
By the Grace of the Gods
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Chapter 8, Episode 1: Every End is a New Beginning

Since the duke and duchess's visit to Gimul, the city's reconstruction had grown exponentially faster. Supplies began to arrive from other cities, and by the end of January, snowfall became lighter and lighter, opening up the roads—and the city's commerce with them.

Now there was hardly anything around the city that required my help, so I'd been picking up some nearby hunting quests while I prepared my businesses to be transferred away from me. The security company was already out of my hands and into the duke's, as we had discussed before I started the venture. Almost half of the employees—former day-laborers—had returned to their hometown with their pay, and the other half would be employed directly by the duke or referred to another job by him. The same agreement had been made for the hospital attached to the headquarters, but that facility was now being used by medical professionals whose places of practice had been damaged in the attack. They were joined by Doctor Maflal and his apprentices, turning the place into a sort of university hospital where doctors both treated patients and conducted research.

Although I still owned Bamboo Forest, I'd appointed Carme, who had been helping to run the business so far, as manager. He would take over managing that location entirely, while I worked as the newly appointed Sales Director. My job now was to travel from city to city, scouting out potential locations for another branch, and to advise Carme on how to garner clients. In reality, all I had to do was make note of any locations or information that would be useful for the business in my travels as an adventurer and report it to him whenever I came back to Gimul. Same job as before, for all intents and purposes, but this gave me more freedom.

My other businesses—the trash plant, the construction company, restaurants, and hotels—had all been delegated to trusty managers I had hired. Many business owners had lost their storefronts in the attack, so I was able to hire

from a pool of displaced store owners. I think all of us made the best of the situation.

Perhaps because of my bolstered reputation from becoming the duke's engineer, plenty of employees who'd lost their workplaces in the attack—along with Tamers who worked for the security company or the Tamer's Guild—applied to work for my businesses. Interviewing them ended up being more time consuming than the actual process of transferring the businesses, but the large pool of employees helped me make sure all of my businesses were in good hands; I was able to hire a few extra pairs of hands at Bamboo Forest, too. The four departments of the laundry shop chain—front of house, accounting, security, and slime management—were each training the new hires. Many of them, as I'd been told, were easy to train because of their prior experience in business or customer service.

Training was being led by the staff of the Gimul headquarters and the three slime researchers I had hired as prospective branch managers. Conveniently, the Lenaf branch contacted me at just the right time to tell me how the trio had successfully completed their training and could be trusted with running the branch. Each of them were also in charge of their own branch, in addition to training.

Once these new hires learned our business, I was sure Carme would trust some of them to run a branch of their own in the future. We would never pressure them, of course. If they just wanted a job so they could rebuild their own business or just keep their head above water, that was their prerogative—as long as they didn't intentionally hurt my employees or steal cleaner slimes or anything.

The duke was paying me more money than I needed to cover the expenses of all of my remaining businesses, as my engineer's salary or direct payment for the businesses I'd relinquished to him. Not that I expected this setup to last forever, but there was no need for me to worry about how I'd pay my employees.

Now two months had passed since the attack, and I was really focusing on my adventurer work. Using long-range space magic that utilized limour birds and other familiars as markers, I took on most any quest I could get my hands on.

And whenever a quest required a multi-person party to take it on, I invited others to join me.

Most of the time, I went with Fei and Hudom, who were both certified adventurers whose schedules I could easily navigate. If not them, I joined the young, formerly delinquent adventurers, with whom I still kept in touch. For quests near the city, I sometimes worked with Miya and the others. I kept up the grind for three months.

“Completion of the quest is verified. With that, Mister Ryoma Takebayashi, you have passed the C rank exam. Congratulations,” declared the Guild receptionist.

“Thank you,” I said. I had met the requirements to take the exam on my last trip, and I’d completed it as soon as I reached a guild branch. However, climbing the adventurer’s ladder had come at a slight cost. “Just to be sure, the rank is being awarded to me through proper procedure and fair judgment on the part of the Adventurers’ Guild, right?”

“Of course. Your achievements, although with far more emphasis on monster and bandit hunting than most, exceeded the quota for C rank. Now that you’ve completed the second test by completing this quest, you have earned this rank through proper procedure... I am terribly sorry for what happened the other day—”

“I don’t need an apology.” I cut her off unintentionally. “From the Guild’s perspective, I can see how my progress could arouse suspicion. Still, I was assumed guilty without proof, and I was threatened with detainment and revocation of my adventuring license. I don’t want further unfounded accusations after my new rank has been processed. If they were, I would be forced to seek out the duke’s aid and influence. So I only wanted to make sure we were on the same page, at least on the legitimacy of my new rank. I don’t intend to sue anyone here, either.”

The tension in the lobby had been palpable since I’d walked in. Now, the receptionist and a flock of employees—as well as the other adventurers—seemed to relax a little.

“Then allow me to update your guild card. One moment, please,” an

employee said, and took my card into the back.

While I waited, I let my attention wander.

“Why’s no one talking? What’s that kid whining about, anyway—”

“Shut up, you idiot!”

With the exception of a few people who apparently didn’t know what had happened when I’d first arrived at this branch, everyone kept quiet and avoided making eye contact with me.

This was far from the first time I’d found myself in this situation, and I could explain it quite easily: I’d take on a quest to the *very best* of my abilities; upon checking in with the completion of the quest, guild representatives would accuse me of falsifying my report; and then, adventurers who’d overheard the conversation would start a fight with me on the spot, or shortly after leaving the building.

In this case, it was a guild master stuck in his ways and a nasty exam admin who was obviously working for him. Word had apparently spread more widely than usual because they had made my first exam public in an attempt to humiliate me. This had to be about the eighth time this sort of thing had happened when checking into a guild branch. I never thought I’d run into such a cliche *isekai* story beat after all this time...

They’re far cries from warm welcomes, but I wasn’t the one starting these fights, so I didn’t have to worry about trying to defuse the situation peacefully. For the most part, they were just inconveniences. Besides, this only happened where I was relatively unknown; never once had I been suspected of anything in Gimul or its surrounding areas. In fact, some of the locals there had started calling me “the Cleaner.” I’d been told that those who made a name for themselves were sometimes given a moniker based on their characteristics or accomplishments. From what I could tell, my moniker came from my career as a laundry shop owner and freelance cleaner. However, for other adventurers and guild workers who knew me, the name had a double meaning: someone who “cleans up” monsters and bandits without a trace...

The thought made me blush, but I’d decided to take it as a show of their confidence in me. In that sense, I was on the right track.

“Thank you for your patience.” The receptionist returned to the desk and handed me my guild card.

Not that I expected them to give me a counterfeit to frame me with it later, but I inspected it nonetheless. From what I could tell, it was genuine. Of course, if they were trying to frame me that way, they wouldn’t make it obvious.

“Is something wrong...?” The receptionist asked.

“No. Just letting my new C rank sink in. Thank you. I’ll be on my way.” I wasn’t going to hold a grudge or demand an apology for their accusation, but I certainly wasn’t going to trust them.

I left the guild branch and jumped to the city gates with space magic so I could walk out the gates on foot, then jumped again to the limour birds I had sent ahead.

We were halfway up a rocky mountainside. The bare path curved along a craggy ridge, over which I could see the outer walls of a city.

“Oh? We’re...almost to the next city. You guys flew far,” I said to the birds, and they whistled proudly in response.

Their mobility was nothing to scoff at. My next destination, the city I now held in my sights, was the westernmost settlement in this country. To get here by land from where I’d been a moment ago, I would have had to climb three steep mountains, which would have taken me no fewer than three days. Even though the birds didn’t have to battle the harsh terrain, I had only sent them flying a few hours prior. Saving days in my journey like this was extremely helpful when I was in a hurry to increase my rank.

Even if I had been pursued, I would have lost them in the jump. From here, it was only a leisurely walk down to the city of Teresa, and I’d make it there before sundown. Then I’d be in arm’s reach of the Sea of Trees.

Untroubled by the minor setbacks I’d faced and reinvigorated by my new C rank, I started for my destination.

Chapter 8, Episode 2: An Old Friend and a New Friend

After a few hours' walk through the desolate landscape, just when I'd begun to grow tired of the barren scenery, I made it to Teresa. I was ready to settle down for the night. The question was whether to find lodging in the city or sleep in my Dimension Home. After constant expansions—and with great help from the slimes—my Dimension Home had become a full-fledged house with a spacious yard. A far more comfortable option than the average inn. On the other hand, there was some allure to finding local accommodations after coming all this way...

I decided to walk the city for a while, get something to eat, then make up my mind.

As I began walking down the street, a particular carriage caught my eye.

"Is that...?" I muttered to myself.

The carriage was parked in a lot purpose-built to hold carriages for the guests of its adjoining inn, which seemed more upscale than average. Approaching the metal fence that enclosed the lot, I took a closer look. Sure enough, the carriage was marked with the crest of Jamil. Funny enough, I recognized it as the very carriage that had brought me out of the Forest of Gana.

Why is it here? I wondered. Back when I'd ridden in that carriage, I'd watched Sebas take it in and out of his Dimension Home. *Is Sebas here...? Of course, the carriage belongs to Reinhart. Any of his people could be using it...* I turned around, sensing someone behind me.

"Oops. You caught me." A bespectacled woman with tanned skin stood there with an amused smile, her shoulder-length silver hair flowing in the wind. I hadn't sensed her until she was a mere three meters away. "You have sharp senses," she added.

"And you are...?" I asked.

“No one you need to worry about. I’m sorry—I just wanted to startle you a little. You were looking at the carriage so intently that you piqued my curiosity...and I saw an opportunity for a little prank.” True to her word, I didn’t sense any animosity from her.

“Miss Remily. There you are,” a voice I recognized called from behind me. I turned to it. “Lunch is ready... Oh? Is that you, Master Ryoma?”

“Sebas!” I called.

“You know this boy, Sebas?” the woman asked. By the sound of it, she and Sebas knew each other... I’d let that vouch for her character, for now.

“He is our friend, Miss Remily. I never expected to find him here,” Sebas said.

“*Our* friend? Do you mean he’s Reinbach’s friend as well?” the woman noted. “How interesting...”

With every word she spoke, her nature became even more mysterious. She looked no older than twenty-five, and could’ve even passed for eighteen. Still, she addressed Sebas and even Reinbach with such familiarity... I took a closer look at her and realized how good-looking she was.



She was taller than me, but shorter than the average woman. Her open coat and close-fitting clothing revealed her frame: breasts that almost seemed too ample for her height, contrasted with her thin waist, she almost reminded me of a swimsuit model from Earth. She was toned but not muscular—a sign of skill but not brute strength.

“I’m sorry to have startled you. Remily Kremis. I’m a mage.”

“That’s all right. I’m Ryoma Takebayashi.”

“I’m sure you have plenty of questions for each other,” Sebas said. “Why don’t we go inside?”

“Yes. If that’s alright with you, Ryoma,” Remily said.

“Of course.”

As long as Sebas was with us, I felt comfortable going with her.

If Reinbach is here, he’s obviously here to accompany him... Then why is Reinbach here? I wondered as I followed them.

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Sebas showed me to their room in the inn. Before Sebas could even knock, Remily flung the door open and pulled me inside.

“You have a guest, Reinbach!” she announced.

Reinbach, looking as healthy as he had last year, was seated on a couch with another man of his age, apparently mid-conversation. They both turned to us with surprise.

“Great to see you again,” I stammered out.

“Is that you, Ryoma? You’ve grown a bit since I last saw you in Gimul. What brings you here?” Reinbach asked.

“Coincidence. I came here as part of my training, and I was surprised to spot a Jamil carriage. Then...” My eyes floated to Remily, and Reinbach’s and his guest’s followed.

“Looked like you knew each other so I brought him up here,” she said,

omitting more than a few details of our encounter.

Naturally, explanations about how Reinbach and I knew each other and how I'd ended up here followed. Apparently Reinbach was vacationing with friends, accompanied by Sebas.

"I have been made aware of what transpired in Gimul at the end of last year. I regret that we left you to deal with the evil we had allowed to fester there—but I thank you for it nonetheless. For helping my son and his wife in their endeavors," Reinbach said. The first half of his statement was filled with deep sorrow and regret, and the second half with genuine gratitude. How greatly Reinbach must have been troubled by those events, I could not imagine. Since Reinbach was already retired, it was up to Reinhart to take on any challenges the Jamils faced. Regardless of what had caused those problems, if Reinbach were to overstep and involve himself too much, the other nobles might have seen that as weakness on Reinhart's part. As much as it must have pained him, Reinbach had to take a backseat for the long-term benefit of his son and family as a whole. Still, he toed the line, only helping from the shadows.

"Thanks to your efforts, the restoration of the city went smoothly," I said.

"Ah, that makes my heart feel lighter," Reinbach answered. "Oh, these two played some part in that, too. I have worked with them long enough to trust them with anything. They are both well-respected and were great assets in that regard."

"Thank you for that," I said.

"No need to thank me. Reinbach is helping me out in return," said Remily.

The man sitting beside Reinbach, Sever Gardock, replied, "A knight's duty is to serve the people. Doubly so at a friend's behest." As it turned out, he was the former Captain of the Knights' Order that Reinbach had recommended I hire to guard the laundry shop. During introductions, Sever explained that he'd retired, feeling the weight of his age—though his powerful frame gave the impression of anything but feebleness. He was clearly a skilled fighter, but he wasn't intimidating. Not that I had wanted an intimidating introduction, but I had always pictured the Captain of the Knights' Order to conduct himself with such gravitas; it was a relief to find him not so.

Remily, on the other hand, used to serve as the palace mage. Even more surprisingly, she seemed to be the oldest one in the room. As a dark elf, just like all elves, her appearance hardly changed with age. I could only guess that she was the oldest because Sever had let a comment slip, which Remily had met with a murderous look and a threatening pulse of magical energy. At that moment, I vowed never to ask Remily her age.

Both Sever and Remily insisted on me addressing them informally; in Sever's case, it was because he had no rank now that he was retired, but Remily was simply vehemently against any formality.

Now that I knew they were traveling together, I asked, "Why come here? As far as I can tell, it's not exactly a tourist destination."

"We plan to go into the City of Lost Souls, a nearby dungeon. Remily wants to retrieve something from it, and we are here to aid her. This is my price for her assistance in the attack on Gimul," said Reinbach.

"That's right. Have you heard of an herb called midnight dew?" Remily asked.

"It's mostly used as a calming agent or sleep aid," I answered. "A difficult herb to use, since getting the dosage wrong or mixing it with the wrong ingredients can make it a hallucinogen or poison."

"You know your herbs well. But medicine isn't its only use." Remily produce a black staff. "This was made in a dark elf village, by repeatedly soaking the wood in boiled midnight dew and drying it. A staff like this makes casting Dark magic easier."

"How interesting...and you don't mind telling me this?" I asked, wondering if this was some ancient and secret technique of the dark elves.

"It's not a big deal. It's just boiling down an herb and soaking wood in it. Everyone in the village who can get their hands on midnight dew treats their staff, right in their house," Remily explained. "This staff was given to me when I came of age. I took as good care of it as I could, but it's at the end of its life."

"I see. You need more midnight dew to make a new staff," I said.

"That's right."

“And why are you here, Ryoma? I thought you were working in and around Gimul,” Reinbach said.

“Actually, I’m after midnight dew from the City of Lost Souls, too.” Another uncommon use for midnight dew was to make bug repellent with it. The Sea of Trees of Syrus, as its name suggested, was a hot and humid jungle, full of bugs as well as monsters. Effective bug repellent was a must-have, and midnight dew was one of its ingredients.

At the same time, I hoped to train against the undead monsters which pervaded the City of Lost Souls. And while I didn’t expect to encounter many of the undead in Syrus, adventurers who perished there sometimes wandered the woods.

Reinbach grunted. “To reach the village beyond the Sea of Trees...”

“You’ll definitely need to be ready for bugs and the undead,” Remily chimed in.

“Even though I can cast some Light magic, I have never fought incorporeal undead monsters. I’m hoping to gain some experience in the City of Lost Souls,” I explained.

“Light magic?” Remily repeated.

“Yes. Just the basic Light Ball—and Holy Curtain to defend against the undead,” I said.

“That is more than proficient for your age,” Reinbach said, “but leaves a little to be desired if you encounter a horde. If you could cast an intermediate Light spell, you should be just fine.”

“Would you like me to teach you one?” Remily offered. “Reinbach has a lot of faith in you, and seeing how you noticed me even after I cast Hide, I expect you’ll be a fast learner. Besides, if we’re going to the same place for the same thing, we should travel together. Right?”

That would certainly be helpful, but a question nagged at me.

Hide? That wasn’t in the book of spells I was given, but judging by its name...

“You used it when we first met?” I asked.

“It’s an intermediate Dark spell that makes your presence more difficult to detect. Not very useful, since it doesn’t make you invisible. That could be why it’s not well known,” Remily explained.

“Miss Remily is a master of Light and Dark magic, renowned for her talents even among the palace mages. You’d be hard-pressed to find anyone who surpasses her abilities in this regard,” Sebas said.

“Flaws in her character notwithstanding,” Reinbach joked.

“How rude... I am a good person.”

“That you may be, but...” Reinbach trailed off, he and Sever staring at her incredulously. For his part, Sebas stood by Reinbach, his face a perfect mask of neutrality.

Training in Light magic would be a great opportunity for me, but their reaction to Remily was making me a bit nervous.

“Now that you’ve met, you will have to deal with her regardless,” Reinbach said to me. “You should take her up on the offer, if you like.”

What does he mean? I wondered, but I wasn’t going to waste this opportunity.

“That would be wonderful. Thank you,” I said.

“It’s settled, then!” Remily cheered. “You may address me as Master during your short tutelage.”

“Master? All right—”

“Or *Sissy*, if you want. Like I’m your big sister!”

That was unexpected. And embarrassing.

“No, thank you...Master,” I said.

“Aw... Don’t you want me to do my best?” She pouted.

“You told him to call you Master,” said Sever.

“Exhausting as she may be, the only way to deal with her is to ignore or endure her. Good luck,” Reinbach said.

“Master Ryoma, Miss Remily is a very talented mage,” Sebas added.

My first impression of Remily was that she was free-spirited, to say the least.

“Speaking of, Ryoma. I would love to see you in action,” Reinbach said.

“Of course,” I said. “In the City of Lost Souls?”

“That, too. But why don’t you spar with Sever here?” He proposed.

With the former Captain of the Knights’ Order?!

By the looks of it, Sever was as surprised as I was. I asked Reinbach for an explanation before Sever could, and he told me that he always wanted to test my mettle before I headed off to the Sea of Trees, anyway. Sever, he calculated, could judge me accurately and objectively. After hearing this, Sever quickly agreed. He must have only been surprised by the suddenness of the proposal, but he’d never been against the idea of sparring with me. Furthermore, Sever explained that he could better assess my abilities if he had no prior knowledge of them. In life, we don’t always get to make thorough preparations before we take on an adversary... In short, he wanted to hold the sparring match now.

So Sebas and I went to find a suitable location outside the city. Sever would soon follow, as soon as he’d donned his gear.

Soon enough, we found a rocky clearing where we wouldn’t have to worry about damaging anyone’s property. Once Sebas jumped up to fetch the others, I finished up my preparations. Sever, judging by his career, would be a formidable opponent. This was all too sudden, but I was ready to reassure Reinbach that I was ready for the Sea of Trees.

Chapter 8, Episode 3: Test of Strength

Once Sebas had left the inn with Ryoma, Remily asked, “Reinbach, how strong is that boy, in your opinion?”

“Truth be told, I can’t say. I have watched him cast a spell or engage in training a few times, but never have I seen him in action... When I first met him, he was already hunting down bandits. During the recent conflict in Gimul that we were just talking about, he apparently vanquished an assassin of the underground guild. A more than competent fighter, but to what extent... That is why I asked you to take on the task of finding out, Sever.”

“Now it makes sense... Speaking of, Remily.”

“Yes?”

“When you approached him, using magic to hide yourself...he noticed you? Without you intending him to?”

“Curious, are we?” asked Remily.

“How could I not be? Even when we were younger, you thought it was amusing to slip past castle security,” Sever said.

“Amusing? That was a surprise drill. Elias said as much,” Remily said.

“Be that as it may, it was no less of a headache for the ones on guard,” Sever said. “Not only myself, but for the chief royal sorcerer as well as the elite knights and guards... I’ll admit it contributed to improved security, but that doesn’t mean I won’t take every opportunity to complain about it.”

“And how many years has it been?” Remily smirked. “I definitely didn’t expect the boy to notice me before I could even sneak up, let alone give him a hug. And the way he kept his guard up, you’d think he trusts no one but himself... Well, maybe that’s going a bit too far. At least when he was talking to Reinbach and Sebas, he seemed to relax. Maybe distrust for strangers has its roots deep in his heart.”

“You have always been observant of those things,” said Reinbach. “I have not

been made privy to too many details, but his upbringing was not pleasant, from what I understand. When we first met, he was hermitted deep in a forest. Even back then, he spoke and acted much older than his age, as if he were already weary of living. Recently, he seems a bit more lively."

"Hm... He must have faced his fair share of tribulations. I won't consider him a mere child, then. Very well. I'll hold further judgment until our match." Sever swiftly went to his room to prepare for the sparring match.

With deftness acquired from years of experience, he adorned the set of heavy armor he'd acquired after his retirement and took up the trusty halberd that had been his weapon since he'd been in the service. Feeling the weight of it in his hands, he muttered to himself, "Now, if only I didn't feel my age in my bones..."

The halberd that had once felt like an extension of his arms had grown heavier and heavier with every year. By now, he had to use energy meditation —a skill he'd acquired through years of grueling training—just to wield the weapon as he had in his prime. Even with it, Sever couldn't help but notice his strength and dexterity were declining in combat. When he'd first announced his retirement, those around him tried to convince him that age did not weigh so heavily on him as he had thought, and that he had plenty of strength to continue his career. But Sever had still felt his years, as much as he'd tried to carry on out of responsibility for his duty and to his coworkers. In the end, he stayed true to his resolution and resigned from his post as Captain of the Knights' Order once he'd grown confident in the abilities of his replacement. In his retirement, Sever was still mindful to keep up his strength, only to be reminded that mindfulness alone would not let him sail against the wind of time. Just last night, he hadn't been able to keep his drinks down.

"Time waits for no one, right?" Remily said, having been listening to Sever through the wall. "We all have to accept the process of aging for what it is. But I think yours is more gentle because of how aware you are of it. If you weren't so sensitive to the flow of time, you'd have drifted further down before you realized."

Sever chuckled as he remembered the longevity of dark elves. "You seem like you never change, Remily... Is it true that dark elves show signs of aging, too,

however unnoticeable they seem? While you've never told me your exact age—it could be twice mine, for all I know—you look the same you did when we first met. And you're still as nimble as ever. I can hardly believe you've aged at all. When I was finally desperate enough to ask you if there was a secret to staying young, you told me you had a *young heart...* Well, it's not the time for this. I must focus on the match."

Shaking those thoughts out of him, Sever returned to Reinbach and Remily to find that Sebas had rejoined them. Immediately, Sebas transported them with Space magic to the clearing where Ryoma awaited them on mysteriously level ground, surrounded by slimes.

Ryoma ran over to Sever. "I hope to be a good match for you."

"Likewise," said Sever. "What's with the slimes? And the level ground?"

"The slimes are my familiars," Ryoma explained. "And I thought setting up the space like a training ground would make things easier."

"That was very considerate of you, although you must have spent some of your magical energy to do it."

"No, I asked my earth slimes to do it for me with their Earth magic."

"I see. As for our match, will you agree to the knights' method?" Sever asked.

"Well... What method would that be?" asked Ryoma.

"In our case, it shall be one on one, of course. Up to intermediate spells and magic weapons are allowed. Until the match is called, you may attack an opponent even if they are on the ground. Those who resort to trickery in spar matches may not be liked, but all's fair in war. Intentionally killing your opponent is of course out of the question, but other than that—no holds barred. This sparring method can be dangerous without a well-trained healer standing by, but we luckily have Remily with us."

"I can use advanced healing magic, too. Even if you were to lose a limb, I could reattach it as long as I do it right away. Oh, and I'll set up a quick barrier so you don't have to worry about your surroundings," Remily said.

Although surprised by her claim, Ryoma accepted it and turned back to Sever.

The sword in his hand warped before regaining its form. “My weapon is a transformed slime. Will this violate the one-on-one clause?”

“Your weapon is a slime...” Sever repeated. “I am here to measure your own abilities, so let’s say you can’t make any of your slimes attack me directly. Using a slime as your weapon is fine.”

“Thank you,” Ryoma said.

Ryoma and Sever faced each other in the center of the newly leveled ring, weapons in hand. Sebas stood between them, ready to serve as referee.

“Begin!” Sebas announced.

In the same instant, Sever thrusted with his halberd. Dodging the point, Ryoma closed in on his opponent. Sever swung with the butt of the halberd to prevent this, prompting Ryoma to double back and loose a fire arrow from a distance. As if he saw it coming, Sever easily avoided the spell and countered with a blade of wind.

Spells and weapons clashed several times, each fighter concealing his full strength and sussing out his opponent—not that anyone who didn’t know the combatants’ strength already could have guessed as much just from watching the match. In the middle of the ring, now scarred by magical attacks, the pair ferociously clashed, the clang of their weapons heralding the severity of the battle. Sever’s first thrust alone would have ended the match against an average adventurer or soldier.

Sever was the first to take a risk. He swung his halberd down, aiming for Ryoma’s shoulder, but he was charging the weapon with magical energy at the same time. Ryoma took a step back to dodge the blade, noticed the magical energy, then leapt to his right. A moment later, whirlwinds coming from the halberd left numerous shallow scores on the ground where Ryoma had been.

“You *do* have a good eye,” Sever said.

“That would have been it for me if I hadn’t sensed the magical energy,” Ryoma said.

Sever’s halberd was enchanted with the elementary Wind Cutter and intermediate Tornado Cutter spells. Naturally, he had held back enough that

even a direct hit would not have killed Ryoma; it only would've wounded him enough to end the match. Yet Ryoma had sensed his opponent's magical energy flare, decided that Sever must've imbued his weapon with it rather than cast a spell, and actually made the leap to avoid the attack. If Ryoma had made the wrong call or faltered at any step, he wouldn't have been able to evade the attack.

Silently praising his young opponent, Sever hardened his resolve to win the match. Ryoma, too, had renewed his focus.

This time, Ryoma took the initiative. "Fire arrow!" As he cast the spell, he rushed Sever, ready to cut the man with his sword. That much he had tried before. This time, though, just as he darted forward, he cast Earth Needle without an incantation.



Both the fire arrow and Ryoma—who was aiming as if to slice Sever as soon as he dodged the arrow—were decoys for a second spell: the earth spat out needles silently, headed for Sever.

With cool precision, Sever dodged both spells but ended up giving Ryoma an opening to close in and strike. When he did, Sever had to block the boy's blade with the energy-charged shaft of his halberd. To break away, Sever immediately cast several Wind Cutter spells in rapid succession, activating the spells in his halberd at the same time. The spells allowed him to distance himself from the boy again.

As he did so, a question came to Sever's mind.

Strange... The boy blocked my spell but made no attempt to counter. Not right away, at least. He's an excellent swordsman and he can cast spells with no incantations, but he has a bizarre stiffness for someone with his abilities. At first, I thought he was leaving an opening on purpose to lure me in to attack, but this would be making it too obvious. Besides...

After exchanging some more blows, Sever ventured a strike, taking advantage of the opening Ryoma gave him next.

I see, he concluded. *He must have learned to use magic not too long ago. Compared to his spectacular swordsmanship... Did he have no teacher in magic? For his age, his spellcasting is more than competent, but he sorely lacks experience!*

The tide of battle began to turn against Ryoma. In this world, the use of magic spells was expected in combat, unlike on Earth. The type of sword fighting Ryoma had studied in his previous life wasn't designed to be used in conjunction with magic.

Ryoma had creatively explored spellcasting since he'd come to this world, but that had only been four years. Even then, he had only learned his first attack spell after he'd left the forest. Back in the forest, all of his spells had been for survival and for making his life more comfortable. At the most, Ryoma had only spent about six months truly delving into practicing magic for combat. On the other hand, Sever had been born and raised in this world; he'd trained as a warrior for decades, knowing he'd need to know how to use—and counter—

magic. When it came to magical training and real-world combat experience, he was miles ahead of Ryoma.

Until now, Ryoma had only fought against opponents far weaker than him. Some awkwardness in combat had never been an issue, and he could squeak by his self-taught strategies. Sever, however, was on par with Ryoma in physical combat and greatly surpassed his skills as a spell caster. Every time Sever accurately struck at an opening provided by Ryoma's inexperience, it pushed the battle in his favor, inch by inch.

But Sever was not allowed to chip away at Ryoma for long. From their brief series of exchanges so far, Ryoma quickly understood that he was losing to Sever because of his inexperience in magic.

If using magic worsens my position, Ryoma decided, *I won't use magic at all. I'll put everything into the sword. That's what I spent years training in.*

Suddenly Ryoma had switched his style of fighting. Physical energy sparking through his body, Ryoma thrusted with his sword, far more quickly and accurately than before. Sever kept up with Ryoma's invigorated attacks, but the sliver of advantage he had gained was completely gone.

The match grew fierce. Sever swung his halberd, aiming for Ryoma's head. Ryoma lunged diagonally and parrying the attack with a circular swipe of his sword—then stepped wide towards Sever in the next breath, aiming to maim Sever's left leg. Sever avoided that fate by twisting his body and stepping backward, swinging his halberd at Ryoma's feet to keep him at bay. When Ryoma dodged the blade and rushed in for another attack, Sever was already firing a spell at him, at the same time using the magic charged in his halberd to attack where he anticipated the boy would go in dodging the first spell.

The earth was torn up, the wind stirring a thick mist of dirt and dust. Still, Ryoma had evaded the magic, bolting through the dust cloud to slice at Sever again.

Several minutes passed, each fighter unleashing their full strength and range of technique against the other. Being in the midst of intense combat, which gave him no time to think of anything else, reminded Sever of true fulfillment—the likes of which he had long been estranged from. The strength that coursed

through his body now he thought he'd aged beyond; his technique became sharper and sharper in this battle, when before he'd thought himself on the brink of irreversible dullness. Relishing these sensations, Sever concerned himself with nothing but his halberd and his spells.

Yet he knew this exhilaration would not last forever. Suddenly, the fighters were standing some distance apart from each other, their gazes locked. Without so much as a word or even the blink of an eye, they both knew the next move would end the match, one way or the other.

"Hah!" they both grunted. It was time to break this split-second standoff, to engage at last in the final clash of this battle.

Ryoma cradled his sword at his side, tip pointed at Sever. Directing every spark of physical energy to his legs, Ryoma flew up to Sever as if they had never put distance between them to begin with.

To counter Ryoma's incredible speed, Sever poured magic into his halberd while casting a spell of his own with no incantation. Sever fired a violent whirl of magical wind at Ryoma—along with a full-force counter thrust.

An instant before the tip of the halberd met Ryoma's torso, Ryoma slipped by it with a paper's width to spare. But he could not avoid the magical tornado that followed, which left cuts on his cheek, shoulder, and in several spots on the left side of his torso. Blood gushed from them and became mist in the whirl of magic and movement.

Unburdened by his wounds, Ryoma stepped closer to Sever, out of the tornado. Physical energy surged from his legs back up to his body, turning his charge into a tackle-thrust. He was trying to capitalize on the brief opening after Sever's attack. In turn, Sever twisted by his waist to the limit of his mobility, mitigating the blow so that it only left a shallow cut on his left side.

Using his momentum to dart past Sever's side, Ryoma dug into the ground with his energy-bolstered feet, braking himself into an abrupt stop—and turning back around and lifting his sword up over his head, he rebounded explosively, springing at Sever. Sever, too, drew back his halberd for a counter.

Two blades flashed in the setting sun, creating a bright red halo of blood.

Chapter 8, Episode 4: After the Match

“That’s the match!” Sebas called. The air was filled with the stench of blood.

“It seems you’ve...bested me,” Sever said.

“You think so...? It sure feels like...I’ve lost... Ow.” Flinching in pain, I accessed his condition and mine.

“I thought I’d just barely won,” Sever groaned. “Only for you to keep fighting...”

“Mostly thanks to my gear...” I countered.

Our attacks had landed nearly simultaneously. Just as my sword had sliced through his armor and into his left shoulder, Sever had thrusted his halberd—holding it just below the blade—between my arms and into my right shoulder. By the time I’d made a last-ditch effort and held my sword to his throat with just my left hand, his Wind Cutter had torn open my gut.

“Master Ryoma, while you had the opportunity to slit Master Sever’s throat, the injuries in your shoulder and abdomen are significant enough to be fatal without access to immediate healing. Therefore, I declare this match a draw. Lower your weapons, please, both of you, so you can be treated. Master Ryoma, your wounds in particular require immediate attention,” Sebas calmly announced.

Both Sever and I lowered our weapons. Suddenly, Sever fell to his knees. Now that the battle was over, I felt my pain intensify, and I nearly fell back onto the ground before Sebas caught me and gently laid me down. I watched my own blood begin to stain my armor red. My shoulder was in pretty bad shape, but not nearly as bad as my stomach... Judging by the speed of the bleeding, my major arteries were intact, but the cuts were just too big. If the bleeding didn’t stop soon...

“Miss Remily!” Sebas called.

“Yeah, I’m on it!” Remily answered. “Mega Heal! What kind of sparring was that...?”

“Gave me quite the scare,” said Reinhart. “I kept imagining that one wrong move would kill one of you.”

“My apologies, My Lord. As the referee, I should have—”

“You are not to blame, Sebas. I could not have interrupted that match, either,” Reinbach interrupted.

Still healing us, Remily joined in. “Mega Heal. He’s right. Nothing you could have done, Sebas. Mega Heal,” she repeated, casting the spell again. She went on, “I couldn’t even tell what was happening towards the end. My barrier wasn’t much use either, from how quickly you boys broke it down. Now that I’ve treated you, you’ll be fine...but you went way too far. I bet you couldn’t even hear us.

I was blown away. From Remily’s casual comment about reattaching limbs, I had expected her to be adept at healing magic, but this was incredible. In the blink of an eye, my pain was gone. Not so much of an itch in my shoulder or stomach. They’d probably completely healed without so much as a mark. Remily had taken no time at all to cast her spells once she’d seen our wounds. I would’ve had to use a slime’s vision, not to mention keep up immense concentration, to even *try* and attempt the speed and accuracy of Remily’s healing. And all while she was having a casual conversation.

His pain evidently alleviated, Sever turned to me. “I do realize I got carried away... I apologize.”

“Oh, the same goes for me. I’m sorry,” I said.

“Lucky for us, both of you are alive and healed. And Ryoma, you have exceeded my expectations. If it looked like you were not ready for the Sea of Trees, I was going to talk you out of going or send bodyguards with you. But seeing how you went toe to toe with Sever, that won’t be necessary,” Reinbach admitted.

“The only reason this match ended in a draw rather than my loss was because it was exactly that. A match. In the real world, he could’ve utilized traps or familiars in addition to himself. Besides, what I found lacking in him through our match was experience. I suspect that you haven’t been using physical energy, or magic, for very long,” he said to me. “Your dexterity and swordsmanship were

flawless, except that turnaround at the end."

I had a feeling he'd see through me. "You have a great eye. When I use more than a certain amount of physical energy, my body becomes *too* agile and my senses can't keep up. As for magic, I had been focusing my training on that while I worked as an adventurer. I've been calling myself a spellcaster...but you've shown me how much I still have to learn."

"It is said that it takes five years from when someone first feels physical energy for them to learn how to coat their entire body with it. Furthermore, it is said to take twenty years for using physical energy to become second nature...and a lifetime to master the craft. Most people do require that long. But if you keep up your training and gain more experience, I soon won't be able to even draw a match with you." His eyes flashing with confidence and his smile sportsmanlike, Sever extended his right hand to me. I sat up and shook it, each of us acknowledging the other's strength and spirit.

"Aren't you glad?" Remily muttered from beside us.

"What?" I asked.

"Nothing, just something Sever and I were talking about," she dismissed. "By the way, what do you mean 'call yourself a spellcaster'? I understand what you're saying, but why?"

"Oh, well... I know I can handle myself in a fight, especially at close quarters. But it's difficult to get strangers to believe that when I look like this. Explaining and bargaining aren't my forte, so...showing off my magic and familiars is usually the quickest way to convince them." I mentioned how I had nearly been detained at the guild in the previous city I'd stopped by for the same reason. They'd asked me to explain, so I'd gone into detail using other examples. All of that was in the past for me, but that didn't stop the other four from getting sour looks on their faces.

"A fighter of a certain caliber can judge their opponent's strength without seeing them in action, but they are a minority of the population..." Sever said. "Even in the Knight's Order, I remember a fair share of new recruits who were skilled at sword fighting and knew it, causing a lot of trouble."

"Those who can't judge your strength like to judge you by your looks instead,"

Remily chimed in. “I’ve had a few run-ins with the type you’re talking about. They’re also the type to never punch up. A good show of your power, and they’ll tuck tail. Knock a couple of teeth out, and they’ll never so much as come near you.”

“Right. I have a gang of hobgoblins living in my dimension home armed with spiky weapons and armor. Usually I call them out if someone doesn’t trust me when I tell them what I’m capable of. That takes care of most complaints, and the others I take care of myself—after all, it’s self-defense. It makes things pretty simple, really. It almost never gets as complicated as it got at the guild branch in my last stop.” In that sense, the first exam I had to go through really had been easy.

“From what you have told us, this guild master must have wanted you to fail the exam so he would not be accused of withholding an exam from you,” Sebas said.

“It would be interesting to hear the guild master’s side of the story,” Reinbach said. “So far, his treatment of you seems lackluster. Of course, he could not allow anyone to test for the next rank if they had not earned it, and if there were doubts as to their eligibility, it would not be amiss to seek confirmation. However, I do not condone detainment or stripping of rank without *careful* consideration.”

“I kept telling them to contact the other guild branches that have records of me completing quests, but...from how they talked to me, they must have thought I’d skip town if they gave me time to. That was the worst part.” If they hadn’t tried to test me then and there, we could have avoided that tragedy...

“What kind of tragedy are we talking about?” asked Remily.

“During the match, the Dark magic I cast—mostly as a diversion—was *too* effective... My opponent, the proctor, started wailing, rolling on the ground, dripping sweat and tears and drool... Bodily fluids leaking from every orifice, really—all this until he passed out. It was pandemonium there.” He had become so hysterical that I’d let my thoughts drift, wondering if this were the real life version of how someone who’d failed a Sanity check in a tabletop game on Earth would act.

Because I had defeated the proctor, I had actually proven my strength in the end. But it was a trade-off: the mood of the training grounds had turned almost unbearable, not to mention the terrified looks people had given me this morning. A part of me didn't blame them for acting that way after what I'd shown them.

"To make matters worse, the first exam was held in a training ground attached to the guild's branch building, with plenty of onlookers... I should have just hit him on the head and got it over with." Perhaps his fate had been crueler than death. He had accused me of plenty of things before the match, but I still couldn't help but feel a bit guilty, remembering him on the ground. "In any case, I showed my strength and received my new rank in the end. They're not causing me any more trouble. I won't be using their guild branch ever again, so I don't have any reason to interact with the guildmaster in the future. They may decide to send an apology letter or something to Duke Jamil, but I've asked Reinhart to take care of anything like that."

"Oh? Did you return the favor in some way?" Remily asked, a look of mischief spreading across her face.

Not exactly. "I just sold off a lot of monster parts and loot to the local Merchant's Guild," I said.

Selling parts and loot was an important part of an adventurer's income. Most adventurers tried to take out monsters in addition to those they'd been commissioned to kill for quests. Selling the material alone would net them more money, but they might even find a quest later on that asked for a part they already had—which would net them easy points towards their next rank. Since I was taking on these quests to raise my rank, I had no reason not to do the same. I had a huge stockpile by the time I'd made it to the Adventurer's Guild in question, but I never got the chance to sell them the loot after that first exam. So I'd taken my merchandise to the Merchant's Guild, where they'd naturally asked me where I had gotten so much loot, and why I hadn't sold it to the Adventurer's Guild if I were an adventurer myself.

"Of course, I had to answer his questions," I explained. "I was doing business with him, even if I didn't intend to return. Besides, I was confident in my innocence, so I simply told the merchant everything that went down and

encouraged him to verify my story.”

When I had, the merchant seemed to understand why I had come to him. Generously, he’d even offered to buy the materials I would get from the second exam. Unfortunately, I couldn’t make him any promises because I had no idea what the Adventurer’s Guild would throw at me. Instead, I’d only told the merchant that I would see him again, if only the guild master would give me an apology.

Sebas finished my thought. “Then if you never visited this merchant again, there was no reconciliation with the guild.”

“No proper apology was given by the guildmaster, I assume,” added Sever.

“I never so much as saw his face. A receptionist tried to apologize in front of a crowd instead, but I made it clear that I wasn’t asking for an apology,” I said.

“Instead of accepting the apology... Unless you never let her finish it in the first place.”

“Remily, you make it sound like I’m plotting some sinister revenge. Honestly, I did not expect an apology from her,” I insisted.

The receptionist had doubted me at first too, but I could understand why. And moving up the chain of command to deal with a problem above her paygrade was the right thing to do. So I had never put much blame on her to start with. Neither did she; she just wanted me out of there as quickly as possible. No apology had been made after I’d told them I wasn’t expecting one, so I could still honestly claim they never gave me a proper apology. Personally, it didn’t matter to me if I’d been given an apology or not, but if they were going to give me one, it should have come from the guildmaster. Even then, I wouldn’t have expected him to grovel or make a public apology. Still, the least he could have offered was a little conversation in a room, just like how they’d taken me aside when they’d tried to get an admission of foul play out of me rather than verify my accomplishments.

But all the guildmaster had done was make one of his subordinates apologize at the front desk, not even bothering to show his own face. How could I find any sincerity in an apology like that, let alone trust the guildmaster? I didn’t demand an apology because it was meaningless.

“It’s his prerogative if he wants to make his subordinate do the dirty work and pretend it’s all water under the bridge. Of course, it’s not my concern or responsibility how that comes across to his guild members and clients,” I added. As soon as he’d found out I was an engineer in the service of a duke, the guildmaster had immediately lost all the wind in his sails and approved me for the exam. He seemed like the sort of person who would be hurt a lot more by a ding in his reputation than by the humiliation of having to offer an apology.

When I shared this with the group, the three men shared an awkward chuckle.

“The guildmaster’s reputation *will* be affected to some degree,” said Sebas.

“News travels fast in the Merchant’s Guild, whether they decide to take public action against the guildmaster of that Adventurer’s Guild or not,” Reinbach offered.

“From what you tell us, you simply handled your business and left,” Sever chimed in, “but it’s easy to see your action as calculated retribution.”

“And what’s wrong with that?” Remily countered. “This guildmaster wouldn’t have to worry about his reputation if he’d done everything by the book, would he?”

“No skin off my back, at least,” I said. “Except that I can’t use my Adventurer’s Guild card until I make it back to Gimul. Just in case they inserted some fabricated records against me.”

I’d be able to pass through cities just fine using my Merchant’s Guild card, but I wouldn’t be able to stop by any Adventurer’s Guild on the way back to Gimul. A shame that I couldn’t take on any C-rank quests for a while, since I was itching to try my hand at one once I gained C-rank...

But that could wait.

“Might I suggest we visit the adventurer’s guild in Teresa, then? Reviewing the records on your card should take no time at all,” Sebas said.

“Great idea,” Remily agreed. “If we vouch for Ryoma, it shouldn’t take long for them to accept his abilities.”

“The guild branch is located near the city gate. We can stop on our way back to the inn,” said Sever.

“Let’s get moving then,” Reinbach concluded.

“Oh, th-thank you!” I blurted out.

Before I knew it, we were headed to the Adventurer’s Guild branch in Teresa, and I didn’t expect to encounter any trouble considering the status of my current companions. From booking me a room at the inn and indulging me in a sparring match, to even offering me lessons in magic...they were really being too good to me. While I’d had some bothersome encounters so far, reuniting with Reinbach and Sebas and meeting Sever and Remily had reminded me how nice it was to be with generous, kind people.

Soon, through Sebas’s Space magic, the world around us had shifted, and we were standing outside Teresa’s city gates.

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After making sure my guild card was clean at the Adventurer’s Guild, we walked through the dusk-darkened streets back to the inn. Now we would each prepare for tomorrow’s expeditions.

I was given a servant’s room attached to the room designed for nobility, so I first returned with Reinbach to his room.

There, Reinbach handed his coat to Sebas and said, “I am glad to see that guildmaster did not cause you any more trouble.”

“Me too. Thanks to your help, things went very smoothly at the guild here, and I won’t be nervous to use my guild card,” I said.

Maybe it was inevitable, considering that three people who would have received the royal treatment at any guild—the former duke, the former Captain of the Knight’s Order, and the former royal sorcerer—accompanied me, but I was met with utmost respect and service at the Teresa branch. I detected a little awkwardness on the other end, but they ran my guild card, no questions asked. As it turned out, my guild card was properly marked with C-rank, and no

records had been added.

“You need only to ask, and I will always lend a hand for something as simple as this. To reiterate what I told you before the sparring match, I owe you a great debt, and this hardly scratches the surface of repaying you... In fact, now it seems I owe you another debt altogether,” Reinbach said.

“Separate from defending Gimul?” I asked.

“Indeed. For agreeing to that match with Sever. To tell you the truth, his spirits have been low for a long time. Aging is one factor, but I suspect his new desk job has not been suiting him well. While he still had opportunities to fight on the front lines, he did well—but ever since he was appointed Captain of the Order... These last few years in particular, it seemed that he had grown weaker every time I saw him. After facing off against you, I see a good deal of the old spark in his eyes. Though I admit I did not expect him to register as an adventurer at the guild... Once he sets his course, there’s no stopping him.”

“Yes... That even surprised me,” I admitted. While we were all happy for Sever’s reinvigoration, none of us expected him to go and become an adventurer.

It was so unexpected that his friends even asked if he wanted to reenlist in the Knight’s Order instead. To that, however, Sever had said, “It would be selfish of me to ask to be reinstated after I retired against the advice of others. Besides, my replacement has already taken over the post. My return would disrupt not only the Order but all departments. As an adventurer, I will use whatever time and strength is left in me for the betterment of others.”

Sever was determined, just as he must have been when he’d resigned from the Knight’s Order. In the time it had taken for them to review my guild card, he had already registered. As an A-rank, I might add—with his promotion to S-rank almost guaranteed. Sever almost sounded like he’d wanted to start at F-rank, but the Teresa guildmaster had insisted that, considering the experience and strength guaranteed by Sever’s past as a Knight’s Order captain, he could not start him at any lower than A-rank. As soon as that process had been completed, the adventurers—many of them ruffians by nature—had started making way for Sever wherever he walked. Combined with the attitudes of the

receptionist and guildmaster, who'd behaved as though it were a high honor for him to even register at their branch, I felt like I had seen a glimpse of how much trust and good will Sever had accumulated throughout his career.

"If I was able to help in any way, that's wonderful. I really appreciated his sparring with me. It reminded me of how much more I have to learn," I said.

"If the sparring aided you in any way, I am pleased," said Reinbach. "But thanking you for your efforts is another matter. I want you to reach out to me if there is *anything* you need help with. I will not promise to solve all of your problems, but I will do what I can. The least I can do is offer advice."

"I promise I will."

Reinbach seemed satisfied with my answer. He looked me up and down. "How do you feel? You lost some blood in the match, did you not?"

"I'll be fine," I answered. "Remily closed the wounds right away, so I just feel a little tired. Some iron and a good night's sleep are all I need."

"Then you take the first bath when it is ready. I have already asked the inn to start one. Until then, rest in the room next door," Reinbach said.

"Thank you; I'll do just that." I went to the neighboring room to rest up as Reinbach watched me with a smile.

Tomorrow, we would head out to the City of Lost Souls as planned. It would do me well to get myself in the best condition I possibly could.





Interlude: A Certain Guildmaster's Fall from Grace

The night of Ryoma's sparring match with Sever, an elderly man with a grouchy expression and another man with an intimidating gaze sat on a couch opposite a younger, nervous-looking man.

The nervous-looking man broke the heavy silence. "How can I help a pair of guildmasters at this hour?"

"I apologize for knocking on your door so late," said Henry of the Merchant's Guild, holding his piercing gaze on the man opposite him. "There was something that we needed to urgently verify."

"Fayld, you know why we're here. We're well aware it's far too late for pleasantries. Let's cut to the chase," said Charles, the more elderly of the pair. He had flown here from the Adventurer's Guild in Teresa.

After a few moments of thought, Fayld—none other than the guildmaster who had tried to interfere with Ryoma's exam—answered coolly, "Master Henry, Master Charles... I haven't a clue what could *possibly* warrant you both coming all this way."

The expression on each inquiring guildmaster's face shifted. A sharp grin split Henry's face, and Charles's disgruntled look turned downright disdainful.

"You have either mastered the art of masking your thoughts, or you're completely oblivious," said Charles.

"Fayld, we're here to have a serious discussion, so drop the theatrics. A boy named Ryoma Takebayashi came here!" said Henry.

"Oh, I remember the boy...but I still don't understand why you are here. Unless he caused some trouble," Fayld said, clearly expecting a confirmation.

Charles sat red-faced, straining to maintain his composure. There was a clear disconnect between Fayld and the other two guildmasters. A few seconds later, Charles exploded. "You fool!"

Fayld flinched, but met Charles' glare with his own in the next beat. "Master Charles, your anger is getting the better of you. It brings into question your professionalism."

"*You* dare speak of professionalism?!" Charles bellowed. "When you failed to do your job!"

"I fulfill my duties each and every day. Frankly, I am offended at the accusation," Fayld countered innocently.

"You—"

"So you never apologized to him," Henry interrupted quietly, just in time to make Charles hold himself back.

"Apologize?" Fayld repeated. "We simply handled his case as thoroughly as we should have. I'm not sure what tall tales you were told, but his guild card was riddled with suspect information. It is part of my job to consider the possibility of fraud and conduct an interview, just as it is his job to comply to it."

"That much we agree on. The Merchant's Guild was suspicious, too, when he brought in parts from monsters he claimed to have slain himself, along with loot he claimed to have taken from bandits. He must have powers that make it possible for him to complete hunts ridiculously fast. Anyone would have doubted his story at first glance," said Henry.

"I'm glad we're on the same page," Fayld said.

"However, his story made sense. Judging from the wear and tear on the materials he presented to us, the Merchant's Guild reached the conclusion that we could trust his accounts. When we followed up on this by sending word to a city listed on his records, we received plenty of information to back up his records. From these points, we think that your judgment was premature and unprofessional. We also request an explanation for how you treated the boy after the initial interview. Depending on your answer, the Merchant's Guild as a whole may be forced to take action."

Fayld sighed as if he were growing tired of the conversation. "We followed proper procedure. He had come to take his rank advancement exam, so we allowed it. He displayed abilities that met the requirements to advance his rank,

so we processed it. And I have been told that our receptionist apologized for taking up his time."

"Is that all?" asked Henry.

"What other procedure was called for? As I've explained, we simply performed our duties. If we deem it necessary, a registered adventurer is obligated to be held for an interview. There's no need to apologize for conducting one. On the contrary, we should hold our heads high for following proper protocol," Fayld insisted.

Henry's eyes grew cold as ice. "I see. Oh, just to be clear. I didn't come here at his request. Depending on how this conversation went, I was prepared to defend your actions. Especially since the Merchant's Guild has frequent business with the Adventurer's Guild when it comes to acquiring various materials and requesting guards for caravans. I believe we need each other's cooperation to maximize our profits."

Fayld puffed out his chest. "Indeed. In that case—"

"That is why this is such a problem."

For a moment, Fayld's eyes widened. "How do you mean? I always run my guild by the book."

"Allow me to reiterate that I believe the Merchant's and Adventurer's Guilds form a crucial alliance...but the alliance won't stand without trust in the Adventurer's Guild. Rather than treating a member with preconceived notions, I wanted you to conduct a proper investigation, and when you were proven wrong, to offer a proper apology. Without those things, you will find that trust in your guild quickly waning," Henry continued.

Fayld masked his brief astonishment with a scoff. "In other words, I should have bent the rules in the face of authority?"

"Master Fayld, that is not at all what we are talking about. I was speaking of how your guild treated an adventurer, and how trust in your guild will be affected by it. The fact that he is employed by a duke has no relevance." Henry was ready to give up on this conversation altogether.

Then Charles said, "Master Henry is right. You act as if the idea of folding in

the face of the duke's authority is preposterous, when you did exactly that. I've heard you permitted the exam just as soon as Ryoma mentioned Duke Jamil."

"He just so happened to mention the duke's name as I was making the decision to put his abilities to the test. The mention had no bearing on my actions," said Fayld.

"You have the gall to... Just so you know, that boy came to *my* guild this evening. With the former duke, the former Captain of the Knight's Order, and *the* Death's Shadow. Even you must understand what that means," Charles demanded.

For the first time, Fayld's mask of impunity crumbled. "The duke is really behind him...? And the Jamils took action over this trifle of a matter?"

"They ran into each other in Teresa, I've been told. Who knows how much of that is true, but the three I just mentioned did come to my guild together, and each of them vouched for the boy's abilities. That's why I came to talk to you right away. I even used the Space spellcaster I keep on retainer for emergencies." Charles went on to relay what Ryoma had done after receiving his guild card, and that they had visited the guild in Teresa to verify Ryoma's card. "The boy was concerned that some trap or false information had been planted in his card. Evidently he also left the city by Space magic to avoid anyone following him. This may be a trifle to *you*, but how you and your guild treated that boy made him suspect those things! Even if the duke weren't involved, treating adventurers like this would drive a detrimental wedge between your guild and its members. My guild's the westernmost in the country. If some trouble comes over the border we can't deal with alone, you're the one I'm coming to for help. This could lead to a matter of life and death—so I need a real good explanation."

"Truly, I am offended," Fayld said.

"What?"

"You make it sound like I was trying to frame him or make some sort of violent retaliation. I would never take such actions, nor have I done anything that warrants such an accusation. It sounds like the boy is greatly exaggerating what happened here, or is paranoid enough to believe all that. Typical

adventurer. The ones who act like they're heroes for the smallest achievements are the ones who don't have the guts when push comes to shove."

Henry was lost for words, while Charles almost looked like something had finally clicked. The room was so utterly silent that the flickering of the lamps was audible.

First Fayld, then the others, noticed someone outside the room.

A voice could just be heard beyond the walls: "Let me through! I gotta...talk some sense into...that guy!"

"What's this about? My staff are well aware that I am meeting with guests right now. Excuse me," Fayld said, but before he could stand, the speaker burst into the room.

"There you are!" shouted a man of pure muscle.

"Wh-What is the meaning of this?!" Fayld asked.

"Bryan, you can't!" Several guild workers took turns trying to pull Bryan out of the room to no avail.

"I am in a meeting! Get out!" Fayld shouted.

"I don't give a crap! You're docking my pay?! You owe me a damn explanation!" Bryan demanded.

"Someone get him out of here!" Fayld continued.

"I'm sorry—he's too strong...!"

"We can't subdue him...."

"The note says you're punishing me because I had a *bad attitude* with that kid?! You *told* me to do that! How do you expect me to accept being fired for following your orders?! Take it back!"

"Kid? Does he mean..." Henry turned to Charles.

"Bryan, is it? Were you the administrator for Ryoma Takebayashi's exam?" Charles asked.

"Huh? Yeah, I was! So what?!"

“Tell me what happened,” said Charles. “I’m Charles, guildmaster of the Teresa Adventurer’s Guild. And I’m requesting you as a witness. You won’t object, will you, Fayld, if you didn’t do anything wrong.”

“As you wish...but nothing will change. Both my handling of Ryoma Takebayashi and disciplinary action against Bryan were by protocol,” Fayld said.

“Then you better dock your own pay!” Bryan bellowed.

“Bryan, this is a diplomatic meeting,” Fayld said. “As I’ve told Master Charles, shouting your point does not make it more valid. Besides, everyone here is a guildmaster. You forget your place.”

“If you keep talking—” Bryan started.

“Hold it!” Charles shouted, silencing both Fayld and Bryan for a moment.

“Fayld, shut up for a minute. And Bryan, I know how infuriating this guy is, trust me. But we’ll only go in circles if we keep giving him bait. Can you pretend he’s not here and tell us what happened?”

“All right, fine,” Bryan agreed. “Like I was saying, I came up here after getting this.” Having regained some composure, Bryan presented Charles with a piece of paper he had been holding in his fist. It was a notification of docked pay and punitive measures, as well as a summary of the events that had led to the decision.

“‘While acting as administrator of the rank advancement exam issued by the guild, the employee above engaged in actions that infringed on the dignity of the tester, as well as actions damaging to the integrity of the guild. As a result, the following disciplinary actions are issued against the employee...’” Henry read.

“Yeah. I did have a mocking attitude when I tested the kid, I’ll admit that. But only because *he* told me some kid backed by nobility was trying to advance his rank with fraudulent records!” Bryan glowered at Fayld like he couldn’t wait to lay his hands on him. “Of course, I don’t deny the idea ticked me off personally. But more than that, I was thinking about how C-rank marks an adventurer as self-reliant. Starting at C-rank, adventurers can take on more quests—and considerably more difficult ones, at that. They can take on jobs where they have

to be responsible for several lower-rank adventurers. What if someone who didn't deserve the rank became a leader like that? Taking a quest you can't handle and dying all on your own is one thing, but I thought he might put others in danger.

"As an admin of the exam, as an adventurer, I couldn't let that happen. I wouldn't have hesitated to incapacitate the kid through the exam, if that meant protecting other adventurers. I even thought that might be the best outcome for the kid. Like I said, my emotions played a big role in my actions. But those thoughts had already crossed my mind as soon as you told me about the kid, and I told you exactly what I was going to do. And you said nothing! You're just as responsible as I am!" Bryan shouted, more emotional than ever.

Fayld remained unbothered by his words, and just let out a long sigh. "There seemed to have been a misunderstanding."

"Misunderstanding?!" Repeated Bryan.

"I only relayed the *possibility* of fraudulent activity, not that I was convinced of it. In fact, precisely because of that possibility, I told you to take extra care as administrator to assess the boy's strength. I only asked to serve as administrator because I lack the necessary combat knowledge to do so. Still, we need to issue an appropriate exam and determine if an adventurer is ready for their next rank. That's why I trust adventurers like you to handle these exams. Of course, I have no tolerance for fraud, so I understand your personal frustrations about it. Still, those emotions should not affect your work. No matter the circumstances surrounding the test taker, you needed to administer an unbiased exam. Since I trusted you to do so, I thought you would act with integrity during the exam, even if you had personal misgivings about the test taker... Unfortunately, you did not do so. That is what lead to your disciplinary action. I'm sure you understand." Fayld's eloquent defense only managed to widen the chasm between him and the others in the room.

"Yeah, I get it... You're saying I did all that of my own volition and you're not responsible," Bryan said.

"That is not the case," Fayld said. "Some blame falls on the guild at large—for appointing you as administrator. In the future, we will review the contents of

each exam, as well as provide rigorous training for exam procedure. Naturally, you will be required to undergo this training as well. This disciplinary action is a warning. If you fail to conduct exams according to protocol again, we will have to forego renewing your contract. So..."

"I'm done," Bryan said.

"What?"

To Fayld's surprise, Bryan simply turned to walk away. He was so quiet and emotionless that he seemed nothing at all like the man who had barged into the room just moments ago. "The job wasn't bad, but I'm done working for you. No need to wait for my contract to expire. I'll walk out now. You won't miss a guy who can barely administer an exam, will you?"

"I see. Then please fill out the paperwork downstairs. Oh, if you fail to complete the quest without proper cause by not fulfilling your contract, you will have to pay a penalty, and there will be a note on your record."

"You're threatening me?" asked Bryan. "That I'll be arrested, like you threatened the kid?"

"No, just reminding you of the guild's terms. I can't have you claiming ignorance to it after the fact," Fayld said.

"See, there's no talking to you. Put it however you want, you're just dodging your responsibility. Be a human being for once." Bryan walked out of the room.

"I'm out," said Charles.

"I'll go with you," said Henry.

"You're both leaving?" Fayld asked.

"Like Bryan said, there's no talking to you. Ryoma must have felt the same way. I always knew you were a bit stuck in your ways, but I thought you were a hard worker. Now that I know you're such a... You don't *like* adventurers, do you? Why are you even a guildmaster for the Adventurer's Guild?" Charles asked.

"Because that's my job. I do not dislike adventurers. I merely fulfill my duties," Fayld said.

“Adventurers are a mixed bag,” Charles said. “Plenty of hard workers, but some of them act like slugs. It sucks, but there’s more than a fair share of them who don’t treat guild employees with respect. I can imagine what you’ve been through to make it to guildmaster without any experience in the field. Still, there’s no way someone who can’t sympathize with an adventurer, much less respect them, is any good at being a guildmaster. I will make a report of this to headquarters, and request that you’re dismissed from your position. Be ready.”

“Wait! What do you mean by that?! What did I do wrong?!” Fayld called, clearly unnerved by the threat of specific action against him.

“Master Fayld, I have no intention to sever relations between the Merchant’s and Adventurer’s Guilds. However, I do need to rethink the nature of our relationship. As long as you are the one in charge of the guild, I can’t trust you or the Adventurer’s Guild as a business partner,” Henry said. Charles and Henry walked out of the room, ignoring Fayld’s pleas.

Left alone in the room, Fayld crossed his arm, drew in a deep breath, and started blurting out the thoughts he had kept to himself during the meeting. “They barge in at this hour and they think they can accuse me of... Master Charles is just some adventurer who got lucky, after all. But for Master Henry to go so far as to... I only followed protocol. I know! The receptionist must have lied about something. I wasn’t made aware of a crucial detail. Now it all makes sense!”

No matter how much Fayld reflected on the meeting, the idea of admitting guilt never crossed his mind. Swiftly, the guildmaster called for the receptionist who’d handled Ryoma’s guild card.

Fayld’s mental gymnastics and the lengths he was going to in order to justify himself would come back to bite him, and sooner than expected...

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“Why are there only three of you here?” Fayld asked his guild employees the next morning.

Even the three employees present all looked disgruntled and ready to walk

out. “We’re on strike. If you don’t apologize and resign, we’ll quit.”

“What is going on?! You were all working like nothing was wrong until yesterday,” said Fayld.

“It’s your fault!” One of the three employees countered. “You called up Susan last night and forced her to admit to a mistake she didn’t make! We all heard about it, and that’s our last straw! If I weren’t in charge of reception, I wouldn’t be here either!”

“What?!”

“We’re all sick of you,” said another employee. “You never listen to our input, you shove arbitrary rules in our faces that you’ve interpreted in *your* favor... You’re the boss, so we never complain, but it makes our job a pain to do, and none of your directions or explanations make sense. We’re all fed up. It’s just risen to the surface now because of what’s happened these past few days.”

“If you had complaints, you should have bought them up!” Fayld yelled. “If you had, I could have considered them! Instead of making any effort to better your environment, you’re all going to quit?! I can’t even run the guild like this.”

“You have two options,” said the third employee. “Shut down the branch, or keep it running all on your own. Us three are only here as representatives of the strike. We’re not here to work. If you want to fire us, go right ahead.”

“Just so you know, the merchants heard all about what happened through their guild, and how Bryan quit the guild is the talk of every bar in the city. There’s no way to cover this up. We couldn’t do anything about it anymore if we wanted to,” said the head receptionist.

“From what I’ve heard, a good number of adventurers are leaving the city. I don’t know what will happen next, but it’ll be rough. If you plan to hold onto your position as guildmaster, you have a lot of work to do.”

With that, the receptionist and manager left, apparently having said everything they wanted to say.

“Vice guildmaster... You won’t replace me,” Fayld said. “This will only hurt the guild, and you will be held responsible for it, too.”

“I told you, I’m ready to quit. Even if I were made guildmaster of this branch, I’d just be running around trying to clean up your mess. I’d rather work my way up to a decent position in another guild. Besides, you only became guildmaster in the first place because we’re a small town in the middle of nowhere... You didn’t transfer here by choice.”

“How dare you?! There’s no difference in status among guild branches. With that kind of mindset—”

“You can save your empty lecture,” said the vice guildmaster. “Unlike you, who have nothing but experience *on paper*, I know I have enough practical skills to get by elsewhere. Even if I never work for an Adventurer’s Guild again, I won’t have trouble making a living. I’ll get going now. Oh, one more thing... Once you decide to resign, contact my house in person or by mail—either way. As soon as you announce your resignation, we can start running the guild again with any employees who wish to do so.”

Now truly alone, Fayld was notified by a messenger from the Adventurer’s Guild headquarters that his guildmaster privileges were suspended. Then he was brought into headquarters. Whatever Fayld did for the remainder of his life, no stories would be told about it.

Chapter 8, Episode 5: New Gear and the Familiars, Part.1

The day after my sparring match with Sever, our party traveled a long way through the valleys that stretched west of Teresa.

The Valleys of Trell were a natural labyrinth, formed over the centuries. A wide, well-paved road connected Teresa to the border due west, but we were traveling through taller and tighter valleys, bound for the City of Lost Souls, which was to the northwest of Teresa. From what I'd been told, the City of Lost Souls wasn't too far off from Teresa as a crow flies. Our path, however, would wind through a complicated series of turns, with a lot of ups and downs, including a few cliffs we'd need to rappel down. We knew we might have to change our route depending on conditions, so we'd planned to travel for two whole days.

Fortunately, Sever knew the valleys well and had volunteered to be our guide. He told us that the valleys and the City of Lost Souls itself often hosted field training for rookie knights in the Order; he had taken this path several times during his career.

"A little farther, and we should get to a clearing. It's a little early for lunch, but we should rest there awhile," Sever proposed. "The road becomes more challenging beyond the clearing."

"Sounds great," I replied.

"Hmm. By the way, Ryoma, your gear today looks different from yesterday's. As far as I can tell, those aren't off the shelf, either. You had those made?" he asked.

"Yes. I actually have a few well-paying side-hustles besides adventuring. That allows me to order the development of gear that utilizes slime material. It's mostly just a hobby, but the gear comes in handy."

The slime gear I had always ordered through Darson at Digger Armory had become more powerful than ever this spring. For one thing, the blacksmiths

now had a variety of materials to work with. In addition to the sticky slime strings they had been incorporating into the slash-proof armor, they now had fiber slimes that absorbed and melted other materials into string, spider slimes that created webs with their secretion, and wire slimes that could essentially turn into durable wire.

Another reason their products had improved so much was that I'd begun to work as Reinhart's engineer. All the smiths who had been working with me personally were now officially hired on as my "research assistants." In fact, the entire workshop that handled my armor-crafting now worked for me full-time. They'd given me several reasons why they'd agreed to do this: they were looking for a challenge, my projects tended to provide young apprentices with ample experience, and, of course, the money was good. Rather than trying to sell mass-produced pieces in a competitive market, they'd decided they would make better money working for me. Not that I thought money was the most important thing, but I had to admit that deep pockets made things run more smoothly.

"That's how I ended up with the new set of armor I'm wearing now," I explained. "A kind of cloth armor, you could call it. The base is spider slime silk—it's durable yet flexible, so I can maximize mobility."

My new armor was so durable that I could wear it on its own, as a kind of work outfit with no impediments to my mobility. I'd first conceptualized this armor as a sort of tracksuit, because of how comfortable the material was. The description I'd given the smiths was only meant to serve as inspiration, but lo and behold, the armor on my body looked *identical* to a tracksuit from Earth. For a little extra protection, slash-proof patches had been strategically sewn in. The material had managed to stop blades and arrows fired at close-range (as long as they were not enhanced with physical or magical energy) and had even cushioned some of the blow.



While it offered little more protection than the previous model, I was happy with the strict upgrade.

“A-ha! I was wondering if you weren’t wearing a chestplate because I broke the old one,” Sever remarked.

“Well, it gave me an excuse to switch out my armor,” I said. “I always hesitate to use new gear if the old gear’s still in good condition... Oh, and I’m not wearing them now, but I also have a vest and jacket that I can wear above this for extra protection.”

The vest and jacket each had a slot for a plate of metal or pseudo-fiberglass-reinforced-plastic (made from mixing fiberglass into the hardening solution board). After experimenting with giving a fiber slime every ingredient I could think of—fluff from a fluff slime, to name just one—I discovered that fiber slimes can turn metal fibrous, too. Not just plants! While I’d have to find the right materials and set aside enough time for the fiber slimes to process them, they would no doubt be very useful to a variety of projects.

“Of course, the material will eventually fall apart if it continues to be damaged. But even a large, C-rank monster could not destroy it in one bite or slash,” I added.

Remily was showing interest now. “Oh, that’s not bad for how light it must be. Just watching you walk around in it, I can tell how much mobility you’ve got. Is this something I could order a set of too?”

“It’s not on the market yet, but I can arrange that. It won’t be hard to convince others that you can be trusted with it, seeing how you’re Duke Reinbach’s friend and a former royal sorcerer. Feedback from the female perspective could be very useful too—I can’t provide that myself, after all. Oh, and I have some extra pieces of this fabric, if you want to test them out during our break. You can try to damage it in any way you like,” I said.

“I’ll take you up on that. I’ve been thinking of getting some new gear together, now that I’ll be adventuring again,” she answered.

“Wait, you too?” I asked. “You were an adventurer before?”

“Dipped my toe in it before I became a royal sorcerer. Since Sever has his

heart set on it, I decided to tag along for a while. I don't have anything better to do," said Remily.

"Wow. That...will definitely be something."

With their famed experience, I could easily imagine this group becoming one of the most renowned parties of adventurers in the nation.

"Well, I don't know," Remily countered. "My resume would probably get me an A-rank, but I'm not as driven by adventure as Sever is. It'll just give me something to do with my time. Besides, it'll take me a while to get the hang of things."

"Still, her presence will be of great help to us," Sever joined in. "Her character aside, Remily is a great sorcerer."

"See? And I'd be worried about this old man on quests all by himself. I'll go half in, at least," Remily said.

"Oh, *this* old man will have no problem—"

Before Sever could finish, Remily shot him a murderous look, catching me in the crossfire.

Clearing his throat, Sever pointed ahead. "Uh, there it is. Let's rest," he said, clearly wanting to distract Remily.

The clearing was a perfect circle—it would've been large enough to hold a track and field event, with the right equipment. "It's much more open than I thought. Manmade too."

"The Knight's Order often stops here to rest or camp. It's not maintained on purpose, but using the same location a few times a year for several decades will even out surfaces. Historically, the Valleys of Trell were used as a grounds to experiment with magic on, and the City of Lost Souls was a prison and gallows. Many parts of these valleys were shaped by human hands," Sever explained.

"I see... Oh, does anyone mind if I bring out my familiars?" I asked. "I try to let them out of the Dimension Home frequently, and I can ask them to prepare our lunch while I go over my new armor."

"That's all right with me," Sever answered. "Even monsters must feel cooped

up, if they're stuck in a room all day."

Since the others didn't object either, I opened my Dimension Home and called out to my familiars within. Cooking outside of the Dimension Home was something I had asked them to do plenty of times, so they should know the routine. I waited for a few moments. An emperor scavenger slime was the first to come through.

"Whoa!" Sever exclaimed.

"What is that thing...?" Remily asked.

Reinbach showed less surprise than his friends; he and Sebas were already aware that I had contracted a great number of slimes, including at least one big slime. "This one's much bigger than the ones I've seen before."

"You haven't changed, Master Ryoma," Sebas simply noted.

I briefly explained how my emperor scavenger slime had come to be.

"I did see you with an army of slimes in tow," Sever said. "But this big —*emperor,* you called it?—is something else. Ten *thousand* slimes, you said?"

"I've never seen anything like it in my entire life," Remily chimed in.

"I've heard that, while rare, there are some wild big slimes...but I'm not sure if an emperor slime would ever naturally form. Maybe if there were some sort of supermassive outbreak of slime," I pondered.

Meanwhile, the goblins marched out of the Dimension Home, wearing clean clothes and gear that showed they were not wild, carrying weapons or other things. This was a familiar sight to me, but everyone else reacted rather differently from how they had towards the emperor slime. "What's wrong?" I asked.

"Well... I wasn't expecting *this*, either," Remily said.

When I requested an explanation, Reinbach volunteered. "Each goblin horde has its own hierarchy. The alpha always comes first. When they eat, the alpha eats first, then the next goblin in the hierarchy eats from the scraps, then the next, and so on. That is why goblins on the bottom of the hierarchy are ganglier than those towards the top of the horde. An adventurer who's familiar with

goblins can take one look and predict an individual goblin's strength, as well as where they stand in their horde's hierarchy. The majority of your goblins were born in your care, I assume. Most of them look very well-fed. The skinnier ones are survivors of hunts, born in the wild. Am I wrong?" he asked.

"That's exactly right," I said. "They eat as much as a human. That's more than the amount recommended by the Tamer's Guild, and that includes supplements for their health and strength."

Goblins multiplied exponentially. More food meant more goblins, who would grow stronger with each generation. Considering the threat of a goblin outbreak, limiting their food might be the safest recourse. Still, as their master—and as reward for helping me with my work—it only felt right to provide them with adequate food, shelter, and clothing. I was also curious about the effects of the supplements that I had just started developing.

"Supplements... I see. That hobgoblin there, for example, looks as strong as an average goblin knight. If you don't mind me asking, have they ever ignored your orders or revolted?" asked Reinbach.

"They have—a few times," I answered.

Their first rebellion had happened a week after the first generation of goblins was born under my care. The goblins had grown to full size in no time, and they'd soon organized against me. The original eight goblins I had captured still followed my orders, but thanks to how fast goblins reproduced and grew, the original generation had soon been outnumbered.

"Since it didn't look like the original goblins could keep the others in check for long, I lured the younger generation into attacking me so I could defeat them. Right now, I am the alpha of their horde," I said.

"Ah, I do recall you joining a large-scale goblin hunting quest," Reinbach said. "And I suppose newborn goblins never stood a chance against you, when you can go toe-to-toe against Sever. So you've shown your dominance by strength."

"Yes. I don't know if this will prove it, but..." I turned to the goblins still marching out of the Dimension Home. They all seemed curious about my companions; most of them were at least stealing glances at them, and some were downright staring. So I sent a command to all of the goblins with Taming

magic: *Don't lay a finger on them.* At once, each goblin made a nod or salute or sound that indicated their compliance before turning their focus to making lunch. While I didn't understand their language, their attitudes were very telling. I turned back to Reinbach. "There you have it."

"You do have a firm grip on their reins," he said.

"Yes. I've learned firsthand how dangerous goblins can be because of how swiftly they multiply," I said.

"I see... It seems my concerns were ungrounded," said Reinbach.

"Still, I really do appreciate you bringing it up to ensure our safety," I said.

This only worked because I was strong enough to take the goblin horde on, and my experience with goblins made things easier. If a rookie adventurer with no prior experience tried to replicate my situation, they would probably be killed—or let some goblins escape, which could lead to others getting hurt. No wonder the Tamer Guild strictly warns against overfeeding goblins.

"That makes me feel better, but also like I'm speaking to an adult," Reinbach said, as if he didn't know what to do about it. Still, he spoke kindly.

Stumped for words, I turned to watch the goblins working on our lunch.

Chapter 8, Episode 5: New Gear and the Familiars, Part.2

Following my gaze to the goblins, Sever asked me, “Ryoma, I couldn’t help but notice the sets of armor the hobgoblins are wearing. Are those experimental, too?” He was watching the hobgoblins spread around the regular goblins.

These were more aggressive goblins who stood guard for the other goblins unfit for combat. True to their post, each of them was paying close attention to our surroundings, some swinging their weapons in their air. I had crafted their armor myself, building each part with alchemy. This armor was modeled after the armor worn by the Greatsword Brothers, and I was pretty happy with how it’d turned out.

“Those pieces are prototypes, but they weren’t made by real smiths. More of a deterrent than anything,” I explained.

“Ah, those are the hobgoblins you send out to avoid petty conflict,” Sever recalled. “Hobgoblins of that size walking around in heavy armor and greatswords on their backs *are* rather intimidating.”

“I used an alloy called duralumin, which is pretty light, especially for its durability. It does rust easily, so I coated each piece with sticky solution mixed with ash to prevent rusting and make the armor look heavier by suppressing its sheen. And I’ve trained them with basic combat principles, so they come in very handy for hunts, too. I may be biased, but they’re not all for show.”

As a general strategy, the goblins were separated into two groups: the larger ones as front row combatants, and the smaller ones as back row support attackers. The back row goblins would fire arrows or magic together, and the front row goblins would deal with any enemies that came close through the onslaught. If I asked the limour birds, they could search for enemies from the sky, and I could construct traps and camps very quickly with the help of slimes. With my Space magic, we could even get out of a location quickly and discreetly. Making the first move in the field would make our position even

more favorable. It’s rudimentary, but gaining the upperhand means making me and my familiars safer. In the past few months, the goblins alone had taken out more than a few groups of bandits or monsters.



“You utilize them much more like a proper battalion than I thought...” Sever said. “I suppose that makes you the general or strategist.”

“Oh, I don’t know if I’d call myself a strategist,” I said. “I do *know* a strategist, though—Marble, the genius chicken.”

Marble was the leader—more accurately, the customer service representative—of the clever chickens I had purchased to create a sustainable egg supply. Marble, who hadn’t even turned one year old, somehow kept the flock of silver spoon-fed clever chickens. One day, I made him a chess set, hoping it would provide him with some much needed escape from the stress of poultry leadership. Not only did Marble learn all the rules immediately, he quickly became much better at the game than I was. Once Marble had taught the rest of the flock how to play chess, the chickens became too engrossed in the game to think of their usual complaints. Sometimes even a conflict between clever chickens could be solved with a game of chess. In the end, Marble was very grateful that his workload had lightened because of chess, but I didn’t feel entirely right about accepting the praise; I hadn’t planned any of that when I’d made him the set.

“I seek out his advice sometimes,” I said. “He’s got good insights.”

“I don’t know about that...” Sever turned to Reinbach. “Are all clever chickens like this?”

“Not many people would think to teach their livestock chess... We’ve always known that clever chickens are intelligent enough to understand our speech, but I have never heard of one that plays chess. But seeing how Ryoma’s *do* play, it may be possible to teach all clever chickens how to play, with the right method,” Reinbach said after some thought. He added that clever chickens playing chess could become a popular spectacle for the wealthy.

“As a kind of sideshow?” I asked.

“It would draw spectators out of curiosity, but strategic games like chess are a part of education among nobility. It isn’t uncommon to see nobles host tournaments, sponsor talented players, or hire one as a tutor. Those passionate for the game have money to spend on it. If a clever chicken can learn to play, there might one day be a chess tournament for clever chickens—all sponsored

and trained by dedicated tamers," Reinbach said.

"Like racehorses," I noted.

"Exactly," Reinbach agreed. "The only difference being the subject of competition: speed or chess.

"There's always a demand for competitions like that, though different forms of them fall in and out of fashion. Nobles love to have flashy new things to do. You could make a lot of money with that," said Remily.

Even on Earth—although they were outlawed in most places now under animal protection laws—there were dogfighting and cockfighting rings...

Isn't this idea the exact same thing? The word "fighting" makes it sound so barbaric...but "bird chess" just sounds lame.

Sebas asked, "I am also intrigued by the clever chicken, to be sure—but Master Ryoma, what is that cart the goblins are pulling? It almost looks like a cooking pot on wheels."

"It's like a portable oven that makes it easier to cook large quantities outdoors." When I thought about equipment I wanted for my adventuring, I prototyped a cart inspired by the cooking vehicles that the Self-Defense Forces use...but I didn't have the proper knowledge to recreate that, so I ended up with basically an old-fashioned baked potato cart, which looked like a wheelbarrow with a chimney sticking out of it. Simple structure too, with just a gas stovetop loaded onto the cart, which is treated to be fire retardant. But that simplicity makes it durable and easy to fix if something broke. It's fueled by methane gas, which the air scavenger slimes exhale—it's the main component of natural gas, and a small component of cow burps and human farts.

One scavenger slime could only exhale a minute amount, but the emperor scavenger slime exhaled more than enough gas to fuel the cooking cart. Though it *did* wind up exhaling a lot of extra particles that just stank up the air without fueling anything...

"The machine next to the stovetop eliminates unwanted parts of the gas," I pointed out. Another simple device that looked like a pneumatic trough from a chemistry lab at a school. The scavenger slime would exhale its blend of stench

and methane gas into the tube, and most of the smell would be absorbed into the deodorant slime sitting within the device. The remaining gas would pool in a pocket until it built up enough pressure to escape through another tube containing a filter slime, which would prevent any liquids from escaping the device *and* filtering out most of the stench. In the end, just the methane gas (with only a very subtle smell) would feed into the stovetop.

"That's the gist of it," I said.

"So the slime produces a sort of...earthwyrm breath, and you're using it," Sebas said.

"Earthwyrm...? I'm sorry, I don't know what that is," I admitted.

"Earthwyrm breath is wind that comes from the earth. It is highly flammable and toxic. You mostly find it in volcanic areas; legend has it that it's caused by an earthwyrm hidden underground or in a cave, breathing out into the air," Sebas explained.

"In that case, you could think of it that way," I said. "It can be found underground, and it can leak out. It's also true that it can be dangerous if mishandled." Even the cooking cart had to be used outdoors, or at least in a place with great ventilation. Besides, I'd made sure the filter slime wouldn't eliminate the gas's odor entirely, so we could smell it if it started to leak. "And everything from how much solution is used to deodorize the gas to how fast the gas is fed in is all handled by slimes. There are plenty of improvements to be made, chief among them safety measures. If someone else wanted a cart like mine, it would be a lot safer and easier for them to create something that used a Fire magical item instead of the scavenger slimes. This was all just a pet project."

The engineering of the cart aside, methane gas itself could be highly dangerous without expert knowledge. I once worked for a gas company and became certified in handling certain equipment, but that was a long time ago. I wasn't confident that I remembered enough to teach others how to handle the gas properly. At least right now, it was best for me to stick with careful personal use.

"More projects under your belt," Reinbach remarked.

“At this point, I’m wondering if even your backpack was engineered somehow,” Remily said.

“It was, actually. The same alloy I used in my armor is what I used for the frame—it lightens the pack a lot while still giving it durability. Tying this belt around my waist makes it so I can distribute its weight more efficiently too. If I press this button, it unbuckles the pack right away, so I can ditch the pack quickly if I need to run or fight in a pinch. Rubber from rubber slimes fill the gaps in the frame, so this thing can take a hit. While it won’t fit too much, I have drawers on the bottom that allow me to store small objects or breakables. These drawers can be accessed easily, so I keep my first aid kit in there.

“Hmm. Can I try it on? And if you have any spare armor, I would like to see it,” Sever said.

“Of course. I have plenty of prototypes with me. Take your time,” I said.

“We would like to see them, too,” Reinbach chimed in.

How did I end up like a door-to-door salesman? Oh, well.

I continued presenting my new prototypes until lunch was served.

Chapter 8, Episode 7: Lunchtime Smalltalk

“*Mm*... This tastes like something that was made fresh in the city. I would not have believed this was a ration pack, had I not seen it being cooked myself! And it only needs to be boiled in its pack for such a short time... It’s perfect for camping and mid-march meals. If I had known of this when I was in the Order, I would have made sure both the Order and the military implemented these packs!” Sever was the one most excited about the instant meals I’d had the goblins heat up.

“I get it, Sever,” Remily said. “But you need to calm down.”

“It is incredible that we can have a proper meal out in the field in such a short time,” Reinbach said.

“These freeze dried soups only require hot water. While it is a convenient option for adventurers, it would make for a drastic improvement to military rations,” Sebas noted.

“Do you plan to sell these, Ryoma? I would pay good money for these,” Sever said.

“I’m glad you like them so much, but I’ve passed on the manufacturing and distribution of these products to Duke Reinhart,” I said.

“Hmm... Considering their potential, I suppose only a powerful noble could handle their distribution appropriately,” said Sever.

“If Ryoma weren’t protected by the Jamils, plenty of thick-headed nobles would try to get their grubby fingers on these. Good call, Ryoma,” Remily said. “These really are delicious... Slimes can be quite useful, can’t they?” But then she fell silent, seemingly lost in thought. From how quickly she was eating, she was still enjoying the food, at least.

“What’s the matter?” asked Reinbach.

“Well... Hearing Ryoma talk about his slimes—it seems like such a waste. An acquaintance from the capital recently told me that the slime lab in the National Monster Research Institute is being shut down,” she said.

“Wait, really?” I asked. Caulkin, one of my employees, used to work there.

Reinbach looked surprised. “Reinhart hasn’t told you?”

“Nothing about the capital, really... I’d heard from someone who used to work there that the slime lab had always been undervalued within the institute, but this is my first time hearing about a closure,” I said.

“Did you know that reports of monster sightings and attacks have been on the rise these past few years?” Remily asked.

“Only in rumors,” I said.

“We have record of more monsters showing up and wreaking more havoc than usual in recent years, so we’ve been on high alert as a nation. Information is among the most important commodities of war, wouldn’t you agree? If our expected enemies are monsters, we need more information on monsters. When mutations or new species arise, monster researchers at the institute are called upon. Researchers will have more and more on their plate, so the higher-ups of the institute are trying to focus their resources on high-priority subjects,” Remily said, with a twinge of bitterness in her voice.

But now I was more concerned with what was going to happen with the slime researchers. “What will happen to the employees of the slime lab?”

“Don’t worry about them,” Reinbach said. “The House of Jamil will take in any of them who wish to work for us after they’re let go from the institute.”

“Really?!” I asked.

“Yes. His Majesty contacted the duke directly before the closure was finalized,” Sebas said. “I was involved in some capacity, but the duke spoke of having them continue their research on slimes, so we were under the impression that they would be working for you, Master Ryoma.”

“Continue research...” I muttered. Something came to my mind.

When I had first been hired as Reinhart’s engineer, during one of our meetings, he had shown interest in my food production plant—he’d even put forward the idea of building a brand new farming village, partially to test the effectiveness of the plant. He mentioned two reasons for conducting this

experiment: one, he wanted to see if all the steps involved in slime farming could be handled by anyone else but me, and to evaluate their effectiveness; two, he wanted to fortify the Jamils' stockpile, so as to prepare for any emergencies.

With the construction of instant food plants and factories on the horizon, the scope of this project was going to grow dramatically. That was why we had decided that I wouldn't be involved from the get-go. That was no skin off my back, so I agreed, knowing that I could still go where I wanted and do what I wanted... Maybe the king's request had led to that conversation, I realized now. Naturally, Reinhart couldn't have discussed any details about his meeting with the king with me.

"Cost effectiveness is another matter, but if there were a whole village dedicated to producing and storing these meals as emergency rations, it would be a life-saving safety net," Sebas said.

"If someone needs to represent the project, things might go over more smoothly with a researcher from the capital than with young Ryoma," Sever chimed in.

"Also, the duke is taking in researchers that have been kicked out of the institute, regardless of the reason behind it. Perhaps he intends to let the dust settle before making them privy to any secrets," Remily said.

"I pity their circumstances," Sever said, "but there's no telling their character or state of mind. In a moment of desperation, with their livelihood and honor on the balance... There's no guarantee one of them won't be tempted to steal Ryoma's contributions for himself upon meeting him." He glanced over at my cooking cart, instant meals, and armor. Everyone, including myself, agreed with his assessment.

"There are points of concern to be sure," Reinbach offered, "and navigating these treacherous waters falls on the shoulders of the duke. The researchers will be given a second chance at their careers. Their efforts, and Reinhart's, will determine their fate."

"I agree," I said.

One of the benefits of slime farming was the ease of obtaining farmland. In

fact, that was how I could make my base in the middle of Gimul at all—a large warehouse or two would provide enough space to manufacture these instant meals. The Jamils would have no trouble recruiting trustworthy staff. Not to mention access to magic in this world. Even if they had to develop a random plot of land from scratch, they should be able to accomplish that without spending too much time. I would be hoping for their success, for sure.

On another note, there was something else that had piqued my interest. “Speaking of...can I ask what sort of person the king is? If you don’t mind...” The only thing I knew about the king was his name, Elias de Rifall. But he probably knew a good deal about us through Hudom, and he might be involved in this project. If we were going to cross paths, I wanted even a small hint of his character.

When I explained this, everyone but Remily fell silent.

“No need to worry about little Elias,” Remily said. “He’s a bit nontraditional by royal standards, but reasonable when you sit down and talk to him.”

“Really?” I asked the others.

“There’s no doubt about that,” Sever agreed. “He is not afraid to make tough decisions, but he is far from heartless. He was privy to the closure of the slime lab, and was frustrated by it. Moreover, researchers at the institute are the brains of the country itself. The slime researchers were surely valuable human resources. It must have been a tough decision to open up other resources in the institute.”

“Even if they simply switched the researchers to another lab, there’s no guarantee they’ll be treated differently,” Remily added. “If there’s a chance that they’ll still be subjugated in the shadows, Elias might have decided it would be better for them and the country as a whole to have them conduct their research in a new environment.”

“If their research proves useful to the country, the king can access their results through the duke,” Sebas said. “Nobles in the capital won’t be too happy about it, but His Majesty never hesitates to make bold decisions when the situation calls for it.”

“If His Majesty was receiving word through Hudom, there is no doubt you are

a part of his plans," Reinbach said. "That being said, now that you are officially our engineer, there will be no unreasonable demands made to you without Reinhart's approval. Even royalty would not ignore a noble's rights and run the risk of losing trust with his people. His Majesty will weigh what is best for the country." He smiled.

Sever and Sebas were both choosing their words carefully, but they seemed to share the opinion that the involvement of the king would not cause me any trouble. So I decided to trust that.

"Okay. If something ever comes up, I may ask for your help," I said.

"That's it?" Remily asked. "You don't want to ask any more questions?"

"I'd be lying if I said I wasn't curious, but all I needed to know was that His Majesty is not a tyrant. I've expected the story of the attack on Gimul to reach the capital, and I trust the Jamils to handle anything that comes up because of it. I trust them well enough to do that."

My smile drew out theirs.

Our relaxing lunch came to an end with a cry from the distance. As soon as the crow-like shriek reached us, the goblins were on guard—reaching for their weapons, setting their lunches aside.

"A flock of harris crows. Maybe they smelled our lunch," said Remily.

"Most likely," Sever joined. "Oh, no need to deal with them head-on. They travel and large flocks, but they are weak monsters on their own. Scare them a little and they'll fly away. Like this."

I'd been preparing a spell while calming the goblins down, but Sever stopped me from casting. He cast Tornado, sending a flurry of wind into the air and blowing about twenty of the birds away. While it didn't look like it had done that much damage, the flock scattered and flew away in the opposite direction.

"Those can be troublesome to take out. That way is much faster and doesn't cost as much stamina or magical energy," Sever added.

"Thank you," I said.

"I could do this all day. *Someone* helped me realize that I still have plenty of

time before I retire! Ha ha ha!”

Sever almost seemed like a different man compared to my first impression of him.

“Don’t get carried away and overextend yourself, Sever. You may *feel* younger, but your body is not. We can’t pick up as much of your slack as we used to,” said Reinbach.

“Oh, I understand I’ve aged. Just not to the point where I’d let a flock of birds get the better of me,” Sever persisted.

“You are getting carried away. That has always been a specialty of yours—”

“You’re the one to talk, Reinbach! Do you remember when...”

Sever really had gotten more energetic. He launched into an argument with Reinbach, but they seemed almost invigorated by it. Sebas and Remily returning to their lunch like nothing was out of place showed me how long they had known each other.

I couldn’t help but hope for friendships like this that would keep me young in my later years.

Chapter 8, Episode 8: First Brush with the Undead

As Sever had warned, our path through the valleys became more difficult as we progressed after our lunch break—it was an endless winding stretch of cliffs that seemed to never change. Without his guidance, we could have easily lost our bearings. The farther we progressed through the valleys, the more frequently we encountered monsters. Most of them were smaller and easily chased away, but that still warranted caution. Even a small monster could kill you in a moment of complacency, not to mention that fighting on unstable terrain was dangerous on its own.

That being said, being on high alert all the time would've been more taxing than productive, so we made sure to relax when we could. All while keeping a watchful eye out, of course. Eventually, I felt a strange presence and noticed the stench of rotting flesh.

"Do you smell that?" I asked.

"There's an undead ahead. A zombie, most likely," Sever predicted.

Sure enough, after twenty seconds or so of waiting, a rotten corpse turned the corner and came into our view, shuffling in a meandering manner. From what I'd read about them, Undead monsters preferred nighttime and dark locations, but could withstand daylight. They could also move as fast as an average person walks, but they were far from agile. Compared to most other monsters, they weren't considered much of a threat, but they did leave an unpleasant stench in your nostrils.

"Let's go over the characteristics of the Undead," Sever said, then darted to the walking corpse and slashed it into three pieces with his halberd, through its shoulder and across its waist. "That was just a normal cut—no magic. Not very effective. It'll regenerate soon enough and continue attacking." And indeed, the pieces of the zombie were crawling towards each other already to reconstruct the body. "Most Undead monsters can regenerate, so taking them on with only

regular weapons—especially blades—is inefficient, though not impossible. If you really need to take one out without magic, the fastest way is to pummel it to a pulp with a blunt weapon. However, some species can withstand even that. Attacking them with magic is going to be the most straightforward solution."

At this point, the zombie had merged itself back together and started to approach us again. This time, Sever cast Wind Cutter to slice the zombie in two at the waist. Although the zombie began regenerating, the process seemed slower than before.

"As you can see, magic slows its regeneration, making it easier to take out. The theory behind this is that Undead monsters are powered by Dark magic, and any spell cast against them scatters some of the Dark magic. Some forms of magic are more effective against them, some less; the most effective is Light magic," Sever continued. "You said you can cast Light magic, didn't you, Ryoma? When the zombie's all regenerated, try hitting it with Light Ball."

I did as instructed. "Light Ball!" The ball of light flew straight from my palm to the zombie's chest. The spell went straight through the monster, taking out a huge hunk of its flesh. The zombie groaned as if in pain, and its wound showed no sign of regeneration as it collapsed onto the ground.

"Remily?" Sever asked.

"Strong and fast. He's got the basics down," she replied before turning to me. "But some could survive a hit or two like that, unless you find their head or chest like you did just now."

"Got it," I said. "I didn't expect Light Ball to obliterate its flesh, though... I read that the Undead were once human corpses. Light Ball wouldn't do that to an ordinary corpse, would it?"

"No, an ordinary corpse would not disintegrate with Light magic," Reinhart said. "It is thought that corpses undergo some physical change when they become Undead. I do not know whether this theory is true or not. Some Undead come into being without a corpse. Many questions remain unanswered on the subject."

"Another theory is that the Undead monster itself is made up of Dark magic. Then again, some cursed objects can change into or become haunted by

Undead monsters, so there's no clear-cut answer," Remily said.

Another zombie had appeared during our Q&A session. When I readied myself to cast a spell against it, Remily stopped me. "You know how you cast spells without incantation yesterday?" she asked. "Can you show me that again? The best spell you can, with whatever element you're most comfortable with."

"Okay." I decided to go with Wind, and I sent Wind magical energy into my hands. In the next breath, I'd shattered the zombie's head and chest with balls of compressed air that I'd fired from my fists.

"Air Hammer," Sever noted. "And two at once."

"Again, it's powerful and fast enough, at least as much as the Light Ball," Sebas added.

"You've always been good at magic, but it seems you've been practicing diligently," Reinhart said.

Not too shabby, as far as I could tell from their reactions. Except Remily looked like something was troubling her. "Is something wrong?" I asked her.

"Nothing wrong—except that I need to figure out what to teach you next. If you didn't have the basics down, we could have started there. Looks like we can skip that, though. You're pretty much self-taught, aren't you?" Remily asked.

"You can tell," I said.

"I was once a royal sorcerer. Spellcasters who've received formal training—at an academy or in the military, or even from a tutor—fit a mold, for better or worse. No *tells* in their casting. While you have the bare basics down, like releasing magical energy and converting elements, I can see you've developed spells with your own technique and imagination from there. The one you just cast just now without any incantation absolutely did the job, but it was more like you'd punched the zombie than fired a spell at it."

Wow, a professional sorcerer can tell that much from a couple of spells...? Or can everyone see that? Either way, Remily was correct.

I had only just recently learned how to cast spells without incantations. It had

started with the slime magic I'd developed at the end of the year. Through the process of giving the synchronized slime directions—according to how I envisioned the spell I wanted to cast—via magic, I'd never made any incantations, though I hadn't realized that at first. Once I'd noticed what I was doing, I'd started with the *sensation* of casting slime magic and focused on spellcasting myself, based on the instincts I'd developed—and it had worked like a charm. I had practiced casting magic without incantations for a while, but this newfound mindset drastically improved my success rate and the effectiveness of my magic. As part of the instinctive casting process, I started to work in martial arts movements that had become second nature to me in my previous life. For example, for a spell that shoots something out—like Air Hammer, which uses compressed air to damage the enemy—I cast it as if I'm just throwing a punch. Spells like Earth Needle, I cast with a low kick.

"Normally, that intuition is gained gradually through years of repetition. But you combined two skills you excelled at—martial arts and...slime magic?" Remily noted. "It reminds me of the arcane sword fighting style practiced by knights. If you were a regular student, I'd just have to assess how many of the skills in the curriculum you'd mastered...but I need another approach with you."

"Miss Remily, I believe the best course of instruction might be to show Master Ryoma the spells *you* can cast, and have him try them. Master Ryoma has always created and cast spells on his own. Once you explain the nature of a spell, he will find a way to make it his own," Sebas said.

"Even when Sebas taught him Space magic, Ryoma managed to learn up to intermediate spells that way," Reinhart pointed out.

"Then it's settled," Remily said. "We can always try another way if it doesn't work."

As the adults settled on my educational plan, yet another zombie turned the corner, dragging its feet on the ground.

"Another one..." Sever noted.

"Is that unusual?" I asked.

"They could have been drawn to the sound of combat, but three seems a little too many to see consecutively when we're only half a day's walk from the travel

road," he said.

"Maybe the number of Undead here are increasing like the other monsters in the area," I suggested.

"It's perfect for your training, at least, Ryoma. Here, I'll show you an intermediate Light spell." Remily lifted her staff and began her incantation. "Exorcism!"

A basketball-sized orb of light appeared at the tip of the staff, and flew into the zombie. Instead of piercing the monster, the ball exploded and enveloped the zombie in light before obliterating it in its entirety.

"Like that, this spell envelops a targeted Undead with Light magic. A weak one like a zombie will just disappear, and it's very useful to detain faster or higher-level Undead. This will come in handy more often than you think. It expends about 1500 magical energy per cast. A bit overkill to take out zombies or skeletons one by one with this, so I'd use Light Ball against those and save this for when you really need it. Fire magic works well against Undead, too, so it can be more effective to burn a larger horde than cast Light magic...but that all depends. Practice makes perfect."

And so I began practicing my magic against zombies and skeletons as we came across them.

Chapter 8, Episode 9: A Horde of Unexpected Size

We walked for two more hours, taking on Undead monsters as they crossed our path. Following a trail that almost seemed too rugged to be called one, we made it to the top of a rocky hill. Below us spread countless valleys that had been created by centuries of rain eroding the plateau. It was a grand landscape painted by nature's powerful brush. It would have looked like a tourist destination on Earth, if it weren't for...

"What a heinous sight," Sever said.

A sea of Undead monsters filled the valleys, including the route we had planned to take. Not only did they ruin the view, they were an annoying obstacle to our trek. Even my very experienced companions were watching the enormous horde with dismay.

"What should we do?" I asked them.

"Looks like they're all zombies and skeletons, but there are a lot of them. There could be advanced species in there," Remily said.

"Going around would make things easier for us, but I wouldn't feel right leaving the area infested like this," Reinhart said.

"We *are* some distance away from the travel road, but if they made it over there, it could affect international trade. Best to take them out now," Sever said.

"Our journey has objectives, but not a deadline. We can afford a detour," Sebas pointed out.

In this country, hunting Undead monsters meant more than removing threats. Because it was believed that the Undead were human corpses, eliminating them meant sending the trapped souls of the dead to the gods. Everyone in our party seemed quite willing to take care of this horde before we resumed our journey.

“I agree,” I said. “But the question is how to deal with that many of them. From what I’ve seen so far, my slimes should be able to handle them... Would it be okay to feed them to my slimes? Would it harm the slimes or infringe on any religious custom?”

“Clergypeople or devout believers might not be excited about it, but that’s the extent of it,” Remily said. “I doubt many people have fed Undead monsters to slimes before, but as long as we get rid of them, who cares? There’s no sense in us sticking our neck out for tradition, either. I’m not bothered by it, at least. I don’t know how it will affect your slimes, though.”

“I agree,” said Sever. “Our top priority is our safety, then the hunt. Our hunting methods matter even less.”

Reinbach and Sebas agreed with this too. As long as they were fine with it, I had no issue asking the slimes to handle this. I’d have to observe and take note of how they interacted with the Undead and any changes they underwent, though...

My main attackers would be scavenger slimes that liked dead flesh, acid slimes that could eat bones, and light slimes that could cast Light magic. Still, the other slimes could help with the hunt, too.

“Master Ryoma, before sending out the slimes, why don’t we put a dent in their number ourselves? I do not know what happens to slimes who eat the Undead, but a concentration of Undead can generate cursed energy,” Sebas said.

“Toxic magical energy,” I recalled. “That’s a lot of them to feed to the slimes even as an experiment.”

“Let me handle them,” said Reinbach. “I’ve got plenty of magical energy, thanks to you all taking care of them so far. I can burn off a good deal of their numbers with Fire magic.”

Since none of the Undead we could see were the sort that could fly, Reinbach’s idea would keep us from getting surrounded.

“Oh, I have a lot of oil and gunpowder in my Item Box. Would you like me to disperse them first?” I asked.

“If you don’t mind! That will make it easier to burn...” Reinbach trailed off, looking at me with astonishment. “Did you say gunpowder?”

The other three were also giving me a questioning look.

“In the process of researching slimes, I figured out how to create a substance similar to gunpowder. I kept experimenting, and I actually used it in traps against the attackers on Gimul.”

Before I had been attacked by those hitmen, I had anticipated the attack and prepared numerous traps on my grounds. My plan had been to run like a normal kid in the case of an attack, but because I was tired and sleep-deprived and on that past-midnight adrenaline rush, I ended up taking on the assailants without activating any of the traps. I’d used oil and gunpowder in the traps I had planted to slow down—or hopefully incapacitate—any attackers while I made a run for it.

“Since I didn’t activate the traps, I have the materials all left over. I brought them with me after I read that fire was useful against the Undead,” I explained.

Reinhart grunted. “Where to start...”

“A *normal* child doesn’t set gunpowder-loaded traps for potential attackers,” Sever said. “I’m impressed you even knew how to create such an inefficient material.”

“My grandmother had a lot of books on various subjects,” I said.

“I see. If you know enough about it to make it from scratch, this may be unnecessary advice, but make sure to handle it with care,” said Sever.

After I’d discovered how to make my own gunpowder, I’d found out through research that the substance isn’t widely used in this world, simply because magic and magic crystal powered items exist. Comparing explosives made from the same mass of gunpowder and magic crystals, magic crystals are more effective, safer, easier to manufacture and store, and cheaper. Furthermore, magic crystals had a wider variety of uses, like cooking and heating. So gunpowder was a strict downgrade from magic crystals. Not many people even knew gunpowder existed, and those who did know considered them useless. For the same reason, there were hardly any laws regarding gunpowder,

allowing anyone to legally manufacture and experiment with it as long as it didn't harm anyone.

I had almost expected Sever, as someone who must have been involved with enforcing laws around dangerous substances, to discourage me from using it—his reaction was much tamer than I'd thought. The way I saw it, this showed how undervalued gunpowder was in this world. When only a small portion of the population knew of it to begin with and an even smaller population could manufacture it, I supposed it was only natural. Of course, I didn't have the slightest intention of spreading the good word of gunpowder in this world or anything. Rather, I was itching to get rid of my stockpile so as to not accidentally make gunpowder more common.

"Then, let's see... I'll cast my spell from over there." Reinbach pointed to an isolated cliff above the valleys of Undead. From the cliff hung what had once been a rope bridge, which must have fallen long ago. None of us objected.

En route to the cliff, I asked about the bridge and was told that it was called the Bridge of Hope.

"Criminals assigned to the prison ahead were all serving a life sentence or scheduled for execution. At the time, the prison was rife with abuse and torture conducted on the whims of the wardens—they often took out their frustration on the inmates, or they just got a sort of twisted pleasure from violence. There were even rumors that illegal experiments were conducted on the inmates..." Reinhart said.

"Long story short, the bridge was a popular spot for suicide. And for soldiers to push off some of the inmates they were transferring for sport. The Undead are created in and are drawn to places like that," Remily added.

"So the 'hope' part is ironic..." I said.

"Sadly, humans have always had a dark side," said Sebas.

"Let us liberate the souls of at least any Undead we come across."

I agreed with Sever and noticed that we were nearly at the destroyed bridge. Since the once-maintained path up to the bridge was clear, we set our packs down a fair distance from the bridge and put our plan to action.

We first made sure the overlook was secure, then used Earth magic, rope, and wire slimes to set up lifelines. While I couldn't tell the exact height of the cliff we were standing on, I estimated about five stories, which warranted safety measures in my opinion.

Once we were tethered, I began taking out one barrel of oil after another from my Item Box and set them on the edge of the cliff. Then the adults began chucking them below. It surprised me a little that each of them were picking up and throwing the barrels over, rather than just pushing them down. Those wine barrels that I had reused were sizable and filled with oil, making them rather heavy. Watching the adults—really, more like two elderly men and a younger-looking woman—lift them with ease, it seemed a little out of place, even though they were surely bolstering their strength with physical or magical energy.

Remily chuckled. "I never fight in close quarters if I can help it, but I can handle this much. Every spellcaster needs to prepare for some kind of close quarters fight, or they won't last long in the field."

"I'm sure you're right," I said.

Still, her lifting the barrel with one—toned, granted, but slender—arm, even going so far as to strike a pose... It almost looked like it had been Photoshopped. In some ways, my mind was still on Earth.

"Master Ryoma, a royal sorcerer can focus on many projects, ranging from research to training other sorcerers. Miss Remily mainly researched magic designed to hunt monsters and bandits, which could be applied to combat in general. She was one of the most powerful royal sorcerers in history," said Sebas.

"So not all royal sorcerers can do what she does," I said.

"Precisely," he answered.

Enhancement magic, like physical energy, became more efficient and effective with practice. Accordingly, she could also expend additional magical energy to gain better results.



We kept working as we discussed these things, the sound of crashing barrels and Undead screams echoing through the valleys. The Undead were packed tight in the valleys, perhaps to avoid as much sunlight as possible, so each barrel was taking out at least two or three of them.

“That will do, Ryoma,” Reinhart said.

“Are you sure?” I asked. “That’s only half of my oil supply, not to mention the gunpowder.”

“Thirty barrels is plenty,” he reassured.

“That’s only half of it?” Sever muttered.

“I can make plenty of vegetable oil with my slimes and magic,” I explained.

Now that we had enough oil spilled, I called out the slimes from the Dimension Home. I felt like one each of an emperor scavenger slime, a big acid slime, and a light slime—as well as fifty each of metal, iron, spider, and sticky slimes for support—would do the trick.

“Your slimes are ready, it seems. Let us begin,” said Reinbach as he rapidly cast a series of Fire Balls at the pieces of barrels on the ground. Uninterrupted, the balls of flame landed on their targets, erupting and forming a wall of fire through the valley that engulfed the sea of Undead. The monsters showed signs of trying to flee the flames, but the fire spread too fast for their already slow movements, which were made even more cumbersome by the congestion of the horde. Valley winds only stoked the flames higher. Black smoke would rise and shield our vision, only to be blown clear by the wind. Whenever the valleys were visible, I saw countless bodies writhing in the inferno.

“Those were just Fire Balls, weren’t they, Rainbach?” Remily asked. “Why is it spreading so fast?”

“Hm... I’d expected corpses containing fluids to take a while longer to burn, even with the oil,” Reinbach said.

“Since I was planning to use that oil in my traps, I added some sticky slime adhesive solution to it, making them easier to stick and harder to remove from clothes and skin,” I offered. That one extra step was the reason why I hadn’t

been able to put the oil to good use until today, since it made it unusable to cook with or fuel anything. No chance I could put that on store shelves, either.

“Quite the ingenuity,” Sebas said.

“What you’ve made can be a weapon of war. Eliminating the Undead should be easier than expected now,” said Sever.

“I’m glad I could help,” I said. Watching the disaster below, it almost seemed like the fire alone would wipe out the entire horde, so I mentioned it to the group.

“Not likely. The Undead are irritatingly resilient,” Sever said.

“Even with your enhanced oil, my guess is it will only burn three quarters of them,” Remily said.

“Even half of that endless horde would be a big step in the right direction,” said Reinbach. “The remaining Undead should be weakened from being forced to regenerate so much in a short amount of time.”

I was ready to take their word for it, but it looked like it would take some time for the raging fire to subside. Not that I was complaining. This was far more safe and efficient than having to take on that horde head-on.

“I’ve been thinking, this place does have a great view,” I said.

“I saw you were taken in by it. Is this your first time seeing something like this?” Remily asked.

“Mountains and forests I’m used to, but nothing like these expansive valleys. I can’t imagine how much time had to pass to form these,” I said.

“About fifteen hundred years, I think,” she said. “The child of the gods who’s said to have existed at the time changed the landscape while practicing magic.”

“Huh... The one from the fairytale.” A “child of the gods” was another term for someone reincarnated into this world like me. Some of them have been remembered in history to some degree, according to a book the gods had given me when I first arrived in this world.

“There are plenty of exaggerations and details twisted by time, I’m sure, but it’s no fairytale,” Reinhart countered. “The one who shaped these valleys from

practicing magic was the king of our nation at the time. His name and accomplishments are recorded in historical documents. Masaharu, a child of the gods and king at the time, was born with enormous magical energy and could already cast powerful spells in his childhood. Magic generated in his training is said to have created mountains, tore them down, and washed them away with rain and flood. The result is these valleys. It is also told that our nation was at war when King Masaharu was young, and that he turned the tides of the war with his abilities."

"I hadn't heard that story," I said. It was hard to believe that even a reincarnated person made these valleys with magic. I just couldn't imagine what kind of magic he used. The landscape before us was so vast that I could not have replicated a fraction of it, even with slime magic. *Maybe by casting the spells over and over again, I would get close. But it would still take a long, long time... So he became the king. Which means...* "Um, that means King Masaharu is Elia's ancestor, right?"

"That is correct," Sebas answered my question.

I knew it! He's the super-sorcerer the gods told me about! They hadn't given me too many details, except that he focused all of his gifts into magic. That could explain how his spells grew powerful enough to change the landscape.

I pondered the newfound potential of magic and that fellow traveler who had come before me. Eventually, the fire became subdued, which was our cue to move on to the next step of our impromptu hunt.

Chapter 8, Episode 10: Extermination

“Hmm... There’s plenty left over.”

Reinbach was right. While the number of Undead below the cliff had decreased, there were still several hundred writhing in the valleys. Many of the remaining monsters were slower or had stopped regenerating. Still, with the fire dying down, the disintegration of some of them had given the others enough room to wander, making any more spreading of flames unlikely.

“I call it a major improvement. Let’s take it easy—it’ll take as long as it takes,” said Remily.

“Then I’ll bring the slimes to secure locations for you all to descend,” I said.

“Thanks. As soon as you give us those openings, we’ll join the fray,” said Sever.

The wind blowing through the valleys should’ve cleared the smoke and carbon dioxide, but I decided to wear a filter slime like a face mask to be safe, and prepared to spray water onto my landing zone.

“Water I can handle, Master Ryoma. Waterfall!” Sebas’s spell generated enough water in the air to fill an olympic swimming pool, which cascaded down a moment later. There was a sizzle and steam rose as the water met the scorched rocks below, but the steam was soon engulfed in the downward torrent.

“Thank you!” I said, and gave a direction to the emperor scavenger slime.

In response, it enlarged itself as much as it could. As soon as its body reached the edge of the cliff, it contracted, toppling over the ledge, jiggling in the gusty air. The emperor scavenger slime landed like a rubber ball in slow motion, using its resilience to cushion the landing. I checked in with it, and it responded by sending me a mental image that indicated it was doing well. Even after a five-story jump, the slime remained completely unharmed.

“I wasn’t convinced that your slime would be unaffected by the fall until I saw it,” said Remily.

“Emperor slimes have incredibly high resistance to physical damage. I once tried attacking it as an experiment, and I couldn’t deal any damage to it,” I explained. Magic fared better than physical attacks, but its effectiveness was also greatly muffled by the slime’s resistance and sheer mass. I don’t know if I could’ve taken an emperor slime down if I had to. As it turned out, I now had a slime that could prove very dangerous in the wrong hands...which was exactly why I felt so safe with it on my side.

“Look at it swallowing up the Undead,” Sever remarked.

“They don’t stand a chance,” Reinbach said.

The Undead would notice the emperor in their vicinity and approach, only to be entangled in the slime’s tentacles and crushed under its overwhelming mass. The monsters must have been trying to resist, but their efforts made no difference against the massive emperor slime.

“It’s doing great,” I said. “It should be able to split up and carry on fighting, but I’ll send the other slimes down before I do that.

Seeing that the emperor slime had stretched out like an airbag, I sent down the other slimes to safely land on the cushioning emperor slime. Soon, I followed suit.

“I’m going down,” I announced.

“Be careful,” Reinbach said.

“I will—thank you.”

Releasing my lifeline, I dove off the cliff among my slimes. The cold air buffeted me and roared in my ears, but I was untroubled by it.

In the process of testing the emperor slime’s physical resistance, I had jumped onto it from great heights numerous times. While the idea had never made it out of the planning stages because no one but me could tame an emperor—an amalgamation of ten thousand slimes—I trusted it enough that I’d considered using the slime to help with rescues even before the attacks on Gimul.

Holding my knees mid-fall, I landed on the emperor slime cannonball style, and it gently caught me. I barely felt the impact, let alone suffered any injury.

“Are you all right?!” Sever shouted, representing the four adults peering down at me over the cliff.

“I’m fine!” I waved to them as I began separating the emperor slime. With the Undead still running amok, I wouldn’t have much time to talk.

When I brought my gaze down, however, the slimes were trampling over the Undead. For example, a skeleton who’d noticed my descent tried to attack me, only for a metal slime to charge it from the side and shatter its ribs, rendering the monster a pile of immobile bones on the ground.

Other metal and iron slimes leapt into the air with momentum, morphing into lances or chakrams to pierce or tear up the monsters. The slimes were making good use of their mass, speed, transformation abilities, and advantage in numbers.

The gruesome corpses left behind in their wake were absorbed by the scavenger slimes and acid slimes that followed. They treated the flesh and bones of the Undead just like any other monster’s. I did see them struggle a bit with parts of Undead that were still regenerating, though.

Even the spider and sticky slimes helped with the effort by tripping and gluing down the Undead with their silk and adhesive solution.

Despite the large number of remaining Undead, slimes already in the action held an overwhelming advantage which left the light slime with nothing to do except to observe.

While I had resolved to continue watching my slimes feast on fresh Undead meat and bones both for our safety and for research purposes, I had to admit that the Undead were never easy on the eyes.

Soon, I sensed magical energy behind me, signaling the others descending by Space magic.

“This shouldn’t take too long,” Remily noted.

“We’ve been watching their movements from above, Ryoma. There are fewer Undead to our right. We’ll take care of those first,” Sever said.

“Got it. I’ll keep the other side in check,” I answered.

“Don’t get too carried away, Sever,” Reinbach warned.

“I know. Just a little exercise,” he said.

“Miss Remily?” Sebas prompted.

“You got it. Coating Light.”

As I gathered my slime forces to start on the Undead to our left, Sever readied his halberd, and Reinbach and Sebas each drew their swords from their belt. What drew my eye was Reinbach’s unusual longsword—it was matte white, as though it had been carved out of a bone. What was more, the blade caught fire as soon as he drew it, its length suddenly covered in roaring flame.

Sebas’s weapon of choice was a rapier, which now emitted a gentle glow as an effect of Remily’s spell. It almost looked like one of the lightsabers from those movies back on Earth.

It was easy to see how effective each blade was against the Undead. When Reinbach sliced an Undead in half, fire spread from the wound, preventing regeneration as it turned the monster to ash.

Sebas’s thrusts left holes much larger than the size of his blade in the Undead. With how rapidly he struck, it almost looked like he was blowing up the Undead on contact.

Sever had leapt in front of both of them to wreak havoc. His wind-coated halberd might have been less flashy than a sword that flamed or glowed, but each swing of his weapon was followed by a ripping gust. His long reach and wind magic cleared the way while Reinbach and Sebas cut down any monster he missed.

“I knew how strong Sever is, but I’m impressed by all of them,” I said.

“Of course. Reinbach and Sebas could each go toe-to-toe with a proper knight in a swordfight,” Remily said. “Besides, Reinbach’s Arcane Sword is a basic technique that you could do too. Actually, I think your incantationless spells are harder.”

“They produce a similar effect, but you think mine is more difficult?” I asked.

“When you cast the spell, you coat your arm with another burst of magical

energy to protect it from your own spell," she pointed out.

"Yes. When I realized while practicing that I could hurt myself with my magic, I started putting my spells over a thin coat of magical energy."

"I'm sure you developed that through experimentation, but it's not a novice technique. Arcane Sword is a lot simpler. Just coating the sword with magic. With fire, you just have to burn your own sword." Remily's explanation made me wonder if the magic would damage the blade. Apparently Remily saw the question written on my face. "Those who use Arcane Sword choose a sword made from a material that resists whatever element they plan to use. That way, there's no need to protect their blade with magical energy. It makes the spell a lot easier."

"A good spell to learn as a foundation," I noted.

"That's right. Same deal as Sebas, except I'm casting the spell."

"I see... I usually work alone, but being able to enhance someone else's weapon might give me more options in battle," I said. "Are there any other spells with similar effects?"

"Hmm... For your friends, I'd say Neutral enhancement spells or barrier spells. But if you have the time and money, making magical items and weapons will serve you better. Of course, there's no downside to learning those spells," she said.

The concept was giving me ideas, but my thoughts were cut short when I spotted an Undead traffic jam where I had gathered my slimes. "Excuse me for a minute."

"Need any help?" Remily asked.

"I should be fine. It's just a little congested..." Readying my slime sword, I concentrated physical energy into the blade. One horizontal swipe and a blade of energy flew at the dozen or so monsters, who were helplessly caught in a pool of slimes—and it severed the monsters in half. A clattering of skeleton bones followed, making me feel like I'd gotten a strike in a bowling alley. Now the slimes would have an easier time absorbing them and marching onwards.

I sent blades of energy flying toward a few more clusters of Undead that were

holding up slime traffic. That ought to clear the way for the slimes to take care of the rest.

“Another technique in your arsenal?” Sever asked.

While I’d been bowling, the men had returned from mowing down slimes on the right.

“I just learned it,” I said.

“Impressive execution for a newly-learned technique,” said Sever.

“Three of my employees who could apply physical energy like this taught me.”

Those three were Hudom, the former spy; Fey, the former assassin; and Ox, the former champion of the colosseum. After my match with Hudom, I’d gone around asking them what kind of physical energy techniques they could teach me. Respectively, they’d taught me how to fire physical energy from a punch, how to shrink and extend a blade of physical energy, and how to concentrate extra energy into weapons to boost their effectiveness. Based on their instruction, I’d strived to recreate the move the Greatsword Brothers had used against me during their attack, and I’d ended up with the move I used just now to cut down the Undead.

“You’re an avaricious student, stealing the techniques of assassins sent against you,” Sever noted.

“Once my curiosity is piqued, I can’t help it.” In fact, now that the slimes were back on track, I wanted to learn more about Arcane Sword. I summarized to the other adults my conversation with Remily.

“I was wondering what you were doing instead of backing us up,” Reinbach said.

“Did you forget I enchanted Sebas’s sword? Besides, you never needed our back up, and you know it,” Remily quipped. “My time was *much* better spent giving Ryoma some pointers. And rule number one is preserving magical energy when you can.”

“I have no complaints.” Reinbach turned to me. “I can teach you the basics of Arcane Sword, Ryoma. If you don’t mind using Fire magic, I’ll get you a dragon

fang like mine.”

“Dragon fang?! Not that I know exactly how expensive one is, but I’m guessing they’re extremely rare,” I said, ready to decline his offer.

“As long as you have a dragon as a familiar, you’ll get one every few years when they regrow. They’re not hard to come by in our family. It is considered a top-shelf material, but I’m still very much in your debt,” said Reinbach.

“I’m interested in the spell, but I feel like I would waste a material like that. I’ll practice with a normal sword for now.”

Dragon materials would make me feel like I had to prepare to face a final boss in a video game, and I wasn’t ready for that. A glance at my slime sword made me feel more comfortable... Slime weapons were going to be the best fit for me.

I looked up and saw that there wasn’t a moving Undead in sight. They were all on the ground—or glued to the spot, just waiting for the slimes to devour them. Since us humans had nothing to do and didn’t want to risk catching any slimes in the crosshairs, we just watched them work.

Good thing that they’re working their way through the Undead, even if I pretty much just chatted away while they worked.

After not too long, the slimes collectively waved their tentacles in victory.

Chapter 8, Episode 11: Battle Against Remily

“Let’s rest around here today,” Sever announced.

After exterminating the large horde of Undead, we resumed our march to the City of Lost Souls, only to encounter wandering Undead monsters with great frequency. Seeing how we’d spent a considerable amount of time on the horde, we had decided to camp one stop earlier than we had hoped to reach this day.

Marching in the dark was dangerous enough without the added threat of more active Undead. Since we weren’t in a hurry, I was happy with Sever’s call. None of the others objected, either.

“Remily?” Sever called.

“You got it. Hey, Ryoma, do you want to see a neat spell?” she asked.

“Yes, please!”

“Here goes. Holy Space,” Remily chanted.

A moment later, I sensed more magical energy than I had sensed from any of her previous spells, accompanied by a faint glow. The ball of light and energy expanded past the campsite until it formed a dome reaching the edge of our defensive perimeter. Perhaps because of Remily’s magic filling the dome, it almost seemed like the air was cleaner within it.

“Holy Space is an intermediate Light spell,” she explained. “It creates a temporary boundary that Undead monsters can’t cross. The likes of zombies, skeletons, and wraiths would evaporate on contact. It’s useful protection for camps in places like this. It’s worth noting that your skill determines the range and duration of the spell—and some stronger Undead may be able to force their way in. The spell would weaken them, but a breach in the space would drain its magical energy quickly, soon rendering it useless. If a powerful Undead comes in, you have to deal with it right away. So the spell isn’t impervious—that’s very important. Try to camp in the safest spot you can find anyway. As for

practicing this spell... You better just give it a try, Ryoma. Just a large enough space for you to lie down in, if you can."

So I gave it a try. With Light magical energy, I defined the boundary like I usually did with barrier magic—imagined filling the space with that magical energy—and incanted, "Holy Space."

While the spell activated, I found it more difficult to wield than barrier magic. If an ordinary barrier spell was a solid wall that contained the magical energy within like water, this spell was like a porous cloth that water kept seeping out of. I would have lost my grip on the magical energy I was trying to contain if I wasn't careful while I cast the spell.

The spell did look like a success. "What do you think?" I asked Remily.

She seemed troubled for some reason. "You did it, albeit with some rough edges. Congratulations. It's great that it's so easy for you to learn new spells, but I don't feel like much of a tutor... This is supposed to be the most difficult intermediate Light spell to control."

"I already knew how to use some barrier magic, so I just applied the same principle," I explained.

"All spells use an element of magical energy to produce a desired effect. Spells with similar forms or uses can work similarly. Magic was only separated into elements and categories to make teaching it easier. No need to get stuck in that mindset. Especially since you can already think outside the box," said Remily.

Ever since I had first come to this world, I had always been impressed by the convenience and freedom of casting magic, so when Remily explained that all spells worked essentially the same, it really clicked with me.

"Now that I've shown you Holy Space, let's set up camp," she said.

"Our night won't be very restful if we're exposed to the elements, with or without the Undead," Reinbach said.

"Indeed," Sebas agreed.

I turned to set up the tents when Sever said, "Ah, Ryoma—we'll set up camp if

you don’t mind setting up a series of walls around our parameter with Earth magic. I would like to reinforce Remily’s spell with physical impediments.”

“Of course. I don’t mind, especially after what we’ve seen,” I said. “How wide or tall?”

“About an arm’s length wide, up to my waist or so. Any larger and we won’t have many openings to fire magic at our enemies. It’s better to slow a potential approach and limit a path for any intruders rather than block them completely,” he explained.

“Perfect. I have just the slimes for the job, so that won’t take long.”

“We’ll help as soon as we set up camp. Don’t push yourself,” Sever said. His request was easy enough to meet that I didn’t expect to take long at all.

First, I pulled out stone, spider, wire, sting, metal, and iron slimes from the Dimension Home. I took what was now an army of ten thousand-plus stone slimes to a nearby cliff. One Earth spell and I’d reduced the wall to a pile of rocks.

“Dig in and grow big!” I called out. The stone slimes swarmed the rocks. If they hadn’t been moving, I would have had a hard time picking them out from the rocks. Leaving them to their task, I returned to our campsite.

Stone slimes, as their name suggested, have a mineral body. Just like other species, they use the nutrition they intake from meals and multiply. But I had discovered that stone slimes—if told not to multiply as they eat—can grow from the size of a pebble to the size of a rock too big to hold in one hand.

I’d have them grow as large as they could, then tell them to form stacks, making them into walls. Stone walls have been historically used to build bastions. Although my version wasn’t too impressive compared to the castles on Earth, I thought it should suffice to set up our perimeter. Still, I planned to set up a second series of rock slime walls that would form a circle with staggered openings. Once the general locations of the walls were determined, I began to dig holes in the ground in between where the walls would stand, setting up a pair of the metallic slimes in each hole.

“As soon as I set one up, you guys can finish them,” I called to the spider,

wire, and sting slimes.

First, the spiders climbed the rods of metallic slimes and cast a web. Then, with the aid of the spider slimes, the wire slimes stretched into spirals around the spider slime silk. Once the sting slimes had attached their poisonous barbs to the wire slimes, I had a makeshift barbed wire fence.

Unfortunately, I doubted the venom on the barbs would have any effect on the Undead, since they weren't alive, per se. But the barbs themselves could slow a monster down by catching its clothes or skin. More effectively, if any monster touched any part of the fence—which was entirely made up of slimes—I would know, because I was their tamer. That information would be very useful in defending the camp.

Since our camp was no more than two tents and a bonfire, ninety percent of building the defensive parameter took no longer than thirty minutes. After that, all I had to do was go around touching up each section of the parameter.

"What do you think?" I asked Sever.

"Even more impressive than I expected. You didn't need our help after all."

"I was just enjoying the show," Remily said. "Those stone walls that stack themselves are handy. It looked like you could easily restack or tweak them, too."

As they gave me their seal of approval, I spotted Sebas holding a tray with steaming mugs. He was standing next to Reinbach, who was stoking the fire. Apparently the tent and bonfire setup were already complete.

"Splendid work," Sebas said to me. "Would you care for a cup of tea?"

"Thank you."

Reinbach waved me toward a chair by the fire. "Come take a seat, Ryoma." I obliged, and the others followed suit until we had formed a circle around the fire.

Now that I was stationary, the winds of the valleys felt harsh and cold. Fire and tea were the perfect medicine for that. "Finally, I feel like I can relax," I said.

"Let's rest while we can," said Reinbach.

The party unanimously agreed, opting for an early dinner and enjoying each other's company to rest up mentally and physically. Soon, the sun set into the valleys.

The Undead had emerged from the dark of night, much more active than they were in the daytime.

"I had a feeling this would happen...and I'm not happy about being right," I said to myself.

In addition to the skeletons and zombies we were all too familiar with, wisps (floating balls of light) and wraiths (translucent, human-shaped spirits) flew around the campsite like moths to a lamp.

While the Undead horde were growing in numbers by the second, they seemed deterred enough by the Holy Space spell that none dared cross the threshold. Still, they were a potential threat. And I would sleep much easier if we took care of them now.

"Nothing else we can do, now that they found us. Let's get it over with," Remily announced.

"I suppose you're right," I replied.

We had discussed it over dinner. Remily and I would use Light magic to clear out the swarm of Undead in case of an attack. In exchange, the two of us would take the later watch, giving us a chance to get some solid sleep. Barring some emergency befalling the camp, this should be my last job of the night. The home stretch.

"I know. Why don't we make this into a competition?" Remily proposed.

"Right now?"

"Give us a little motivation," she added. "Let's see which one of us can take out more of them. Loser has to do what the winner says, just once. What do you think?"

"Well, as long as whatever you tell me to do isn't outrageous... Wait, I'd be at a huge disadvantage in a contest of magic. I don't have your knowledge or experience," I said.

“What if the only spell we can use is Light Ball? Our knowledge of the spell is about even, and I think you can cast the spell as well as I can. And let’s set a time limit. If we go until both run out of magical energy, that would give you an advantage, and if we limit the number of times we can cast, I’d have an edge because of my experience,” Remily said.

“I guess... That would make it an even match.”

“Glad you’re convinced, Ryoma.” Remily turned to the others. “Thanks for volunteering as referees, boys!”

“Very well,” said Sebas.

“Fine, we’ll play along,” Reinbach said.

“I’ll count for Ryoma, then,” Sever put in.

And so I was roped into a spellcasting competition against Remily. We walked toward either edge of the parameter and faced off our respective hordes of Undead.

“Are both parties ready?” Sebas asked.

“I’m ready,” I answered.

“Anytime,” said Remily.

“Your ten minutes begin...now!”

As soon as those words came from Sebas, I set my eyes on the skull of a skeleton right in front of me. “Light Ball.”

The spell fired straight, evaporating the skull of the skeleton, and pierced another Undead behind it before disappearing. With careful aim, I would be able to take out a few Undead with every spell.

“Light Ball.” When Remily cast her spell, I saw my shadow stretch every which way.

“What are you doing?!” I turned to find that Remily had cast ten balls of light in one go, each of them finding its mark on the head of an Undead.

“It’s called parallel casting—casting multiples of the same spell in one go. Light Ball. Takes some practice, though. Light Ball.” Even as she explained,

Remily continued to cast her spells...and flashed a triumphant smile.

“This is why you set no limit to the number of casts,” I realized.

“Too bad you already agreed to the rules— Light Ball,” she broke off to incant once again.

“No mercy, huh?!” I only had one shot to stay in this game: to master parallel casting myself. Remily, perhaps because she was so confident in her victory, had explained the concept to me. “Light Ball... Light Ball... Light ball.”

My first attempt at parallel casting could have gone better. I was able to produce multiple balls of light from the start, but my maximum was five. If I tried to make more, I couldn’t keep their form long enough to fire them. Worse, I couldn’t maneuver the five spells independently—they all flew toward the same target. Rather than help me in the competition, this was only wasting my magical energy.

When I tried only generating two spells at once, I could move them separately but not too accurately: one wasn’t a clean hit and the other missed entirely. I felt like I was trying to draw different shapes with each hand at the same time. This wasn’t a technique I could master on the spot.

So, I was forced to fire one Light Ball at a time as quickly and accurately as I could...which only let me cast two or three while Remily fired ten.

I wish I could wipe out a wide area in one shot... How can I pull that off with nothing but Light Ball?

Even as I racked my brain, I could maintain my fast and accurate firing, one at a time. Even though I was careful to keep my guard up, the safety of the Holy Space made me feel like I was in an arcade on Earth, mowing down digital zombies...well, on easy mode, since none of the enemies even threatened to attack.

I haven’t been to an arcade since coming to this world, obviously... I wonder if they put out a new version of that series I liked. At one point, I was way *into it... You had to choose the right type of ammo in each situation, I think. Not that I was a pro at those games by any means, but I remember the bomb launcher, the machine gun, the shotgun...*

This distraction made me realize something. Magic took whatever form the caster imagined. Could I improve the Light Ball spell to represent different types of ammo?

Let's give it a shot.

I couldn't envision the mechanism of an exploding bullet, and I thought a machine gun might drain my magical energy too quickly, so I settled on the shotgun. A shotgun shell, if I remembered correctly, was packed full of smaller buckshot that scattered after the shell was fired. If I imagined the Light Ball splitting into a burst of smaller projectiles...

"Light Ball."

The spell scattered like I imagined, but didn't deal enough damage to each zombie it hit. It spread too wide, so that each "buckshot" was weakened. I tried again, using ten times as much magical energy. This time, the spell obliterated all the Undead in its four meter wide, fan-shaped trajectory, as well as some wraiths that were flying above.

"What are *you* doing?!" Remily demanded.

"Light Ball! I'm just casting it creatively!" I defended myself.

Since Remily was being creative with her casting, I saw no problem with my method, as long as I was only casting Light Ball. Sebas's silence confirmed that I wasn't going against competition rules. Remily didn't complain, either, but she did quicken her pace. I'd have to keep my head in the game.

I still had plenty of magical energy left, but I decided to use half as much magical energy this time, remembering that there were many different types of shotgun shells, distinguished by the size of their buckshot. I envisioned evenly distributing magical energy to fifty buckshots, similar to how I spread my magical energy when casting Holy Space. "Light Ball...!"

No good. Controlling magical energy like this was no easy feat, as it dissipated before the spell could even scatter, only taking out two Undead which were directly in front of me.

Focusing on controlling my magical energy, I kept practicing parallel casting while trying to catch up in our competition.



“Ten seconds left,” Sebas announced. “Nine, eight, seven, six...”

The countdown had started all too quickly for me, as I had lost track of time concentrating on this new technique.

One last spell, I thought. *Differentiate it from Light Ball. Focus. Imagine...*
“Light Shot!”

My final spell turned every Undead within three meters of me into Swiss cheese, obliterating them into mist. While the spell wasn’t as powerful as my first attempt, when I’d poured ten Light Balls worth of magical energy into it, I was happy with the result—especially considering I’d only spent half that much.

“Time’s up!” Sebas declared. Satisfied that I had done the best I could and curious to hear my tally, I turned to our referee...to find him looking displeased, for some reason. “Master Ryoma, what did you say just now?”

“Just now? I just cast Light...” *Oh.* I realized that I had called my final spell Light Shot. I’d screwed the pooch at the last second.

“Unfortunately, I must declare your last spell to be distinct from Light Ball due to you changing its name. Miss Remily wins by default,” said Sebas.

“A silly way for me to win, but our deal still stands.” Remily wore a dangerous smile.

What is she going to have me do?

Chapter 8, Episode 12: Time Spent with Remily, Part One

After our spontaneous competition, Remily and I had wiped out most of the Undead still surrounding our camp. Then Remily told me her demand—or a favor, as she called it.

Now...I found myself in Remily's sleeping bag. To be more specific, I was the little spoon. Since I was significantly shorter than her, a pair of *pillows* rested behind my head.

"How did I get here?" I wondered aloud.

"Because you cheated at our competition," Remily answered. "I think any boy would love to be in your place."

"I admit you're beautiful and youthful, but I'm not in a place to enjoy this right now."

Maybe most men would envy my situation. Even if I looked like a third grader on the outside, I was a dude in his forties on the inside. A forty-something year old who'd barely held a conversation with a woman who wasn't his mother or coworker while on Earth. However coveted this situation was supposed to be, it was completely wasted on me... And it wasn't as though I thought Remily would do such a thing, but I couldn't help but fear being convicted of sexual harassment.

Old habits.

"You really aren't moving an inch, are you...? I doubt you'll get any sleep if you're that wound up about it." Remily began stroking my hair. "Works for me. I did want to talk to you."

"Talk to me about what? And what are you doing?" I asked.

"Oh, I used to do this to my little brother when he couldn't get to sleep."

"I didn't know you had any brothers."

“Just one. I pretty much ran away from the village I grew up in. Haven’t been back in a long time, so I’m not winning sister-of-year anytime soon... It’s not that cheerful of a story, but I’ll tell it to you. Think of it like a lullaby. Oh, but shy away from asking questions.

“I live in the city now,” Remily went on, “but I was born in a village of only dark elves. Nothing happened there. Have you ever met someone really old who always starts a story with ‘back in my day’...?”

“I have, and I know what you mean.”

“As obstinate as humans get as they grow old, it’s so much worse in a village of such a longevous species. Humans are considered fully grown at fifteen or twenty years old, but a dark elf has to be fifty, at the youngest. And they grow up raised by adults who’ve lived much, much longer, who reject any change to their customs. By the time dark elves are grown, they don’t even question tradition. I got sick of all that before I was even an adult. So I ran away from that place and became an adventurer.”

“It must have been difficult for you, once you left.”

“I’d be lying if I said it was smooth sailing the whole time. Even though I wasn’t considered an adult by dark elf standards, I was already over thirty. It’s not like I was some naive girl who wouldn’t see a scam for what it was. I was already strong enough to beat anyone who’d approach me with ill intentions, anyway,” she explained.

“I see...”

“Making it out of the village was the hard part. They pursued me viciously. During the day, I kept hidden under bushes or in caves. I traveled in the dark of night, and went directly for the farthest city I could.”

The adults of her village were probably just searching frantically for who they thought was a child lost in the woods. To hear Remily tell it, though, it was like a stealth mission from some RPG.

“Working as an adventurer *was* smooth sailing. Exploring new cities, taking in new views, tasting new food. It was a lot of fun, until...” Her tone shifted. “Maybe the sailing was too smooth. Using my magical talent, I hunted monster

after monster, bandit after bandit. Before I knew it, a lot of people knew my name and envied me."

"How did you deal with that?" I asked.

"I just kept going. It's hardly as though I cared about what I could do better than others. Like I said, I took care of anyone who came up to me with ill intentions. I was a bit rough around the edges back then." The memory seemed to cast a shadow on Remily's smile. "I began to garner fear in place of envy, until people started calling me Death's Shadow.

"My favorite element of magic is Shadow: a combination of Light and Dark," Remily went on. "Spells designed for war and assassination. Because of its nature, I had specialized in hunting quests. Rumors that weren't so nice followed: that I left countless bodies in my wake because I enjoyed killing for sport, or that I only took quests so I could legally fulfill my bloodlust. Not that I let those bother me, either."

"Those are...pretty nasty rumors," I said.

"Malicious? Yes. But I've never done anything wrong. On the contrary, I was going around removing threats to *their* safety! The more rumors I heard, the more hunting quests I took on," Remily explained. I wasn't sure if I should respond so naively as to compliment her determination. "But I wasn't having fun anymore. Hardly anyone wanted to work with me, and every quest giver clearly wanted nothing to do with me beyond the interactions they had to make to hire me.

"Even though I kept adventuring for a living, I began spending more of my time finding hobbies. Eventually, I guess those people who weren't too fond of me couldn't stand it anymore... They trapped me and almost killed me. Hilarious." Her tone was *not* matching the content of her story... How could she find nearly being killed hilarious? "The trap was hilarious, I mean. Even I wasn't jazzed about putting one foot in my grave."

"I see...? Well, I don't really understand how a trap could be hilarious, either."

"More of a hilarious situation, I guess. Like I said, I did as many hunts as I wanted, taking down plenty of bandits and underground guilds. That led to the arrest of some nobles, so I was making plenty of enemies, too. A hit was put on

me more than a handful of times. Eventually, people who wanted me dead must have figured out their assassins weren't getting the job done with their usual methods.

One day, I was called up to the Adventurer's Guild out of the blue, where they saddled me with an 'emergency quest.' The way they described the quest to me, it did explain why it was so urgent and high-paying. When I went to where I was told to go, I was greeted by a *spectacular* ambush by dozens of attackers...all naked."

"Naked?" I repeated, sure that I had heard wrong.

"It seems ridiculous, doesn't it? But they had a good reason for showing up buck naked. Shadow magic controls shadows in real life, and can often use them as a starting point."

The idea struck me. "Like the shadows cast by their clothes."

"Good boy. What's the use of armor if a spell can strike under it, right? They decided run-of-the-mill armor would only cast more shadows for me to exploit. There are pieces of armor and items out there that can defend against Shadow magic, but they're rare. However many they could have gathered, it wasn't enough for all of them. And I'm sure giving half their men better equipment would have caused a rift in the assassin squad. Even if all of them had that kind of armor on, I could still use the shadows inside their mouths or nostrils, so it wouldn't have made much of a difference."

Shadow magic was starting to sound pretty devastating. Firing a spell directly into someone's body could cause massive damage with minimal magical energy. No wonder it was considered fit for combat and assassination. Especially with Remily's parallel casting...

"I made it out of there in one piece, but it wore me out. Even though I knew I should get away from there, I could move for a while once the fight was over... For the first time, I thought to myself, 'What am I doing?'

"No doubt I'd made enemies, but they were all bandits or other criminals. Every human I had hunted down had a good reason for me to. What right did they have to blame me for their deaths? That's what I kept telling myself, until that night.

“Imagine grown adults, men and women, stark naked with only their weapons in hand, charging at you, demanding bloody vengeance for whoever you’d killed. All of them were willing to cast their shame—and their lives—away to kill me.

“There were so many of them that their attack on me became a big deal. I ended up finding out who was pulling the strings and arresting them. After all that, I didn’t feel like being an adventurer anymore.”

Remily had seemed so happy go lucky at first—but now it sounded like she had seen more than her fair share of brutality. No wonder she had become burnt out. When she’d said “hilarious,” she must have meant it in a sardonic, almost self-deprecating way.

How am I supposed to respond? I wondered, hesitating to ask any questions for fear of bringing up details of her story she still wanted concealed. A person better versed with delicate conversational skills could have navigated these treacherous waters much better than me. So I couldn’t speak.

Perhaps picking up on my thoughts, Remily let out a quiet laugh. “Don’t worry about me. I told you, I stand by everything I’ve done. Just a moment of doubt, that’s all. At the time, I had been recruited by the kingdom, so going from adventurer to royal sorcerer seemed like a solid career choice.” Stroking my hair, she continued, “Once I became a royal sorcerer, I did all sorts of jobs, like guarding the castle or a specific member of the royal family, or tutoring knights and soldiers. I faced some pushback at first, but compared to adventuring, my new life was much more comfortable and lucrative. After working the job long enough, I started to earn people’s respect.

“Without those nasty rumors and that bizarre ambush, I doubt I ever would have accepted the offer. Back when I first left my village, I would have expected a royal sorcerer’s job to be too restrictive and monotonous, too full of red tape.” Remily had come to accept her past. All of it. There was nothing for me to say, and it wasn’t my place to say anything. “If you can set your sights on a goal and never stop running towards it, more power to you. But only a small fraction will ever make it. It’s not that easy for the vast majority of us. You’ll trip, fall, stop...look around and wonder what’s behind that *other* path. It might wind back to the original path, or you might find a new goal. There’s nothing

wrong with that. *That* is life." Suddenly, Remily fell silent.

"What's wrong?" I asked.

"Listen to me, giving you *life advice.* I feel ancient... Telling you a story from my 'youth' made me feel old enough."

"Um, I thought it was illuminating to hear the story of someone who's lived through so many experiences."

"That's not as reassuring as you think it is, Ryoma. I won't scold you for it, just because I know you're trying to make me feel better."

I knew I'd made a mistake as soon as the words had come out of my mouth. My comment was tantamount to an insult. I'd consider this a yellow card from Remily...especially since her grip around me tightened.

"I told you the story because I wanted to. There's nothing for you to feel guilty about."

"All right... Can I ask why you wanted to tell me?" I asked.

"I'd been meaning to. Remember when you told us what happened when you tried to take your rank exam?"

"Yes, we discussed it after sparring with Mister Sever," I recalled.

"Hearing how you handled the aftermath reminded me of myself. Of how I used to be. Of course, I think you're the type to worry about other people's perceptions of you, unlike me. It sounded like you were self-aware of that and were trying to consciously stand your ground."

"Oh... I think you're right." Now that she put it that way... I'd become more forceful after the attack on Gimul. Could that have been my way of subconsciously trying to stop myself from holding back?

"Just to be clear, you don't need to change that," Remily said. "I know you thought it through. A lot of times, you won't even know how things will turn out until you try them. I just can't tell you if your methods will continue to serve you in the future. If you ever think it's not your style anymore, don't force it. You can go back to conforming to others' expectations, or look for another path altogether... Keep that little nugget in the back of your mind, won't you?"

“I will... Thank you for your advice.” I assumed that she had given me this advice through her story in case I fell into similar circumstances in the future. She had gone to some length to tell me this story, too. Now that I’d heard her through, I was left with nothing but gratitude. “I’ll have to remember this conversation if I find myself in a situation like that again. I’m sure that won’t be my last.”

“Outstanding talent draws outstanding envy. No matter the field, it’s an unavoidable fact of society. Only way to get around it, I suppose, would be to devote your life to appeasing others or forcing every aspect of yourself into a box,” Remily said.

Exhausted by the thought of it all, I let out a sigh that took the tension in my body away with it. “I agree.”

“Of course, that can’t be easy, either. Especially for a child of the gods.” Remily’s comment struck me like a sucker punch.

Chapter 8, Episode 13: Time Spent with Remily, Part Two

“Looks like I hit the mark,” Remily said.

My heartbeat had turned from calm to thundering in an instant, and I was sure that Remily could hear it, given our physical proximity. *Is this why she demanded to cuddle with me? Could it still be a mere guess on her part?*

“Don’t be nervous. I have no intention of harming you in any way,” she whispered. “Besides, I pretty much knew before I asked you. There was a time in my life when I delved into researching historical children of the gods.” Remily began explaining how she’d reached her conclusion. “The idea seemed plausible after your match with Sever. I had been curious about your powers since our first meeting, when you spotted me after I cast Hide. First of all, you’re way too strong for your age. Second, your magic didn’t run out after casting all those spells on the road, which means that you have far more magical energy than most of us. When you showed us your merchandise—the instant meals and all that—that was the third sign, because children of the gods usually have exceptional knowledge in some department and make groundbreaking inventions. And number four, you told us about your gunpowder when we were trying to clear out those Undead under the cliff. For whatever reason, children of the gods show interest in firearms and gunpowder.

“One of those children of the gods told of in history is said to have used something called a ‘shotgun’ that sprays a wide area with small bullets... You called the last spell you cast in our conversation Light Shot. Seeing how the spell acted just like this mysterious firearm, I bet you got the idea from a shotgun.

“As a bonus, you reacted a bit strange when we talked about King Masaharu. Almost like...you were taking every word to heart because it applied directly to you. How’d I do?”

There was no denying it now: Remily was sure of her assessment. Given how

she had a general idea of what a shotgun was, she must have had a lot of information surrounding children of the gods.

If she can hear my heartbeat on top of all that, there's no weaseling my way out... Then the least I can do is own it.

Although tales of the children of the gods were considered nearly mythological, they were widely accepted as historical figures. If I'd kept on adventuring without holding my powers back, someone would have put the dots together sooner or later. It just happened to be sooner. "Bull's eye. Did I really react so strangely to the story of Masaharu?"

"Most people wouldn't jump to this conclusion even if they realized the depth of your abilities. I only did thanks to my knowledge on the subject and... Well, let's call it a hunch. And I think our travel companions are starting to guess too, even if they don't mention it. That research I did stemmed from rumors surrounding Elia. You know how she has a lot of magical energy too? Since she's also a descendant of King Masaharu, rumors spread for a while that she's a child of the gods."

"Right... I haven't asked for details, but it was something about an accident she caused."

"Rumors were starting to circulate before that, but the accident made the rumors really spread. I couldn't ignore it anymore, so I started digging into historical documents. Reinbach's family was involved in the research—Sever was helping me with it, so he shares my knowledge on the subject."

"I didn't realize," I admitted.

"Just to be clear, the Jamils won't just use you for personal gain with no regard for your wishes. The other nobles... M*ost* of the other nobles would treat you with respect if they knew you were a child of gods," Remily said.

Nothing would shake my trust in the Jamils, but I wouldn't have expected a reaction like that from other nobles. So I asked Remily to elaborate.

"Each child of the gods has some sort of exceptional talent or great well of power. No exceptions. Nobles would see the potential for great profit in currying favor with you. On the other hand, there have been records in history

where upsetting a child of the gods led to them going off the grid or even triggering a disastrous battle. The power of the gods can be a great force of good or a great force of evil. People *do* believe that the children are sent to us by the gods, and the church would not sit idly if anyone so much as angers a child of the gods. Since upsetting a child of the gods could lead to disastrous effects on the kingdom, nobles would have to be willing to risk execution to get on your wrong side."

No matter how great the power, it would be nothing but a liability if a child of the gods couldn't control their power. So it made sense that nobles would rather kiss up and make sure any child of the gods remained relaxed and content... But still had more questions.

"Not to contradict you," I said, "but I can't imagine the kingdom's entire nobility concerning itself with the moods of a single person."

"Despite their self-important facades, the nobility and royalty totally concern themselves with that." Remily went on to give an example.

It was the story of a man who'd appeared one day in the kingdom of Rifall. He rode a tireless steel steed and traversed the country at incredible speeds. He also wielded powers similar to Space magic, allowing him to transport vast amounts of cargo. The king at the time recognized his powers and ordered him to use them for the betterment of the kingdom.

However, the man valued his freedom and stubbornly refused the king's order, despite threats to rob him of his career and liberties. Finally, when the king's patience had been spent, he sent an army after the man...only for them to be defeated with ease. On the back of the steel steed, the man outran any pursuits the king could unleash.

From that day, the man went on to rob noble after noble in the country. The steel steed proved as swift in attack as it had been in retreat, making his movements utterly unpredictable. As his gang grew in numbers, they became too powerful for even the kingdom's whole arsenal to handle.

Without anyone to combat the bandits, they only gained more momentum. It didn't take long for their criminal activities to reach neighboring nations. Furthermore, as the bandits fled the scene of the crime with their loot in tow,

they always told the story of their leader's downfall in the kingdom of Rifall, claiming that they robbed only to survive and to protest his treatment.

Eventually, the opinion of the popular court found the king of Rifall at fault; by now he was criticized by other nations in addition to citizens of his own kingdom. International relations crumbled, and the king lost all control of Rifall, until his brother took the throne from him and he was executed.

"His death quelled the international prosecution, but this part of history became a stain on Rifall. It might have been a different story if the new king had been able to apprehend the child of the gods, but no such luck. Since none of the stolen goods were recovered..."

"It's not a happy ending," I said.

"Exactly. And that was just one example. Plenty of other tales speak of how a child of the gods threatened the balance of our world powers. You can see why the kingdom doesn't want to antagonize a child of the gods—even if they can't reach a mutually beneficial arrangement, they're often content to live and let live when it comes to children of the gods.

"Of course, stupid people will always be stupid no matter the time period. And there are some examples where things got really ugly because no one believed a child of the gods when they proclaimed their identity. In the first place, the kingdom developed the live-and-let-live policy precisely because of cautionary tales surrounding the children of the gods like the one I told you."

"I understand what you've told me, but not why you shared this with me," I said. She'd shared a story from her past to warn me of what I might face in the future, but I wasn't sure why she'd revealed that she'd pinned me for a child of the gods.

"I wouldn't have told you if I thought you might go berserk just because you knew someone found out your identity. I was sure you'd have an open ear and mind. I thought being honest with you would make things easier," she explained.

"I appreciate your trust in me."

Judging by the stories of the past children of the gods, Remily must've

anticipated some possibility of me not taking this news too well—a possibility that could have been life-ending for her... That she'd told me at all was a testament to her guts and kindness.

But then she dropped another bomb. "It makes things easier for me too. There was no way for me to tell you that Elias knows you're a child of the gods and still pretend like I hadn't figured it out myself."

"What?" I had heard that name just recently. My instinct to turn my head was subdued by the voluptuous masses behind it. "Just to clarify... You mean, His Majesty?"

"Uh-huh. Elias took part in that research, too... Well, he was the one who commissioned the research in the first place. On top of being king *and* a descendant of a child of the gods, I'm sure he has information we don't. Through documents only the royal family is allowed access to, for example." At the end, the king had determined that Elia was not a child of the gods. "Her store of magical energy was vast, but that was the only sign she showed. Elias explained it away with her being a descendant of King Masaharu...but that wasn't enough evidence to disprove the rumors, and we weren't exactly convinced, either.

"But a king's word is law, so we had no choice but to support it. And it was more convenient that way for us to protect Elia. Most likely, Elias knows some secret way of determining where or not someone is a child of the gods, unbeknownst to us."

It made sense. At the very least, I had no reason to doubt Remily's guess. In fact, I didn't even know what kind of person the king was... What concerned me more, though, was that he apparently knew *I* was a child of the gods. While Hudom—who had spied for the king until just recently—still worked with me, he no longer gave the kingdom any intel on me after Reinhhart had spoken to him about it. Still, the king had to have heard of what transpired during the attack on Gimul.

"He brought it up with me, so I wanted to tell you first. You would have been surprised if he called you to the castle out of the blue," said Remily.

"If you hadn't told me, I would have been very suspicious."

“All I want to ask you is to listen to him calmly when that time comes. Elias wouldn’t want to make an enemy out of a child of the gods.”

“Okay.” There was no sense speculating when it came to this. If my situation changed, I would seek Reinhart’s advice. “In preparation for that, I should tell the Jamils that I’m a child of the gods.”

“Are you sure?”

The truth was, there was no real problem with revealing that much about me. It was just that, historically, revealing this particular identity hadn’t worked out for everybody. Some children of the gods in history were betrayed by those they confided in. Others were labeled liars and ostracized. Others still became too famous—they lost their freedom and loved ones to nefarious forces that had caught wind of their powers... There were just too many historical examples of misfortune befalling them.

The manual I had been given right after coming to this world stated that, while I was allowed to reveal my identity, it was not recommended. If I had my heart set on telling anyone, I was supposed to make sure I trusted them and would have no regrets if things went south because of it.

I trusted the Jamils wholeheartedly, and if they already suspected it, it might make it easier for them to make the right call if trouble arose.

“Besides, now that you know—and you’ve only known me for a few days—I don’t see the benefit of continuing to hide it from them,” I said.

“Makes sense. I was probably the most suspicious one in your circle.”

“I do appreciate what you’ve done for me. And I trust you to keep this between us for now.”

“Of course,” Remily said with genuine gravitas I hadn’t heard from her before. “Now that that’s out of the way, we should get some rest. Without a good night’s rest, we’ll be miserable tomorrow... Not to mention, sleep is essential for maintaining youthful skin.”

“Right... Good night,” I said.

After everything that’d happened, I must have been bone tired. Despite the

surprises I had faced today, I ended the night relaxed. In no time at all, a cozy sense of drowsiness came over me.

Chapter 8, Episode 14: Worry of the Jamils

The next morning, after we sat down for breakfast, I confessed to the other three members of our travel party that I was a child of the gods. Even if they'd suspected it already, they were at least surprised that I decided to break the news to them now.

"I'm sorry I kept it from you," I said.

"No need to apologize. If you were going around sharing that information lightly, I would have been gravely concerned. Besides, everyone has secrets, big or small, for reasons of their own. We, for example, never told you that we suspected you were a child of the gods," Reinbach started.

"A relationship where you can trust each other and share everything is a wonderful thing to have, but there can be a long journey to get to that point. You have every right to choose with whom to share your secrets and when, Master Ryoma. Thank you for choosing to share them with me now."

"That makes me feel a lot better," I said. Reinbach and Sebas seemed ready to treat me the same as they always had. On the other hand, I was still scoping out Sever, who had remained silent, a sour look on his face.

"Whatever it is, Sever, spit it out," Reinbach urged him.

"Yes, sorry... I don't want to bombard you with questions, but I do need to clarify one thing. Do you have any intention, Ryoma, to use your powers as a child of the gods against this kingdom?" Although he spoke quietly, Sever's question put far more tension between us than I had felt during our match.

Clearly he would see through any lies or non-answers. And that wasn't a problem for me. "Not in the slightest, at this point. I would like to maintain my lifestyle as long as I can, so I have nothing to gain from starting fights with the royal family or the kingdom at large. Titles and power don't interest me, either. Honestly, I don't care about all that."

The tension between us faded. "That's what I thought. My apologies. That question was burning in my mind."

“Only natural, considering your career,” I said.

Then Sever promised not to divulge my secret to anyone. Not even the royal family. Now that he was retired, he wasn’t obligated to report information like this. “However, if His Majesty has gathered any information on you, our silence won’t make much difference. The king will reach out to you sooner or later.”

I suspected as much. Chances are, there’s nothing I can do to prevent the king from finding out. If he does have a way of identifying children of the gods, how does he do it?

It was really bugging me that I didn’t know what his method was.

“A way to identify if someone is a child of the gods...” Sever repeated. “I’ve never heard of such a thing.”

“Neither have I. If I had, I would have used it on you,” Reinbach chimed in.

“When His Majesty called off the investigation, I wondered if he knew somehow that My Lady was not a child of the gods. With such an abrupt conclusion, I believe he had good cause for it,” Sebas said.

“Did His Majesty act any differently before he called it off? For example, did he ask unusual questions or carry any unfamiliar tools?” I asked, just spitballing. The group collectively shook their heads.

“We’d have noticed if he was acting obviously out of the ordinary,” said Remily. “At least one of us kept an eye on Elia at all times, doubling as her bodyguard. Especially whenever Elias interacted with her.”

“A small item that he could keep up his sleeve, possibly,” said Sever. “No one would have searched His Majesty’s person for any reason.”

“True, but if he had such an item, he could have tested her at any time. When the investigation first began, His Majesty pored over documents himself. If he faked that dedication, I’ll be damned. So, he may have found a way during his search...” Reinbach contemplated.

“A peculiar event I recall is that His Majesty made My Lady cry.”

He made Elia cry? “Did he take her blood or something?” I asked.

“Nothing like that. His Majesty took very good care of her, so he often played

games when they saw each other. Accordingly, His Majesty poked her cheek in jest a little forcefully. My Lady was uninjured, of course, despite her wailing. Only shocked by the unusual force in the physical contact. It was a memorable anecdote to me, but I can't imagine it bears relevance to how His Majesty concluded the investigation."

"I see..." I muttered. If the king had utilized some tool from Earth or something else that would only make sense to someone from Earth, there was a chance that all of my travel companions had not thought anything of it. There was just too little information for me to even make a guess as to the king's methods. "Thank you for sharing that with me."

"Heard enough already? If we keep talking, one of us may recall something else," Reinbach offered.

"Food's almost heated. And I was just curious about whatever method he might've used;after all, I might end up on the receiving end of it. Even if the king couldn't tell for sure, he could have made the declaration for political reasons. He *was* right, so if there's a way—" I couldn't finish my sentence, because the adults were staring at me more intently than when I had revealed my big secret. In particular, powerful emotion roiled behind Reinbach's and Sebas's eyes.

"Is that true, Ryoma?" The gravity in Reinbach's voice finally made me realize that children of the gods were treated like bombs in this country. They could bring about great profit with proper application, but could also trigger mass destruction if rubbed the wrong way. Since Reinbach had no way to determine whether or not someone was a child of the gods himself, he was never completely sure if the king had been right. Some part of him must have always longed for concrete proof that his granddaughter was no ticking time bomb.

"I'm sure of it. She apparently did inherit King Masaharu's gifts, but nothing more," I said.

"Master Ryoma, not to doubt your claim, but can you tell us how you know this?" asked Sebas.

"There aren't any documents or anything. What if I showed you this?" I produced my Status Board from the Item Box and pulled up a particular item before handing it to Sebas.

“These are...!” He started.

“What is it?” Reinbach asked.

“Master Ryoma has two titles significant to this matter: Beloved Child of the Gods and Oracle.”

“Incredible,” Reinbach muttered. “When you say that Elia is not a child of the gods...”

“I asked the gods about it. Do you remember when I went to the church to have this card made, shortly after we met?”

“Sure I do. That’s when you spoke to them?” Reinbach asked.

“I was told a little bit about you all, starting with how I was lucky to meet you. Besides, there is only one child of the gods at any given time. There were times when there were multiple, I was told, but I should be the only child of the gods now.”

“I see...” Relief washed over Reinbach, whose eyes were glistening.

Sebas held out a handkerchief for him, although he looked to be on the verge of tears himself.

“And...forgive me for being blunt, but I assume your biggest concern is that Elia might be capable of the calamity magic that King Masaharu wielded,” I said.

“You’re not wrong, but there’s a little more to it...” Reinbach replied. “Did you know that King Masaharu was regarded as a tyrant?”

“Tyrant?” I couldn’t help but repeat it. That was news to me.

“Although it’s distant history, many people hesitate to criticize the royal family, so I’m not surprised you didn’t know.”

Reinbach went on to give me the full story of King Masaharu.

First of all, he wasn’t born a royal, but an orphan. The kingdom was on the verge of losing a brutal war, desperate for any hope of turning the tide. That’s when Masaharu’s extraordinary magical prowess caught the king’s attention. Claiming Masaharu as his illegitimate child, the king hoped to add the child of the gods to the kingdom’s arsenal.

Claiming an orphan as a royal was unheard of, and the king most likely had no intention of passing on the throne to Masaharu. However, all his legitimate heirs died on the battlefield or were assassinated by agents of enemy nations. The king himself suddenly passed away, almost as soon as the war was won and peace was established, before he could sire another heir. As the only member of the royal family alive, Masaharu inherited the kingdom.

“There must have been a lot of pushback,” I guessed.

“Naturally. Historical documents note that Masaharu assassinated the king and possibly some of the legitimate heirs. On the other hand, Masaharu contributed greatly to the kingdom’s victory. People regarded him as a war hero. Nobles at the time thought keeping Masaharu on the throne would be an easier way to rule than finding an excuse to rob him of the crown. In the end, they officially acknowledged him as king,” Reinbach said.

“Long story short, they wanted Masaharu as their puppet,” Remily interjected. “Despite his incredible powers, Masaharu was known as a timid man who never questioned an order before he sat on the throne.”

Once he took the throne, he was on top of the ladder. Amassing treasure and armies for his personal use, regulating the use of specific spells, and drastically rewriting laws were some examples of his tyranny Reinbach and Remily gave me. Worse of all, any dissent was silenced by the force of his magic.

“The best those nobles who sought to puppeteer Masaharu could do was oblige their new king’s tyranny while trying to mitigate the damage to the kingdom. There was no defying a war hero who turned the tide of battles with nothing but his own magic...

We don’t want Elia to fall into a similar path as King Masaharu. While his calamity magic may pose the greatest threat to our kingdom... I’m most afraid that Elia will end up isolated with no one she can trust. That she will turn into someone who has to force others to follow her by force,” Reinbach confessed.

“As for his calamity magic, it’s very unlikely that Elia can cast it,” I said.

“What did you say?” Reinbach asked.

“I doubt Elia can cast calamity magic. Well, calamity magic is apparently not

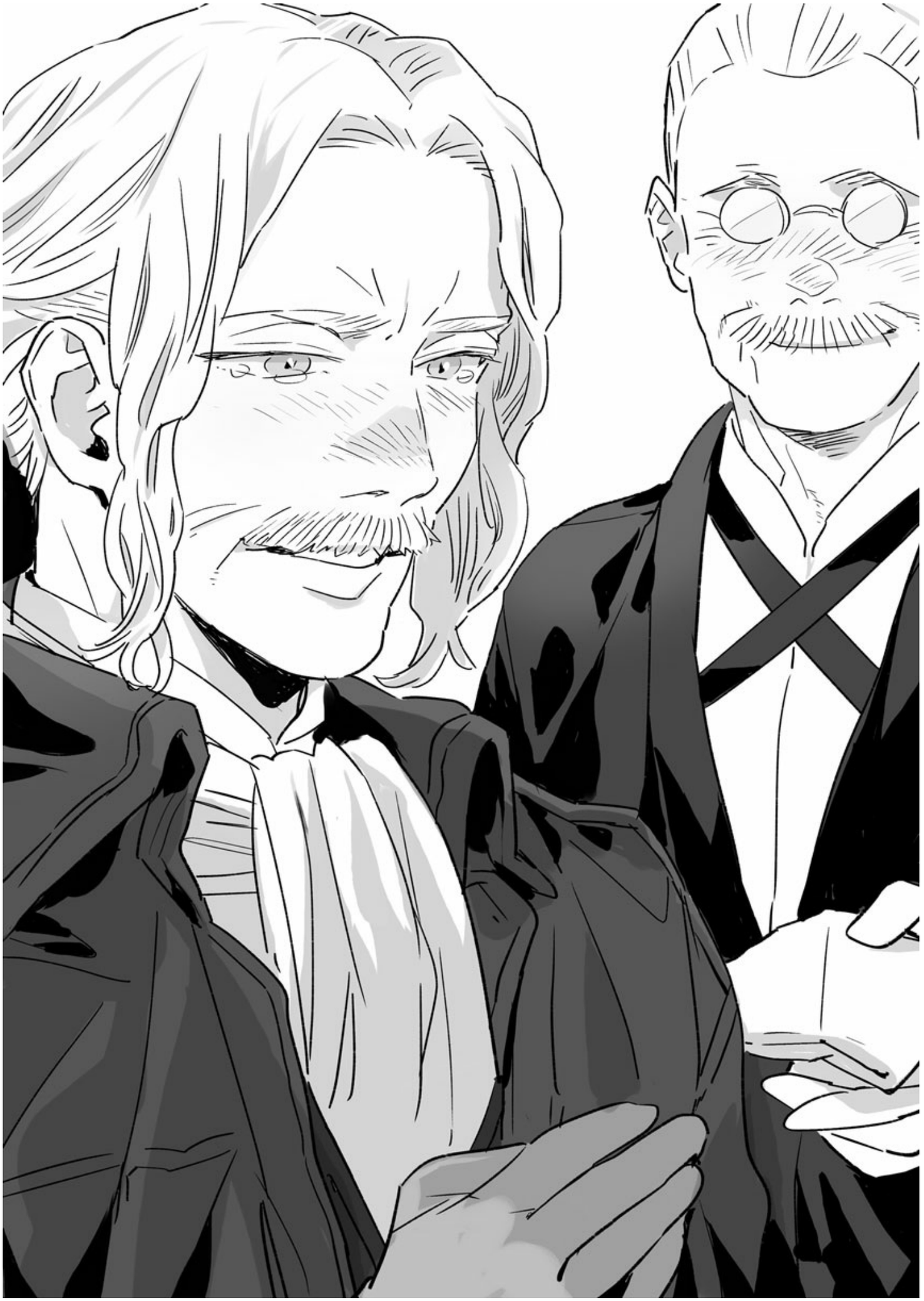
some special spell that requires a particular talent or place in a bloodline. It's the same as the spells you use every day. Technically, everyone who can cast a spell has the potential to use calamity magic," I explained.

"Calamity magic is no ordinary magic..." Reinbach countered. "Take the legend of how these valleys were formed, for example. Masaharu's spells are recorded in history to have incomprehensible power—"

"Only due to his immense amount of magical energy. King Masaharu had a particularly vast store of it, even among the children of the gods," I said. "If the legends are to be believed, I am nowhere near the spellcaster he was, even though we're both children of the gods. Sincerely, I doubt I could ever cast spells like him, and I'd expect the same from Elia, who has about as much magical energy as I do. If anything, she might have a *slightly* better chance of casting such magic than the average spellcaster." I tried to explain in as certain as possible terms.

Reinbach must have reached his limit. He lowered his head, holding Sebas' handkerchief to his eyes. "Excuse me. Just a moment."

"I'll accompany you," said Sebas.



Having excused themselves with trembling voices, they both returned to one of the tents that still stood.

Silence fell over the rest of us until Sever said, “Thank you. Even as a mere friend of hers who took part in the investigation, I feel the weight taken off of my shoulders. I can only imagine how relieved Reinbach and Sebas are.”

“They always help me out, so it’s the least I can do,” I said.

“Even so, that was information we failed to obtain after putting blood and sweat into our research. Besides, even though we had already suspected you to be a child of the gods, you could have kept your silence about the Oracle skill or about calamity magic,” Sever added.

“I didn’t expect or even hope for something like this, either,” Remily said. “Knowing you were a child of the gods alone would have made me happy.”

“I could have kept that information to myself,” I admitted. “But to do so at the expense of someone who’s helped me greatly... That wouldn’t sit right with me.”

Regret would stain any peaceful life I could hope to attain, not to mention how awkward I’d feel every time I saw them. Even now, I had the urge to kick myself for not noticing sooner and for focusing too much on how *I* felt... If I had still been on Earth, I would have gotten into a spiral of self-degradation. By comparison, I was practicing much more positive thinking here. And I’d only gotten this far thanks to the Jamils. That’s why I wanted to help them in any small way I could.

Sever and Remily seemed happy with my decision, too.

“It was wonderful news to us, so I have no complaints—as long as you’re happy with your decision, Ryoma,” Remily said.

“Me neither,” said Sever. “But you should choose who to tell and what exactly to tell them very carefully. If any trouble arises because of it, we will help you.”

“Hopefully it won’t come to that. If it does, I will take you up on your offer,” I said.

When Reinbach and Sebas came back out, they thanked me and gave me

adamant promises to help me in my future endeavors.

Whatever the future holds for me, I have people who'll lend me their strength. As long as I hold onto these relationships, I'll make it through anything, somehow.

Chapter 8, Episode 15: Quick Breather

My morning confession had delayed the start of our day's journey somewhat, but we had now resumed our route to the City of Lost Souls. Just like the day before, we frequently encountered Undead monsters but our trek was going more smoothly than ever because we were riding the emperor scavenger slime today.

"Never thought to ride on a slime," Remily said. "It's pretty comfortable once you get used to it."

"A surprisingly smooth ride," Sebas added. "As if we were gliding on a flat board."

The emperor slime crawled just like any other slime, but its enormous size gave it a larger stride (if I could call it that) that helped with the rough terrain. According to Sever, we were going about as fast as a horse's trot, which was plenty fast for being able to glide through the severe off-roads of these valleys with ease. Moreover, riding the emperor slime helped with fighting the Undead. While fighting them on foot could take time away from our journey, the emperor could simply absorb a few Undead and keep going. Even when we had to go through larger hordes, we could whittle them down with long-range magic before we came up to them and mow right through without having to stop.

"It can cushion anything that bumps into us or catch us if anyone falls. This is a safe and convenient method," I said.

Still, mounting the emperor slime did have one downside. The Undead—currently being digested by the emperor slime—were right under us. At least the Undead couldn't escape the slime on their own, and I had set up a waterproof fabric coated with Light magic between us and the slime to keep the Undead out of our sights and to prevent the emperor slime from accidentally swallowing us up. It also served as a failsafe to prevent us from being attacked. While I thought this mode of transportation was highly efficient...I'd be lying if I said the Undead being digested just below us didn't bother me.

Since I suppose all of us were thinking of what jiggled beneath us, conversation stopped for some time.

Reinbach was the one who eventually broke the silence. “About our conversation this morning, Ryoma... I’ll only share that with my son and his wife.”

“I trust you and both of them,” I said. “Are you sure you don’t want to tell Elia?”

“Hm. When she was younger, he held a family meeting about how to raise her, keeping in mind that she had the potential to be a child of the gods... In the end, we had decided to teach her what was important to know as a person, more than what was important for a noble to know. First order of business was to show her as much love as we could. We would protect and grow her young heart. Of course, we’d want her to learn to protect herself from malicious intent. But while she was a child, we could protect her instead. If her powers did awaken one day, we would pray that we’d taught her to believe in others.”

Come to think of it, I had the stereotype that nobles—even children—were calculating and two-faced. Elia must have seemed like a nice, normal girl because of the policy Reinbach spoke of and because of her family’s effort to raise her that way.

“Elia grew up to be a genuine, kind girl,” Reinbach continued. “But politics isn’t her forte because of it. If we told her about you, she might unknowingly draw attention to you through any changes in her that she can’t quite control. Young ladies of nobility raised with more *traditional* values attend her school, many of them shrewd and observant. We must mitigate the risk of news spreading, whenever we can.”

“That is very kind. Thank you,” I said, knowing that Reinbach would’ve liked to tell Elia the truth right now if he could’ve.

“Without you, Elia would have to question whether or not she was a child of the gods all her life. Even though she won’t know the truth now, it will spare her from a lifetime of asking herself an unanswerable question. Oh, even my heart feels lighter. I look forward to sharing the news with Aria.”

Aria was a name I hadn’t heard. From the context, I could at least guess that

she was a Jamil.

“Aria is Reinbach’s wife,” Remily explained.

“Elia’s grandmother,” I confirmed.

“Miss Aria was not in the best health for most of her life. She was greatly concerned for her granddaughter’s future until she passed, when Miss Elia was little. If I go first, I will enjoy sharing this with her,” Sebas said.

“I’m glad to hear that, but don’t be in too much of a hurry to leave this world,” I said.

“Exactly. A weight off your shoulders is one thing—but don’t let it lower your guard,” Sever said.

“What’s the harm? It’s such a beautiful day; let’s enjoy it,” said Remily. Sure enough, the weather was great. Our leisurely journey under the cloudless sky was accompanied by a refreshing breeze in our faces. “Besides, we won’t have time for that once we make it to the City of Lost Souls. Better build up our strength! Let’s talk about something fun. Any ideas, Ryoma?”

“You could give me a prompt, at least... Anything...?” I muttered, worried that topics I would’ve usually chosen to talk about had been exhausted. Left alone, I’d start rambling about magic again... “How about your favorite spots to travel to? I’d be interested to see them, and I may want to know about a few places where I could hide out if the world finds out I’m a child of the gods.”

“A healthy mix of optimism and pessimism,” Remily said. “I would choose a town along the Adora river. The river is a major source of transport and tourism. The more people there are, the easier it is to hide. If you ever need to make a run for it, you can leave by land or water.”

“With your experience living in the forest and your skills in Space magic, Count Baramus’s territory to the South may suit you well too,” Sebas suggested. “Surrounded by thick woodlands, it would be easier to conceal yourself. And their famous high-end furniture and woodwork do draw in some tourism.”

“From my experience as a knight, if you’re in a situation where you have to make a run for it, it’s already too late. Wanted posters can spread your name and likeness through the country. Even without it, the order could always find

some clues by spending enough man hours investigating a town. You are in a situation where you can ask the Jamils for aid, so I recommend you do that as much as possible. If you find yourself in too much trouble to do so, either flee the country or hide out in a location too dangerous for them to hunt you down easily," Sever chimed in.

If I wanted to follow that advice, I could build a hideout in the Sea of Trees of Syrus. My destination was where a village had once stood, so I should've been able to build a lodging for one. Maybe I'd finally swing back to the forest of Gana and fix up my house there.

"Anywhere you go, I doubt you'll have any trouble surviving," said Reinbach. "Instead of worrying about running from the public in case your secret comes out, I think you should build up your own status so you can stand your ground in any public court. Specifically, you can raise your adventurer rank." Even when Reinbach and I had first met, he had recommended that I work on improving my rank. That was right after my status board had been made, and we had discussed how much magical energy I had. In hindsight, he must have already suspected that I was a child of the gods. "A rank is rare even among nobles, but you could go straight for S rank. Even nobles would hesitate to interfere with an S rank adventurer."

"I just turned C rank... What would I need to do to get to S rank?" I asked.

"You have two options. You can either spend years and decades completing quests, or you can fasttrack it with brute force."

Reinbach began to explain in more detail.

S rank was partially an honorary title. Individuals or parties considered to have contributed greatly to the guild or kingdom at large were promoted to S rank. Worgan, the guildmaster of the Gimul branch, had earned his rank this way. On the other hand, sometimes adventurers with exceptional skills would join the guild. Someone like me, a child of the gods, was a good example of that. Another reason the guild designed the S rank title was to give those individuals status and protection, as well as put a leash on them. The title would come with some red tape, but it would give me status and deter a lot of people from messing with me.

“When I became an adventurer, my career as a knight was considered part of my contribution. That’s why they gave me A rank right away,” Sever said.

Remily chimed in. “Same with me. If I went back to adventuring, they would add up my old rank and my history as a royal sorcerer and probably give me S or a high A rank, almost S rank. You know, the three of us could just form an S rank party.” That did sound like a blast, but Remily was getting us ahead of ourselves, and I told her as much. “That’s because I haven’t told you this *amazing trick* that’ll help you climb the ranks in no time.”

“You mean, like, bribery...?” I asked.

“No! You just need to efficiently rack up enough points to get you to S rank. You know how Sever’s or my career would contribute to our adventurer rank?” Remily prompted.

“I see... I just need to have a career that will boost my rank.”

“That’s right! And I’m talking about you becoming a Gladiator. It’s a spectacle, sure, but you gotta be strong to make it up the ranks. By the same token, you can climb that ladder a lot faster than the adventurer ladder as long as you can prove your strength. A high-rank in the Colosseum is a guarantee of your abilities in combat.” Remily’s suggestion reminded me of applying for a certification to get a promotion on Earth. At least the concept was familiar. “It’s not a path you can take without the strength to back it up, and you’ll have the opposite of a low profile. As long as you can live with that, I think you’ll go far. It’s a legal and relatively safe place for you to gain more experience, and you can learn a lot from it. Once you’re a famous Gladiator, you won’t be underestimated as often just because of how you look.”

“That’s true... I have a former Gladiator who works for me, so I’ll ask him about his experience when I see him,” I said.

As a former champion, Ox was sure to have a lot to tell me about that career. Even if I wanted status fast, there was no sense in rushing into it. Maybe I could even check out the Colosseum as a spectator before I decided if I wanted to fight in it. If I did, I could have Ox tag along with me. Hopefully he’d be willing to give me commentary that would help me understand the matches better, and if he wanted to participate in a match himself I’d love to watch him. Making extra

money would help him buy his freedom faster too.

“I’ll stop by once I return to Gimul,” I said.

“I think you should,” Remily agreed.

We continued our smalltalk—some useless and some not—while we rode on the back of the smooth-sliding emperor slime. At the pace we were going, we were sure to make up the time we lost yesterday and make it to our destination before sundown.

Chapter 8, Episode 16: Our Destination and a New Slime

“As we suspected,” Sever said.

We had nearly arrived—we could see the City of Lost Souls ahead as the red of sunset was beginning to stain the sky. As we’d suspected, things looked dire enough to draw sour expressions from the faces of my companions, well experienced in monster hunting.

The City of Lost Souls was an expansive, abandoned prison in the center of a crater. To prevent inmates from escaping, watchtowers had been built to form a perfect octagon around the structure. We stood at the far end of a path carved out of a cliffside that led to the front gate of the prison. The gate was closed, preventing us from seeing past it. But there must have been a crack in the gate somewhere, because Undead monsters clogged up the gate-bound path beyond the halfway point. It was similar to the situation we’d faced yesterday, which had given me an excuse to use up half of my oil stockpile.

Breathing was difficult, despite the clear weather and steady breeze. I felt a persistent sense of discomfort, almost like I was sick.

“Cursed energy is flowing out of there... Are you all right?” Remily asked.

“Shouldn’t slow me down,” I said.

“Good, but don’t hesitate to say so if it gets worse. Cursed energy is a form of magical energy, so it’ll feel gross even if you don’t know it’s there. This level of cursed energy might just make you a little nauseous, but that won’t go away as long as you’re near its source. Don’t overextend yourself. Oh, and if you start to *see* cursed energy—it’ll look like a black blur—be careful. When cursed energy is dense enough to be visible, coming into contact with it can kill you. Stay away from pools of cursed energy as much as possible, and get rid of any Undead coated in cursed energy as quickly as possible. Those are your two rules,” Remily explained.

“Got it.” I’d keep a close eye on my physical condition. The question was

where to start from.

“It’s a shame, but Midnight Dew will have to wait. We need to whittle them down as much as we can, while we can,” Sever said.

“I second that. Even I won’t go herb gathering while the city’s in this state,” said Remily.

“Me neither,” I chimed in.

“Shall I jump to Teresa to report this?” Sebas offered.

“Faster for me to call a dragon and turn to them ash,” Reinbach said. “It would take too long for news to reach the local lord, and even longer for the militia to arrive.”

“Either way, we need more information. Why don’t we take the closest watchtower and consider our options from up there?” Sever proposed.

The adults were far more relaxed about this than I’d expected. No better company for tricky situations.

Our route to the nearest watchtower was simple: down the path and up a thin set of stairs. To go down the path, of course, we’d have to go through a horde of Undead.

“Should we set up defensive parameters again?” I asked.

“Only after we reach the watchtower,” said Sever. “Remily? Can you take care of this?”

“Sure, but you boys take on whatever’s upstairs,” she answered. “Ryoma, I’m going to wipe out that horde with a big spell. Once I do, can you ask your slimes to barricade the bottom of the stairs?”

“Absolutely.” I didn’t doubt Remily’s ability to pull that off. She wouldn’t have fibbed about something like that. Not now. I was more concerned with not missing a moment of her grand spell.

“I’m just going to fire it before they notice us.” Remily sauntered out into the path and chanted, “Laser.” Then a thin beam shot out of her outstretched staff, much like a laser pointer back on Earth. I remembered that some models could leave a light burn or blind someone, but that didn’t seem powerful enough to

handle a horde of zombies. Just as that thought crossed my mind, every Undead on the trajectory of the laser vanished. The laser followed a split-second later, piercing the air where the zombies had stood. As Remily flicked her staff left and right, the laser followed and wiped out the rest of the Undead. In a matter of seconds, the path was clear of Undead monsters.

“It’s that easy...?” I blurted out.

“This spell has spectacular penetrating power, so you’ll achieve something like this in an open space. It costs a lot of magical energy, though, so I can’t fire them in quick succession. Can you secure the stairs sooner than later?”

“Right!” Sprinting, I asked the emperor scavenger slime to block off the stairs by splitting into a swarm of scavenger slimes that could deal with any Undead that approached them.

Once the bottom of the stairs was secured, we carefully climbed the stone steps. The Undead had made their way up the watchtower too. Zombies and Skeletons popped up in the tight corridors, making perfect targets for a scattershot. “Light Shot,” I cast.

“Oh, that’s the spell you made in our competition,” Remily noted.

“Looks efficient in small quarters. That may come in handy when fighting indoors,” Sever said.

“Remily’s challenge wasn’t a waste, after all,” Reinbach laughed.

“Definitely not. I wasn’t sure about the competition at first, but now I’m glad I accepted.”

“Maybe I’ll give that a try.” Remily began mimicking my Light Shot, covering me as we advanced.

Although the first casting didn’t scatter well, once I gave her a few pointers—at her request—and she’d cast the spell three times, she seemed to have mastered it. Thanks to Remily’s quick learning, we were making our way through much quicker.

“I know I asked for it, but you may want to keep this spell a little closer to your chest,” she said.

“Right. Knowledge of shotguns might give me away as a child of the gods,” I said.

“That’s not what I mean,” Remily countered. “Just say you got your inspiration from old fairy tales, or something. The problem is that the spell is too useful. You’ll have people flocking to learn it.”

I’d been casting the spell without much thought beyond the initial improvisation, but Light Shot apparently required advanced magical energy manipulation and careful maneuvering, meaning the spell caster had to be reasonably skilled and experienced to maximize the spells effectiveness.

“Every spell is affected by the caster’s talent and experience, and Light magic is particularly difficult to master... No harm done if everyone who tried and failed to cast Light Shot chalked it up to their inability, but I know there will be plenty of people who won’t accept that conclusion.”

Remily, a master sorcerer, had been sought after countless times as a mentor in spellcasting. Many of her less successful students blamed their shortcomings on her, calling her an ineffective teacher or even accusing her of withholding information to keep her spellcasting a secret. Even a well-meaning offer of tutoring could lead to a hassle. She cautioned me to carefully select any potential students, and to keep my teachings to the basics. While Remily gave her advice, Sebas was nodding along. Apparently, he’d had similar experiences while trying to teach Space magic. I took their advice to heart.

I cast the spell one last time. “Light Shot. That about cleared them up.”

The watchtower was simply a cylindrical tower and an adjoining shed that must have been the breakroom of the watchmen. Despite the facility being long abandoned, the tower had retained its structure. The base of the tower, which stood on a small patch of leveled ground, was elevated above the surrounding landscape, with no handrail in sight. While I wondered if the rail had crumbled and decayed over the years, its absence made it much easier for us to overtake the tower.

Once I saw that we were safe, I turned to assess the current state of the city. The thought of climbing the tower still made me a bit nervous, so it was lucky for me that the base of the tower was already elevated enough to serve as an

overlook. Past the gate, the former prison was a series of undecorated rectangular buildings made of heavy stone. In the center of them all stood a tower similar to the watchtowers that formed the octagon perimeter but bigger. Predictably, the City of Lost Souls looked decrepit, with visible moss and cracks throughout the structures. Still, few of the structures had collapsed. I still couldn't see what was behind or within those structures, but I didn't see anything like the pool of cursed energy Remily had described.

"As far as I can see, it's just low-ranking Undead throughout," Reinbach remarked. "Cursed energy is spread wide and thin."

"We should still deal with them at once, but it is not an emergency," said Sever.

"A silver lining," Sebas added.

What looked to me like a scene from a zombie movie where all hope had been lost was apparently no big deal. I was relieved by it enough to start imagining what sort of catastrophic pandemonium would have to occur to rattle these four. Then I felt it.

"What is it, Ryoma?"

"Is something the matter?"

"Some of the slimes I stationed down there are... Well, they're not in trouble, at least. I don't sense any nervousness or danger from them." For a second, I thought they'd overeaten the Undead monsters before realizing that it was most likely an evolution.

I told my companions about it and headed down the stairs to find about ten scavenger slimes showing signs of evolution. Protected by a circle of their kind, they continued releasing and absorbing magical energy. I assumed that they became defenseless during an evolution. Slimes had always evolved while I protected them—or hidden somewhere.

Could I touch them during the evolution? I wondered. I'd read on Earth that touching an insect in metamorphosis could adversely affect its development... I thought that was what I'd read, anyway. My curiosity had been piqued, but I'd feel bad if something were to happen to these slimes because I touched them

during their evolution. Besides, this was the first evolution of slimes on an Undead diet. I could afford to just watch.

Focusing on observing the evolutions, I saw more magical energy than evolution usually produced. I could chalk that up to the fact that several of them were evolving at once.

“So that’s how slimes evolve,” Remily said.

I jumped, noticing that Remily and Sever had joined me. “You scared me. I didn’t expect you down here.”

“Reinbach said you might be too distracted by your slimes to keep a good guard up. These slimes must be very interesting,” said Remily.

“I’m sorry; I really didn’t notice you,” I admitted.

“Don’t be too sorry, although keeping your guard up is always a good idea. She cast Hide on us just to sneak up on you,” Sever said with some exasperation. Remily was shooting me a mischievous grin.

After that, we watched the slimes evolve. Neither of them had seen a slime evolve before; they watched with genuine interest.

“Looks like they’re done,” I said after some time.

The evolved scavenger slimes had all turned the color of dark soil. At a diameter of about 60cm, each of them was much larger than any other regular species of slime. *A perfect size for a chair,* I thought. Of course, I didn’t sit on them.

Through Monster Analysis, I discovered that they were a species called grave slimes. For a moment, I thought they were *glaive* slimes, like the weapon. Then I read their skills.

Grave Slime

Skills: **Attract Spirits 1, Absorb Spirits 3, Lay to Rest 3, Disease Resistance 7, Poison Resistance 7, Cursed Energy Resistance 8, Foul Feeder 6, Cleanse 2, Deodorize 7, Physical Attack Resistance 2, Jump 3, Consume 7, Absorb 3, Split 2, Unarmed Combat 2**

Attract Spirits, Absorb Spirits, and Lay to Rest were new, obviously death-related skills they had acquired. As a trade off, the level of their Cleanse skill had gone down and they'd lost their Deodorant Solution skill entirely. On the other hand, they had retained all the skills they had built through training with me. The elements they preferred were Earth, Dark, and Space.

Space?!

"Incredible." I'd never had a slime that preferred Space magical energy. Providing normal slimes with Space magical energy had never led to an evolution. Just when I was starting to doubt their existence, Space magic wielding slimes seemed plausible!

And I had to test out their new skills. To see the effect of Attract Spirits, which I assumed was to pull Undead monsters towards the slime, I had the scavengers still dining on the Undead monsters make way.

Their skills turned out to work as expected. As soon as the grave slimes began glowing pale blue, the Undead monsters that had been attacking random scavengers began walking straight towards them. Then the Absorb Spirits skill apparently allowed them to wholly consume the Undead that were drawn to them. What made this more impressive was that most of the Undead didn't even resist, unlike when they were being absorbed by the scavenger slimes... Is this *another of the grave slime's powers?* I wondered. Watching the Undead march up to the grave slimes even gave me the impression that the monsters *wanted* to be taken in by the grave slimes. Lay to Rest, the last of the new skills, allowed the slimes to absorb Undead monsters without dissolving them and take them back out at any time. I couldn't imagine that this particular skill would be very useful if they could only store Undeads, but if their power extended to animal carcassess, they could carry any game I catch during a hunt.

"There's so much I need to research!" I exclaimed.

"Ryoma, can we interrupt you now?" Remily asked. "We're not familiar with slimes, so we wanted to ask you some questions."

"Oh, yes. Of course. Let's go back upstairs. That would be a better place to talk."

All the way up the stairs, I felt Remily and Sever's eyes on my back, like they were parents keeping an eye on a child who might at any minute run off to play with no regard for his own safety.

Chapter 8, Episode 17: The Carrot and the Stick

Back at the watchtower, Reinbach and Sebas had set up camp for us.

“You’re back. What slime was it this time?” Reinbach asked as he worked on one of the tents, all too familiar with my modus operandi.

I relayed what I had found out about my new slimes through my Appraisal and trial runs.

“Grave slime... Never heard of it. I’m sure it’s another new species... With a very intriguing set of abilities,” said Reinbach.

“A slime that lures Undead and preys on them. This evolution could not have come at a better time,” Sebas said.

“Probably because that’s been their main diet for this journey,” I speculated.

“We saw those abilities in action—there’s no doubt about their effectiveness,” Remily said. “I’m more interested in their resistance to cursed energy. Could they consume cursed energy along with the Undead and neutralize it?”

“Perhaps if I can measure how much cursed energy they can contain. I would have to test that with different variables,” I said.

“If that pans out, grave slimes will be extremely valuable,” Remily added.

Undead monsters and cursed energy can appear in any place where death has occurred. The greater the number and severity of deaths in the area, the more likely it was for them to materialize. There were methods of preventing bodies from becoming Undead—like burying them—as well as strategies to dispatch them. Rarely did Undead monsters become a problem in populated areas, but humanity isn’t perfect. We were gazing out over the former prison, now in ruins because the facilitators had failed to prevent or deal with the emergence of Undead. The City of Lost Souls was one of the most extreme examples, but there were numerous spots around the world more prone to produce Undead

monsters and cursed energy. Grave slimes could be very useful in any of those places.

“The Lay to Rest skill is what I’m most curious about,” Sever said. “If they can store and carry any corpse or carcass, it would be a game changer to have one accompany every Knight’s Order and military mission. When hunting monsters, knights are allowed to take any monster parts and cash them out in addition to their pay. If there’s no room to pack them, though, they’re forced to leave them behind. The ability to bring back as many parts as possible will improve their payout and, naturally, their morale... Not to mention the knights who pass away during missions.”

“I see...” No one would want to leave the body of their fallen compatriot behind.

“It may make taming Undead monsters easier,” said Reinbach. The adults were giving me new perspectives on the grave slime, but his was the most unexpected.

“You can tame an Undead?” I asked.

“They are monsters, after all. It is possible, though few prefer to. Taming a humanoid corpse is especially frowned upon. Those who do are almost always turned away from inns, and even barred from entering some cities. Even without the stigma, their only useful ability is their regeneration. It’s difficult to make it worth your while because of their weakness to sun, their smell, and the backlash you would face in society,” Reinbach explained.

“Makes sense,” I said. “I wouldn’t want to tame one anytime soon... Does anyone really go through with it?”

“I’ve tried it once to test my aptitude as a tamer. Had no desire to maintain that contract, but there are some tamers who are only compatible with the Undead. Those who research Undead monsters may be forced to tame one for that purpose.”

I doubted that researchers of the Undead were treated much better than those who studied slimes. If they found out about grave slimes, could they keep their subjects of research stowed away when they didn’t need the monsters around? Maybe not...

“The grave slimes may be more versatile than I thought,” I said, setting aside all the ideas percolating in my mind. “Slimes multiply the more nutrients they get. Do you mind if I take the time to increase their numbers now? They could be very useful in our next steps.”

“Yes, we were still discussing our next move,” Reinbach said. “I don’t mind, of course.”

“The less Undead are around, the better. I have no problem with that,” Sever agreed.

“Not much daylight left,” Remily pointed out. “Let’s save the big hunt for tomorrow and shore up our defenses for tonight.”

Sure enough, red light already creeped into the sky. With the City of Lost Souls right under our nose, I expected we’d face a much larger horde tonight than we had the night before. So we set up the same defense perimeters: slime-based stone walls and barbed wire that circled the open area before the watchtower. The only staircase leading up to the watchtower was blocked off by the emperor scavenger slime. Placing grave slimes behind it would stop any Undead monster on the ground. Even if the emperor slime were to encounter too many Undead than it could absorb at once, it would pass them on to the grave slimes or throw them off the stairs.

Can grave slimes absorb the flying Undead too? I wondered. I’d seen them absorb zombies and skeletons, but I hadn’t seen a grave slime encounter a wraith or wisp yet. If the grave slimes could absorb them, I could incorporate them into our defense in the air... Considering that wraiths were not corporeal and wisps were basically floating balls of fire, I wasn’t sure. It would have to be trial and error.

As the sun set further, more and more Undead showed themselves. Chief among them were the wraiths and wisps, flying up through the roofs of the old prison buildings. From afar, I could almost pretend they were fireflies bedecking the night.

“I guess those are embers of life too...” I muttered to myself.

“How poetic.”

I turned. “Oh, Mister Sebas!” His comment, rather than the fact that he had heard mine, made me blush.

“The wraiths will approach us once it’s darker,” he said. “Please come in. We have dinner ready.”

“Thank you.” I followed Sebas into the Holy Space and felt a tangible difference in the air as I crossed the threshold. Breathing was easier, which made me realize how much difference purifying cursed energy can make.

“Miss Remily, this spell is amazing,” I said.

“You can really feel it when you come in, can’t you? I made sure tonight’s is stronger than yesterdays. Let’s have a relaxing dinner.” Remily took the lead in reaching for one of the instant meals in the pot. As soon as she tore the bag, something happened.

A group of Undead flying above the city nearby came straight towards us, as if they were drawn to the camp by some force. I even checked the grave slimes to make sure none had activated the Attract Spirits spell. As I kept an eye on them, they hovered right above us. Although they were kept at bay by the Holy Space spell, they showed no sign of trying to attack the slimes on the outside, only floating in place. Like they were watching us.

“Ryoma, don’t worry too much about them. This happens a lot,” said Sever.

“Really?”

“The Undead are influenced by the emotions and thoughts they possessed when they were alive. And starvation was one of the methods of execution here. Hunger and thirst must linger in them. Many Undead flock to you if you show that you have any kind of food,” he explained.

“That makes sense, but this is kind of awkward,” I said.

“Only natural,” Reinbach said. “Who can enjoy a peaceful meal in the face of starving souls, even if they are criminals-turned-monsters? I’m not sure I’d enjoy the company of anyone who could.”

“Knights usually lose their appetite during the first meal they take here,” Sever joined in. “The more time you spend eating, the more difficult it becomes.

The best remedy is to chow down on your food fast."

After hearing this, I focused on eating my dinner. It only made sense that we finished our meal more quickly and quietly than we were accustomed to.

"They haven't left even though we finished our food," I noted.

"Perhaps they think we have more," Sebas said.

Even after our meal, the Undead floated around the perimeter of the spell, almost like they were begging. Although they were harmless at the moment, they made me uneasy. Precisely because I was in a safe space with spare time, my eyes kept drifting up to them. Now I realized that our competition last night had been an effective distraction.

"Would they go away if we gave them food?" I asked. Dead criminals still suffering from hunger and thirst reminded me of the Buddhist *gaki*—hungry ghosts. Some regions or households in Japan held a ceremony called *segaki* during the summer, when they would offer food to the starving spirits in hopes of accumulating good karma. Wondering if there were similar customs in this world, I asked the group about it.

"Sometimes we offer flowers or alcohol to wish the dead a peaceful rest. Never with the Undead, though... They are dangerous. Most people would choose to hunt them or run from them," Sebas said.

"Besides, the Undead can't be satiated by food," said Sever. "Every year, a rookie or two would give them a part of their rations. The monsters tried to eat it. Zombies picking up and dropping the food in front of them with arms that hardly moved. Skeletons tossing the food into their skulls only to have it fall out from under their ribs...and wraiths and Wisps are incorporeal and so are helpless. Overall it only made it harder for us to watch."

"I see what you mean..." I said. Sever had seen these pitiful monsters trying to sate their insatiable hunger year after year. Maybe he had even tried to feed them himself, from how much pity I could hear in his voice.

Is it just easier to hunt them down, then? The moral debate tugged and pulled at my mind as I spotted a particular wraith. Like the other wraiths, it was a blurry silhouette of a human with no distinguishable face. But while the other

wraiths wandered to and fro, this one seemed to stand just at the edge of our Holy Space, staring at us. “What is it doing?” I asked.

“Who knows? There’s no guessing the logic behind the behavior of any Undead,” Sever replied.

“Higher-ranking Undead sometimes have a sliver of memory from when they were alive, but even then they have no intelligence...” Remily chimed in.

“If you’re curious, why don’t you try training it? You may find out something,” said Reinbach.

A taming contract did allow me to sense the emotions of slimes who couldn’t speak to me otherwise. I assumed this would be the same for the Undead. Besides, I wanted to see if I could tame an Undead, in case I ever came in contact with an Undead slime in the future.

I walked to the edge of the Holy Space, as close as I could get to the motionless wraith. There, I tried casting the taming contract.

Snap!

I could almost hear it.

“What happened?” Sever asked.

“It didn’t work. With slimes, I can tether them with magical energy without effort. With the wraith, it felt like the tether was torn.” I felt rejected, like I’d extended my hand for the wraith to shake and it slapped it away.

“Indeed, that is a failed connection. You must be very incompatible with wraiths, or perhaps with all Undead. Most tamers describe an unsuccessful contract as feeling some resistance or as the tether not connecting. I’m not sure if your incompatibility is only with wraiths or with the Undead overall,” Reinbach said.

To figure out which was the case, I asked the grave slimes and emperor slimes so I could try to tame a zombie and a skeleton making their way up the stairs. I felt the same tearing sensation with both. Apparently, Undead monsters and I were oil and water, no matter which individual I tried to tame.

I also noticed that each rejection felt a little different somehow. I couldn’t

explain how, but...it bummed me out. Even if the only salvation for the Undead was taking them out.

“Could I try giving them food?” I asked the group. “I’m sure they’ll swarm it, but I’ll take care of them if the food doesn’t help.”

“I won’t stop you,” said Sever.

“Knock yourself out,” Remily agreed.

Now that I had their permission, I crafted a large hearth with Earth magic from a chunk of nearby soil. From the Item Box, I produced some firewood and potatoes I’d packed just in case we’d need it. Noting how the Undead monsters took immediate notice of the potatoes, I lit the firewood in the hearth.

“You’re going to the trouble of cooking for them?” Sebas asked.

“No—once the fire’s big enough, I’ll throw the food in the fire.”

There were plenty of religious rituals that used fire. A common practice in Japan was to start a fire to both welcome and then send off ancestral spirits during the summer. In Hinduism, monks sometimes fed offerings of flowers and food into a fire before a divine statue. Japanese Buddhist altars were adorned with incense because deities are believed to feed on the scent of it.

I had no detailed knowledge about these rituals, or proper tools, or even a single stick of incense. These customs didn’t even exist in this world, but I was improvising one—it was a long shot.

Explaining my thought process to my companions, I fed the dried meat to the flames, along with my hope and prayer.

As soon as the smoke rose and touched a few wraiths overhead, they began furiously flying all around the Holy Space. Not only was their state a far cry from peaceful, I sensed anger in them.

Do they think I just wasted food because they don’t have these customs? I guessed.

For my next attempt, I fed potatoes laced with Dark magical energy into the fire. Dark magic affected the mind, just like I’d instilled fear into that exam proctor at the Adventurer's Guild. This time, I willed with my magic that the

wraiths might find some relief from their hunger—that they would, if possible, find their way peacefully to the world beyond. I kept up the stream of smoke to carry my will upward, until...

“Did they hear it?” I asked aloud.

Gradually, the wraiths steadied from their violent flight until they began to fly through the tower of smoke with purpose.

“That looks like a success. You had to turn the food to smoke?” Reinbach asked.

“Just burning it won’t do the trick. Think of it as a Dark spell of its own kind,” said Remily.

“How do you mean?” I asked. Did I really create Dark magic spell in the spur of the moment?

“For every spell, you need a firm grasp of its concept,” Remily said. “For example, I know a spell called Shadow Needle. It’s similar to Earth Needle, but no natural shadow will turn into a needle and pierce someone, will it?”

“No. That would be terrifying,” I said.

“Then how is it possible? Because a sorcerer concretely imagines the spell they want to cast and make it happen with magical energy. In order to make your imagination more vivid and real, you need a firm grasp on the concept of the spell.”

According to Remily, understanding the underlying logic of a spell made it more efficient and effective. By the same token, a sorcerer could cast any spell with the most basic concept in mind as long as they didn’t mind spending a lot more magical energy than they had to if they had a better understanding.

“Just now, your concept of mourning the Undead manifested—through Dark magical energy and the fire—a unique Dark spell that could actually feed the Undead. The only other ritualistic spells about the Undead that I’ve seen tried to turn dead bodies into Undead—or even tried to make the *spellcaster* Undead while maintaining their mind and tricking death. Most of the time it’s a foolish attempt that goes wrong. There are some cases where those were partially successful, though, so I’m not surprised yours went well. I mean, you always

tweak spells as you cast them, Ryoma. Why are you surprised now?" Remily was absolutely right, so I had no response. "Looks like they're hungry for more."

"Oh! Thank you," I said.

I'd only fed a slab of meat and a single potato to the fire, and now they were little more than charcoal. I added more food and Dark magical energy and prayers to the flames and sent more and more smoke skyward.

After continuing this process for some time, one of the now countless wraiths hovering above stopped right in front of me.

"Are you...?" I wondered if that was the first wraith I'd tried to claim, but I wouldn't get a chance to ask it.

The wraith's expression was still indistinguishable, but just for a moment, it looked peaceful. Just as I suspected that I'd imagined the emotion on the wraith's face, it vanished into the smoke.

May their next life be filled with happiness, I wished. Maybe I felt this way because I had died once myself. Watching the Undead fade away one by one, I wished for their peace beyond. At the same time, I hardened my resolve to take out any Undead that didn't vanish this way by force, and not feel guilty about it.



Special: Woes of the Gods and a New Goddess

“Hmm...”

“I’m stumped...”

“What should we do...?”

While Ryoma was praying for the Undead in the watchtower, the nine gods encircled a table, each of them making objects intermittently appear then disappear in their palms. Troubled expressions could be found all around the table; the conversation had plateaued. No one had suggested any tangible solution to their problem. After a long period of stagnation...

“Mm?”

“What, Gain? You got an idea?” Tekun asked.

“No, a message from Meltrize. She wants to talk. Asking where we are,” he answered.

“Oh, okay.” His hope dashed, Tekun’s eyes found the empty air.

The other gods looked disappointed by this, but engaged with the conversation nonetheless.

“A message from Meltrize? She woke up?” Lulutia asked.

“I thought she’d sleep in for another century,” Kufo said.

“She must be up...and it sounded urgent. Something might have happened. I let her know we’re gathered here. She’ll show up soon,” Gain said.

Kiriluel massaged his temples. “Fantastic. Another problem on her plate.”

“We don’t know that,” Wilieris pointed out.

All of the gods, including Serelipta, Girmp, and Tekun who did not comment on Meltrize’s arrival all shared the same thought: *Why now? My plate’s already full.*

After a few seconds of wishful waiting, a new goddess appeared at the round table. “Good morning... What’s all this?” she sleepily asked. The goddess looked like a little girl with doll-like features, down to her blonde hair and blue eyes. She would not have bothered coming to see Gain without good reason, but her expression lacked the weariness present on the other gods’. The gods hadn’t seen Meltrize in some time, and they were relieved to see that she seemed like herself. Even if some problem had arisen, it wasn’t catastrophic.

“Long time no see, Meltrize,” Gain greeted. “We have a little problem on our hands. If our situation didn’t improve in a little while, I was going to wake you anyway.”

“Good timing. Our talk wasn’t going anywhere, anyhow. Let’s take a breather from our problem and see what Meltrize has to say.”

“I second that, Grimp. I’m tired,” Serelipta whined.

The other gods showed their agreement, too. Each god’s drink of choice materialized on the round table, easing the tension in the room.

“So... What did you want to talk about, all of a sudden?” Gain asked Meltrize.

“Tell me about the Traveler,” Meltrize said. Her directness was not new, but the other gods seemed a little surprised by her interest in Ryoma.

“What’s up? You’re usually not interested in them, Meltrize,” Kufo remarked.

“Tell me,” she repeated.

“Well, we don't know where to start unless you tell us what’s going on...” said Kufo.

Meltrize angled her head. “The number of Undead in the outbreak were drastically reduced over the past few days. Because of the Traveler—the one who casts strange spells and tames strange slimes.”

Meltrize was the goddess of death and sleep. Her duties encompassed everything regarding death, including the management of souls that float to the divine realm after death. Meltrize could perform her regular duties while she slept.

Knowing this, the other gods understood that Meltrize had taken notice of the

increase in the number of soul fragments released from the Undead by Ryoma's hands, which had ended up in the divine realm.

"I got the gist, but why would Ryoma do that?" Kufo asked.

"There was an outbreak of Undead, wasn't there? He probably took on a quest," suggested Wilieris.

"Hey, did anyone see him...? No, of course not. We were all busy with our own stuff," grumbled Tekun.

"Look away for a few months and humans are always up to something new," Serelipta said, watching the events below like a human on Earth scrolling on their phone. "Oh, he's in the City of Lost Souls right now. That's why he's been hunting Undead. Now I get why it caught your attention, but that really made you rush over here? Normal humans hunt the Undead all the time."

Meltrize added matter-of-factly, "Vanishing Undead, clearing cursed energy, and just a little cleansing of the land all in one move. And the slimes he's using are weird."

"He went ahead and took care of some time-consuming stuff. Yeah, I'm curious too," Serelipta said.

Fernobelia spoke now for the first time since Meltrize's arrival. "Based on what he remembered of religious practices from his previous life, he constructed a ritualistic spell as a sort of requiem. The spell was a wide-ranging effect because he pooled together bits and pieces of several rituals from Earth. There are rough edges because he improvised. Creation of the spell was almost accidental. It's an almost haphazard spell, but it works. Any danger the spell poses is so miniscule it can be ignored." As the god of magic, Fernobelia's word was law when it came to spell casting.

"Then, there's no problem," Wilieris said with a smile.

Grimp mirrored it. "Lots more cursed energy lately, thanks to magic becoming more active... Not that Ryoma would know that, but I appreciate him lending us a hand anyway."

They both sipped their tea.

“More details on him,” Meltrize demanded.

“Ryoma’s a bit of a complicated subject,” Gain said. “I’ll send you the info.” He closed his eyes in brief concentration. Then, without a word, Meltrize knew everything Gain wanted her to.

Her brows ever so slightly pinched in distaste. “Understood. The current Traveler, Ryoma Takebayashi, is abnormal. I feel outrage at the treatment of souls perpetuated by the gods of Earth.”

“Hm. We share your sentiment about the gods of Earth. But there’s no need to be concerned about Ryoma. He carried some old scars over with him, but he’s a good kid.”

“And we’ve all been a little busy lately, but he comes to see us every now and again. You can talk to him then, or tell him anything you want to tell him,” said Kufo.

Meltrize’s expression went completely neutral once more. “I do not have a bad impression of him. More information is needed before I can judge his character, but I approve of his casting and cleansing.”

She had said that much without a hint of joviality, but the other gods knew after all the years they’d spent together that Meltrize was happy that she was given the information she had requested.

“Let’s return to our agenda, then. We would like your opinion on this, Meltrize,” said Gain.

“Allow me to explain and recap our situation,” Fernobelia cut in.

In short, their problem could be boiled down to the following: the problem was occurring at the Sea of Trees of Syrus, one of the sacred grounds maintained by Fernobelia; one monster was causing this problem; what had once been a normal monster had grown rapidly from the magical energy in the Sea of Trees; and, finally, the monsters had acquired a troublesome ability just the other day.

“This ability is one that binds the souls of the dead to the land,” Fernobelia added.

“Influencing souls is a taboo...even for us,” Meltrize said.

“Exactly. The monster is not terribly powerful yet, but it has the potential to acquire enough strength to do the same thing the gods of Earth are doing now. Even if we knew that it couldn’t, it’s too dangerous to be left alone.”

“The problem is simply the nature of the Sea of Trees of Syrus,” Serelipta said nonchalantly.

A nerve in Fernobelia’s cheek jumped, but he agreed and continued, “Normally, divine beasts are stationed on sacred grounds to guard the land and dispatch intruders. This wasn’t the case for the Sea of Trees of Syrus.”

Divine beasts guarded sacred grounds like well-trained gatekeepers, but they used a lot of magical energy just to sustain themselves. So Fernobelia had experimented with creating harshly competitive ecosystems that would naturally reject foreign monsters and humans.

Meltrize knew this, and tilted her head again as if she didn’t understand how this constituted a problem. “Easy. Remove it.”

“Sure, I could drop a lightning bolt and get rid of the thing,” said Kiriluel. “What we’re concerned with is the production of magical energy. While you were sleeping, the Sea of Trees of Syrus became one of the top producers of magical energy among sacred grounds.”

Despite this particular problem, the ecosystems Fernobelia designed could handle outside factors like foreign species and intrusive humans. In addition to achieving its primary goal of saving on magical energy consumption by not using a divine beast, the ecosystem allowed the sacred ground itself to expand, increasing its production of magical energy as well.

Kiriluel explained this to Meltrize, and she boiled it down to the essentials: “Magical energy miser,” she called him.

“That’s right. Whenever we interfere, we tend to destroy the local environment...” Wilieris said.

“Considering we’re barely maintaining the status quo even by striking a bargain with the gods of Earth, we’ve been hesitant to pull the trigger on this one,” Tekun said.

Now that they had uncovered the sinister rule of the gods of Eath, the gods of this world wanted nothing to do with them. But they were too desperate to leave their deal behind. Doing so would lead to them eventually fading away, along with the world—the one they watched over, which existed by feeding on magic and magical energy—along with everyone in it.

So they wanted to buy enough time to push back their next bargain and put distance between them and the Earth gods. If possible, they were striving to solve the root cause: the lack of magical energy. And right now, the Sea of Trees was one of the sacred grounds vital to that end.

“So we’ve been struggling to come up with a solution,” Gain finished.

“Understood. One question,” Meltrize said.

“What is it?” Gain urged.

“Does Ryoma Takebayashi know?”

“No. The last time we met, we were still investigating the matter. I’m sure he’ll call on us at least before he goes to the Sea of Trees. We’ll tell him then. Doesn’t seem right to tell him without seeing him face to face,” said Gain.

“Out of all places in the Sea of Trees, the monster decided to settle in the ruins of Korumi village, where Ryoma’s headed. He’s bound to run into it,” Kufo added.

“Why don’t we ask Ryoma to handle the monster?” Serelipta casually proposed, earning him ocular daggers from the other gods.

“I thought the same,” Meltrize said. “If we get involved, the results will be catastrophic. If Ryoma Takebayashi works alone, the effect on the sacred ground will be minimal either way. Serelipta’s suggestion may sound impulsive, but there is reason in it. Fighting this monster will require high combat capability and resistance to mental attacks. Otherwise, the battle will be over before it begins. Ryoma Takebayashi meets these conditions. We can wait to see how he fares.”

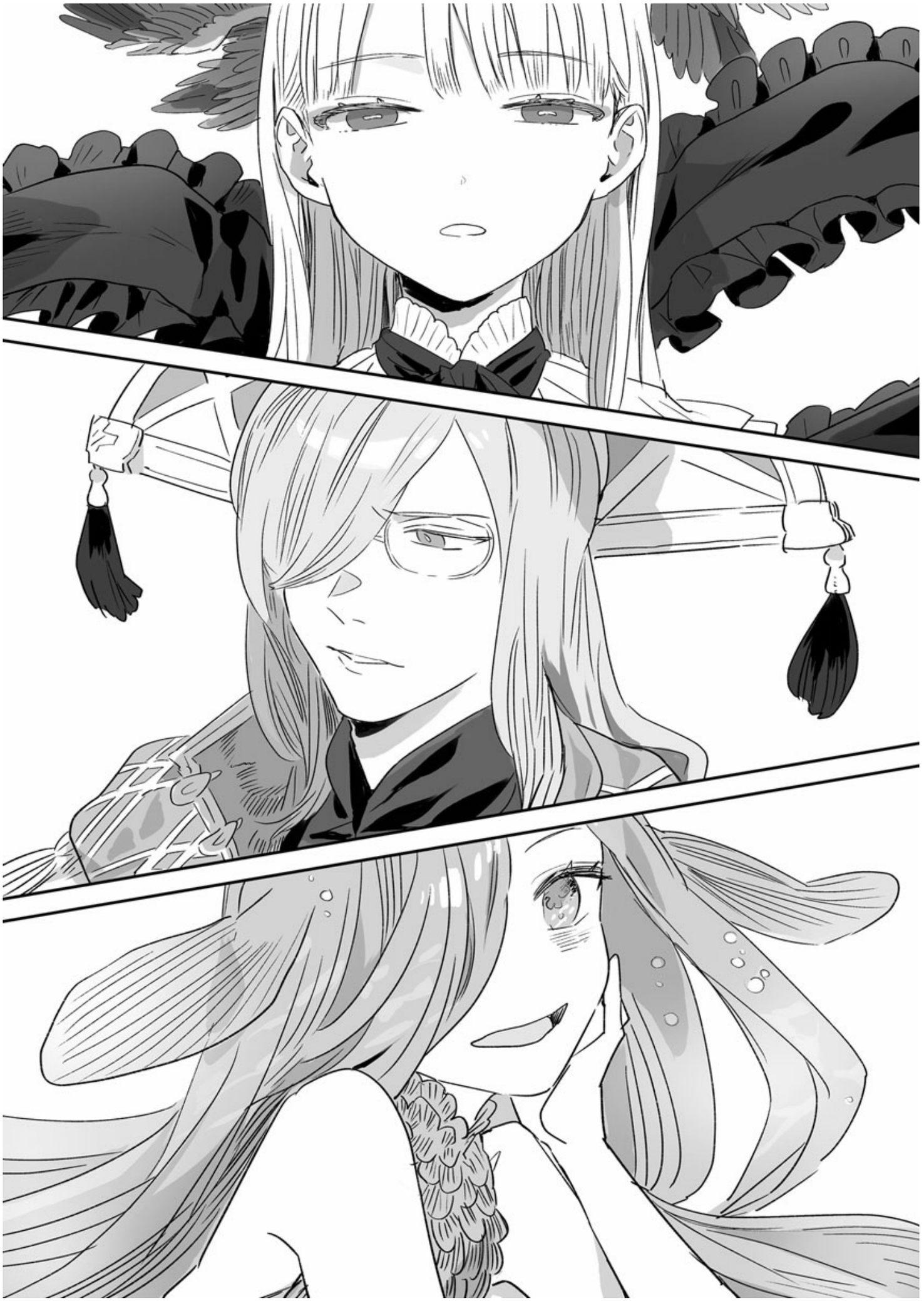
The gods fell silent. She had a point. Precisely because of their vast power, the gods could not interact with the world below without leaving huge footprints. No matter how they sliced it, many lives would be changed and many would be

lost if the gods were to get themselves involved. Hence their hesitation. It was also true that Ryoma could take on the monster with little effect on the world. Of course, it was a highly dangerous task that would need to rest entirely on the boy's shoulders.

"I object."

"I expected you to agree, Fernobelia," Meltrize remarked.

"If I told you that I don't care for Ryoma, I would be lying. He is one of the very few humans we have truly had a relationship with beyond one-sided oracles. But that isn't why I object. This is happening in a sacred ground which is under my care. It is our problem to deal with. Neither Ryoma nor any other human should be involved. Lifeforms in this world have already left our hands and have begun to live on their own."



“The conclusion we reached was not to sever our involvement entirely,” Meltrize countered. “If we speak directly to Ryoma Takebayashi, our effect on humanity will be minimal. Also, I question that we should treat him the same as any other human, mostly because he can travel between the divine and human realms. Ordinary humans, even Travelers, require the process of death and birth to make this journey. On the other hand, he has actually come and gone to the divine realm several times, albeit with an invitation-only policy. In my opinion, we should consider him a being that has one foot in the divine realm. Requesting that he defeat the monster is an option we can take.”

“Wait a minute, that’s a leap of logic,” said Kufo. “Sure, we were surprised by how Ryoma could come up here, and we’ve looked into it. That’s why I also know that, no matter how exceptional, he’s still human. There’s no arguing that.”

“What the harm in asking?”

“It’s not as easy as that, Serelipta. You know how people react to oracles. The vast majority of humans can never refuse what we ask of them,” Lulutia says.

“Well, in Ryoma’s case, he’d agree to it just because he’s going that way already... I don’t like this either,” Tekun said.

“I’m leaning towards asking him. Am I happy about it? No. But we can’t leave that monster unchecked, and Ryoma can deal with it without damaging the world. Besides, he’s used to facing danger,” Kiriluel said.

“Still...” Gain began.

The gods debated with increasing passion until their meeting became more like a shouting match. It seemed that it would take the ten divine beings a while longer before they reached a conclusion...

Afterword

Hello,

This is Roy, the author of *By the Grace of the Gods!* Thank you so much for picking up Volume 13!

Ryoma made it though the turbulent New Years, and now he's departed on a journey, finally setting his sights on the Sea of Trees. Having grinded his adventurer rank up, he's almost prepared to face the vast forest. He also met new people in new places and learned new things.

Ryoma has seen and heard a lot of things since leaving the forest he was once a hermit in, but apparently, Ryoma's world was still very small compared to everything he could see and learn.

A new environment can mean facing new challenges as well as finding new joys. You can count on Ryoma continuing to grow at his own pace, aided by the relationships he builds along the way.

Ryoma still has a lot to discover in this world. I hope you will keep an eye on his journey.