who asked him to stay in the first place. I’m sorry I kept him for so long.”

“No apology necessary. My father has a habit of overstaying his welcome when drinks are involved... Oh, where are my manners?” Kenji produced a business card from his pocket, which I instinctively took.

Kenji Oya...?!

I was astonished by the title listed next to his name. Preceding the name of a very famous and successful company were three letters: CEO.

“Th-Thank you kindly. Here is mine,” Urami answered.

Right, I better give him my card, too! I quickly rummaged through my pockets. Of all the times to lose my own business cards...! The CEO Kenji’s eyes felt like daggers.

“Um... Apologies if I’m mistaken, but are you Mr. Tabuchi?” He asked. How did someone like him know about me? I tried to think of even a guess, but those drinks seemed to slur my thought process.

“Uh, yes...?”

“I knew it!”

“Have we met?”

“Baba from your office told me a lot about you.”

Oh... Baba had mentioned a *connection*... That made sense.

“I see. Baba...” I asked for details, and heard that a company Kenji used to work in to gain some experience had been one of our clients. He had met Baba then, and went on to trust our work to create part of the software when he started his own company.

“He’s been very good to me, but I haven’t a chance to speak to him since... I was just hoping to see him again when he called me. We met up and talked for a while. Mr. Tabuchi, I’ve heard you are a talented and hardworking technician, and that you worked under the late Mr. Takebayashi. He assured me that you can do anything from managing systems to developing new ones from day one, including details of your illustrious achievements. I’ve already spoken to my HR team. I was wondering if you would come and work for my company.”

“Um. That’s a great offer. Really...” Baba had apparently shown him a picture of us together one time, which allowed Kenji to identify me. It’s a small world (or maybe just dumb luck). Can’t believe I’d run into an acquaintance of an acquaintance like this...

“Hey, Tabuchi, you’re going to quit? Guess you are if you’re going to work for my son.”

“Um... Yes, to tell you the truth. Baba is one of my bosses, and he’s encouraged me. Everyone, myself included, had enough of that company, I think. Now he’s used his connections to look for new jobs for us. We’re all going to quit, and even though we’d be in different companies, we all decided we wanted a fresh start.”

The landlady nodded, and I wondered if Urami was planning to write an article about this. Whether or not that would be a good use of his time, I thought I might want to warn him against it.

Then, Kenji piped up. “You all did! Baba found a new job, too, then! How wonderful!” He was beaming.

“What?” I felt like I was choking. “Wonderful?”

“Baba took great care of me back in the day, but he’s so close to retirement. I couldn’t quite convince my HR on that one... And he may be a skilled salesman, but he can’t keep up with the job, I don’t think, physically speaking. Unfortunately, his technical skills were thoroughly average, without anything worthy of note... It didn’t work out with us.”

Come to think of it, Baba had been transferred away from sales, made to work from a department he was completely unfamiliar with from scratch. We had so much of a head start as engineers who came in with a skill set at the

ready. But even I didn't find that out until recently. He had enough skills to take care of tasks, no problem... And Kenji was right. Baba didn't have any exceptional development skills or knowledge. It wouldn't be hard to find someone more skilled than him at programming and system design. That's why he still didn't have a job?

"Baba searched everywhere for work..." I muttered.

"Oh, yes, I've heard. I keep in touch with other CEOs through seminars and social networks..." Apparently, Kenji had approached his online acquaintances about Baba. Some of them knew of Baba, but none wanted to offer him a job. There were some signs of interest, but his age was a dealbreaker. Kenji had kept one ear open for news of Baba's new employment, but had heard nothing about it.

I couldn't speak a word while Kenji explained all this. The great feeling that had swelled in my chest was gone. I had utterly sobered up, a sick feeling whirling in my gut.

"Mr. Tabuchi?"

"I didn't know anything about that. Baba said everyone..." He was the only one without a new job? He kept quiet so he wouldn't worry us?

"N-Not that I'm aware of all of Baba's connections," Kenji hastily tried to reassure me. "He could have help from someone I don't know of."

It didn't work, as I couldn't help but think of how Baba had acted that day. I couldn't keep his expression out of my mind when he had muttered "perfect" at the office.

"The press conference!"

"The press conference? Oh, that's 8 p.m. tonight, isn't it? It's a little past seven now."

"Barely even an hour...! Sorry, I need to run back to the office." I began scrambling to gather my things.

"Tabuchi? What's going on?"

"Baba's going to appear at today's press conference. A manager who's gotten

away with scandals is being demoted, leaving him with the position and the responsibility for what happened."

"What?!"

"It didn't sit right with us either, but Baba was the one who convinced us in the end."

Perfect. We're all responsible for our job until quitting time on our last day.

Baba's words kept repeating in my mind. "I can't explain it, but I'm worried about him. What if Baba does something rash at the conference? I have to go!"

If I was wrong, then great. Just my alcohol-addled brain playing tricks on me. But what if I wasn't? I had to ask him before the press conference.

I was just about to leap out the door when Kenji called, "Wait!" He caught up to me at the front door. "I have a driver and a car right outside. Let him drive you there."

"What?"

"I can't overlook what you just told me."

"Th-Thank you!" I took the offer without any time to second guess it. In the meantime, Urami had grabbed something and came to join us. Leaving the landlady at the apartment, the three of us sprinted out the door...

■ ■ ■

???'s Side **Baba, having been saddled with the title of manager, stood alone in an office. With the prepared script he had been given from the higher-ups of the company in one hand, he was gazing out of the window. His expression lacked conviction, making him look astonished, but his eyes still gleamed with strong intent. We watched the media representatives who had already gathered, apparently waiting with bated breath for the conference. Baba tightened his grip on his script when a man entered the room. He was as old as**

Baba, and despite his polished dress, he looked exhausted.

“Baba, sir. It’s almost time. If you could get ready to...” Baba kept staring out the window without answering. “Sir?”

“Mitani... I’ve devoted many years to this company. No offense to the development team, but being transferred there from sales wasn’t easy, but I stuck around. I remember working with you, too, before all of this.”

“I remember...”

“This will be my last project for this company, I think... And that brings back some memories. My first day, and the years I’ve spent working... The company was still small back then, with enough employees to count on my fingers...”

“I remember that too...” Mitani said, more quietly than before. Tears came to his eyes, and Mitani shifted his gaze to the floor.

A weak grin came over Baba’s face, shaded with some guilt. “Pardon me... This is hardly the time to be taking a stroll down memory lane, right? I’ll get ready.”

“Yes... Please.”

“I won’t fail my final project... You can count on that.”

Mitani sprung his head up, now looking at Baba. “Baba, sir...” A moment passed. “Uh, never mind.” Mitani left the room.

Now alone again, Baba stood staring out the window, his eyes burning with determination.

Afterword

Hello. Roy here, author of *By the Grace of the Gods*. Thank you so much for picking up Volume 7! I hope you enjoyed the full cast of nostalgic characters. Episodes full of happy feelings, like preparing for a wedding, are such a blast to write.

While I was working on them, I received repeated texts from a friend in Japan, and found out that they had gotten married! I also found out that several of our old classmates (whom I hadn't spoken to since graduation) had already married, too. It wasn't like I was trying to research the novel and reached out to them, either. A funny coincidence, I suppose. Happy times all around, both in the novel and in real life.

Unfortunately for me, my protagonist is technically a preteen. While I have female characters in the series who adventure with him or work with him in the shop, the series completely lacks any romantic plot lines. *By the Grace of the Gods* may be an outlier in that sense, amidst the recent trend of light novels where cute girls all want a piece of the protagonist, or at least are prominently featured throughout the series (though I may be a bit biased).

Since I wrote in Eliaria toward the beginning, I may or may not be a bit worried that some readers are feeling duped into reading the rest of the series.

In any case, Volume 7 is finally out... I feel like I say this in every postscript, but that mere fact means that there are plenty of readers who want more of this series. It fills me with joy that I have another opportunity to compose a postscript. I always relish a sense of accomplishment when I do, and it's also when I feel the closest to my readers. Thank you again, dear readers.

I'll keep trying my best to make this series a fun read for you. Until next time!

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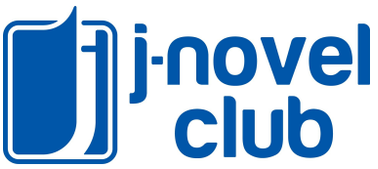
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By the Grace of the Gods: Volume 7

by Roy

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Edited by Nathan Redmond

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