By the Grace of the Gods

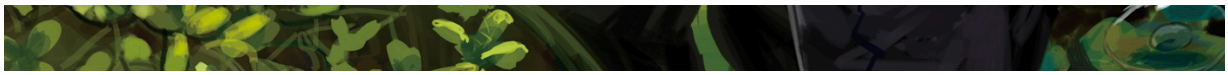


Roy

Illust. Ririnra

16


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Roy
Illust. Ririnra
16




“This is a divine relic of my creation, with the same function as any chapel in the mortal realm.”
“Just give him an item for contacting us instead of a book. Like the one they had on Earth.”
Meltrize muttered as if she was searching her memory. With a flick of her hand, a pager materialized, looking a little too big in her child-sized hand.
神まってます




We were traveling on slimeback (if I could call it that) from the foothills to the testing grounds. A huge bush slime carrying all five adventurers led the way. Just like it did in the Sea of Trees, it plowed through dense trees and foliage, carving a path up the mountain wide enough for two people to walk side by side.
“Gods waiting!”


“Are you all right? What happened?”
“Master Takebayashi?!”
“Shame on me!”



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Chapter 10, Episode 1: Return from the Sea of Trees

Glen and I left the village and hiked for a while before we came to the lake that had been one of my landmarks on the way in. I'd been in a hurry then, but now I had the chance to appreciate the beauty of this lake, its crystal water rippling from the breeze and shimmering with the reflection of sunlight. Thanks to that breeze, the air tasted fresh. All around the lake, the banks were coated with fresh moss disturbed only by the small monsters that drank from its lapping ledge. Despite the innate danger this far into the woods, there was a serenity about the place, somehow. Maybe this was how the lake always looked when Undead monsters weren't around.

"Now we're close enough," I said. From here, I could clearly sense the location and condition of the stone slime I'd buried in the ground. I could use Space magic to quickly travel to another stone slime, while making sure that there wouldn't be any monsters waiting for me on the other end, all by communicating with slimes.

"Why didn't you bury those slimes all the way from here to the village?" Glen asked.

"That would have been convenient," I admitted. "But there were too many Undead around at the time."

"Yeah...I guess you really didn't have a chance to," Glen said.

"Next time, I'd like to complete the line to the village. So, are you ready?"

"Yep. If any monsters come knocking, I'll take care of them."

"Thank you," I said. "Here we go. Warp." Controlling my magical energy to envelop Glen as well as myself, I cast the spell. In the blink of an eye, the lake was replaced by a dense forest. The slime that I'd been sensing in the distance was now directly under my feet. "It certainly worked. Let's keep going."

With a series of bursts of Space magic, we flew through each slime marker I'd placed like a train passing from station to station.

"Oh, there's a raptor pack passing through our next marker," I said. "Let's wait here for a minute."

"I knew we'd be going fast, but it's pretty insane actually experiencing it. This is where the treants showed up." Glen jerked his chin to the pair of treant carcasses we hadn't been able to collect after we had defeated them. If my memory served me right, it had taken us a whole day to walk from this point to the village. With Space magic, we'd retraced that journey in only an hour. "Love the speed, but how's your magical energy holding up?"

"Within the expected range. The rapid-fire casting does spend a lot, but I have plenty to work with. There'll be times like this where I don't make the next jump right away, and I can always summon a huge rock slime and rest if I need to. In case we don't have time to rest, I also have a store of magic recovery potions." Considering how quickly we had made it this far, spending the magical energy was definitely worth it. Even accounting for some pauses along the way, we would probably be able to leave the Sea of Trees before the end of the day. "And while we've been talking, the raptor pack left the vicinity of our next marker."

"That wasn't much of a break. Is there anything you and your slimes can't do?" Glen said, half approving and half exasperated.

We teleported to our next spot—just shy of the swamp where I reencountered Glen. "I couldn't bury any slimes in the swamp, so we need to cross it the old-fashioned way." The slimes would have been fine underwater, but it would have been too difficult for me to collect them. We wouldn't lose our way, though, thanks to another slime buried in solid ground on the opposite shore of the swamp. Besides, with my boat and slime magic, crossing the swamp would be a breeze, just as it had been on the way in.

Then, I realized a potential flaw in my plan. "Will this hold you?" I asked Glen, pointing at my trusty boat. I'd ridden it with Hudom in Gimul, so the boat could fit me and one adult...one average-sized adult, at least. But Glen's stature far exceeded the average.

"If I put my hammer away..." Glen said, doing just that and

putting one foot in the boat before squeezing on board. We'd be cutting it close both in size and weight.

"You made it on, but we won't be going too fast," I noted.

"And I can't fight if any monsters show up. I can barely move."

"Even if you could move, you might capsize us... How did you cross this swamp in the first place, when you found me on this side after we first met in that base?" I asked, half expecting him to say that he had run straight through the muck.

He thought about this for a minute. "Don't know. I was running around whichever way I felt like going until I ran into you. Probably went around the swamp somehow—didn't make sense to slog through it when I didn't have to."

"Then let's follow the shore, just in case," I suggested. "We won't lose our way, so I'd rather be safe than cutting straight through."

Glen agreed, so we set out on our way. With the help of the mud slime, I started the boat. As expected, it didn't go as fast as before, but this was easier and quicker than walking through the mud, even at the pace of a leisurely gondola.

Gallow moss alligators must have preferred the deep ends of the swamp, because we were attacked a lot less frequently than I was on the way over. And we were able to dodge even those attacks, thanks to Glen and the slimes detecting the gators before they could get close. Going slowly wasn't a problem for us.

Suddenly, Glen shouted, "Ryoma! Turn!"

Immediately, I pointed the boat towards the center of the swamp and away from the shore, on which a herd of monsters lounged in the distance. "Oh, shotgun hippopotami..." I noted. According to my research, they boasted high defense—albeit not as much as cannonball rhinos—and were highly aggressive. Like their namesake, they were able to fire attacks from a distance. They preferred to hunt prey with hard exoskeletons like the rock fish and spiky snails that lived in the swamp. Undigested fragments of their shell or scales became the hippo's buckshot.

"Those guys scatter their crap everywhere—it's a drag trying to dodge it all. If you don't want to get showered with scat, it's best to stay clear," Glen said.

As silly as it sounded, the shotgun hippos attacked with their feces. That might have sounded ridiculous on paper, but the sharp shards of scales and shells were dangerous enough, not to mention the risk of infection they posed. Luckily, we were able to avoid that herd. That was one monster I didn't want to face off against for so many reasons.

But since we could see them, they could see us. One of the hippos let out a pained toot.

"It...misfired? Do you think it was trying to scare us off?" I asked.

"Probably. The other ones are agitated too," Glen said. There was no harm done since we were way out of range already. "No reason to get close or hunt them. Let's just blow past."

"Agreed. Let's take the direct route, even though we'll cross the deeper parts."

Dodging monsters lurking in the swamp as well as on the shore, I kept the boat going. On the current of the mud slime, we sailed through an area that smelled of trees and mud and water until we eventually reached the opposite shore of the swamp. From here, we'd travel by Space magic again.

We carried on, taking a few breaks and opting not to stop by the bases along the way. We made it back to where we could see the base at the edge of the woods by the time dusk began to fall.

"Whoa. We really made it here in a day," Glen said. "Since the sun's coming down, you wanna stop here for the night?"

"Yes, let's." We could still make it out of the Sea of Trees if we hurried, but we'd have to find lodging at the nearest town or camp out like we'd been doing anyway. Either option wasn't too different than spending the night at the base here, and getting to rest early was definitely a plus. Once we made that call, I encased myself in Light magical energy...and we were ready to go.

We approached the base by foot and a familiar guard opened the door to the base like he knew we were coming. "Welcome back," he greeted us.

"Ashton!" I said.

"I didn't know you'd be coming tonight, so I didn't plan my shift around it or anything, but I've been looking forward to seeing you

again... We can talk more after you come inside." He glanced at Glen but didn't say anything further as he let us both in.

As soon as we made it inside, people at the nearby tavern erupted.

"Hey, look!"

"That kid really came back!"

"Yes! Yes! Yes!"

"No way! Dammit, I lost!"

"Damn! Oh?!"

Their cheers turned into bizarre shrieking before quickly quieting as they noticed Glen.

"Why is that kid with Glen?"

"How should I know? The kid was probably trapped somewhere in the woods and Glen saved him, or something like that."

"No shot. Glen never gives you a second glance unless you can fight."

"Maybe he'd save the kid's life if he came across the scene, but he'd never play bodyguard and escort him back here. The kid isn't acting like Glen's protecting him either."

"Give it up. The results aren't gonna change."

"Noooo!"

Everyone who spoke out was either ecstatic or devastated, all of them sneaking glances at me. Come to think of it, I'd heard some whispers of bets being made on me. "Ashton, did they...?"

"Yeah. They bet on whether or not you'd make it back—and if you came back, whether you'd be hurt or not."

"Which option had more votes?" I asked.

"Odds were eight to two on you not making it back. Half of adult newcomers disappear, so betting on your survival was definitely a long shot. Twenty percent voting on your return is pretty unusual," Ashton said. After experiencing the depths of the Sea of Trees, I understood full well how an ordinary child couldn't have survived what I had.

"Well, we're hoping to stay the night," I said.

"Yeah, just let Sutem know. He'll be at the same tavern as before. Show your face and grab some food, he'll get a room ready by the

time you're done," Ashton said. "My shift's almost over. I'll buy you a drink or two—call it your cut of my profit."

I was just about to ask if he was sure, but it sounded like he was part of the twenty percent. "Then I'll gladly accept."

I called Glen over and we crossed to the tavern on the other side of the base, drawing every pair of eyes along the way.

"Thought I heard some excitement," Sutem said by way of greeting. "You're back."

"Safe and sound. And we were hoping to book two rooms for tonight—" I started.

"And some food and booze. I'll be over there," Glen said, sauntering off to an empty table without waiting for a response.

I turned to him. "Glen—"

"No sweat. I don't know why you're traveling together, but that's normal for him," Sutem said.

Come to think of it, Glen hadn't been very talkative since we came into the base. I remembered him telling me about the kind of people who flocked to his fame and strength, so maybe he was trying not to interact with other adventurers more than necessary.

"Looks like you made it to Korumi," Sutem added.

"You can tell?" I asked.

"There isn't a shred of regret on your face. Congrats on a successful first exploration of the Sea of Trees. I'll get you some decent meat and drink. Take a seat with him." Even though Sutem's congratulations were blunt, it was nice to receive them nonetheless.

While I was walking to join Glen, I saw Ashton jogging down the same path we'd taken across the base. I waved him over to join us.

"Sorry for the wait!" Ashton said.

"We haven't waited at all... You're much earlier than I expected. I hope I didn't make you rush out on your shift," I said.

"No, no. My replacement came right as you left. Some guys on my shift started bugging me to buy *them* drinks, so I had to get them off my tail first." Ashton glanced at Glen. "I probably should have asked this sooner, but you're sure you want me to join you?"

"You don't mind, do you?" I asked Glen, already expecting the answer.

"It's not gonna bother me if we're just drinking. Just don't start talking nonsense," Glen said.

"Oh yeah? Then I'll join you." Ashton confidently took the seat across from Glen, and I sat beside him.

Sutem came over. "You're here too, Ashton? Give me your order already."

"Start me off with whatever they're having. Money isn't an object today," Ashton said. "So, how was it?" he asked, once Sutem brought over our mugs and plates.

Since he asked for it, I began retelling the events of my journey since I left this base, from my trek through the Sea of Trees and the bases along the way, to how I met up with Glen past the swamp, and the current state of Korumi...

Throughout the story, Ashton gave me expressive reactions and asked questions just at the right time to make me want to give more details. He was an amazing listener.

When I was done, Ashton blew out a breath. "You guys are...something else."

"What makes you say that?" I asked. "The things that happened past the Edge?"

"That, too, I guess, but I'm still on the food you ate on the way. With Space magic you can set up crazy camps. I get that. But you guys were cooking and eating hot meals and *drinking?!* If anyone else did that, it'd be suicide," Ashton said.

"I had nothing to do with his crazy food. Ryoma's the only crazy one," Glen said like he was offended...after all the food he had eaten! "The food was crazy good, but it wasn't normal."

"I can't argue with that," I relented.

"That's the best food I've had on any job, let alone in the Sea of Trees. Your slime camp is basically the same as a room at the inn. And you're fun to fight with. I wouldn't mind teaming up with you." He said those words casually, but it still silenced everyone else in the room.

After a tense silence, where everyone obviously hung on my next words, I simply said, "No, thank you."

"All right," Glen said.

Most faces in the tavern were twisted in surprise. Ashton practically climbed onto the table as he turned to me and squeezed out, "Are you serious, dude?! An S-rank adventurer just offered to team up with you?!" Judging by the other faces around us—some actually nodding in agreement—he had spoken for the whole tavern.

"Of course, I have no doubt of Glen's abilities or accomplishments. I just want to choose which adventures I go on," I said.

"Yeah. I'm always gonna do what I want when I want," Glen said. This time around, I had been the one making calls because he had tagged along with me of his own volition. If we were to properly team up, I had a suspicion that he'd run the show most of the time—impulsively, by his own admission. Not that I was much better when it came to letting my feelings guide me.

"Most adventurers would have jumped at an opportunity like that... But it's your decision, even if I don't understand why you wouldn't team up. You're both pretty cut-and-dried about this, huh?" Ashton said.

"We both want to do what we want. If what we each want to do ever aligns again, we can work together for as long as it does. Like I followed you this time around," Glen said.

"Yes, if the opportunity arises," I agreed. I wondered what I'd gotten myself into when I first met him, but these past few days had been pretty fun. I meant what I said—I wouldn't mind us working together when our plans and moods aligned.

Our conversation was over, but not without leaving an impact on the eavesdroppers in the tavern. Their gazes started to burn, and I could hear their whispers more clearly. Perhaps living in this harsh environment made them put a lot of stock in the words of someone with proven strength—like an S-rank adventurer.

A few moments later, Glen clicked his tongue quietly but clearly. "Hey, old man!" he bellowed.

"I'm not deaf, you know. What?" Sutem answered.

Glen was approaching him, sticking his hand into his pack...and dragged out the carcass of the immortal snake. "Put everyone here on my tab. If this doesn't cover it, I got more." Then, he hoisted the

massive serpent with one arm and shouted, “All that whispering is getting on my nerves! If you’re gonna talk, make it a party!”

A beat of silence, then the tavern patrons roared out cheers. It wasn’t that I had expected Glen to snap and start throwing punches, but I definitely hadn’t expected this.



"Does it cover it?" Glen asked Sutem.

"It's been years since I've seen an immortal snake brought in, especially in such clean condition. The hide of this one alone will more than cover it."

"In that case, feed them the meat," Glen said.

"You got it. Hey! I don't care who, help me carry this thing!" Sutem bellowed above the rising cheers of the tavern. The immortal snake was carried off to be cleaned, cooked, and served.

"Don't you owe people money?" I asked Glen.

"It's better than letting that crap sour my drink. I probably made more than usual on this trek. If it's still not enough, I'll go back out and make some more," Glen explained.

It was no skin off my back, since the immortal snake was part of Glen's cut, as we'd already arranged. This explained how the S-rank adventurer had racked up his debts. Still, I kind of liked that about him.

Even if the odds were against me four to one, some of them had bet on my survival, and I could take that as their way of encouragement in the Sea of Trees. Sutem and Ashton were openly celebrating my return, so it felt right that I return the favor somehow.

After asking Sutem for his input, I decided to provide the extra fresh vegetables I had. As I unloaded them from my Dimension Home, the excitement of the adventurers only grew, turning up the voltage of our impromptu party.

Even though I hadn't been around long to earn the adventurers' respects the traditional way, Glen's approval and my offering of vegetables—that happened to be proof of my ample food supply—served to prove my abilities to them.

A few hours later, I was standing in the middle of a howling crowd.

"Hey! Wake up, Glen! Wake up!"

"Open your eyes! Please!"

"Not going to happen. He's out cold."

"Then the kid—I mean, Ryoma—wins!"

Glen, drunk and passed out, sprawled before me, amid a few

other adventurers who'd gone down earlier. Ashton had been carried out a while ago, having passed out early.

With a little bit of a buzz, I tried to remember how I ended up here. Once the party began, a drinking contest had started before I knew what was happening. Maybe I should have expected that from a party full of ruffians and adventurers. Glen was paying and I was the main subject, so the attention of the adventurers zeroed in on us, and we ended up in the center of the contest.

"Hey, are you sure he's not a dwarf?" a person in the crowd began fearfully.

"He's not. I just asked him. His grandfather was a dwarf, but they weren't related by blood."

"There's no way. Look at this mess."

Thanks to the blessing of the god of drinks, I was the last one standing. Given how many people had drunk themselves unconscious, the party would soon be over. While I still could, I bolstered myself with physical energy and slung Glen over my shoulder. There was no way to avoid dragging his feet on the ground, but Glen stayed asleep—I'd just have to chuck him into his room. "Sutem, I'm sorry to leave a mess here, but if we could get our rooms..."

"They're ready. Don't worry about the tavern, I'll take care of it. Are you not even drunk after all that?" Sutem asked.

"I am, but not enough to affect my motor function or speech. I do have a blessing from the god of drinks, so the people who bet against me didn't stand a chance."

"That's their problem. Besides, no one around here is going to quit just because they lost a bet or two."

"Is gambling really that rampant here?" I asked.

"Adventuring in the Sea of Trees is like putting your life on the line every day in hopes you strike it big. You'd be hard-pressed to find anyone who isn't a gambler," Sutem said as I followed him to our assigned rooms. Chucking Glen into one of them, I went to sleep in the other.

***

The next morning, Glen grumbled, “Dammit. I never thought I’d lose in a drinking contest.”

“We were down to a one-on-one in the end, so I know you can hold your liquor,” I said.

“Hey... I tapped out at the beginning—ow. How are both of you so unaffected?” Ashton asked.

I’d woken up normally without being hungover. Glen didn’t seem hungover either. While we enjoyed a big pile of breakfast, Ashton brought over a bowl of soup that looked soothing to the stomach.

“No idea,” Glen said. “But even after I black out, I’m never hungover.”

“I have a god’s blessing... Do you think your internal organs are automatically strengthened like the rest of your body?” I asked. I’d noticed last night that Glen *did* get drunk—just much less than anyone else. On second thought, perhaps his heightened metabolism helped break down alcohol quickly.

We kept discussing the party until all of our plates were clean. When I rose, Ashton—still looking groggy—asked, “You’re off? Not that you’ll need it, but...be careful out there.”

“I’ll come back again soon. Take care,” I said, knowing that we’d see a lot of each other in the future—there was no point in drawing out this goodbye. With a quick word of farewell, we left Ashton nursing his soup, Glen and I left the tavern and the base itself.

Then, I used Space magic to get us to the edge of the Sea of Trees, and we walked the final few meters. In a reverse of what happened on the way in, I felt the air cool and dry all around me. “Now we’re out of the Sea of Trees,” I said. “What now? I’m going to the nearest city if you want to tag along.”

“Nah, I gotta sell off some stuff to turn it into cash. I’m going to the capital,” Glen said, pointing in a direction that had no road or town as far as the eye could see... Was he going to literally run the whole way to the capital?

“See you around,” I said.

“Yeah. Let’s tussle when we meet again!”

That, I might have to decline. Still, Glen would make for a great partner to practice on.

Glen sprinted off, then suddenly stopped and turned on his heel. "I almost forgot! Ryoma! When I get the cash I'm going to come buy your instant food, so have some ready for me! Just name-drop me to your noble friend! Thanks!" he bellowed. Then he was off again without waiting for an answer. By the time I even thought about responding, he was a speck in the distance.

"There was never a dull moment with him..." I muttered. "I don't think he's a bad person, though." Since I wanted to replenish the stock of meals I'd used on my journey, I decided to ask the goblins to amp up production of them. Glen hadn't mentioned specific dishes or numbers, but he ate a lot, so he'd be happy with a decent amount of each variety. All in all, he was a great client to have, since he could usually afford to pay.

I'd still have to ask Reinhart about selling the instant food to Glen. "Wait. Did I mention the Jamils to Glen?" I wondered.

When we first met, I'd kept my guard up and never mentioned the duke's name...or the specific city I lived in.

I had realized that too late, though. Glen was already long gone beyond the horizon.

Chapter 10, Episode 2: Status Report

After such a rushed departure, I realized that I hadn't given Glen a way to contact me. Still, I wouldn't be too surprised if he showed up one day and said that he found me by following his gut feelings.

So I decided not to worry about it anymore, and came to the church at the town nearest the Sea of Trees. I gave a donation like I normally did and offered a prayer in the chapel.

"How's it going?" Kufo greeted me in the divine realm.

"Hello... Oh?" I realized there were only five gods today: Kufo, Gain, Lulutia, Fernobelia, and Meltrize.

"Everyone else is off working," Lulutia supplied. "Like checking for other demon lord fragments, and other boring stuff we have to do to maintain the world."

"Today, we want to talk about your reward and to treat your curse because it's been a while since we last saw you," Kufo said. "But take a seat. You've just come out of the Sea of Trees."

It was hard to grasp the enormous scale of it, but I was sure the day-to-day work of managing the entire world was quite arduous...even if the usual coffee table and set of tea that materialized before me conveyed anything but urgency.

"Thanks. I made it out okay, as you can see. I thought I'd report to you about your request," I said.

"No need for that," Gain chimed in. "We were watching you closely until you made it out of the thick of it. In short, you completed our request without a hitch. Isn't that right, Meltrize?"

"The souls of the dead were released. If that monster—Korumi—won't use that power again, you don't need to kill him."

"Good!" I said. That's what I'd thought the gods would say, but it was a relief to hear it from their lips.

"Don't worry. He is another life that we the gods look after. Even though I am the goddess of death and sleep, my job is not to bring death to the living. It is to watch over the dying, protect them during their peaceful sleep after death, and prepare them for their next life. Death need not come when it is not needed. We needn't worry unless he decides to use his power to bind souls again. If that happens, I will send you to end him."

"Understood. I'll make sure it won't come to that," I said.

Meltrize nodded, her blank expression tinted with almost imperceptible approval. "He can use any other powers as he pleases."

"Even Necromancy? I feel like magic that deals with the Undead interferes with their souls somehow," I said.

"It is generally forbidden, but not entirely," Meltrize said.

That sounded like a riddle to me, so I turned to the others.

Fernobelia explained, "To oversimplify in the interest of time, a soul is composed of more than one part. Depending on how you conceptualize what a soul is, there are different ways to divide it into its components. For now, imagine that a soul has two parts: the outer layer and its core. We only forbid interfering with the core of a soul. The kind of magic known as Necromancy only interferes with the outer layer, which is permissible—that is what Meltrize means."

That explanation made sense, except I wondered how well-defined that line between the outer layer and the core of a soul was. Korumi hadn't realized he was using his power to bind souls...

"That monster is a rare exception," Fernobelia added. "Interfering with a soul's core is no easy feat. That's why Necromancers often attempt it, considering it some ultimate achievement of their craft. For the most part, it's impossible to interfere with the core unintentionally."

"The most common form of Necromancy is to turn a corpse into an Undead monster," Lulutia said. "When a creature dies, most of their soul—especially the precious core—immediately returns here. Humans may find it disturbing or violating to have their corpse reanimated, but we see it as permissible because it has nothing to do with the soul's core."

“Souls are delicate by nature. It has an outer layer to protect the core that mustn’t be damaged. When the outer layer is damaged, it can heal to a certain degree and even make the soul stronger, like muscles being trained,” Kufo added.

The comparison of soul to muscle made sense, but it also seemed very similar to slimes.

“Then you have a good enough grasp,” Gain said. “Just to be clear, we don’t condone treating the living inhumanely in the name of researching Necromancy.” Even though he’d said it as a casual warning, something about his tone caught my attention. Maybe because it pertained to the human soul, but I felt like they were telling me *not* to try that kind of magic, despite them saying they had no problem with surface-level Necromancy.

“Are you sure you don’t have a problem with Necromancy?” I asked.

“Sometimes you read us like a book, Ryoma... It’s true that Necromancy itself isn’t the problem. We were just thinking about a Traveler who abused it in the past,” Kufo said.

“Which isn’t your fault, so you don’t need to limit yourself for our sake,” Meltrize said.

“Now you’re only making him curious,” Lulutia said.

“There’s not enough time to go into that—we need to treat his curse,” Gain countered.

“It could be a useful cautionary tale, but we’ll have to save it for another day. Right now, Ryoma is due his reward. Here.” Fernobelia handed me something as if to try and clear the awkward air—a leatherbound book with gold lettering that exuded craftsmanship, care, and a long history all at once. Its cover read “Book of Creation.” It reminded me of Tekun’s gift to me. Was this another divine relic?

“Precisely. This is a divine relic of my creation, with the same function as any chapel in the mortal realm,” Fernobelia said.

“So if I pray to the book, I can come here from anywhere?” I asked.

“Yes. As treatment of your curse progresses, it will be more difficult for you to go into crowded places—like churches. With this,

you can come to the divine realm for your treatments without having to risk going into a crowd," said Fernobelia.

"That would be great!" It really would. I hadn't been worried about exposing myself to crowds yet, and now I would never have to dodge them and sneak into chapels to have my curse treated.

"On top of removing your cursed energy, you still plan to work with us, don't you, Ryoma?" Gain asked. "Then it's also in our best interest to make it quicker and easier for us to speak."

"Then just give him an item for contacting us instead of a book. Like the one they had on Earth. A small, rectangular board." Meltrize muttered as if searching her memory. With a flick of her hand, a pager materialized, looking a little too big in her child-sized hand.

"That's a blast from the past," I said.

Meltrize looked at me. "It's old?"

"Pretty old, by human standards. Even by the time I died, a device that evolved from this—called a smartphone—was mainstream. Kids today probably don't know what that is," I said.

"Meltrize doesn't show much interest in Earth, and she sleeps for long periods at a time. I think her intel is outdated," Kufo said.

"It takes a lot for her to wake up," Lulutia said.

"Everyone uses these nowadays," Gain said, materializing a smartphone even I wasn't familiar with. It had to be a newer model that came out after my death. Why did Gain casually have a smartphone anyway? What's more, his thumbs flew over the screen as fast as a teenager's as he demonstrated the device to Meltrize.

"He doesn't just know what it looks like... He really knows how to use it," I commented.

"He crosses over pretty frequently, so he must have picked it up while he was there. Back to the divine relic, I shaped it like a book as a disguise. The Book of Creation is the sacred text of Creationism. If anyone sees you with it, they would only think you a practicing believer. Humans—those with power, particularly—have a tendency to want anything that is rare. Something that looks like technology from Earth like a beeper or smartphone would draw too much attention. That's why the binding doesn't look too expensive either," Fernobelia explained.

"Thank you for being so thoughtful," I said. Drawing attention to myself was daunting enough when I wasn't carrying around a divine relic.

"Something to keep in mind—this book is not an unlimited hotline to us. In order to use the same feature as the church, it expends fifty thousand units of magical energy. The book itself has the capability to store magical energy, so whenever you have excess magic, you should store it. You can take out and use the magical energy for any purpose—not just to speak to us. The book can never be marred or damaged either," Fernobelia added.

So it was a portable church and magic crystal—a magical energy power bank—all in one! "Thank you... You've thought of everything."

"Your reward needs to match your work," Fernobelia said again. "Considering how this whole thing was my responsibility to begin with, I tried to reflect that in the features I added to the relic. And...let's see. You did collect your grandparents' inheritance, didn't you?"

"Yes. That's all I've done with it so far."

"I recommend going through what your grandmother left you—especially her books. At least keep all the titles in mind. They should contain some knowledge that will aid you in the future. The Sage—Meria—had remarkable knowledge."

"Got it," I said. If it came at the recommendation of Fernobelia—the god of magic and academics—the information I'd find could be priceless. I'd go through the books sooner rather than later.

"Done talking?" Meltrize asked, returning from Gain's crash course on how to use a smartphone.

"Yes. Fernobelia gave me a wonderful reward," I said.

"Good. Then we'll start treating the curse."

"Sorry you haven't gotten a chance to relax since making it out of the Sea of Trees, but we want to take care of it while you still have plenty of time up here," Kufo said.

"No problem. I'll use this book to come talk to you all soon," I said. The gods might have thought that I was cursed because of their slipup in the past, but I considered it an accident if anything. I was just grateful that they were treating it for me. I told Kufo as

much and laid down on the table they set out—the gods handled the rest. Soon, my mind faded away, and I felt my body grow lighter and lighter... *Is this what a general anesthetic feels like?*

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I woke up suddenly with the sensation of falling.

"Oh, you're up," Kufo said.

"How do you feel?" Lulutia asked.

It took me a moment to remember where I was. "Mm... Fine. My head's a little foggy. I feel like I overslept."

"It was a long journey in and out of the Sea of Trees," Kufo said. "Even with all of your conveniences, you must have been exhausted. You were asleep for a while, so it's almost time to go."

"Got it... Thanks for the treatment. I'll use the book that Fernobelia gave me to come back in a week," I said.

"No need to make an appointment," Gain said. "We are available most of the time. Why don't you go see the people who are waiting for you? Come back once you've settled down."

Meltrize took a step forwards. "One last piece of advice. You should study magic—hexes, specifically."

"What?"

"You were trying to build a base in the Sea of Trees to grant Korumi's wish. That is one way to go about it, but there are other means. With magic, you can make it so Korumi can interact with people in cities outside of the forest," Meltrize explained.

It took me a heartbeat for the facts she gave me out of the blue to sink in. "Really?!" That was important information too.

"You already have all the knowledge you need," Fernobelia answered. "If you craft a spell that meets your goal, you can have him interact with humans. His powers would weaken, but that, too, is up to you and your spellcrafting."

Just then, my surroundings began to shimmer. "Perfect timing," I grumbled.

"It is. Think it over," Fernobelia said, like a teacher assigning homework.

“If you can grant Korumi’s wish in any capacity, the less likely it is that he will meddle with the souls of the dead again,” Meltrize added in her businesslike manner.

“Fernobelia, Meltrize...” Kufo chastised lightly.

“They’re both saying it for your sake, believe it or not,” Lulutia said.

“Take your time and have patience,” Gain added.

My body was soon wrapped in light...leaving me with only the voices of the gods and the thought of one more thing to study.

Chapter 10, Episode 3: Check-In

After I unexpectedly received a divine relic and valuable information from my visit to the divine realm, I spent a few days returning all the way back to my place in the Forest of Gana. Since I'd prearranged to send the Jamils a message when I reached here, I dispatched a limour bird as soon as I arrived. The Jamils had said that they would make time once they received my letter, so they'd be visiting me soon.

"I could run some experiments while I'm at it." The next day, I prepared for some impromptu research while I waited for their arrival.

Pretty soon, the weed slimes I placed outside sent me a signal. Despite the short notice, they'd already made time to come see me.

"You are here, aren't you, Ryoma?" Elise called from the entrance.

"The sign outside said 'Experiment in progress—please come in.' I'm sure he wants us in here, but what is he up to so soon after his return?" Reinhart asked.

"Welcome, everyone," I greeted them.

"Ryoma! Great to see...you?" Reinhart said questioningly.

"Welcome home! Oh?" Elise tilted her head too.

As soon as they entered the room, they seemed to sense something was off. I thought they would only see me sitting normally in a chair next to the table...maybe those who knew me well could see through my trick? Reinbach, Sebas, four guards, and Eleonora followed after.

"Excuse me for staying seated. It's part of the experiment," I said.

"I don't mind, but what are you up to?" Reinhart asked.

"It doesn't look like you're experimenting on anything," Elise said, "and your face seems...stiff?"

"Your voice too. It's slightly, very slightly, off," Sebas noted.

“Oh, you can tell. Let me explain—” I said, about to pull back the curtains.

“Hey, don’t tell me you got hurt in the Sea of Trees!” Hughes rushed up and reached to put a hand on my shoulder.

I realized what he was doing too late. The body on the chair slumped over and slid out.

“Watch out!” Hughes caught the body before it hit the ground, but its limbs were slacked. The others rushed over out of concern.

“I’m okay—?!” I tried to say.

“His neck is all twisted!” Reinhart shouted.

“Ryoma!” everyone shouted.

My trying to convey that I was okay made everything worse. Hughes was holding a body with a twisted neck that was twitching weirdly, preventing me from explaining anything. As soon as I realized that, I ran into the room from a hall leading out of it, coming face-to-face with my guests who were holding a collapsed and immobile me...well, the mimic slime disguised as me.

“It’s okay! I’m not hurt!” I said.

“Hmm?! What’s going on?!” Reinbach asked.

“Another Ryoma...?” Jill joined, followed by the others, who all regained their composure even as they seemed confused by the situation.

I finally gave them the full story. I explained that they first saw a mimic slime I tamed in the Sea of Trees that had the ability to shape-shift with nearly perfect fidelity...after I had the slime shift back to its original form.

"So I was sharing my senses with the slime that was mimicking my likeness, using its eyes, ears, and mouth to speak with you. I'd already figured out that I could share senses with it, so I thought if I could have a conversation from a distance through the mimic slime without you realizing, I could still meet with people without being affected by the curse. I'm so sorry I scared you," I said to the group.

"I thought I was going to have a heart attack... But that was impressive. By looks alone, I would never have guessed," Elise said.

"Obviously you didn't mean it as a prank. It's a good use of your new slime's powers, I think, especially to mitigate the effect of your curse," Reinhart said.

"Now it finally feels like Ryoma is home," Hughes said.

I didn't know what he meant by that, but the rest of them seemed to agree. Sure, I'd done things off the cuff before, but I didn't think I'd ever surprised them with anything horrific before...

"I'm sure everyone wants to celebrate his safety and ask about his journey, but do you think we could talk in private first?" Reinhart asked.

Though I didn't know why, I showed him, Elise, Reinbach, and Sebas to the next room. Just like when we'd met before I went into the Sea of Trees, we set up a magical item to soundproof our conversation.

"Let me ask you right away. Did you do what you went there for?" Reinhart asked, almost at a whisper.

"Yes. I was able to make it to Korumi and recover my grandparents' inheritance," I said, guessing that Reinhart was being so careful to keep the identity of my grandparents a secret. "Research notes, weapons, crafting materials, and tools make up most of the inheritance, along with a few keepsakes and diaries."

"What do you intend to do with them?" the duke asked.

"They're all valuable, I'm sure, but I have no plans to sell or give away anything except for some of the weapons. I've skimmed

through the notes and found some that may be useful for my own research...and plenty more that piqued my curiosity in general. Besides...” I hesitated, weighing whether or not I should share this next part. In the end, I decided to trust them, after everything they’ve done for me. “Academically speaking, those notes have to be extremely valuable to the point where any scholar would want to get their hands on them. No doubt, some people would believe I ought to donate the notes of the Sage Meria to national research institutions that can make good use of them.”

“If you understand that much, we’ll stay out of it,” Elise said. “Of course, if you ever feel like you have no more use for them, we would be happy to take them off your hands for the right price.”

“As far as I’m concerned, Ryoma can be the one to decode those notes, or we could buy them off of him and have someone else go through it. Either way, it’ll be beneficial to our family,” Reinhart said, earning a smile from me and the three others.

After that, I went on to explain all about Korumi, especially since I wanted their help with some things. As I continued, their smiles slowly faded until they had completely gone by the time I got to the point where I left Korumi. Behind them, even Sebas stood with a cool expression, though he couldn’t hide the sweat beading on his forehead. “Is everyone okay?” I asked.

“Yes. I think we understand... I think,” Reinhart said hesitantly.

“To be honest, the mimic slime was all the surprise I needed. Sebas, may I have a cup of tea?” said Elise.

“Right away. My apologies, ma’am. The details about the inheritance that I had heard before were not too shocking, so I’d let my guard down. Just a moment on the tea.”

“I can’t believe Sebas missed a beat. He’s usually perfectly on top of those things,” I said.

“That’s how shocking this is,” Reinbach said. “First, the cursed magic gem and now this... You seem to always find yourself in unexpected situations.”

“That I can’t argue with,” I said.

Even though the gods had requested I go to Korumi village, I had planned to go there long before Korumi awakened. If the gods

hadn’t asked me to go, I still would have encountered Korumi. There’s no telling if I would have decided to deal with the hordes of Undead without any prior knowledge, though. Then, I remembered that Gain had said something similar—that I had bad luck despite the fact that the gods had given me a boon of luck—something about me defying the odds. If even the gods thought I had some sort of crazy luck—for better or worse—I had to believe I was born with it.

“My luck aside, I have a favor to ask. Several, actually,” I said.

Reinhart leaned forwards, his spirits raised. “Now that is a rare occurrence. If there’s anything we can do to help, don’t hold back.”

“I won’t,” I reassured him. “The first is about the Undead I mentioned that was nearly human—Baron Destoria. Could you deliver his armor Korumi had kept to the baron’s family?”

“It’ll take some time—we don’t have much contact with the Destorias, but we can reach out to them, and I’m sure they would love to have that heirloom,” Reinhart said.

“The Destorias take pride in their family’s military service. It may seem roundabout, but I’ll contact them through a mutual acquaintance—that will make this go smoother. Tell me the details about the baron’s heirloom and his last moments later,” Reinbach said. His own time in the military would make him the best fit for this.

“I’d also like a referral to a saddlemaker who could tailor them for my familiars—one for the luring ostrich the mimic slime can turn into, and the other for the juvenile cannonball rhino entrusted to me by her parents—I named her Rino.”

At first, I was going to name her Rai, after the Japanese word for lightning, after hearing the boss charge and make that thunderous sound, with the hope that the little one would grow up as strong as its parent. However, Korumi had pointed out that Rino was actually female, so I decided to call her Rino instead. If it weren’t for Korumi, I still might not have realized it.

“The mimic slime might be able to adjust its own size, but Rino is going to grow up quickly,” Elise said. “I’ll introduce you to my go-to workshop. They make the equipment for all of my pups, so I can

vouch for their skill."

Elise's familiars were little fenrirs which, contrary to the name, were large, wolflike monsters. If this workshop could handle gear for them, they'd be able to work with Rino's equipment as she grew up.

"There's also something I'd like your advice on, rather than a favor. I want to reach out to the warlock Rosenberg I met the other day."

"About your curse?" Reinhart asked.

"It's not unrelated. I actually found some notes on curse-breaking in my grandmother's inheritance. Apparently, it's an ancient magic that was used in a city-state that is now swallowed up by the Sea of Trees."

"Curse-breaking magic lost to time..."

"Exactly. My grandmother had gathered enough information to recreate the spell...and even left a memo that said it could be far more effective than any variety of the spell used now," I said. Meria had a vast array of interests, but I still hadn't expected to find documents so relevant to my current situation...no wonder Fernobelia had told me to at least scan the titles of her papers. "To be honest, I could probably cast the spell on my own, using the information she recorded. But I don't know enough about my own curse, so I'd feel better if a specialist could supervise me. I want to make sure it's someone I can trust with information about my grandmother."

"Rosenberg is a good choice—you can trust him," Reinhart said. "Especially since your curse seems like a powerful one. The last thing you need is to use an unfamiliar spell and worsen it altogether."

"I'd also like his tutelage in hexes," I said, just as Meltrize had suggested. Studying hexes could be the key to helping Korumi interact with others. Apparently I already knew everything I needed to know to accomplish that, but the pieces hadn't snapped together. An expert's lesson could give me a hint.

"Got it. I'll follow up with specific dates for the meeting, but I'll tell him what you're looking for," Reinhart said.

"Thank you. Lastly, if I succeeded in connecting Korumi to the

outside world, could you introduce me to a teacher who could instruct him on the etiquette and expectations of human society?" I asked.

"A teacher? Can you tell me a little bit more of what you're looking for?" Reinhart asked.

"I'm not sure how to make it happen, exactly, but if I can manage to set up a way for Korumi to interact with people, he'll need to learn how to do so correctly. I'll teach him what I can...but I'm not much better than him in that department. I was a hermit for years, and I—well, every child of the gods—is from a...place, called Earth. It's a place so distant that no one can come or go from there without the help of the gods," I tried to explain.

"Of course, you grew up with different customs. Most children of the gods are depicted as eccentric in legends," Elise said.

"There is a saying where I'm from: 'When in Rome, do as the Romans do.' It means to follow the customs and rules of the land, wherever you go. I do try my best to follow that mantra, but I don't feel confident enough to train someone else. Besides, Korumi acts like a small child, but his mind-reading abilities seem to have cultivated a lot of knowledge and logic within him. He asked me some questions that I had trouble answering..." I said, adding specific examples from my encounter with him.

Chapter 10, Episode 4: Close Call

On my last night in Korumi village, Korumi was looking through some of my memories.

"Ryoma! Your school! It has so many people!"

"School? I suppose there were a lot of people there," I said.

"Wow. I want to be a school."

"I never thought I'd hear a sentence like that... If, in the future, a lot of people start gathering here, something like a school could be a good idea," I said.

"Really?!"

"Well, there'll be a lot of things that have to be set up, but your power could be really useful in teaching... It's not a bad idea. Once they settle in, have the goblins help you test out a school-like setting."

"Okay!" Korumi went through more of my memories as a student for a while...until his mood sank. "Ryoma...?" he whimpered.

"What's up?"

"Why does bullying happen?"

"Oh... I can't really give you an easy answer. It's a web of complex factors, like the school environment, the individual situations, the psyche of the bullies... I'm sure you were watching me in school, but bullying doesn't just happen there. It's common for working adults to bully each other, and it even happens in packs of animals. Unfortunately, we all just have to do our best knowing that bullying is going to happen, or suffer the inconvenience of keeping a distance from everyone... That's kind of why, when I was reincarnated, I wanted nothing to do with other people..."

"Then how do you deal with bullying when it starts?" Korumi asked.

"That's another million-dollar question. The best I can tell you is that it depends case by case..."

"On the...internet? It said that the only way to stop bullying is to crack down on it. That's not it?"

"Depends what cracking down looks like... And I won't tell you not to look into my memories of the internet, but don't believe everything it says. That's an important lesson, actually," I said, still struggling to explain bullying to him. *What do parents say when their kids ask them?* I'd had my fair share of being picked on, so I certainly wasn't going to make excuses for bullies. If "cracking down" meant creating a system of detecting and dealing with cases of bullying early and administering consequences to the perpetrators, I was all for it. But if "cracking down" just meant making the punishment for bullying more severe, I doubted that would make much of a difference.

From my personal experiences, bullies rarely believed that what they were doing was wrong. Or, at least, they thought they wouldn't get caught or punished. I'd seldom heard of a bully who knew the difference between right and wrong and calculated the risk and the consequences of their actions. I couldn't say it never happened because I'd seen bullies become sort of addicted, even when they knew it was wrong. But then there were others who went along with bullying because they didn't want to be made a target themselves. If the point of "cracking down" was to prevent bullying, the best way to do that would be to make sure the consequences were doled out, not merely threatening more severe punishments.

"Kids aren't stupid..." I said. "When parents or teachers don't notice—or pretend not to notice—the bullying, or let them get away with warnings, kids start to pick up on that. They don't mind risking getting caught because the consequences don't affect them. Most bullies I've met probably felt that way. The longer a child carries that false sense of security, the harder it'll be for them to pull themself back. And things we learn as children tend to stay with us through adulthood."

Teachers were as vigilant as possible, I was sure, but I'd often heard how grueling their job could be and how parents too often let the school raise their children... So putting all the blame on teachers felt neither appropriate nor fruitful. Wouldn't it be more productive

to think of prevention strategies under the assumption that there were not enough teachers to monitor every student throughout the school day? Even though I had no background in education or school management, I could already think of a few ideas: hiring security officers to patrol the halls and monitor students, or installing cameras where there weren't adults to supervise. I'd heard that security or even police officers in schools were commonplace in America. As for cameras, I was sure it would come to a debate about protecting students' privacy...even if I didn't believe any place in a school was all that private, save for bathrooms and locker rooms.

"Another issue is that, barring violence and clear threats, a lot of bullying can come down to the eye of the beholder. One guy at my office thought I was bullying him when I gave him a warning for showing up late... That's an extreme example, for sure, but there needs to be a line drawn between bullying and proper discipline," I added.

If telling someone to follow the rules—even for their sake—could result in being punished, I could see how some kids would stop bothering with trying to help others, or even making friends altogether. It was pretty common for a group of bullies to gang up and make a false accusation as a form of bullying in its own right. A thorough investigation and fair judgment was key.

"Another thing that will help is to make sure the victims are supported. Exposing bullying at school can be a whole ordeal on its own, especially if the victim stops going to school because of being bullied..."

Not that I wanted to sound like a college kid bragging about his semester abroad, but there were different systems in other countries. For example, America had homeschooling, where a parent or guardian could opt to perform the teaching at home instead of sending their child to school.

"How will they make friends at home? And won't they learn less than they would at school?" Korumi asked.

"Those are probably the risks they weigh, but I think it'd be nice for everyone to have that choice. A lot of people say that school isn't

just a place to learn subject material, but also how to navigate in society. If someone's getting bullied, though, they're not learning anything good socially. It can't be easy to concentrate on their studies when they constantly have to look over their shoulders."

Once bullying started, it was incredibly difficult to break that power balance, even as adults. Grinning and bearing bullying almost never improved the situation... In fact, that almost always made things worse, further fostering the victim's sense of inferiority. That much I'd experienced firsthand. Psychological damage, as well as physical, took time to heal—if at all. Considering that some kids felt like suicide was the only escape from their bullies, I didn't see the value of forcing them to remain in school. Actually, the risks of forcing victims to stay in school seemed to greatly outweigh the benefits. For those who were in that horrible situation, it was admirable and important to try and improve it...but it wasn't worth destroying their bodies and souls over.

"The actual experience of having gone to a school isn't important. I think homeschooling works when the student and parent can set up an environment where the student can build the same amount of knowledge, social experience, communications skills, and self-esteem as they would have gotten from attending school. That might have been difficult when I was a kid, but the internet had developed by the time that I died. They had to be careful about staying away from toxic communities or people, but having some sort of interpersonal connection online had to be better than none at all. It isn't a child's responsibility to attend school—it's on the parents to provide opportunities for education. I guess I feel that a school is just a facility that makes it easier for parents to do that."

In America, I'd heard that parents could be held criminally responsible if they didn't follow protocols that attempted to ensure that homeschooled students were actually receiving quality education. PTAs were often considered a burden in Japan, but I'd heard that American parents often volunteered to help with extracurriculars. Regardless of how bullying was handled in each country, western culture had a vastly different attitude towards education than Japan did. That was something I realized a long time

ago.

"Let's get back on track. If a child breaks a rule, they do need to receive some sort of consequence. It's important to follow through with those consequences, but even more important to set up a system of early detection and de-escalation, as well as caring for the victims. That's my take, anyway. If you ask someone else, they might give you a different answer, though. All those ideas are just what I'd thought of from the concept of cracking down on bullying. I can't give you a clearer solution—I'm not an expert on this," I explained.

"Okay..." Korumi said.

"Once you can talk to other people, you can learn more. That will give you more perspective to think about things."

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"That's how that conversation went," I explained.

"That is a tough question with no right answer," Reinhart said.

"It's a question that shows his innocence. Which makes it all the more difficult to answer," Reinbach added.

"It must have been easier than talking to a human child, thanks to his ability to read minds. He could comprehend most everything I said, and there was no room for miscommunication," I said.

The three Jamils shifted a little.

"I keep forgetting that Ryoma isn't that old," Elise said.

"It's only natural that you would struggle with something like this. But we should be of aid to you. We have some experience in raising children," said Reinbach.

"Once you clear him to meet with other people, we'd love to meet Korumi. You can ask us for advice about him anytime. Is that okay for now?" Reinhart asked.

"Thank you. I'm not sure when or how I'm going to make it happen, but it's a relief just to hear you say that," I said. Come to think of it, the Jamils had raised Elia. Their help with Korumi would be invaluable. As relief hit, I noticed how parched I was from talking nonstop.

While I drank the tea Sebas poured for us, Elise said, “You certainly know how to talk about some complex topics.”

“What? No, I found myself in that situation because I didn’t know what to say.”

“Not from what you told me. Actually, I’d be interested in seeking out your opinion as a child of the gods on more topics and glean any insight that comes from your foreign knowledge,” Elise said.

Did she mean she wanted me to present my viewpoints like in a debate? I didn’t think I’d ever done anything like that in my previous life. It wasn’t that I hadn’t spent much time around anyone whom I could have a decent discussion with, but I was mostly afraid of offending someone in the process. “What kind of topics, specifically?”

“How about land management or politics?” Elise said.

“No thank you, I don’t want to get canceled,” I blurted out.

“Canceled— You mean killed?!” said Elise.

“What does that mean? How will that harm you?” Reinbach asked.

“Is talking about politics deadly to children of the gods?” Reinhart added.

“Perhaps the gods restrict his speech in some way,” Sebas suggested.

My instinctive word choice had caused some confusion—I quickly clarified what I meant.

“So ‘canceled’ means to be verbally criticized and attacked by a mob of sorts,” Reinhart paraphrased.

“I’m sorry I wasn’t clear,” I said.

“Some miscommunication is to be expected in conversations across cultures. I’m sorry we lost our composure,” Elise said.

“That’s all right... In my country, the topics of religion, politics, and baseball—a type of sport—were the three taboos of conversation in most places. Is that not the case here?”

“Discussing politics is expected among nobles. Especially among lords and ladies like us,” Reinhart said.

“There isn’t much fiefs can do if we can’t discuss politics. In our house, we regularly exchange ideas of all sorts—including politics—

even with Elia. I'd expect that to be no different in most noble households," Reinbach said.

That was a rather simple and convincing reason for them to engage in political discussion. Not that I ever suspected Elise of suggesting those subjects out of any malicious intent, but Reinbach's explanation made it clear that she had only suggested topics of discussion familiar to her. They just happened to be ones that were taboo in my culture.

Almost as soon as I finished my cup of tea, Sebas brought me a fresh cup, and along with it he brought a fresh subject of conversation. "Sir, there was something else you wanted to discuss."

"Oh, that's right. We have a formal request for you, Ryoma, as our engineer," Reinhart began.

"Please," I encouraged.

"Before you left for the Sea of Trees, we briefly discussed developing a village, setting up more systematic slime farming practices, and expanding the manufacturing of instant meals. We would like to expedite that process," the duke said.

"Of course, I'll help in any way I can. Why the rush?" I asked.

"Harvest hasn't started yet, but we're getting reports that our crops aren't growing very well. You know how it's been hot lately? Many villages have let us know that the higher-than-average temperatures have affected crop yield. This won't immediately lead to famine or anything, but we need to deal with it." Reinhart went on to add more concerns regarding this. The weather was affecting far more than the Jamils' territory—so much so that the neighboring lands and even the whole country could face food shortages. A disparity in food supply between territories could lead to a rise in robberies and raids. To mitigate that situation, the Jamils were ready to send aid to neighboring territories as needed.

"That sounds like a serious problem," I said.

"There's little we can do about the weather. We're lucky we at least have a contingency plan," Reinhart said.

"I'm glad I could help with that contingency plan." Talking about food supply reminded me that Glen had requested to buy the instant meals. I relayed his request before I could forget about it again.

“Glen is someone who eats and spends money with abandon—he’ll probably try to buy them in wholesale quantities.”

“Okay. We were planning a large-scale project to build more plants to make the instant meals. We’ll bump that up the list,” Reinhart said.

“Are you sure?” I asked.

“Glen is renowned throughout the country. Even just accounting for his S-rank status, his endorsement will carry a lot of weight and lead to massive profits. Once we decide on a specific timeline for the manufacturing of the plants and the development of the village, I’ll pass it on to Eleonora. She can tell you once she begins work as your assistant,” Reinhart said.

“As much as we will try to expedite, developing a new village will take more than a week or two—don’t push yourself too hard,” Elise made sure to warn me.

“I understand,” I said.

“I’m sure Hughes and the others are dying to speak to you,” Reinbach said.

“Yes. I brought back some things from the Sea of Trees, so I hope they’ll enjoy them.”

That concluded our somewhat secretive meeting. Now...it was time to celebrate!

Chapter 10, Episode 5: Celebrating with Old and New Friends

After my meeting with the Jamils, I greeted the others who'd been waiting for me. After retelling my journey in and out of the Sea of Trees, I took out my souvenirs from the forest... Most of them were food and drink, so it was only natural that a tasting-slash-party broke out.

"Let's celebrate Ryoma's accomplishment and safe return." Reinhart raised his glass. "Cheers!"

"Cheers!" Everyone else raised their glasses full of heatwood ale I'd bought at a base in the Sea of Trees. After the first sip, people began knocking their drinks back pretty quickly.

"Ryoma! This stuff is great!"

"The aroma is strong but refreshing. It goes down easy."

"Is this what the Sea of Trees smells like?"

"I guess this ale doesn't really leave the adventurers' base camps in the forest."

"A lot of materials that can be found in the forest fetch a higher price than the ale, so those are probably given priority."

Around me stood Hughes and the other guards, Eleonora, and the Jamils, who stood a little farther off since we'd already caught up. Everyone had nothing but rave reviews for the heatwood ale.

"All right, everyone. Let's start grilling," I said, facing the large metal plate before me. Within arm's reach, I also had a table full of food, with a mountain of thin-sliced immortal snake in the middle, surrounded by an array of spices and fruit from the Sea of Trees.

Most adventurers would say that food in the Sea of Trees was hard to come by, but that was only because of the presence of dangerous monsters. There were plenty of edible plants throughout the woods—specifically around Korumi village, I could see where

people had once attempted to set up farms for their survival. Still, my top food of the forest *had* to be the immortal snake. That's why I had decided to host this sort of cookout. I began laying slices of immortal snake on the hot plate, spreading the sound and aroma of crackling fat throughout the room.

"Whoa... Just the smell of that meat is making me drool."

"The phrase 'violently appetizing' comes to mind..."

"And you haven't added any spices yet?"

"I was hoping that would catch your attention," I said. "Yes, this meat tastes good without any seasoning. It has a simple but powerful umami that can actually overpower a lot of spices."

"If that's true, I can't wait to taste it," Jill said, his gaze shifting between the sizzling meat and the pile of food. "Even most nobles rarely get to taste food from the Sea of Trees." He would know, since his father was an earl. Bringing home any food from the Sea of Trees would be an ordeal—hiring an adventurer to do so would cost an exorbitant sum. "I doubt many people have even seen an immortal snake in real life."

"Jill is right," Reinbach chimed in. "Back when the king's forces were trying to develop the Sea of Trees, a unit came back with one and presented it to the former king...which caused a stir for a while. I can't remember how long that lasted..."

"A few years, at most," Sebas said. "It certainly had demand because of the former king's praise for the meat and the unit who brought it back, along with its scarcity and a widespread rumor that claimed—because of the immortal snake's regenerative properties—it was an elixir of immortality. Alas, the supply was too limited for the trend to last."

"Now I remember. In the end, only those who believed in its life-extending qualities were hunting for it." Then, Reinbach tilted his head. "Oh? I do remember many rumors claiming that the immortal snake tastes vile and it wasn't worth sending adventurers into the Sea of Trees to hunt for them, despite their rarity."

"I can already tell you the meat doesn't taste bad..." Hughes said.

"I agree. I am baffled that such rumors circulated when its aroma alone seems to grab hold of my senses," Reinbach added.

"Those rumors probably came from some of the immortal snakes that had been regenerated," I said, theorizing that those who'd liked the taste had eaten a piece of the immortal snake that a hunter had cut off in battle. Those who didn't like the taste must have eaten an immortal snake that had been killed after a long battle that caused the immortal snake to regenerate. Perhaps some of the meat had been mass-farmed using a captive snake's regenerative abilities.

"That would explain the disparity. Too many people are willing to do anything to make a quick buck," Reinbach said.

"Even if the meat was farmed, it's still genuine immortal snake meat," I countered. "It's also possible that the quality of the meat suffered due to conventional methods of transporting it out of the Sea of Trees. With so few people having tasted good cuts of an immortal snake, I doubt it was difficult to convince people who ate the regenerated cuts that an immortal snake was supposed to taste that bad... Oh, these are almost ready," I announced.

I could only imagine what condition the immortal snakes were in when they were previously on the market, but mine was in the best possible: freshly caught, meticulously cleaned with the help of my slimes, and carefully stored to preserve its freshness.

I moved a perfectly cooked slice onto my plate and took a bite...and the familiar burst of flavor assaulted my taste buds.

As soon as everyone took a bite of their own slices, their eyes widened as they silently chewed. They all seemed to smile as they swallowed.

"I never thought game meat could be this delicious," Camil breathed, and everyone quickly agreed, including the Jamils. The immortal snake seemed to satisfy even the sophisticated palate.

As their host, I could have hoped for nothing more.



"Let's eat up," I urged. "It's delicious on its own, but I have plenty of seasonings: pepper from Korumi village, herbs from throughout the Sea of Trees, along with soy sauce, miso, and sesame dressing. Try it with any of them!" Even while I said all of that, people eagerly began grilling their next slices without a hint of flavor fatigue yet. Since they'd probably grill and eat the meat as it was for a while, I decided to make serving portions of the seasonings. It was then that Eleonora came up to me.

"Master Takebayashi."

"Eleonora. What can I do for you?"

"I saw you walking towards the table of food. I can help," Eleonora offered.

I was happy to have her relax and continue eating with everyone else, but maybe she felt awkward doing so when her soon-to-be boss was doing a task. "Then I'd love your help with divvying up the seasonings. I'll set up a station for you. Can you grab those wooden dishes with partitions—enough for everyone here?"

"Right away," Eleonora said.

In the time it took me to create another table with Earth magic, she returned with the plates. Working together, we filled them with every seasoning I'd prepared. There were a lot that I'd found throughout the Sea of Trees, so her extra hands were very helpful. Soon, I was passing her the bag of pepper to divvy out. She did have a nervous tone and attitude, which was only natural since this was only our second time meeting each other—she had to be struggling to find topics of conversation, just as I was. We seemed to be figuring each other out while we stuck to our task and conversations related to it. But knowing that we'd be working together soon...I wanted to formally introduce myself.

"Eleonora," I began.

"Yes?"

"Now that I'm back from the Sea of Trees, the duke should reassign you to me soon. I just want to thank you in advance for working with me."

Eleonora hesitated for a moment, then met my eyes with powerful intensity. "I will serve you until my bones are dust," she

said, and clearly meant it—like she felt that this was her last chance.

To avoid making things any more awkward than they already were, I tried to shift the conversation a little. "Thank you for saying that. I know this is a party, but I was hoping we could speak a little about my expectations of the job, if you don't mind."

"There were a few things I wanted to ask as well," Eleonora said. I hadn't expected her to refuse since I was about to be her boss, but her tension seemed to ease a little—this was an easier subject for her to broach. We weren't close enough to talk about any personal matters like hobbies, and considering her history, her private life was a conversational minefield... To be honest, my only option was to talk about work, so if she hadn't agreed, then we would have been stuck with awkward silence.

"The first thing I wanted to go over was your residence in Gimul, where I work. I've already prepared a place and an office with basic necessities. Is there anything else I can have ready for you? Anything that you think may be helpful. It will improve our work if I can ease other burdens you may have and make sure you can be well-rested."

"A bed and a kitchen are enough. I can use your establishment for laundry, which makes it a lot easier. As for an office, what I would need would depend on the work expected of me. Since my primary duty will be to organize and relay information, I should only require basic stationery and file storage," Eleonora said.

"Got it. I'll have you make sure you have everything you need once you officially start the job. Don't hesitate to let me know if there's anything else you require," I said.

After going over a few more things, she seemed to be less nervous about speaking with me. For the first time, she initiated a conversation. "Upon reviewing records of your business and research, there was something I noticed regarding the contracts between the garbage plant and other businesses. Purchasing food waste from restaurants seems like a net loss without any benefit for your business," she said with a stern expression.

That contract included a clause that prohibited us from reselling or giving away the food waste, which prevented us from producing

any direct profit. Even though we paid a fraction of the price compared to how much that food would cost fresh, we bought it from all over the city at a considerable expense.

She hadn't mentioned this contract solely out of concern for turning a profit, though. She continued to bring up something I wasn't too proud of. "This contract stands out because it benefits one party at the expense of the other. I wouldn't be surprised if you had delegated the drafting to someone else as you tended to your many duties, but that contract seems malicious."

I hadn't hidden anything from the Jamils, nor did I ask Hughes and the others to keep this a secret—it seemed like they had an effective net of communication within their ranks.

"As you've guessed, there was some malicious intent involved with the drafting of that contract."

Back when I'd decided to purchase food waste and begun looking for shops and restaurants to buy it from, some of the owners started quarrels with me, so I decided to work with them first and get the negotiations over with. At the first appointment, the owner greeted me with barely concealed disdain and nonstop backhanded comments. He kept complaining about the contract I'd drafted until he proposed the ridiculous one I had now.

"I could have walked away then and there, but I had an idea," I said. "I agreed to his terms, including a clause about revisiting those terms when the contract was up for renewal, of course."

He must have thought I was going to leave with my tail between my legs, either offended or dejected. When I accepted, he looked surprised—then smirked mockingly. The food waste was meant for me to continue my experiments with slime magic and instant-meal making. Not being allowed to sell or give it away wasn't an issue for me. That owner had proposed these terms with malicious intent, but it hadn't hurt me at all. He and the other business owners who had a history with me had probably never imagined that a kid was working on improving food productivity with Wood magic or inventing new instant meals.

"Even if he hadn't expected me to go along with his terms, he still presented horrible terms, out of a personal vendetta, no less. You

wouldn’t consider him a trustworthy contact, would you?” I asked Eleonora. “I took those same terms and presented them to every owner I met with... That made it really easy to figure out who I could and could not trust.”

“You used those terms to test your potential vendors,” Eleonora said.

“It helped me decide where to purchase the food I needed for my canteen once I had hired a lot of staff for the security company, garbage plant, and the hospital. I wanted to make sure I could trust whoever was going to supply the food that my staff would end up eating. I hadn’t considered doing business with those whom I couldn’t trust. If I do say so myself, they missed out on a massive contract.” Even among business owners who had a conflict with me at the meeting, there were people who pointed out how unfair the food waste contract was for me—regardless of their personal feelings, they had stayed honest in business. With some of them, I had established a recurring contract for buying food off their shelves as well. “Also, from the perspective of those untrustworthy vendors, there would be a huge difference between refusing to sign a contract with me in the first place and turning down a renewal after temporarily enjoying the unfair benefits of selling off their food waste. This way, it’s a lot harder for them to reject a renewal offer.”

“Not only will it strengthen your position in future negotiations, you could potentially get them to amend the contract. If they refuse to compromise and continue to act as if they’re superior, you could end the contract completely. That would be an ironic payback,” Eleonora said quietly, letting a dark smile slip through for a moment—whoever she thought of in that moment, she apparently had some scores to settle in life.

“I had considered the option of paying them back that way...but they kind of took themselves out,” I said.

“What do you mean?”

“Well, the reason we had friction in the first place was because I refused to fall for a con that they all went along with.”

Eleonora seemed to remember. “I read the report on that. Some store owners had been tricked into setting up explosives in their

shops and warehouses, thinking they were for surveillance."

"Those businesses, owned by many of the people who had a problem with me at the meeting, blew sky-high," I said.

Some of those storefronts had doubled as the owners' residences, so it was a small miracle that no one had died—even if they didn't feel that way. Without my doing anything, their businesses had crumbled, regardless of my contracts with them.

"Even without that explosive turn of events, their malicious contracts with me and their shady business practices were the talk of the Merchant's Guild for a while... I doubt their reputations would have survived for long anyway. Even that contract, which wasn't much of a loss for me to begin with, is being revised under the supervision of a former law officer recommended to me by the duke," I explained.

"A former law officer... There was no need for me to mention anything, then. Thank you for walking me through that, and I'm sorry to have wasted your time," Eleonora said.

"Not at all. I'd barely explained what your job will look like. I feel very reassured that you were already on top of things regarding my businesses." I saw her gaze drift towards the guards a few times during our conversation, so I assumed she'd heard about the contract from them. Buying out that food waste really was mostly for my research, and I was basically running that aspect on my own. Everyone had been busy at that time, and I hadn't completed signing those contracts until they'd returned to the Jamils' residence, so they must not have heard the full story. Even in my previous life, and with the help of email, there were plenty of times when information was sent out late or left out altogether. This conversation with Eleonora was fruitful enough in the sense that I was able to get her caught up. "Don't hesitate to ask me anything you'd like to know," I reassured her. "There will be more times when I will leave the city, potentially for long periods of time. Even when I'm here, I'll be focusing on my research, so the more curious you are, the more secure I'll feel."

"Understood," Eleonora said. There was still a hint of nervousness in her demeanor, but I was happy that we were at least able to hold

a conversation. Just as I was about to wrap it up and let her enjoy the party, Reinbach and Sebas approached us.

"Now that it is an impressive spread," Reinbach said of the seasonings.

"I hope you're both enjoying yourselves," I said.

"Of course. The immortal snake was so delicious that we'd forgotten the man of the hour," Sebas said, apparently in an attempt at humor. The butler was always a calming presence, but he seemed particularly happy today.

"I'm happy showing off my loot from my adventure and having everyone enjoy themselves. The spotlight should be on the food, really," I said.

"Then I must enjoy all the food and drink I can," Sebas said.

Is he a big drinker? I wondered, thinking how he was the only one who hadn't been hungover after we had celebrated Elia taming a limour bird. Maybe he enjoyed any form of eating or drinking.

"Sebas often traveled either as my attendant or messenger," Reinbach said. "Tasting different cuisines at our destinations was a hobby he enjoyed in what little spare time he had. When you're skilled enough in Space magic, even accounting for breaks needed between each jump, using magic is much faster than traveling on horseback."

"There is only so much work I can do on the road," Sebas added. "Not to mention the tight schedule. I was exploring ways to use my free time productively." He smiled nostalgically and beamed outright when I gave him a plate of my favorite seasonings.

"Can I get you anything else?" I asked.

"The fruit looks delicious... But if I'm going to try these spices out, I would love another drink," Sebas said.

"Don't party too hard, neither of us are young anymore," Reinbach joked, took his own plate of spices, and walked Sebas back to the hot plate. Everyone else was still enjoying the meat unseasoned, but the first pile of immortal snake slices was running thin.

"Eleonora, let's take these spices over there, along with more meat," I said.

"I'll get them right away," she said, rather mechanically. Still, she was good at communicating and completing any task I'd given her. Feeling optimistic about my new assistant, I played waiter while I enjoyed talking to everyone for the rest of the party.

Chapter 10, Episode 6: Sinking In

My welcome-back/Sea-of-Trees tasting party was a big success. So much so that time flew by and it was time for my guests to leave before I knew it.

"Thank you for all the wonderful food," Reinhart said as we stood at the entrance to the Forest of Gana. He, and all the others, looked full to the point of bursting. Reinhart laughed. "I don't think I'll have room for dinner tonight. I'll owe Bahtz an apology. Although I'm sure he and his sous-chefs won't give us a second thought once I show them the food you packed for us, Ryoma."

"I always enjoyed your chefs' dishes. I'm curious to see what they'll do with ingredients from the Sea of Trees," I said.

"Stop by any time and try it. We'd love to order more food from the Sea of Trees when you do. Of course, I'll pay a good price for it."

"When you do, I'll try my best to bring the highest quality food," I said. I'd planned to frequently travel to and from the Sea of Trees to see Korumi, and having a base there made it much easier. My trek there and back would be far less arduous than that of a normal adventurer. Once Eleonora started, it would streamline my communication with the Jamils...not to mention that I'd have more free time.

"Are you going to Gimul after this?" Reinhart asked.

"Yes. I thought about spending the night here, but there are people waiting for me in Gimul. It's not a long journey if I use Space magic, and I always have the limour birds," I said. While exploring the Sea of Trees of Syrus, I couldn't risk taking them out of the Dimension Home except when we were in Korumi's core. Even though that was for their safety, I'd felt bad about keeping them cooped up, and would love to let them stretch their wings. Besides, I had plenty more souvenirs that I had to deliver. I'd packed them carefully, but it'd be better to deliver them sooner rather than later.

"I know it's only midday, but be careful on the way," Elise said, prompting the group's departure. Each member of the group gave their own farewell: Reinhart left with a wink, Sebas with a bow, the four guards with a salute, and the rest waving as they left.

After the Space magic that took them home disappeared, I was left with a slightly lonely sort of quietness. "Okay... Time for me to go home!" I announced, bringing the limour birds out of the Dimension Home. As soon as they were out, they soared into the sky and flew off in the direction of Gimul, so I followed with my own Space magic.

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That evening, I arrived at Gimul before the sun had completely set, feeling much more comfortable with long-distance teleporting with the help of my familiars. After greeting the guards, whose faces I had gotten to know well enough to recognize after the attack last winter, I passed through the city gate. Several places were on my list to visit, and I chose to go to the laundry shop first.

It didn't take long for me to get there, walking through the city streets and taking in the artificial cityscape with constant sounds of people talking and a distinct city smell.

When I reached the laundry shop, it was still during its operating hours, though I could see from the lack of a line of customers on the street that the rush was over—a perfect time to pop in without intruding.

"Wel...come," Jane said when I walked in, her cheerful voice quickly fading as she turned and saw who it was. Her eyes were wide, and she stood still with a broom in her hand. After a few moments, she shouted, "Everyone! The owner's back!" Her voice reverberated through the customer-less shop.

Soon, footsteps came from the back, and I was surrounded by my employees, who all celebrated my safe return.

"Now, everyone. He's only just returned," Carme pointed out for my benefit, and the other employees went back to their posts for the time being. Carme showed me to a meeting room where he, Hudom,

and I could bring each other up to date, at least on the most important business matters.

"Still, nothing much has happened while you were gone," Hudom said.

"There was only one thing of note: We had a rude customer come back a few times. I heard he was an adventurer who recently moved to Gimul. He has already been banned for the attitude he gave our staff," Carme explained.

"We had some nasty customers for a while when we first opened..." I pointed out, concerned that this was also an organized sabotage.

"I heard a little bit about that," Hudom said. "But this one's different. He's not working with anyone, and I doubt he's trying to sabotage the shop. He just tried to make a move on our female staff. There was no whiff of a plan or any indication that he was working with anyone. Fay double-checked."

"I spoke with him a few times before I banned him... Some of those times, his breath reeked of alcohol," Carme added.

"Just a drunk, then," I said.

"Even if he attempted to come back, our current security would not have a problem dealing with him," Carme said.

As annoying as that must have been, a disorderly drunk wasn't the worst thing that could happen. Of course, I wanted Carme to take special care of the mental health of those who had to deal with that guy.

"Absolutely," Carme said.

"Let me see what I can tell you..." I began. "First of all, I did make it back to where I grew up. As a result, or because of what happened on my journey, I will be regularly visiting the Sea of Trees." I also briefly told them about Korumi. I almost hesitated to bring up that I'd be leaving again, but I already knew I was going to, so there was no sense delaying telling them my plans. The earlier they knew, the easier it would be for them to make plans for when I was in the forest.

"Understood," Carme said simply, like he'd expected something like this from me. "You don't have to look at me like that. You came

back safe and sound. I won't object to you going back anytime you like."

"I'm not sure what look you saw on my face, but thank you. Since I'll be away from the city more than I'd initially expected, I'd like to keep you in charge of the laundry shop," I told Carme. Then, I told them about Eleonora and her official hiring. In addition to explaining how she would be my secretary who'd keep files on information I'd need to know while I was away, I told them how I planned to have her pick up all tasks not directly related to the laundry shop. "Carme, you've helped so much as my assistant and secretary, with work related and unrelated to the laundry shop. You really have more than made up for all of my shortcomings when it comes to handling business, and I truly appreciate that."

"I would have no problem continuing as your assistant," Carme said. "And a part of me wishes I could continue learning in that position, but I understand there is no turning down someone appointed by the duke. I would be lying if I said I wasn't disappointed, but I am all prepared for the transition. She can come in anytime."

Apparently, the Jamils had contacted Carme while I was in the Sea of Trees. I was sure Eleonora would be great at the job, but I couldn't deny how incredible Carme was. That being said, I wondered what he meant by "continue learning"? I couldn't recall a single thing that I could have taught him. In fact, I was confident that I completely relied on him when it came to running the laundry shop. Completely puzzled, I decided to table that thought until later.

"Then please begin the transition when she arrives," I said. "And even though you will be in charge of this business, I'll still stop by from time to time. If I can help with anything, you can always let me know as you have been." That's why I'd created a sales department and kept my name on it. It wasn't like we were never going to see each other again. The air in the room had gotten a little sappy, but there was no need for tears or anything. "And I'd like to ask a favor of you, Hudom. When she comes, I'd like you to look after her for a while. Not that it matters to me much, but she is noble born—of a status similar to yours."

"Of course. Which house is she from? Each has their own philosophies and values, so knowing that would make it easier for me," Hudom said.

"Right. I've only ever given you her first name. She's Eleonora Ransor: Baron Ransor's daughter," I said.

"Oh...her," Hudom said, looking a little unsure. If he had any reservations, I wanted to hear them now.

"She was two years above me in the capital's academy. I've never met her directly, but I'd heard rumors about her—that she was beautiful and brilliant. A genius in academics and in magic," Hudom explained. "Even from afar, it really seemed like she didn't want anything to do with other people. If I'm being blunt, she seemed standoffish."

"Really? I did feel like she had a wall around her, but I wouldn't go that far," I said.

"That was back when we were in school, which was more than a few years ago. I wouldn't be surprised if she's changed since... I'll have to meet her and find out," Hudom said, not sounding too concerned. Neither was I, since Hudom always had a knack for keeping people at the right distance.

"Is she very good at magic? Neither she nor the Jamils said anything about that," I said.

"She graduated from the magic curriculum at the top of her class... You should ask her about it, though. Everything I know about her is through rumors, and combined with the politics that comes with noble houses, I'm making a lot of assumptions about her character. The duke wouldn't send her if he expected any problems—don't worry too much about it. I'll assist her as she gets started."

Hudom had a point. Maybe the Jamils didn't mention her magical talents only because it didn't affect her ability as a secretary.



"Then I will focus on the transfer of duties," Carme said.

"Thank you. I'll take care of her lodgings," I said.

A polite knock came from the door. When I called for them to enter, Chelma the chef came in. "I'm sorry to interrupt. I'm preparing dinner and wanted to know if you would be eating with us."

It had slipped my mind that it was already dinnertime. I appreciated the offer, but I could still feel the immortal snake steaks in my gut... I would have to take a rain check. "I'm sorry, I had a late lunch. I would love to join you next time."

"Absolutely. I'll make sure to prepare an outstanding dish to make up for today," Chelma said.

"That would be wonderful," I said, realizing that I hadn't given her my souvenir. "Oh, Chelma. I brought a bunch of ingredients from the Sea of Trees. Think of them as a little souvenir."

"Really?"

"Yes. A whole bunch of them, freshly caught and harvested. I'm sure your menu is set for tonight, but perhaps you could serve some fruit for dessert." I placed a basket full of fruit on the meeting room table. I reached to take out more of the immortal snake meat while I was at it...and realized I was all out of what I had prepared earlier. "Oops. I gave out all of the cuts of meat earlier."

"Don't worry about it. All of these rare fruits are a treat on their own," Chelma said.

"It's okay, I just need to clean another one... Where can I do it, though?" I asked.

"You can't do it in the kitchen?" Hudom asked.

"The game is too big," I said, then decided it'd be quicker to show them than explain. I summoned a grave slime and had it show the immortal snake carcass. As soon as the snake's head poked out, Chelma screamed bloody murder. That was a boneheaded play on my part, because I hadn't realized how shocking a dead snake the size of a tree trunk could be to a non-adventurer. By the time I'd realized my mistake, the security team had rushed in, followed by the other employees. I managed to bring the situation under control by explaining everything, using the snake carcass as a visual

aid...even if it gave them a little—or a big—scare.

"Why don't you ask Sieg if you can use his place?" Hudom suggested.

"A butcher shop *would* have all the equipment," I agreed. "And he's only two doors down." I'd also be killing two birds with one stone by giving him his souvenir.

I decided to head next door first, and found Pauline congregating with her friends in her flower shop. It felt like a rare sight to see a gathering like that at this hour.

"You can say that again. Men. Won't they ever—"

"Hello," I said, and that prompted all the ladies to speak to me at once.

"Huh? Oh, it's you, Ryoma!"

"Good to see you."

"I heard you were off somewhere dangerous. You look well."

Apparently, they'd learned through the Gimul grapevine that I had gone to the Sea of Trees. Even though they were giving me kind words, they were as ferocious as a pack of raptors.

Barely holding back against the tidal wave of questions, I managed to retell a brief summary of my journey. "...and I brought souvenirs."

"You didn't have to do that. It must have been hard enough going there and coming back."

"It was no trouble. You've always been very kind to me," I said, taking out a basket of fruit.

"Wow, that's..."

"They're very pretty, but I've never seen any of these before."

The basket was filled with three types of fruit: bananas that came in bunches of five and resembled a hand, mangos with an opening in the center in the shape of fangs, and lychees the size of basketballs. While the ladies looked curious about the fruit, they hadn't reached for any.

"They look a little unusual, but they're all delicious," I promised. "Would you like to try them before you take them home? I have some plates too."

"Use that table over there. I've got knives in the drawer down

there," Pauline said.

With that, I started by separating each banana in a bunch and peeling them before cutting them into slices to make them easier to taste test.

"It looks easy to peel once you separate them."

"There's such a sweet smell to it... Mm!"

"This is delicious! And soft. Kids will like these."

The banana was a hit. For the large lychee, I sliced into its skin before peeling it off with my bare hands, taking out a juicy, pearly white fruit. It was too big to eat, so I cut it into bite-size pieces to serve them out.

"This is good too. There was a burst of juice in my mouth."

"The last one was thick, but this one is refreshing."

"Just what you want when it's hot out."

Finally, I took the mango and cut it down the middle. Already, a ripe aroma filled the air. All I had to do was slice crosshatch and flip the fruit over, and it all fell off the peel. Just as someone in the room audibly gulped, we heard voices from down the street.

"I smell something good!"

"It's coming from mom's shop!"

Pauline's daughter Renny and son Rick came running over.

"Hey, it's Ryoma!" Renny said.

"It's been a while," Rick added.

"I heard you went somewhere dangerous on your own. Looks like you made it back," Renny said, like I was a reckless, troublemaking kid...not that I could deny the Sea of Trees was dangerous. "Well, at least you're okay. What's that smell?"

"Souvenirs Ryoma brought back. Some local fruit," Pauline explained.

"Fruit? I want some!" Rick said.

"Here you go," I said, giving him and Renny some of the mango I'd just diced.

"It's sweet! It's so good!" Rick exclaimed.

"Wow! I've never had anything like this!" Renny joined.

Their faces lit up as soon as they took their first bite. No fancy descriptions necessary—their faces and simple commentary were a

perfect five-star review that warmed my heart. This alone made it worth bringing the fruit back.

"It's good. So good."

"Rick, you're not going to enjoy it if you scoff it down like— Don't take mine!"

"Kids! Have some manners!"

"It's all right, Pauline," I said before turning to her children. "And you don't have to rush. I have plenty more."

"Really?!"

"These kids..." Pauline said good-naturedly and asked me, "Are you sure?"

"I really did gather a lot of them as souvenirs. Besides, they don't last. They won't go bad over a couple of days, but they will after a while. Don't feel bad about taking them off my hands," I said.

"If you insist. Thanks, Ryoma. But I am going to get you something from our butcher shop. And if you want to use the chopping block today, it's all yours. I'm going to go tell Sieg."

"Thank you!"

Pauline wiped her hands on a rag at the end of the table and walked into the shop. While I handed some of the fruit to the other two ladies, she quickly returned with Sieg.

"Hi, Ryoma. I hear you brought us back something delicious. Come on in, you can totally use our shop. Do you mind if I watch, though? I'm curious about this monster you're going to clean."

"Of course. The meat is part of your souvenir."

With the butcher's permission, I cleaned the immortal snake in his shop.

After that, I acted like an off-season Santa Claus, running around the city with piles of meat and spices and fruit, delivering them to the people I couldn't wait to see, until it became dark out. As much as it spent my energy to interact with other people, it brought me a kind of warmth that I couldn't experience on my own. Today, it really sank in that the Sea of Trees and the big city each had their own perks.

Chapter 10, Episode 7: Eleonora Arrives

On the third morning after returning to Gimul, a letter arrived out of the blue, announcing that Eleonora would be coming. I'd been told that her assignment would be expedited, but I hadn't expected it to be this fast. The letter also included that she wanted to meet and speak with me as soon as possible. Although it didn't quite sound like an emergency, I could tell that she had a reason to see me urgently. Curious about what that reason was, I got dressed and headed out to the city. Eleonora had also written that she would report to the laundry shop as soon as she made it to Gimul, so I'd be able to meet up with her there, unless I missed her somehow.

Once I made it to the laundry shop, Lilyn at the front told me that we had a guest, much to my relief.

"Sorry to interrupt," I said as I opened the meeting room door and found Eleonora dressed for her new job, having exchanged her maid's uniform for a pantsuit. She was in mid-conversation with Carme, Hudom, and Sebas—who must have brought Eleonora here. When they all turned to me as I entered, I could read all their faces. Judging by them, at least this wasn't some terrible disaster scenario.

"Master Ryoma, I apologize for requesting your presence so abruptly," Sebas immediately apologized.

This was the right call, though. Since something unexpected had happened, the quicker we addressed it, the better. I told Sebas as much, and they all gave me faint smiles. It felt like I'd brought a fresh serving of tea that broke the tension of a meeting that had come to a standstill. Since I had no idea why, I asked to be caught up so I could join the conversation.

"Allow me to explain," Eleonora said, her tone sharper than usual with the urgency of whatever she came to say. "Simply put, we

received intel that a certain lord may have begun constructing—possibly even operating—a facility that imitates your trash plant."

Okay. Because I was working as an official engineer for the duke, the trash plant wasn't just a business I owned, but also a research facility under his protection. If the tip-off Eleonora received was accurate, this lord would be charged with stealing information under the duke's protection.

"The validity of this information, as well as whether or not the facility is complete and running, is still being investigated. Even if it isn't likely that this information is valid, his lordship decided that I would be better stationed here in case of any new developments on the matter," Eleonora added.

That explained why her arrival was pushed up, and I was glad to have her here for this. "If there is no proof of information being stolen... We shouldn't make any big moves just yet. Although I could double-check how the slimes are being kept and used in the plant," I said.

"We were just discussing how we should wait for further information and keep a close eye on the plant," Carme said.

There was no sense in causing a scene when there was no proof—that could worsen our situation. Reinhart must have sent Eleonora only to share the news and make sure we'd be ready if something were to go down. To be fair, I had expected some kind of interaction from other nobles regarding my businesses. "If this is true, they were quick to act," I said.

"I would call it reckless," Carme said. "No one with common sense would attempt to steal industry secrets from an engineer under the duke's protection...or do anything to raise that kind of suspicion."

"I agree... So this lord is someone who might lack that common sense?" I prompted—Hudom and Eleonora cringed.

"Recently, a certain group of nobles has been causing more and more problems," Carme said. "It leads back to the incident at the end of last year... I'm sure you're aware that the nobles involved in the attacks against the duke have been punished."

"Yes, I remember hearing about that. To be honest, I wasn't

interested enough to pay attention to the details, but I remember that the nobles involved in the attack were arrested. Investigations revealed their other crimes, which led to more arrests, and so on."

"More than a few titles were passed down to their successors because of those arrests, and some houses had made these criminal acts their family business. When all of the expected successors in line were captured and out of the picture, some who never expected to inherit the title and did not know how to properly conduct themselves were suddenly thrust into power. They are the ones who are making choices unbecoming of a self-respecting noble," Carme continued.

With sudden power came egregious abuse of it. These nobles began increasing taxes for all sorts of excuses solely to line their own pockets, started taking bribes from the rich in exchange for undeserved privileges, eliminated those who opposed them by shady means... The list went on. Part of me could understand that nobles were human, too, and there had to be bad apples among them. Still, another part of me was wondering how it could be as bad as this sounded.

Hudom chuckled at this, saying, "A contributing factor for this has to be the difference in how an heir and the other children are educated."

"Educated?" I repeated.

"The bloodline is everything to nobles. Naturally, most of them have multiple children...but that also makes it more likely for conflict over succession to arise. To mitigate those potential conflicts, it's not uncommon to only give the direct heir, or at most the first and second sons, the knowledge and craft needed to run their land. Of course, all noble children also receive a bare minimum of etiquette training so as to not embarrass their houses."

In other words, these new lords were thrust into a job they knew nothing about and had no experience in...which sounded like a disaster waiting to happen.

"There are a lot of moving pieces like the history and current standing of the land, the relationships between neighboring territories... There's also some subtle difference in etiquette

expected in meetings between lords and ladies, certain unwritten expectations and dealings in place. There's no way they could function as the head of their house without any preparation," Hudom said.

"When there is a sudden change in lordship, one of the advisors usually stands in or works closely with the new lord. Or, the new lord seeks out guidance from another noble family they have a relationship with. However, things are different in cases like this where the change in power comes from an arrest. Most likely, anyone close and privy to the intricacies of governing were arrested along with them. And no noble family would choose to associate themselves further with houses of such ill repute," Carme said.

People tended to lose their cool when they felt backed into a corner. It was believable that some people would make rash and illogical choices in this kind of situation.

"Are they acting this way because they feel desperate and isolated?" I asked.

Eleonora pinched her brows. "That is possible, but the responsibility falls on the new lords at the end of the day. Many who aren't expected to earn the title can be...loose, in more ways than one."

Hudom shifted in his seat uncomfortably. "I can't argue with that. I've met my share."



"I did not mean you. I merely stated a fact that there are many who conduct themselves in that way. People who never had to work, whose only responsibility is to wed at the right age to a suitable match, their minds filled with nothing but abusing their family's money and power for their own pleasures... My ex-husband was a great example of them."

"Right..." I muttered, remembering that Eleonora was divorced...from a terrible excuse for a husband, from what I'd heard. Not that I was defending the noble in question by any means, but I'd been wondering why she'd sounded so fiercely accusatory when we had no proof of his crime. "This is still unverified information. Let's prepare to act while we wait for a follow-up. We can expect another report, can't we?"

"Yes. A report verifying the criminal activity or lack thereof will arrive shortly—in as soon as three days," Sebas said with certainty. When I asked for details, he shared that Reinbach himself had gone to meet with the suspect noble as soon as he heard of the rumor...with three of his dragon familiars, each carrying as many hardened guards as they could.

That noble is going to do more than just sweat, I thought. "Could that cause any issues?"

"None," Sebas said. "Whenever he visited other territories when he was the duke, he always took just as many guards with him. When it comes to guards, our motto is quality over quantity...but there are appearances to consider on visits such as this. And it is important when conflict like this arises to draw a clear line in the sand the first time. In that sense, this rumor was beneficial in keeping the other nobles in check without expending a lot of resources."

There couldn't be too many nobles in this world willing to start fights with someone who'd come flying on dragonback at the first sign of trouble. I saw it as a sign of the Jamils giving it their all to protect me, and it seemed like I really wouldn't have to worry about any other nobles messing with my businesses. "Then I will leave that to him," I said. "Do you have any plans after this?" I asked Eleonora and Sebas.

"I shall return to the estate to report on this meeting," Sebas said.

"I would like to start working as soon as possible..." said Eleonora. Since she was new in the city, there was much for her to do, but we couldn't start her onboarding now. Carme had started preparing for the transition, but this visit was too sudden.

"If you don't mind, I can show you to the housing we discussed earlier," I suggested. "And if we have time, I can show you around the city and introduce you to people you will be working with."

"Thank you for your consideration. That would be wonderful," Eleonora said, and added that she had come directly to the laundry shop without even booking a room. Sebas was holding on to her belongings with Space magic, so she just needed to take them from him before going to her lodging.

In a few moments, we were outside of the shop receiving Eleonora's luggage...which was just two leather duffels. She really had only packed the essentials. One of the duffels looked brand-new, while the other one looked clean but well-worn, marked with lots of little scratches and a few patches—signs that she had used it for years with great care.

"We're going to go around the city," I announced.

"I'm headed back to the estate to make my report," Sebas said.

We stored Eleonora's duffels in my Space magic and set off walking without the burden of any luggage. I could have taken her by Space magic to wherever I wanted to go, but this would double as my tour of the city, so we'd be going by foot and public transit.

At the nearest main road, we climbed onto a communal carriage and headed for the northeast side of the city. We rode for a little less than twenty minutes while I pointed out stores and notable locations that we passed until we came to an alley close to our destination.

"This area seems different from where the laundry shop is. The roads and buildings all seem very new," Eleonora noted immediately.

"You're absolutely right," I said. "Until last year, this was part of the slums. We did some rezoning at the end of the year—now it's a proper residential area."

"So this is the place... I had read about it in the report. There

isn’t a sign of the slums left.” Her eyes narrowed as she intently scanned every corner of the alley, so focused that she didn’t seem to notice I was watching her. Was she on edge because it used to be the slums? Or was there something about the location she didn’t like? If there was a problem with the place, we had to address it sooner rather than later. When I asked her, she said, “I’m sorry. It is not that I don’t like it. I was admiring it.”

“Admiring it?”

“Yes. How much do you know about my family and our land, Master Ryoma?”

All I knew was that her father was a baron who ruled over a pretty small territory, albeit with literal gold mines present. I’d also heard that other nobles had interfered with the digging and running of the mines, taking advantage of Eleonora’s family.

I told her all of this honestly, and I saw a shadow fall over her face. “Yes. Our family had its only source of income—the gold mines—taken over by other families. Even though the mines are very lucrative, all but a pitiful fraction of it was taken by the four noble families and their territories. We have always struggled to make ends meet in terms of running our land effectively. It is our fault that we couldn’t prevent those families from interfering and taking advantage of our assets...but our people also paid for that mistake. Those with connections to the four families took advantage of those without, driving the class divide in our land further and further. For as long as I can remember, more than half of our people were starving,” Eleonora said, the last part spoken through teeth gritted with shame. There was no way for me to know exactly how bad it was in her territory, but I could tell that it was just as bad or worse than the slums had been.

She went on to say that her family had searched desperately for a way to improve the lives of their people, but still hadn’t come up with an effective solution. “I wasn’t the heir to our title, but my parents were some of the few nobles who taught all of their children everything the future baron or baroness would need to know. Thanks to that, I think I understand how difficult it can be to rule a land as they have. That’s why I couldn’t contain my surprise and

admiration at the drastic improvement in this part of town. I apologize if my behavior was misleading."

"There's no need to apologize. If you had any aversion to the slums or its residents, I would have had to reconsider some of your potential duties. Many of my jobs involve the people of the slums, and they played a big part in the transformation of this district," I said.

"That will not be an issue. My parents have raised me under the belief that it is the duty of a lord or lady to improve the lives of people struggling on their land. How can we help them if we don't even acknowledge them, they told me. Even though I am your secretary now and not the lady of a territory, I have no fear or animosity towards any resident here," Eleonora said earnestly. I could tell that both she and her parents were honest, honorable nobles. Her outlook was still limited to a noble's point of view, which was to be expected from her upbringing. She seemed eager to work with the struggling people, so I felt like Hudom and I could support her enough in those endeavors. Another thing I noticed was how she'd hesitate a little when she mentioned her family. I didn't sense any ill will from today's story, but perhaps she had some reservations about them.

Even in the short time I'd spent with her, I was learning more about her, little by little. I'd be careful not to overstep my place as her boss, but I wanted to make the effort to speak with her going forwards. By the time I'd made that decision, we had arrived at our destination.

Chapter 10, Episode 8: Introductions, Part 1

"Here we are. This is your home-slash-office from today," I said. This street was one of the areas I was directly involved in rezoning, lined with rows of Georgian-inspired architecture. These buildings might have lacked the ornate elegance of the real thing due to my lack of artistic talent, but they were perfectly serviceable living quarters.

"I prefer this sort of understated aesthetics," Eleonora said. "I noticed that this building, and the ones on either side of it, are slightly larger than the others."

"The original building here was rather expansive, so it made sense for the zoning to split it into three buildings. And when we were building this place—"

Just as I was about to tell the story while we stood before her office, the door of the house to the right of it opened to let out a string of familiar faces that belonged to the delinquents-turned-adventurers I'd been looking after.

They noticed me before I could call to them, and their hunched shoulders snapped straight. "Good morning, Ryoma!" they all said, practically saluting me.

"Hmm... Good morning," I replied at their usual display of obedience. My wiping the floor with them when we first met really whipped them into shape. "Oh, Eleonora. These are...some adventurers I'm mentoring. Kind of." Then, I briefly introduced her to the adventurers. "So, if you need something when I'm not around, you can speak to her...but don't bother her unless it's necessary."

"Yessir! It's nice to meet you!" they said to Eleonora.

"I-It's nice to meet you too," Eleonora said, faltering for once. I didn't blame her—these guys almost genuflecting before her still

looked like street thugs. “Do you all live here?” Eleonora asked.

“Oh, I need to—” *explain that,* I almost said, when the door opened again.

“What is it, young men?! Did you forget something?! Or do you have a question?!” A voice boomed so loudly that I couldn’t hear the door as it banged open. Birds flew off in fright from a tree across the street. The thundering voice belonged to an elderly man with a muscular frame and impressive mustache. “Hm?! Ryoma, my boy! Why are you here?!”

“Hello, Mister Sanchez. My new secretary, who I told you about, arrived today. I’m showing her to her house,” I explained.

“Here already?!” Garcia huffed.

“Eleonora, this is the former law officer I told you about. Mister Garcia Sanchez.”

“Nice to meet you. I am Eleonora Ransor.”

“Mm! I’m retired from practicing law, but you can come see me with any questions about law or taming! Even if you only know you want to learn more about law, I’ll make the time!” Garcia said.

“He gives private lectures about law to those who are interested,” I supplied. “I’ve asked him to drill into those adventurers, at the bare minimum, what kind of actions would break the law and what the consequences would be for those actions.”

“All are equal before the law! Every citizen benefits from the protections they afford them, and must face any punishments for breaking them! Then why shouldn’t every citizen be educated on the law?! I have plenty of time on my hands in my old age! Do not hesitate to ask me anything!” Garcia assured Eleonora. “Now! I imagine you’ve much to do to acclimate yourself! I shall take my leave!”

“Oh, we’ll get going too,” the adventurers said, going their own ways as Garcia retreated into his house. Suddenly, it seemed so quiet on this residential street.

“Quite the first impression,” I said.

“He is like a tempest,” Eleonora commented.

“Don’t worry. He’s naturally loud, but he’s not angry or anything. Actually, he’s a very nice person,” I said.

The phrase “all are equal before the law” was Garcia’s motto. From what I’d heard, he lived by his motto when he practiced law, never bending once to the pressure of the powerful or the rich. That reputation had earned him the duke’s seal of approval, and I tried to imagine how difficult it must have been for him to stay true to his beliefs. I wasn’t idealistic enough to believe that everyone in his position would have done the same. Even on Earth, lawyers and judges were only human.

“Now, let’s—” I was cut off once again when another door—to the neighboring house on the opposite side of Garcia’s—opened, letting out a well-dressed elder with a cane, who walked over to the property line as he waved us over.

“Hello, Mister Stoia,” I greeted him.

“I could hear him from inside my house. He would be perfectly agreeable if it were not for that blaring voice... Oh, pardon me, Miss Eleonora Ransor. I am Mueller Stoia. Just as you have, I’ve been appointed by the duke to aid Ryoma with my expertise as a former tax collector. It is very nice to meet you. I expect us to see each other often,” Mueller said.

“Oh, yes. I look forward to it,” Eleonora said.

“Forgive me for not lingering longer. The sun these days is too oppressive for an old fart like me.” Using his cane and dragging one of his legs, Mueller returned to his estate.

“He’s...” Eleonora started.

“Mister Stoia can come across a little harsh in his manner, but he is kind,” I said. Despite his rough demeanor, he enjoyed talking to other people. According to his grandson, who accompanied him one day, Mueller thought that long conversations were rude and time-wasting, so he tried his best to be concise.

“If he came out of his house just to meet me despite his leg, that seems like a warm welcome to me,” Eleonora said.

“You’re right. So if you have any questions about taxes or accounting, you can always knock on his door,” I said.

Mueller, too, was a man with integrity. As a tax collector, he accepted no bribery or even so much as a paid lunch. His eye for finding evasion was unparalleled to the point where he had been the

nightmare of tax dodgers everywhere. While his age hadn't helped with his leg, he first started using a cane when someone whose tax evasions were brought to light attacked Mueller in revenge. Tax collectors were often depicted as scummy villains in fiction, but even the honest and good collectors were putting their lives on the line.

"Now that you've met the neighbors... To get back on track, these buildings are larger than the others for the benefit of the two people you just met...and I thought it was about time I got a house in the city," I said.

"This is your house?"

"Oh, we won't be sharing a roof or anything. Don't worry." I'd built it in part for tax purposes, but I'd never ended up moving in since my commute time was close to none thanks to my Space magic. Eleonora would actually get full use of the place.

"A live-in position is very generous as it is, so I won't pretend to decline it... Thank you," Eleonora said.

"It wasn't quite a waste, but I always wanted to utilize it better, which I hope you can. The interior is clean; I've been generally keeping up the place regularly. It's also pretty sparse inside." I unlocked the front door and gave Eleonora a tour, if I could call it that.

The house had five rather spacious rooms and an open kitchen-living-room. Assuming she'd use the first floor as her office, there were three rooms she could use for work, plus a bathroom, and ascending stairs. The second floor, which would most likely be her living space, contained two bedrooms and the kitchen-living-room, as well as a master bath. This was hardly a tour because only the second floor was furnished, and only with the bare minimum. Eleonora didn't seem picky about her living space either, so we only took quick glances at each room.

"What do you think?" I asked.

"It's even better than I hoped. Forgive me for the comparison, but when I was with my ex-husband, I lived in a detached barn that was barely kept up," Eleonora said, sharing a light on how tough her life might have been. "We need to at least spruce up the rooms downstairs where we will be meeting clients."

“Then once we’re back from giving introductions, that will be your first official task. Use the business account to dress the rooms however you see fit,” I said.

“Understood.”

Now that the house tour was over, I wasn’t sure where to go next. There were plenty of places I wanted to show her. For instance, the market would be somewhere she’d go to a lot... I decided to ask for her input rather than picking randomly.

“In that case, I would like to prioritize places that pertain to my duties. I am embarrassed to admit it, but I can’t do much in the kitchen beyond basic grilling or boiling. Most of the time, I eat out or just eat bread, cured meat...things I don’t have to cook, but that last a long time. I packed clothes and necessities in my luggage.”

“So work-related places are more important...” I repeated. “Got it. Then let’s do a loop.”

I decided to introduce Eleonora to people I knew and worked with. There were several businesses around here that I owned, including restaurants, so I could kill two birds with one stone by getting lunch while I caught up with the head chefs.

When I pitched this idea to Eleonora, she accepted. After setting her luggage down, we set out into town again.

Chapter 10, Episode 9: Introductions, Part 2

After showing Eleonora her new office and home, we took the public carriage again, this time to the center of the city.

"As you can see, there are a lot of tall buildings here. If you ever get lost, you can always get here by finding a main road and heading towards the center. It's a good landmark," I explained.

"I heard that most of your businesses are concentrated in the northeastern neighborhoods of the city, and the same was true with my new office. If I can make it back here, I shouldn't have too much of a problem finding my way back to that part of town," Eleonora said.

"The roads should be easier to navigate after the rezoning, so unless you get lost very easily, I don't expect you'll face any problems. Branches of the guilds are concentrated here too, and I've made friends with many people around here, so I'd like to introduce you to them."

So, we started with the nearest—the Adventurer's Guild. Given the late-morning hour, there weren't too many adventurers inside, save for a few people bumming around. They likely either couldn't find a suitable quest or were just taking some time off. None of them were at the reception counter.

Eleonora was drawing many of their eyes, since it was rare for a non-adventurer woman to visit—especially one as well-dressed as she was. I decided it would be best if we made this quick.

"Oh, Ryoma," Maylene—the receptionist—greeted us, looking up from her paperwork.

I took the opportunity to introduce Eleonora to her.

"Got it. So I can contact you in Ryoma's stead," she said. "Nice to meet you, Eleonora. Business or otherwise, you can come see me if

you ever need anything. At the very least, I can lend an ear."

"Thank you. It is very nice to meet you," Eleonora said.

"Oh, do you want to meet the guildmaster too? He should be available now. There's a little lull in his work," Maylene said.

"What's all this?" a guy said loudly from across the lobby. He eyed us shadily as he stalked over from the quest board. I'd never met him before, but it was clear that he was talking to us and that he wasn't looking to make friends.

While others in the guild sensed an air of trouble and turned our way, I noticed Eleonora brush her pocket with a casual movement—she must have been hiding a weapon or something for self-defense.

The guy didn't seem to notice as he stared me down. "Bring a chick in here? It'd be one thing if you were here to post a quest, but you're telling me a twink like you is an adventurer? With a *secretary*? Adventuring ain't some hobby for the rich! We're out here risking our lives day in and day out!"

"Excuse me—" Maylene tried to interject.

"And you! 'Do you want to meet the guildmaster?'" He sneered mockingly. "So this guild goes around pimping their master out to any rich brat who walks in?! Huh?!"

His grievances quickly spiraled from complaining about us to the guild in general. Pretty quickly, it became clear that he was a new adventurer in town and that he wasn't happy with his work here. Being hassled at the guild was a cliché in fiction... I just didn't think it would happen to me after living here for so long, in the most insignificant way possible. Come to think of it, my now-loyal adventurer gang had accosted me when we first met. Maybe the majority of adventurers were quick to anger—that had to be it.

"This city's full of scumbags! Like that laundry shop that kicked me out! They don't *do* any real work!" the guy continued.

"My laundry shop?" I blurted before I could stop.

"*Your* laundry shop?" The guy snarled.

As far as I knew, mine was the only laundry shop in Gimul. If he was kicked out of it... He had to be the sad sap Carme told me about! "So you're the drunk we banned."

"Then you really are a part of that stupid store that embarrasses

their customers!" he shouted, barking up and down the guild about all sorts of things that didn't go his way. He was more focused on shouting for now, but he was aggressive enough that I felt he might reach for us any minute.

Meanwhile, Eleonora was in a combat stance, ready to fight if it came to it. To be honest, I didn't see this guy as a threat. I never would have been afraid of someone like him, but after facing off against truly dangerous monsters and adventurers like Glen in the Sea of Trees, someone like this whiner seemed even more insignificant. Eleonora looked stronger than him. I expected her to fight mostly with magic like Remily, and that she should have no problem dealing with this loser. That being said, a fight among adventurers would be less of a headache later. I'd have to ask her to take a back seat.

"I'm okay, Eleonora. I'll handle it," I said.

The fact that I was paying more attention to Eleonora than to him seemed to enrage the guy further. "Trying to show off in front of that chick?!" With his face beet-red, the guy raised his fist all too slowly. His form wasn't much better than Glen's, and I could easily follow his movement.

I merely brushed my hand against his arm to deflect the punch—I couldn't believe how easy that was. I'd barely needed to use my arm muscles, let alone the rest of my body. Then, the guy's midsection was wide open. I kicked him there to end the fight...and then felt the crack of his armor and my foot sinking into his flesh.

"Crap! I was too distracted to adjust my strength!" I blurted out. I hadn't kicked him as hard as I kicked Glen, but it still sent the guy flying into the wall, where he slumped to the ground motionless.

I ran over to see that he was conscious, and his injuries were—luckily—healable with magic.

"There!" I said, after running five doses of healing magic.

"What are you doing?"

"Ah!" I whipped around to see Worgan. "How long have you been standing there?"



"Since you kicked him. I'd come down in between my work to deal with some guy causing trouble... I didn't expect to see a full-grown man fly across my guild lobby today," the guildmaster said.

"I'm sorry for the ruckus," I said.

"Maylene gave me the rundown," Worgan said. "It's not the first time he's stirred the pot anyway. The worst you'll hear from me is a little warning. Mind your own strength. There you go. I'll take care of the rest. I can move him, right?"

"Yes, he's all healed," I said.

"All right, I'm gonna chuck him in the back until he comes to! Someone give me a hand!"

Several veteran adventurers of Gimul answered the guildmaster's call.

"You got it, boss."

"Why'd he have to start a fight with Ryoma of all people?"

"Ryoma looks like a normal kid if you didn't know him. Pah. This guy reeks of booze."

"I've never seen him without smelling some on him."

"Even if humans can't tell, every beastkin can smell it."

"He can't even put down the bottle? How much of a scumbag is he?"

"Of course, I'd be jealous of someone bringing in a pretty girl in here too."

"You can say that again."

"Hey, Ryoma! We're all jealous of you!"

The adventurers hauled the unconscious man by his arms and legs and hauled him off, calling out good-natured jeers at me.

With that problem solved, I introduced Eleonora to Worgan and the adventurers before leaving.

"Who knew a tour of the city could get so hectic," I said. "Are you tired?"

"I was somewhat overwhelmed by the number of people who've approached us, but I'm not tired of it. You have a great many friends, Master Takebayashi," Eleonora said.

"I'm just as surprised about that as you. Before coming to this city, I could hardly have imagined that I'd get to know so many

people. Sometimes, just once in a while, I do wonder if I'm interacting with them appropriately. There are a lot of good people in this city." That was something I hoped Eleonora could feel for herself. "And thank you for earlier."

"What do you mean?" Eleonora replied.

"You were going to defend me from that guy who accosted us."

"Oh... My help wasn't necessary."

"I appreciate the thought alone," I said. "Just from how you carry yourself, I'd say you're well trained."

"Not as much as you," Eleonora said humbly. "When I was married, I led a battalion of the local militia."

"Really?" Come to think of it, my first impression of her was that she belonged in the military or private security, despite her maid's uniform...little did I expect her to be a bona fide veteran.

"In my case, I was only given the position because of my title. I'm no commander, but I have seen my fair share of combat where I honed my magic," she said.

"Speaking of magic, I was told you graduated from the royal academy's magic curriculum at the top of your class," I said.

A shadow might have crossed her face, but she overcame it so quickly that I couldn't tell if this was a sore subject. Eleonora didn't seem to have any reservations about telling her story, at least. "I'm embarrassed to bring this up now. Back in the day, I was called the Thunderstorm Witch. My forte was Lightning magic, and especially with big and powerful spells like Thunderstrike."

"I didn't realize they gave out monikers at school too."

"Students like to feel special just as much as adventurers. Both like to boast, and nobles often prefer roundabout, poetic language. Mine was on the simpler side, compared to some others... It's embarrassing to think back on it now." Eleonora was faintly blushing.

She wouldn't have earned a moniker like that without the skill to back it up. If she was so adept with magic, I was sure she had the knowledge too... I'd love to ask her questions about magic when she had the time.

With that thought, I asked if she would mind discussing magic. Eleonora looked at me curiously for a moment before agreeing

without protest to a future discussion on the matter. “Speaking of curiosity, if you don’t mind...” she began.

“Anything.”

“Was it the Veldoole boy who told you I graduated top of my class?”

“Uh... Yes, it was Hudom. He didn’t know much beyond that, saying I’d be better to hear about your family from you,” I said.

“I see. He’s still as considerate as when we were students.”

Since they were students? Did she know him back then?

As if she read the question on my face, Eleonora continued, “Being in different grades didn’t stop girls from talking about him.”

“He was that popular?” I asked.

“I wasn’t interested in romance...or understood it, for that matter. Ladies who don’t have a fiancé by the time they enter the academy turn into bloodhounds for a suitor. Being enrolled in the knight’s curriculum meant he was set for life, and he was friendly and considerate. It was only natural that girls flocked to him,” Eleonora said, as she had just been an outsider looking in. She had to have dedicated much of her student life to her studies to reach the top of the class.

When I honestly commended her for it, she shook her head. “There was a lot of hard work involved... I was addicted to it. With enough hard work, I believed that I could find some way to improve my family’s situation. I poured my whole life into my studies. When people showed any less dedication than that... I discounted not only those who seemed lazy, but also those who spent any of their time on anything that didn’t directly benefit their future. I called them slackers or fools who prioritized temporary pleasure over their careers. There was nothing for me besides my school work, which made me a very narrow-minded child.”

“Oh...” I couldn’t just say that I understood how she felt, because our circumstances were different. Still, Eleonora’s story resonated with me. Making friends was a lot harder the second time around...and it wasn’t easy to get it right the first time. “Do you think you could work well with Hudom?” I asked. “I’d asked him to assist you before I knew anything about your history.”

"That will not be a problem. My personal feelings will not affect my work...but that is not what you asked, is it?" Eleonora pondered for a few moments before adding, "First of all, I harbor no feelings towards him. Other than his name, I can't recall anything else...which is why I am concerned that I had slighted him in some way in the past. In no offense to him, he is the kind of boy whom I would have detested as a student. But that was a long time ago. From our brief conversation the other day, I have nothing against him. He did seem a little hesitant, which is to be expected if he knew of me in school. He was still willing to speak to me nonetheless, so I see a fair possibility of building a relationship."

"I'm glad you can see this in an optimistic light," I said. "Of course. I should have been more considerate before I asked too many questions on your first day! I'm sorry," I said.

"No, I really do appreciate it," she said.

"Thank you. I'm not the best at understanding different social situations." I was really hoping Eleonora would reach out for any help she needed on this front, but I also suspected she might not feel entirely comfortable because of our positions. At the very least, now I could hold a longer conversation with her. One step at a time, without pushing too hard, I'd be building that bridge between us.

Chapter 10, Episode 10: More News and Inspecting the Lab

Three days had passed since Eleonora's arrival. We were carrying on with introductions and the transfer of duties when Sebas came knocking on my door again.

"We looked into the potential unauthorized use of your proprietary technology. While there was no theft of proprietary technology, there is a facility that partially resembles your trash plant," Sebas said, once we sat down with him in the meeting room we'd set up in Eleonora's office.

If there was no theft, then it wasn't like one of my slimes had been stolen or one of my employees had sold out information, which was a relief.

Sebas continued, "What first drew our attention were dumpsites newly built around the cities within the lord's territory. When questioned about it, the lord explained that the new dumpsites were set up because his existing trash processing centers were attacked by monsters. His territory is seeing a comparatively faster rise in monster attacks, which they have been struggling to control because of the recent change in lordship. The old trash centers—located outside of the cities—were attacked by monsters searching for prey, which inevitably led to more injuries among their employees."

Preventing monster attacks would require an investment in the facility's defenses. However, this territory was never particularly wealthy to begin with, and having to pay the fines for the crimes of its previous lord was a drain on their coffers. Waiting out the monster attacks wasn't an option, though—if they went unchecked, the monster attacks would only worsen. The new lord's desperate solution was to freeze the existing trash plant and set up temporary dumps around the city. It felt like a stopgap, if anything, and there

were some sanitary concerns, but moving the dumps into the city did allow the guards to concentrate within the city limits. Gimul still had its traditional trash plant outside the city, which was still staffed and operational. The successful implementation of the slime trash plant would probably allow us to better deal with attacks like that. If we didn't have a backup trash plant like mine, monster attacks would have been a huge issue.

"We have varied the establishment of collection spots as well as the rise in monster attacks. The lord is not lying about that," Sebas said.

"About that?" I questioned.

"Very astute. The root of the problem can be traced back to the relationship between the lord and a noble who borders his territory—there's much more animosity there than we'd initially thought. The increase in monster attacks affects not only trash collection but the territory's commerce. The lord admitted his predecessor's wrongdoings and his own inexperience to ask the neighboring noble for help. But then the noble rejected his plea, only to turn around and demand outrageous payments for their aid, knowing how desperate the new lord is."

"Then eliminating those monsters would only treat the symptom," I said.

"New lords and ladies are at the bottom of the pecking order. Sounds like someone's blinded with greed," Hudom said.

"If their territories neighbor each other, all they would have to claim to buy time is that their resources are tied up defending their own territory from the monster attacks. They must be waiting for the new lord to grow even more desperate until they can negotiate an outrageously unfair deal to their advantage. Never mind that the people are the ones who will suffer... Even if the new lord can survive the imminent rise in monster attacks by taking the unfair deal, if those conditions make it so he can't run his territory effectively... Sooner or later, his territory will collapse," Eleonora said bitterly, probably thinking of her own family. Her attitude towards the new lord wasn't friendly, but not entirely unsympathetic. She knew better than most the burdens that came with an inescapable

lineage of lordship.

At this point, I picked up on what Sebas was implying. "The new lord meant for us to suspect him of copying my trash plant... Is that right?"

"Most likely, though he hasn't admitted as much. The former duke's visit had quite rattled the new lord, I've been told, but his defense for setting up new trash collection points seemed rehearsed. Since this *misunderstanding* came to light, the neighboring noble has refrained from contacting the new lord," Sebas said.

"No one's gonna want someone stupid enough to provoke the duke as their lackey. Being associated with someone like that, let alone having them act on your accord, wouldn't be worth the risk," Hudom said.

Like the vibrant coloring of poisonous animals, the new lord had painted himself as dangerously useless—the worst kind of potential ally.

"All he did was collect trash in the city and then burn it, which is not a new method of processing trash by any means. This means that there are no grounds for an accusation of theft of proprietary knowledge. He must have planned to ignore the issue if we had never brought it up, and thought he could play it as an honest mistake if we did," Sebas said.

"Still, that couldn't have made a good impression on the duke. Did he think his reputation couldn't get any worse?" I mused.

"Perhaps he was spurred on by youthful confidence and rebellion," Sebas suggested. "The new lord, having graduated from the academy only last year, is nineteen years of age."

He's that young?! That did make sense, though. This was someone who inherited the lordship without enough time to properly prepare for the role. If he were older, he would have had time to learn his responsibilities before now. I'd considered the possibility that this was a last-ditch effort, but I hadn't quite expected this. "I'm not sure how I feel about this," I admitted. "Was there nothing else he could have done?"

"Requesting aid from the king's army is an option," Eleonora quickly jumped in. "The problem is the timeline. Mobilizing the army

requires several steps: filling out paperwork, deciding how many and which teams to assign, preparing supplies according to the job, and then traveling to where the army is needed. That would have taken two weeks at minimum."

"You may think that's too long, but if there was a system in place that allowed for the king's army to arrive any quicker, it could put the local lords on edge or even offend them if they took it to mean that the king considers their own defenses inadequate. It's a tricky situation, politically," Hudom supplied. "The king's army is always the backup. It's expected for the lord's militia and local adventurers to respond first, then for neighboring landlords to join forces if that doesn't cut it."

Precisely because landlords couldn't afford to squabble with each other and had to come to each other's aid, they needed to maintain a good relationship with neighboring lords. Unfortunately for this young lord, he never had a chance to establish that relationship. "To be honest, I half feel sorry for the new lord, and half incredulous that they can squabble like this when there's an emergency at hand."

"Most problems boil down to squabbles. What seems like a complicated, messy problem is normally just a pileup of small ones. That's why issues should be resolved before they fester and grow," Sebas said.

That much rang true. Even in my job in Japan, there were plenty of small problems that could turn into big problems if they were ignored. As long as I knew there were problems, though, I could try to deal with them early. The worst was when I didn't know about the problems—like time bombs silently ticking away. And my office in Japan had several people who'd made planting those time bombs an art form. I could forgive that they didn't notice the problem right away—what could they do? But there was no defense for hiding a problem after discovering it and then throwing it on my plate moments before the deadline! It would have been bad enough if only our new hires did this, but somehow my boss was prone to it too. There were some nights when I was alone in the office and I just had to scream. In any world, it seemed, messes trickled down the totem pole, leaving those on the bottom to clean it up. The ones

I felt truly sorry for were the commoners living under the rule of the young lord.

"In any case, we won't be bothering you with this incident anymore," Sebas told me. "Even though he hasn't stolen any proprietary technology, Master Reinbach has given the young lord a stern warning, and the entire territory will now be under the watch of the Jamils. If any issues should arise, we will handle them. Please feel free to focus on your studies and research." Then, Sebas took out a stack of papers from his Item Box. "On that note, these are the files and the permit regarding the testing ground for cleansing cursed energy."

"Oh, the plot I asked you about. Thank you," I said.

"Cleaning cursed energy from the land will greatly benefit us as well. The duke had even intended to complete the process before your return from the Sea of Trees. I apologize that it took this long," said Sebas.

"Considering the dangers of cursed energy, I completely understand that the process can be lengthy. This was faster than I'd expected," I said. In Earth-terms, this was like leasing a volcano that leaked toxic fumes. Naturally, there were considerations to be made before Reinhart could give the green light. Even when he did, his employees had to process and record everything, which had to have taken some more time.

"And Lord Rosenberg will be available next week," Sebas added.

"He's going to teach me hexes. I've been looking forward to it very much. The last time I spoke to him, he only said he was going to make the time, so we haven't set a meeting place. Should I come to the duke's residence?" I asked.

"You also mentioned that you found lost curse-breaking magic. As soon as Lord Rosenberg is ready, why don't you have him meet you at the testing ground? He is adept at handling cursed energy himself, and I am sure that location would be better suited for trying out anything that comes to mind," Sebas said, knowing too well how I usually jumped to experimenting once I had an idea. That was a great arrangement for me, so I had no reason to say no. We then set a specific time for Rosenberg and I to meet up and went over

how to access the new testing grounds.

After our meeting, I continued my work in the city—mostly setting up the office—while my anticipation grew to begin officially learning hexes.

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The next week flew by.

"I never realized there was a place like this..." I said.

Sebas had taken us to the foothills of a mountain that was, to my surprise, not too far from the Forest of Gana where I'd spent my first three years in this world. I even remembered passing by this place when I was grinding quests to raise my guild rank.

Cursed energy had apparently taken its toll on the mountain—a patch near its summit was barren, where trees had rotted and crumbled...as if an expansive development project had broken ground. With the rest of the mountain covered in luscious trees unaffected by cursed energy, the bald patch stuck out painfully.

"Master Takebayashi, everyone is ready," Eleonora called. I'd originally planned for her to hold down the fort in Gimul and perform secretarial duties, but I decided to have her tag along this time. Apparently, while she was being trained by Carme, he advised her to become accustomed to my behavior, since she had no problem learning the tasks involved in the job.

I made a mental note to bring Carme something for his dedication. "Thank you. Shall we?" I turned towards the voice and saw a group of people in hiking gear. Beside Eleonora stood Hudom, who'd be assisting me, Sebas, who'd been our guide so far, and Rosenberg, my warlock-tutor. A few paces away from them stood five adventurers: the female beastkin Cilia, Mizelia, Welanna, and Miya, as well as Jeff the lance master. I had asked them to survey the testing ground. I would have done it myself, but there were too many things on my plate. Eleonora had convinced me as much, so I decided to outsource a portion of the surveying.

Since I was working as the duke's engineer, I had to find a crew who were not only capable but also trustworthy. These people more

than fit the bill, and it was nice to have people I personally knew on the team. There were ten of us in all. Although I rarely worked with such a large team, I was sure this was going to be a blast.

Chapter 10, Episode 11: Downsides of the Warlock Industry

"Here we go!" I announced.

We were traveling on slimeback (if I could call it that) from the foothills to the testing grounds. A huge bush slime carrying all five adventurers led the way. Just like it did in the Sea of Trees, it plowed through dense trees and foliage, carving a path up the mountain wide enough for two people to walk side by side.

Right behind the bush slime, an emperor scavenger slime carrying the four nobles plus me leveled the path while it cleared the branches the adventurers were cutting down along the way. We were climbing at a relatively slow pace, but considering how we were on their backs and the slimes were moving up the side of a mountain while carving a brand-new path, they were still much faster than doing this process by hand.

Other than Sebas and I, who'd had prior experience, it was clearly unsettling to ride on slimeback, especially for the four beastkin.

"This feels weird..."

"I never thought I'd be sliding *up* a mountain..."

"It's completely different from riding a horse..."

"We'll get used to it soon enough. It's a smooth ride."

"It's *too* smooth. That's why it feels off."

When I asked them if they were okay, they explained how beastkin had heightened senses that made them particularly sensitive to new experiences. Back in Japan, coworkers and associates who had pets often said that they took a long time to acclimate to a new environment, so that made sense. Just as Jeff said, they should soon get used to it. Since the others added that they would dismount and run on their own if it became too much,

we carried on up the mountain. I decided to take their word for it, and held back the urge to do something to make them more comfortable. I didn't want them to think they were pressuring me into changing my methods.

"I've never ridden on a slime before, but this makes me want one of my own," Rosenberg said, sounding genuinely interested. When I looked over my shoulder, I could see him stroking the slime beneath our feet.

We'd said hi to each other when we met up on the bottom of the mountain, and there hadn't been time for conversation beyond that. Since we last met, my status had changed from client to student. This was a good opportunity for us to get to know each other more. "I'm glad you think so. A slime of this size can carry significant cargo, and they're the best for sliding over uneven paths," I said.

"Splendid. In addition to breaking curses, warlocks also look after cursed lands," Rosenberg said. "Even with regular cleansing to keep the cursed energy of those places at bay, it isn't uncommon for people to flee the entire area, leaving roads leading up to the cursed land unkempt." Because leaving a cursed land untreated would only worsen the cursed energy, he had no choice but to cleanse it, no matter how tough the commute became. "Hexing often requires specialized equipment that needs to be hauled to the cursed land as well. Enlisting the help of a Space magic user can mitigate that problem, but there's always a widespread demand for them. Most of the time, I go in by carriage and on foot. Checking up on and cleansing a cursed land only requires a few visits a year, but I once juggled the caseload of three warlocks because of two coinciding retirements... I don't like remembering the year I spent until replacement warlocks joined. That experience helps me see how useful these slimes are."

"I didn't think being a warlock would be so physically demanding," I said. Even when Rosenberg spoke briefly about the warlock industry during our last meeting, I felt that they were kind of being abused. While I was interested in hexes and wanted to learn about breaking curses and cursed energy and all that, I couldn't say I'd aspire to become a professional warlock.

Rosenberg chuckled, apparently reading the question on my face. "It isn't a cushy job, that's for sure. Warlocks are constantly understaffed. If you can stay away from cursed land gigs, or perhaps limit yourself to cursed lands located near cities, it won't be as physically draining...but that's not realistic for most of us. On the other hand, we're never given assignments that don't align with our abilities. For example, sending a warlock with a talent for curse-breaking but none for cleansing cursed energy to a cursed land would only do harm and no good. Signing up for the life of managing cursed lands certainly isn't the only path. Some warlocks do nothing but break curses."

Of course, that path wasn't all easy either. Curse-breaking warlocks could get cooped up in their workshop, or set up extensive communication with their clients like a doctor does with their patients. At the end of the day, aspiring warlocks had to figure out their ability and propensity to pick their career path.

"If I were to work as a warlock in the future, I'd mostly want to manage cursed lands like the testing ground we're headed to. I have the physical endurance and the slimes to help me. Commuting won't be a problem with my Space magic. On the other hand, if you ask me if I can provide sensitive care to those suffering from curses..." I said.

"That is a difficult task even for seasoned warlocks. You need only to focus on what you excel at. As I said, we are always short on warlocks. Because you'd be willing to take on cursed lands that are more labor-intensive, there will be people who can help you. On top of that, I've heard that you've already devised your own magic that cleanses cursed energy. With talent like that, you'll be welcomed with open arms anywhere you go," Rosenberg said.

"That means a lot, coming from you," I said. "Thank you for your tutelage in advance. I am looking forward to improving my skills."

"Before we begin specific lessons, I was told that you already know how to cast and break a curse. Is that accurate?" my tutor asked.

"Technically, I do know. Miss Remily Kremis taught me how to cast a curse and how to use the Light spell Despell to break curses.

She also taught me the Dark spell Curse Block to protect myself from new curses. When she did, she also mentioned that I was much more talented with Dark magic than with Light," I explained.

"In that case... We will do an initial assessment, but I don't think there's much I can teach you when it comes to spells," Rosenberg said. Hexes were derived from overwhelming negative emotions reacting with magical energy in the user's body. Originally, there was no defined form or category to hexes. However, that made knowledge of them much trickier to pass down. Modern hexes were created so knowledge of these undefinable curses and their remedies could be passed down from master to apprentice.

"For example, casting a curse with a different effect requires you to conjure a different mental image, but casting is all done the same way. Even for breaking curses and clearing cursed energy, the basis is a spell called Curse Transfer. We use a variety of tools and rituals to solidify the image within us, which maximizes the effect of the hex. If you're talented enough to create your own spells, you definitely have potential. Even if the order of learning is all jumbled up, I'd hate to put you in a mold and squash your unique talent. I'd planned to instruct by providing basic knowledge to narrow what you are currently lacking, then practicing your skills through application and conversation. What do you say?"

"That sounds great," I said. "You said a lot of what I've been thinking. I'm sure I'll ask a lot of basic or outlandish questions."

"No problem at all. By the way, I specialize in managing cursed lands and breaking curses. In particular, my skill set is centered around discovering the cause of curses—finding sources of cursed energy or the person who cast a curse. On the other hand, I do not have much experience as a tutor, though I have some. I am certainly not as effective a teacher as a professor in a training institution or even as a warlock who focuses their efforts on training the next generation. Please don't hesitate to ask any questions, no matter how minor. That would help me a lot."

Back on Earth, orientations I'd received for most jobs could be summed up as "figure it out." By simply encouraging questions and promising to answer them, Rosenberg was already miles above the

so-called trainers I'd encountered on Earth.

"I do have a question. I understand that I'm an outlier when it comes to the order of learning. What is the conventional order of learning for aspiring warlocks? Just for reference," I said.

"There are two main paths to learning hexes. One is to apprentice to a warlock, and the other is to attend the training institution I mentioned earlier. Apprenticing works like any other profession, where the apprentice learns the craft through aiding the master in real-life scenarios. This used to be mainstream, but training often extended to all aspects of life. Unless they were raised in a warlock family, many apprentices struggled to master the craft," Rosenberg said.

"Does that mean the training institution is mainstream now?"

"Precisely. Another downside of apprenticing is that the learning process can be closed off from the rest of the world. Not only does this method severely cap the number of potential learners, but it also came to the point where techniques were being lost without anyone to carry on. There were even some master and apprentice warlocks who were made into pariahs in their community because their training made them look suspicious. To combat those issues, Duke Cassiel—a household name in hexes—created and still runs a training institution solely for warlocks." When I asked for details, Rosenberg went on to say the Cassiels were made up of generations of warlocks who had served the royal family. With their post came fame and special privileges. The Cassiels kept their institutions open and were actively seeking out those with talent for the craft. That wasn't all. They also provided a wide array of support for warlocks: developing new technology and tools, protecting and supporting dwindling warlock families, helping with job searches, and even matchmaking.

Rosenberg was related to the Cassiels, so I wasn't ruling out a little familial prejudice in his description of them...but suddenly being a warlock didn't seem as grueling as it had earlier. At the same time, what the Cassiels were offering seemed too good to be true. "Any chance these programs are actually very difficult to qualify for?"

"To take advantage of those programs you need to take an exam

to prove your abilities as a warlock, then register as one, work a certain number of jobs each year, report your home location, and meet a few other criteria—but none of them are particularly difficult if you intend to make living with hexes. I understand you may be suspicious of these programs. They are a testament to how seriously the Cassiels take increasing the warlock population. Curses can be subconsciously used by anyone at all, which is a much larger population than just warlocks. If war or disaster were to strike, curses would break out across the country. Warlocks need to fight against that. If we stop making small improvements to our society, it's going to come tumbling down. To prevent a disastrous future, we believe it's urgent and imperative that we protect current warlocks and raise the next generation of them."

Although Rosenberg was speaking quietly, his words were brimming with passion for improving the short-staffed warlock industry. I still had much to learn about warlocks, and I wondered if Rosenberg's opinion reflected that of the warlock industry as a whole. In that case, a larger workload wasn't too bad as long as there was hope that we could work together towards a bright future...but I kept thinking about my office on Earth.

While we quietly slid up the mountain, curiosity and trauma were battling fiercely in my mind.

Chapter 10, Episode 12: Cursed Energy Cleansing 101

After thirty minutes of climbing up the mountain on slimeback, we arrived at a cottage near the summit. This was where the warlock tasked with keeping tabs on the cursed land stayed during their shift. It was far enough from the cursed land that no cursed energy came this way, making it a great spot for our base of operations.

"It needs a cleaning," I said. Rosenberg had said that the warlock managing this cursed land only came here a few times a year, and the run-down cottage showed it. Now that I was going to be officially put in charge of these testing grounds, I was going to make sure this place was going to be unrecognizable by the time I was done with it. First things first, we just needed a place to spend the night. I sent the cleaner slimes out to give the place a scrub, and sent sticky slimes out to create a perimeter along the cottage, as well as spider slimes into the rafters and under the floorboards to take care of the vermin and pests.

And there was no sense standing around while the slimes were working. "Could I ask you to do a quick task while the cottage is being prepared?" I asked the group.

"Lay it on us. We're all here to work," Welanna assured me.

"Then I'd like for you to scout out the area around the cottage. I'd love to take a close look at the environment soon, but I'd first like to make sure there aren't any Undead, or wild beasts, or other imminent dangers."

"Got it! You can leave it to us!" Miya answered, and the adventurers began assigning areas to scout out.

In the meantime, and with their permissions, I coated their weapons with Light magic to make fighting Undead easier, should it

come to that.

"Master Ryoma, we shall prepare lunch," Sebas said.

"We'll make instant meals and quick meals, like sandwiches," Hudom added.

"I can help with washing and chopping," Eleonora said.

The three of them laid out the cargo we'd brought up with Space magic and started preparing lunch. That left me and Rosenberg.

"If there are no other urgent tasks, why don't we go over the files to prepare for the work that has to be done here. In places like this, where a warlock doesn't stay full time, reports can be outdated," Rosenberg said.

That was similar to the situation in the City of Lost Souls, where things had gotten much worse than anyone had expected. Seeing how the newest of the files I'd received was from half a year ago, it'd be worth going over them again so we could look for any changes that might have happened since.

From a bird's-eye view, this mountain resembled an oval that stretched to the northwest and southeast, with the cursed land halfway up the west-southwestern slope. It was marked by the bald patch I'd seen from the bottom, where there was no vegetation, and showed evidence of a landslide. Even before the landslide, the west-southwestern slope was far steeper than the eastern side, and ground on the eastern side felt solid—that would be the better option for climbing up and down the mountain like we'd done today.

"I'm curious about the center of the cursed land itself. I didn't see any Undead on the way up..." I said. The adventurers would report if they encountered any in the area surrounding the cottage.

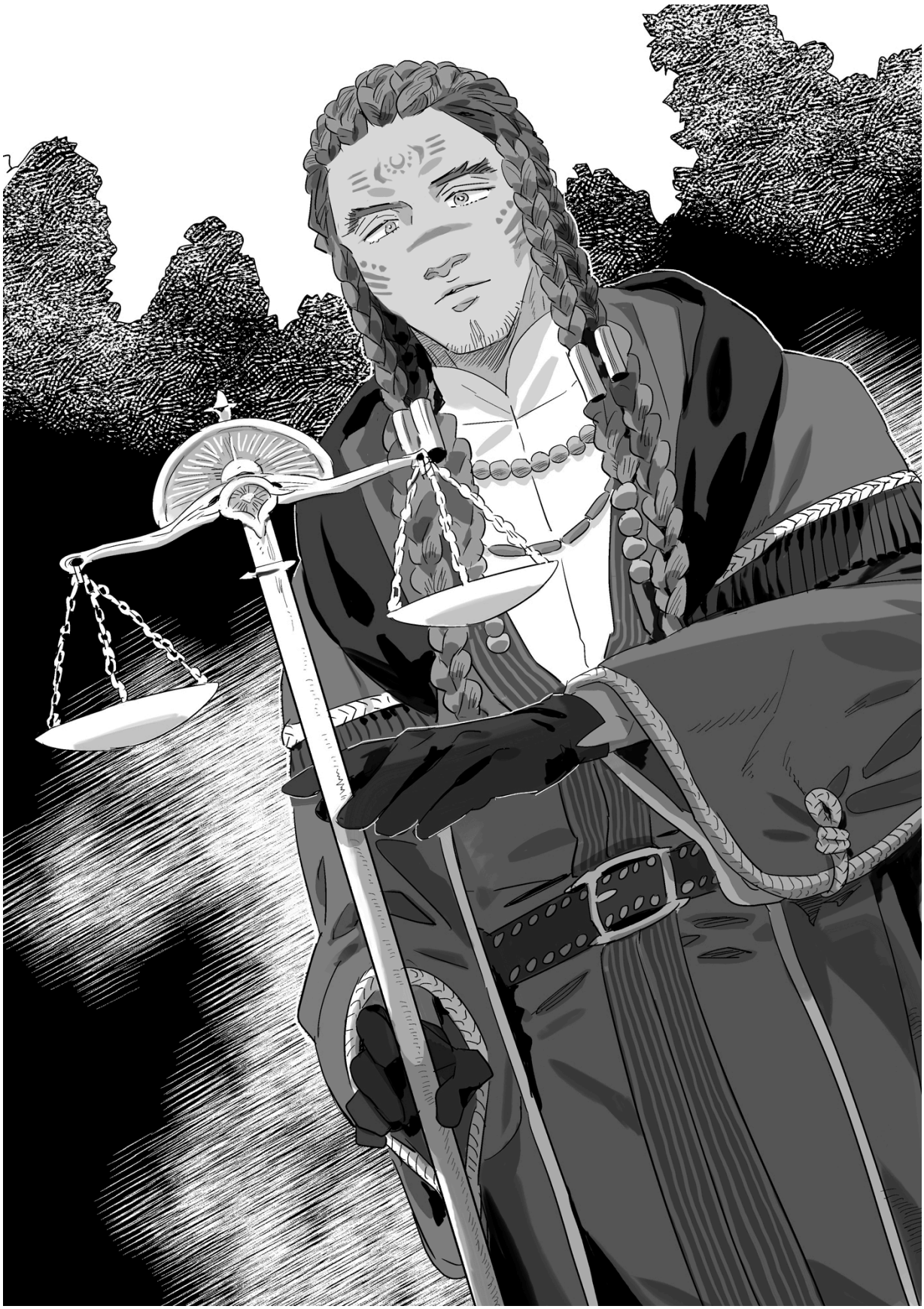
According to our files, there was a small settlement on that part of the mountain long ago. Those who lived there were all exiles from nearby towns and villages, and they were making ends meet by strong-arming travelers who used the travel road at the bottom of the mountain. As long as the travelers paid for passage, the settlers not only left them alone but even acted as guides and bodyguards. Back when that was the only road through the area, merchants didn't mind paying a relatively small sum for safe passage, and the settlers were never prosecuted for it. Once safer and easier paths

opened up, there was no need for merchants to pay the toll. Without anything else to offer travelers, the settlers became outright bandits. In response, the army burned the settlement to the ground. With the settlement and all its residents gone, the mass grave left in its ruin was abandoned for ages until it began to emit cursed energy.

"With proper maintenance, Undead do not appear, even in the center of cursed land. The trouble is that the cursed energy is killing the grass and trees, causing landslides. The increased danger of it makes it more difficult to inspect and cleanse the land," Rosenberg explained.

"My familiars can inspect it from the sky, at least. If we use the spell I created, the landscape won't matter much when I purify it. Wind speed and direction will come into play," I said.

"I would like to see that spell in action when we have a chance. Using familiars to scope out the area is a good idea as well. Now, I think it's best to show you the special magical items we use to measure the density and range of cursed energy." Rosenberg retrieved a slender, dark carrying case from among the cargo Sebas had unloaded. He opened what resembled a case for a flute to reveal a golden stake with a scale on top of it, before sticking it into the ground. Holding the staff steady to keep the scales level, he kind of looked like a surveyor using a laser level. "This is that magical item. There's no cursed energy here, but when I pour magical energy into it where there is cursed energy, the scales tip in the direction where the cursed energy is more dense. Taking measurements at regular intervals while we approach the center of the cursed land can help us map out the boundary of cursed energy."



"You mark where it first reacts," I said.

"Precisely. Measuring more frequently will allow us to pinpoint the boundary. If the center hasn't been found, we continue going in the direction where there is more cursed energy until we find a spot where the scales remain balanced. However, it is imperative that we use some sort of spell or item to protect ourselves from the cursed energy, and that we never push too far. Finding the sources of cursed energy means we're heading into the thick of it," Rosenberg explained. Instead of trying to make a beeline for the epicenter, it was recommended to narrow down the center by approaching from different directions, ensuring safety first. "Still, it will be quicker to find the source in one go if the cursed energy isn't too thick in the air. That's why we determine the severity of cursed energy to determine if we should attempt to find the center in one attempt or several. Do you see the dial on the scales?" Sure enough, there were detailed markings near the fulcrum of the scales that showed the angle at which the scales tilted. "As a general rule, anything up to thirty degrees is considered safe. Caution should be used from thirty-one to sixty degrees. I recommend turning back as soon as you see a reading of fifty degrees, just to be safe. Never go into cursed energy measured at sixty-one degrees or more. And you should always cleanse your clothes and tools after emerging from dense cursed energy."

"So, there are clear, numerical guidelines... I'm sure some people get hurt because they don't follow those standards," I said, more to myself.

Rosenberg's gaze found the ground. "Your assumption is correct. I was just about to say that the primary cause for accidents in this line of work is warlocks not following these guidelines. A warlock's job can be quite repetitive. Some young warlocks cut corners, and even supervising warlocks grow complacent. Duke Cassiel regularly sends letters to every warlock in his network that highlight the number of recent accidents and urge caution. Still, accidents continue to happen."

Did something happen to him? Rosenberg suddenly looked terribly tired. I knew what he was talking about too. When I was still

in school, I'd worked part-time at plenty of construction sites and factories that straight-up ignored safety protocols. From my personal experience, not too many sites used precise numbers to standardize procedures. Off the top of my head, I recalled a site where the manual was so vague that it didn't explain anything, another one where following the manual was "inefficient" and doing so would earn you a talking-to, and even a site that didn't have any manual or written directions whatsoever. It wasn't the same thing exactly, but the same type of negligence seemed common in this world too.

Rosenberg watched me as those thoughts ran through my mind and said, "I'm glad there's no need to explain it all." Then, he gave me specific instructions on how to use the magical item, including how to properly read the dial and the recommended distance between measurements. None of it was particularly complex. Those who designed this item must have wanted to make it easily usable by anyone.

"For accurate readings, make sure to gently pour your magical energy into it. Beyond that, it all comes down to practice. I brought this one for you." Rosenberg offered me the stake.

"Wait, you're giving it to me? Not lending it?"

"Every warlock needs one. It isn't particularly expensive or difficult to get one—it was a simple request through the Cassiels. Think of it as a gift to commemorate the start of your apprenticeship, albeit unorthodox," Rosenberg said.

"Thank you!" As soon as I took the stake, a rustling made my head snap towards a bush behind me. My first instinct was to expect a monster out of habit from when I was in the Sea of Trees. "Oh, you're back," I said. Mizelia and Cilia had returned. "That was quick."

"We didn't scout out the whole mountain, just the area around here. And we had split into two groups," Mizelia said.

"The other three should return shortly," Cilia chimed in.

True enough, the others returned after a couple of minutes.

"This area looks safe. There were no Undead, and not even any large wildlife. There were plenty of tracks and nests of small animals and birds on the east side. Even if food runs out, hunting will be an option."

"You could build a farm here, too, Ryoma. Untouched land like this is usually difficult to till, but the soil seems rich. I wouldn't expect any landslides over here, and there was a large patch of flat land to the southeast."

"I only saw bugs to the south. There was some vegetation, but it seemed gloomy, somehow. It was like there was barely any life. Same to the west, actually."

"We got a bad feeling before we came to the summit, so we went around to the north, where we didn't get that feeling. There were animals in the north too. If there aren't many animals to the south and west, it's probably because of the cursed energy."

"So the atmosphere changes at the boundary of cursed energy."

I considered what to make of all that information. "Lord Rosenberg, is the mountain walling off the cursed energy?"

"Yes. The center of cursed energy here is the grave at the ruined settlement, which means there is a lot of cursed energy stored in the ground. Despite regular cleansing, cursed energy must have piled up in the soil, which spread to the south and west through the landslides, affecting each area's ecosystem. We can also assume that the water main of the mountain has not been tainted. When a water source is afflicted with cursed energy, its effect spreads wider and faster. In this instance, cursed energy would have seeped through the entire mountain if that were the case." Rosenberg segued into explaining how cursed energy interacted with different materials.

Cursed energy corroded everything and had a tendency to pool together. Its behavior was affected by the state of the matter it corroded. For example, soil soaked up cursed energy more easily, but once it did, it was difficult to spread or cleanse. That's why cleansing a cursed land took so long. On the other hand, cursed energy spread more easily through air, which couldn't store as much and could be cleansed more easily. Water was somewhere in between earth and air for all properties. It could get tricky when a water source was corroded because the water could seep into the ground and transfer cursed energy to the soil. As Rosenberg had said, that made it easier for cursed energy to spread through the

entire terrain.

"Some people describe this as earth and water working together. In another example, if the earth is dry enough to be sandy, the wind can carry the corroded sand—earth and wind working together," Rosenberg said.

Because of these interactions, it was important to consider the earth, water, and air in relation to how wide cursed energy could spread. He also said that he sometimes took samples and tested them to measure how much cursed energy was imbued in them, kind of like soil and water tests on Earth.

Even the adventurers were listening intently to Rosenberg's explanations as they learned more about cursed energy. Our conversation—which seemed to be half business and half small talk—continued until Hudom came over to bring us to lunch.

Chapter 10, Episode 13: Training in the Field—Cleansing Cursed Energy

After a filling lunch of soup and sandwiches courtesy of Sebas, Hudom, and Eleonora, we were enjoying a nice, sit-down tea. My slimes had worked hard to clean the cottage, but it still seemed like a tight space for ten of us to sleep in. The cottage was a completely open concept (minus the bathroom) with no furniture, so we'd have to all sleep on the floor together, without so much as a partition to separate the men and women. I could admit that we were a large party, but a cottage this small still seemed inadequate.

"It's only meant to be a temporary lodging for the warlock on duty. No amenities were needed besides a place to sleep. Since the warlock on duty could bring any number of assistants or apprentices, it was simpler to have one large space that could accommodate the whole party," Rosenberg explained.

"Right, it's only used a few times a year... And it's easier to clean," I said.

"Very true. But it doesn't have to be that way. You're the manager now, so you can always work on the cottage as needed."

"Okay. I'll build some more rooms later."

"Later?" Rosenberg asked.

"With slimes and magic, I could build something similar to this cottage in less than thirty minutes," I said. All I'd have to do was mow the grass with a huge bush slime, test and level the ground with soil slime magic, and lay the foundation with the help of a huge rock slime. After that, I could use sand slime magic to 3D print a building. That should suffice for our stay this time around.

Rosenberg looked confused, though. He apparently didn't know

about my constructions in Gimul, so Sebas gave him a summary of them while he served us tea.

Jeff and Welanna laughed across the table.

"Yeah, that's the normal reaction," Jeff said. "You're the weird one here, Ryoma."

"We would have had the same look on our faces if we hadn't seen you renovate the city over New Year's," Welanna said. Sometimes, slimes were unbelievably versatile and helpful. "We should be getting back to work." Welanna stood, and the other adventurers followed suit.

"There's more tea," Sebas offered.

"Just one cup was wonderful."

"We've barely done anything to earn our keep yet."

"There will be no stone left uncovered on the safer east side."

"Tell us when you think it's safe to go west. We will help."

With that, the adventurers set out to scope out the area in greater detail.

"They are hardworking," Rosenberg said.

"Yes, and very kind," I added.

"Take care to maintain those good connections with others. Because hexes use negative emotions, warlocks are in constant danger of being ruled by them, losing their sense of either mortality or sanity. Even more so than other professions, it is valuable for a warlock to maintain friends who support them so they don't fall. Who pull them back from the ledge... Who extend a hand and help you up if you should ever fall..."

Remily had told me the same thing. Hexes required magical energy warped by negative emotions, which were similar in nature to cursed energy. Even if a warlock only had good intentions of cleansing cursed energy, they were still susceptible to those emotions.

"I won't forget it," I said. "Regardless of any warlock business, I intend to cherish my relationship with all of them...and everyone here, of course."

"It looks like I have nothing to worry about in that department. Once we finish this tea, shall we head out to investigate the cursed

land? Put that magical item I showed you to practice," my tutor said.

"Perfect!"

Magical items in hand, we set out for the settlement ruins. My afternoon class was going to be more hands-on.

"Is everyone okay?" I called.

"I can manage if we go slowly."

"This is more treacherous than the file suggested."

"They used to be bandits, right? They probably built these paths to make the village more difficult to invade."

"Or the landslide has made this path smaller than it used to be."

The trail leading up to the settlement was narrower and steeper than the file had indicated. Below us was a steep slope of at least sixty degrees, and some portions of the path were practically cliff ledges where we'd had to hug the wall and shimmy past. With a trail this narrow, riding slimes wasn't an option.

"Let's use Space magic or carve out a new path when we go back down," I suggested. "That would be allowed, wouldn't it?" I asked Sebas.

"Absolutely. The duke has already approved using any part of this mountain as a testing ground, and making any developments as you see fit. As long as it doesn't affect the travel road on the bottom, you are free to add mountain paths."

"If you decide to do so, please share details of the operation with me," Eleonora said. "I will write up a report on it, along with one on the status of the cursed land, and submit it to the duke."

"That would be great," I said. There would still be some paperwork for me to fill myself, but I was mostly free to pursue the tasks that I enjoyed. In my previous life, I would have never imagined working under conditions like this. Just as I felt a surge of excitement, it was tainted by a mild sense of discomfort—a telling sign. "I sense cursed energy," I announced.

"Then try out your item on a solid patch of ground," Rosenberg said.

I did, just as he'd instructed. I pushed the stake into the ground, then held the balance level while I carefully poured my magical energy into it. I'd had a lot of practice with magical energy control,

so that much wasn't a problem. I saw the scales tip forwards to four degrees.

"Well done. Four degrees means we are still very safe. But there's no guarantee as to what lies ahead. Let's make sure to defend ourselves now. What is our objective here?" Rosenberg quizzed me.

"To form a layer of Dark magical energy around us that will protect us from cursed energy," I answered. Light magical energy could also protect us from cursed energy, but that would cleanse and eliminate cursed energy around us, skewing our measurements.

When I explained that reasoning, Rosenberg nodded in approval and demonstrated the spell himself. "Protection." Dark magical energy enveloped him, almost like the Curse Block spell Remily had taught me. Curse Block was also able to shield us from some degree of cursed energy, but Rosenberg explained that Protection is a more specialized spell that offered better protection, but only from cursed energy.

"Protection," I said, trying out the spell for myself.

"Let's see... Very good," Rosenberg said. "For your first time, your magical energy is remarkably stable. Perhaps it is thanks to your experience casting Curse Block. That will be more than enough to protect you from cursed energy."

With that stamp of approval, I practiced Protection a little more by casting it on Sebas, Hudom, and Eleonora. Then, we continued walking.

We carried on following the tipping of the scales, which brought us to the settlement ruin before long. Almost no sign of the settlement remained after the devastating fire and years of the mountain's elements.

"This is where the cursed energy is the strongest, but it's only at twenty-eight degrees," I said. I'd expected ground zero to be a little more dangerous. Partly due to the Protection spell, I was sure, I could barely feel the effects of the cursed energy. If this was already what things were like at twenty-eight degrees, I could only imagine how much these scales would have tipped in the City of Lost Souls.

"For a properly managed cursed land, this is par for the course," Rosenberg said. "The City of Lost Souls was far more expansive, for

one. If it was overflowing with Undead, I expect it to have been no less than forty degrees. I suspect the center of the city must have been at sixty degrees or higher. A typical example of a neglected cursed land."

"So this place could turn out like that if it goes unchecked?" I asked.

"Exactly."

With a better understanding of how dangerous a situation the City of Lost Souls had been, I quietly promised myself I would never let this testing ground turn into another version of it. Keeping an eye out for landslides, we navigated the mountain and its steep slopes, even using climbing ropes when necessary. Although we'd split up, it took a lot of time and effort to figure out the range of cursed energy. By the time the sun began to set, we had confirmed that the bald patch accurately reflected the range of the cursed land—about a two-hundred-meter radius around the center of the landslide. The area wasn't a circle, but more like a rounded triangle, with the initial landslide area spreading wide as it descended the mountain. In particular, the settlement ruins towards the top of the mountain and the endpoint of the landslide lower on the mountain were teeming with cursed energy.

"So far, everything matches the reports," said Rosenberg. "If there were any discrepancies, it could cause the cleansing to fail or lead to accidents. Always make sure to verify that the site is as expected before performing cleansing."

"Got it," I said. "Are those what keep the cursed energy contained to the landslide area? Those marks?"

A strange symbol—a snake or worm or centipede—was carved into trees surrounding the landslide area at regular intervals. I sensed magical energy from them, and I couldn't really think of another answer, considering the circumstances...

"That is a hex that prevents cursed energy from spreading. Many warlocks use some sort of symbol like that," Rosenberg said.

"Then would it be similar to barrier magic, or is it more like an enchantment? If these were set up half a year ago to coincide with the latest file, that's a long time for a spell to hold its effect." I could

use some barrier magic myself, but not one that could retain its effect for half a year, unless I regularly reapplied the same spell. As the state of the cottage proved, no one had come up here in a long time. That led me to believe the hexes could be woven into objects like enchantment spells used to create permanent magical items.

"That is quite astute. In fact, curses are very similar to enchantments. They don't call it *holding on to* grudges for nothing. Powerful, negative emotions last a long time. The hex in the trees uses that tendency to elongate its effect," my tutor explained.

"I see... There's a lot for me to learn."

"And we will have time for it later. I had planned for lessons on curses, and you'll need to learn that very spell once the cleansing is over. But first, we need to clear the cursed energy... It has been an arduous day. Let's walk through the cleansing process before we call it a day." Rosenberg turned to Sebas and requested a few things out of his Item Box. "This is where we start." He brought over the largest basket that Sebas had produced. It was stuffed with over twenty magic wands, like an umbrella stand at a corner store during a downpour. The wands were simple ones—basically a wooden stick with a Dark magic crystal on its end.

Rosenberg plucked one out, took a few steps away from us, and pointed the wand at the ground. "Curse Transfer." Magical energy poured out of the wand and into the ground. Instantly, I could see the cursed energy rise from the ground like a cloud of black dust. While the cursed energy wasn't moving quickly, I could see that it was very dense and dangerous. I kept watching as Rosenberg spun the cursed energy with his wand, spooling it at the tip until it shrank into the magic crystal.

When no visible cursed energy remained, Rosenberg stopped releasing magical energy. "Did you see it?"

"It looked like you extracted cursed energy from the ground, and also from the air, and then sealed it within the magic crystal on the wand," I said.

"Good. This is the basic process of cleansing cursed energy—extracting it from corroded materials. The cursed energy doesn't necessarily have to be transferred to a magic crystal... Take another

look at the wand, without coming any closer and certainly without touching it."

I could see what he wanted me to see immediately. "The tip of the wand looks...worn out. It looked brand-new a minute ago."

"Objects rapidly deteriorate when exposed to concentrated cursed energy. The purpose of this wand is mostly to put distance between the user and the magic crystal where the cursed energy is going to be stored. I use Dark magic crystals as the receptacle not only because they make it easier to cast hexes, but because they're exceptionally durable against cursed energy."

That explained why there were twenty-plus wands ready to go. They were cheap and dirty wands that Rosenberg could easily replace as soon as one showed signs of damage.

"Some people use materials especially resistant to cursed energy, but most warlocks can't afford such luxuries, especially when we have so many other tools we have to purchase. We don't have too many corners to cut, out of safety concerns."

"That has to be rough..." I said.

Rosenberg's eyes were fixed on the distance. He deserved commendation for not cutting costs. There were plenty of workplaces that would ignore their workers' safety to save money. "It won't be easy, but you do have a brilliant financial manager who should be able to make ends meet," Rosenberg said.

"Absolutely," Eleonora said simply.

Now, it was time to practice. Plucking a fresh wand, I took a few steps away from the others and pointed it at the ground. "Curse Transfer." I cast the spell, replaying Rosenberg's demonstration as I did...but it felt like something was stuck, preventing the cursed energy from coming out. *Did I mess it up?*

"The spell was successful, just not powerful enough. Concentrate more negative emotions in your magical energy, and capture the cursed energy that lurks in the darkness below the soil," Rosenberg said.

Taking his advice, I focused on magic detection. Sure enough, I could sense cursed energy that threatened to prick me with discomfort, even though it couldn't touch me past the layer of

magical energy I'd set up. Still, it was unmistakable—the air beyond my thin layer of protection was tainted with cursed energy. I shifted my energy to my feet and saw a clump of cursed energy. My detection didn't reach far enough to see how deeply it corroded the ground. I could only tell that the cursed energy that had seeped into the ground seemed bottomless—pulling all that out would be quite a feat.

"There is no need to dredge up all of the cursed energy at once. In fact, doing so would be dangerous. Do not overextend. Mark out a section of cursed energy that you will cleanse, just below the surface. Concentrate on that patch of cursed energy, and pull it close."

I cast my spell again, with a better focus on my target. This time, I felt like there wasn't much of a clog, and I could see the cursed energy lift out of the ground, quickly mix into the air, and begin to spread—just like normal magic. I kept the cursed energy around the magic crystal on my wand, spooling the torrent of cursed energy into the crystal...until I managed to contain all of the cursed energy that had emerged from the ground into the magic crystal.



With my task completed, I couldn't help but let my shoulders slump in relief. When I looked up from the ground, the setting sun stung my eyes for a moment. "How did I do?" I asked.

"You were already casting the spell on your first try, and I have no notes on your second. It is fair to say that you've mastered the basics of cleansing cursed energy. I plan to cover different applications of this technique, but let's save that for tomorrow. We still need to clean up."

Even though we were done with the cleansing for the day, my class wasn't over yet. When Rosenberg raised his hand, Hudom came over with a long and slender wooden box. Magical energy hummed within it, so it must have been hexed.

"This box can contain curses and cursed energy, so we can safely transport them without worrying about contamination. Even if you only use a wand once, make sure to put it in here and not with the other wands. Some warlocks take their clothes off after cleansing, but if you apply the layer of protection magic and follow safety guidelines as we have, there's no need to go that far."

"What happens to the tools we put in here?" I asked.

"The wand we used today still has many uses in it, so we will continue using it tomorrow. Wands that have been used to their limit are sent off in the box to a disenchanter I've done business with for a long time, who will cleanse the wand there. Unlike warlocks, who use Dark magic, disenchanters use Light. Even though both professions can break curses and cleanse cursed energy, we each employ different methods that suit our element. While warlocks can erase cursed energy, disenchanters are better at it. On the other hand, warlocks are better suited for removing cursed energy as we have just done," Rosenberg explained.

Perhaps because they wielded opposite elements to achieve similar results, there was a stigma that warlocks and disenchanters didn't get along...but Rosenberg said that the two professions often worked together to cover each other's shortcomings.

"I only send my used tools to a disenchanter because I can't wield Light magic myself. If you can treat them yourself, feel free to do so. Just make sure to reuse the Dark magic crystals as much as

possible—they're very rare."

So the wand itself was disposable, but Rosenberg recycled the magic crystals, using leather gloves treated with the same magic as the toolbox. Maintaining and properly disposing of tools was another important part of a warlock's job.

After learning so much on my first day, I was excited to keep this going tomorrow.

Chapter 10, Episode 14: Eleonora's Suggestion

That night, after building two lodgings—one for men and one for women—and eating dinner together, we called it a night so we could get some rest. It was still too early to sleep, so I stepped out to feel the night air, only to find Eleonora. She stood a few steps away from the lodging's entrance, clutching a stack of papers in her arms. Judging by the smattering of footprints on the ground, she'd been pacing out here for a while.

"Master Takebayashi. I documented today's activities, and I was hoping you could approve them when you have the time. Only, I've been hesitating to enter the men's housing," she said.

"I hadn't thought of ways to contact each other once we're in our separate lodgings. We'll fix that tomorrow." I took the papers and flipped through them under the light of the magical item set up by the entrance. The strangely voluminous stack took me by surprise. "On top of a log of today's work, you made a chart of the measurements and observations we'd made on the cursed land, a report to the duke of our findings, and notes on Lord Rosenberg's teachings and vocabulary... You put all of this together in the little time you had?! I knew you were an excellent secretary, but this goes above and beyond. After helping us measure cursed energy, at that..."

"Although the documents were made after dinner, I had organized most of the information during the day's work. There was plenty of time while we walked from one area to the next, and those notes are practically a transcript of what Lord Rosenberg said. It's not as impressive as all that," Eleonora said.

Still, she hadn't had time on her own until after dinner, which was little more than two hours ago. To write all this up—all by hand,

naturally—in such a short time... Sure, there was some downtime while we trekked the mountains today, but Eleonora was also recording my findings the whole time, and we had to clear steep hills and cliffs—sometimes with ropes. I was thankful she took the initiative to write up things like a vocabulary list from Rosenberg's lesson, but I was starting to be worried that she was overworking herself.

"Did I overstep my role?" she asked.

"No! Nothing like that. I was just amazed by your efficiency. The notes and vocabulary are a great help too. They will make it easier for me to review."

"Thank you. I imagine it may prove superfluous to you, but I do have experience studying magic myself through the academy, and hoped to help in what little way I can," Eleonora said.

"Superfluous?" I certainly didn't think so, but Eleonora seemed to genuinely believe it.

"I have been told of your unique upbringing in the Sea of Trees. Yet I believe you already have a vast pool of knowledge that is the basis of acquiring magic, for two reasons. For one, the duke has told me how you independently read tomes from the Magic Guild."

That was true. I'd requested them through the Jamils, and I had been reading up on them when I had the time. That didn't seem enough of a reason to conclude that I wouldn't need any help learning spells, though. "By tomes, you mean any volume related to magic. Some of them are research findings and theses, but most of them are textbooks on magic, aren't they?"

"That is correct. Did you not find them rather difficult to comprehend?" Eleonora asked.

"They are difficult to get through sometimes, with all the metaphors and figurative language." The first example that came to mind was from a tome on the basics of Water magic. An entire page had been dedicated to a poem that could be boiled down to "water trickles down from high to low." I'd been impressed by how much fluff they managed to work into that page.

"That complexity is by design," Eleonora said.

"It's on purpose?"

"Yes. Tomes officially recognized and sold by the Magic Guild are written in a manner that requires an instructor to decode them. The Magic Guild opens its gates to the public now, but it was, at its inception, merely a group of spellcasters—of which there were so few at the time—attempting to protect themselves from prosecution and abuse by those in power who sought to control magic for their own good. That's why the Magic Guild still glorifies concealing secrets of their craft. Higher-ups of the guild, in particular, hate to see magic explored outside of their control," Eleonora explained.

"Ah. That's why they make their tomes so confusing that an instructor is needed just to understand how to read them. That seems like a lot of work for nothing to gain, though," I said.

"I was once a member of the Magic Guild myself, but I never saw much of a point to it, partially because I had access to the academy's library already. It is an ancient organization that changes far slower than the times. Still, it has come a long way considering that magic was once reserved for nobles and their servants—that people were once executed for sharing knowledge of magic. Considering such a history, being able to understand tomes without an instructor indicates that you already have the knowledge contained in the tomes, or enough knowledge related to their topic. The tome you've written for the magical firefighters is a show of your depth of knowledge."

"Yes, I did hand out materials outlining a fire-extinguishing spell I concocted in case of fires in the city at the end of last year... Wait a minute. Based on what you told me about the Magic Guild—"

"If you had published it through the Magic Guild they most likely would have stopped it during their inspection, but your distribution wasn't illegal. It wasn't like you sold it to the public. If it had been problematic in any way, the duke would have warned you about it long ago," Eleonora said. And I hadn't heard a peep about those documents. I'd almost forgotten about it until now. Luckily, it seemed like I had nothing to worry about. "What I mean to say is that having ample knowledge on the subject makes it easier to conjure and solidify the mental image required for spellcasting. Even when knowledge on the exact subject is lacking, knowledge of

similar or related effects can aid in casting those spells. Another requirement of spellcasting is magical energy control. From what I saw today, yours is impeccable, which is the second reason I believe you already possess the necessary skills for casting spells. Knowledge and magical energy control are the two pillars of magic, and why you are so adept at it." It was a little embarrassing, but Eleonora's explanation was purely logical, and if I was being honest, accurate.

"When you put it that way... Surviving the Sea of Trees was grueling, but I was extremely gifted in circumstances when it came to education. I was also gifted with a large store of magical energy that I've practiced my control with through both business and hobby. More recently, I've been training using my slimes' vision."

"Your slimes' vision?"

I remembered that I had Eleonora so focused on secretarial duties around my businesses that I hadn't explained slime vision to her yet. It didn't take me long to explain it to her now.

"So by sharing the senses of the slimes through Tamer magic, you can take advantage of the slimes' far more effective magic detection," Eleonora summarized.

"Exhausting the brain this way can cause headaches and fatigue, but the method is highly effective and allows for a variety of applications: keeping watch, searching an area, healing magic... Even throughout today's training, I was training my own magic detection through modeling slime vision."

"It is far easier to control what you can see than what you cannot. Visualizing magical energy makes it easier to control it more precisely. Frankly, anyone who uses magic would kill for an ability like that," Eleonora said.

Oh? Can I bring Eleonora over to the slime side? Just as the thought crossed my mind, a cold gust blew past us. After being acclimated to the temperature of the Sea of Trees, even the summer air didn't feel too hot during the day, and a little chilly at night.

"I've been enjoying discussing magic with you so much that I've lost track of time," I said. "Thank you for these documents, Eleonora. I'd like to go over them thoroughly. Do you mind if I wait

until tomorrow morning to give you feedback?"

"Absolutely. Please don't hesitate to point out any shortcomings." Eleonora took a half step back as she was about to leave, before she hesitated for just a moment and added even more stoically than usual, "I would like to make a suggestion regarding this testing ground. Earlier today, you mentioned the possibility of paving a path from here to the testing ground. Personally, I also recommend paving paths around these cottages, and all the way down the mountain if possible. It should be made clear to anyone that these facilities and their surroundings are being maintained."

"Not just for our benefit, you mean."

"No. This is about appearances." She went on to explain that, since I had been granted access to this testing ground by my request as the duke's engineer, I should make a show out of using the grounds effectively. "Technically, these grounds are lent out to you by the duke, and it would be up to him to extend the duration of said lease or revoke it altogether. However, from what I have been told by Sebas, the duke will not revoke this lease barring catastrophic negligence. Therefore, this lease is effectively a grant of these grounds."

"I wasn't told that," I said.

"On purpose, I suspect. It would be more beneficial for the duke that way... And—I am only speculating—the duke probably thought you would turn down the offer if he had granted you the deed to these grounds outright," Eleonora said.

I'd been gazing up at the beautiful night sky before I knew it. A chunk of land I could use as I saw fit would be huge, but if I'd been offered the deed outright, I would have most likely considered the gift too generous. It made sense that they expected that reaction from me. Even though I thought I owed the Jamils several debts, they considered themselves in my debt...

"Is the supposed lease beneficial for the duke because it doesn't look like he's giving the newcomer any special treatment?" I asked.

"Something like that. Although the Jamils are vigilant, many people are involved in their operations, especially towards the bottom. There is no guarantee that no one will resort to more

sinister actions. Those of noble houses concern themselves with how things appear, in particular...”

If something like that were to happen, and if it looked like I wasn’t properly maintaining the land—by ignoring needs and not building out necessary paths—I could easily imagine the retorts:

“Is that really suited for experiments?”

“Is he even trying?”

“What’s the point of granting him the testing grounds?”

“Not using the duke’s gift is treasonous!”

It was very possible to encounter people like this who’d just want to tear me down just for being higher in the duke’s good graces than they were. There were enough people in this world who wanted to cause a fuss regardless of facts, and people who made snap decisions based on imperfect information.

“Very well,” I said. “Let’s make big changes all around. Sebas had mentioned that problems should be dealt with before they have a chance to grow. It makes sense to fill in whatever cracks we can. The last thing I want is for suspicions to arise about my work ethic and cause the Jamils any trouble.” To compare this to modern-day, an employee’s scandal—even a false alarm—could harm the reputation of the entire company. If nothing else, it would be an unnecessary inconvenience for the Jamils. “Then the question becomes how to carve out the time for those projects.”

“There should be enough wiggle room,” said Eleonora. “With the construction method you used to build these lodgings today, carving out paths will take much less time than traditional methods. Besides, I believe Lord Rosenberg had allotted much more instructional time to the spell you’ve acquired today.”

“It should be doable then, if I ask the adventurers to scope out potential paths to the bottom of the mountain,” I said. Whether she had this suggestion planned since she learned about the lease of the testing grounds or only since witnessing my work today, the conversation about how quickly I could learn spells was a lead-in for this suggestion. “I’ll ask them to get started on scouting those paths tomorrow morning.”

“Thank you for taking my suggestion to heart.”

"Of course. Thank you for suggesting a good idea."

"Although I believe in its merit, I am aware of how oversensitive it sounds," Eleonora said with a clear undertone of self-deprecation that even I could pick up on.

"Then I thank you even more for it. I can also be sensitive to these things, so having a solution for it makes me feel better. Besides, nobles need to guard themselves against every little threat, don't they? I don't have the experience or mindset to prepare me for that, so I really do appreciate your opinion because you can see things from that perspective," I said.

"Thank you."

"If anything else comes to mind, don't hesitate to bring it to my attention. I may decide to put it on the back burner depending on what it pertains to, but I will never consider it a waste of time," I said.

"Understood."

After our somewhat mechanical conversation, only the sound of leaves rustling in the night wind remained. A few moments later, she bid me good night and began walking away.

"Have a good night. Stay warm!" I called after her, and stepped back into the men's lodging. I couldn't gauge how she felt about my response, but it was a good sign that she was volunteering her opinions. Now that she placed the ball of trust in my court, I'd have to take good care of it, and that started with giving these reports a thorough read.

Chapter 10, Episode 15: Advanced Applications of Cleansing Cursed Energy

The next morning, I brought up Eleonora's suggestion with the rest of our party over breakfast.

"Miss Eleonora is spot-on when it comes to my instructional plans," Rosenberg said. "You are very much ahead of schedule, so there won't be a problem with you spending more time on infrastructure projects. I recommend it, in fact. It would make for a nice change of pace."

"We're all going to keep scouting out the mountain anyway. It'll be easy to mark places that are easier to walk."

"My only concerns are for you, Ryoma," Hudom said.

"Right! You're going to be busy, busy, busy!" Miya chimed in.

They all seemed enthusiastic to help, only hesitating for my sake.

"I'll be fine," I reassured them. "We mostly finished measuring the cursed energy yesterday. We'll do a quick retest before cleansing, but I've been told we don't need to be as thorough as we were yesterday. That was the most physically intensive task, and construction won't be too arduous with the use of magic."

I made a mental list of things I wanted to accomplish while we were here: study cursed energy cleansing; learn more about and possibly recreate the lost curse-breaking magic; explore methods of having Korumi interact with people outside of the village. The last two on that list were my bigger priorities, and I'd need to study hexes to accomplish that. Without a solid foundation of hexes, I wouldn't be able to derive complex applications—even if I could, there could be flaws in my spells that I wouldn't even catch until they were too late. That was why I'd asked Rosenberg to make the

time for me. It might have seemed like I had a lot going on, but it all came back to me studying hexes. I wouldn't be multitasking, but executing a series of tasks. Since half of the cleansing was done yesterday, I even had some extra time to play with. With Rosenberg recommending it, there was no downside to moving forwards with improving the mountain's infrastructure. Not only did it make my life easier while I stayed here, if it also made me look better as the duke's engineer and prevented future annoyances, I'd be killing three or four birds with one stone.

"You'll all be helping me, and so will my familiars. I'm going to take shortcuts wherever I can," I said.

"If it looks like Ryoma's pushing himself too far, we can stop him," Hudom pointed out to the group. That seemed to quell their concerns, so we moved on to discussing specific plans.

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After breakfast, we went out to practice more cursed energy cleansing—advanced applications, this time. However, Rosenberg had requested over breakfast that we start with the method I'd devised in the City of Lost Souls.

While I was using my magic, I had the adventurer team stand back. This was because my method utilized smoke—just in case there was something wrong with my spell, and just in case the smoke drifted their way. Then I set up on the flat patch at the bottom of the landslide, read the wind, and began.

Because today's objective was to cleanse the cursed energy, I initially thought about imagining the smoke as clouds of disinfectant...until I remembered that the root cause of the cursed energy was the abandoned mass-grave and the forsaken souls buried in it. I decided to start with the prayer after all. I'd be performing the same ritual anyway, so I figured I'd pray for their souls before cleansing the land itself.

First, I quietly built the fire and offered prayers for the souls as I put food and magical energy onto the flames. Keeping in mind what I'd learned the day before, I made sure to pay attention to the flow

of cursed energy too.

As I repeated the same movement while I watched the state of magical energy, my mind began to clear the same way it used to when I'd run forms in martial arts. The sounds of the mountain and the smell of the smoke disappeared, allowing me to sense the current of cursed energy more clearly.

Even though I'd used this spell several times before, my new perspective allowed me to make a new observation. The smoke was absorbing the cursed energy, just like the wands did yesterday. Then, as the smoke dissipated to the wind, the cursed energy disappeared with it. Once the smoke was scattered, I didn't feel the unpleasantness of the cursed energy anymore. I couldn't explain how that worked, but I'd call it a win. With a clearer picture of the cleansing process through the smoke, I kept stoking the flames.

"Let's stop it here," Rosenberg said.

"Okay." I stopped.

"You were concentrating very hard," my tutor noted.

"Yes... How long has it been?" I asked.

"Almost an hour."

Indeed, I'd been so focused that time flew by. I was drenched in sweat, and my throat was parched from standing in front of a fire for that long. By the time I'd realized that, though, Sebas had already brought over a canteen and a towel. I was spoiled.

"Let me give you my assessment while you rest," Rosenberg said. "First of all, your cleansing was effective."

"Really? That's great to hear," I said.

"If it hadn't been, I would have stopped you much earlier. I have no notes. In fact, did you improve your spell while you were using it today? It seemed to me that it grew more and more effective as time went on."

When I explained that it was because I'd tried to incorporate yesterday's lesson, Rosenberg gave a chuckle. "It is impressive that you developed your own spell and elevated it in such a short time...but most of all that you've invented this when you had little to no knowledge of hexes. Now I don't even need to instruct you on advanced applications."

"You don't?" I asked.

"No. Manipulating cursed energy to disperse to the point where it is too scattered to recondense, rather than collecting it, returns it to nature. This is the advanced method of cleansing cursed energy with hexes. The possibility had crossed my mind when you first told me about this...but I am still amazed to see you've jumped to this application. Just as Miss Kremis said, you have a talent for hexes," Rosenberg said.

"Thank you. In hindsight, though, this was pretty precarious, wasn't it?" If I had failed to disperse cursed energy just right, would I have spread it even further?

"Yes. That's why this is an advanced application, not intended for beginners to attempt. It's meant only to be practiced under a master's supervision, and only after thorough practice of manipulating cursed energy with the basic method. So, I was ready to stop you if your spell was showing any adverse effects." Rosenberg added that he wasn't too worried after my record in the City of Lost Souls. Apparently, Remily's word as a former royal sorcerer carried weight even in departments that she wasn't necessarily an expert in. "Of course, I did not compromise my judgment, even after Miss Kremis's reassurance. Now that we can skip instruction on advanced applications, I'd like to—"

"Excuse me," Eleonora cut in. "If the cleansing spell is operating properly, can we have them start on their scouting?"

"Oh, that's right. Lord Rosenberg?" I asked.

"Yes. Now that the safety of your spell has been verified, that would be more time-efficient."

So, we had the adventurer team and Hudom head out scouting.

Once we saw them off, we resumed our lesson on hexes.

"Now that we've established that you can cleanse cursed energy without issue, let's learn about curses. They'll be needed for the next step: processing after cleansing," Rosenberg said.

"I'm guessing this has something to do with the symbols on the trees," I said. Those symbols enabled the hex that kept the cursed energy within its confined area to last for so long.

"Exactly. I think you learn better through practice than lecture, so

I'll keep this brief. When casting a curse, it is paramount to keep your target and purpose clear, precise, and limited. You may think that is true for all magic, but when it comes to curses, this is what prevents the spell from going rogue." Rosenberg followed this up with an anecdote often repeated among warlocks for its many lessons.

Once there was a greedy and cruel noble who didn't hesitate to abuse his power and the law for personal gain. In the shadows of his riches was the suffering of his people, who begrudged their lord for it. One day, a body was found in that noble's carriage. The victim had been cursed to death, as investigation uncovered, by a vagrant —the son of a merchant who used to have dealings with the corrupt noble. His parents had their business destroyed and were saddled with debt, leading them to poverty, starvation, and early death. When the noble's carriage passed him on the street, the merchant's son instinctively released the years-long grudge in the form of a curse. The fact that he'd killed someone with emotions alone would serve as a cautionary tale, but there was another twist to the story. The body found dead in the carriage did not belong to the corrupt noble.

"It belonged to another merchant who had taken over his father's position. This new merchant had gotten into the noble's good graces by means of bribery, and had rented the noble's carriage on that day when his own broke down," Rosenberg said.

"The one who unleashed the curse mistook the merchant for the noble?" I asked.

"Indeed. Emotions are a wild stallion. Ride them well, and they can take you to new possibilities. Curses can be more versatile and powerful than other forms of magic. On the other hand, they're easier to lose control of and can cause more damage when they do. Once the damage is done, it will be too late," Rosenberg said.

"It reminds me of the damage rumors and false information can cause. There's a sort of danger that comes from reckless malice: a sort of unpredictability... I can't really explain it." As someone who'd lived in a society entangled in the internet and social media, it felt too close to home.

"Oh, that wasn't very brief, was it?" Rosenberg said. "Once again, you must always make your target and intentions clear when casting a curse. Like the curse of the merchant's son who killed someone he didn't intend to, a curse without a clear target and intentions can harm people indiscriminately and even the caster themself."

"I'll be careful."

"Very well. A common way to define the target of a curse is to place a marker. In our story, the noble's crest on the carriage became the marker for the curse," Rosenberg explained.

"That makes sense. And those marks on the trees were those markers?"

"You can make use of anything that is visually recognizable, whether it be a family crest or a unique geometric design. A marker can also be a specific item or decoration. If the target is human, it could be their name, likeness, or part of their body."

That last example reminded me of a traditional curse well-known in Japan that involved weaving a strand of the target's hair into a straw doll and nailing it to a tree. I asked Rosenberg if that sounded like the same concept, claiming I'd read about this type of curse long ago.

"Most likely," he answered. "It makes sense for the marker to be human-shaped. Understanding how a curse is delivered can make it easier to defend against. Also, hexes are not always malicious, and the same curse can be used for good or evil. A sleeping curse can be used to treat insomnia, just as it can be used to render an enemy unconscious. Please keep that in mind."

Rosenberg concluded his lecture, and we moved on to practice. First, he requested that I show him a curse I'd used before, bearing his lecture in mind. The only curse I could currently use was the curse of Influenza that Remily had taught me in the City of Lost Souls. Just like I did before, I picked up a pebble and cursed it. And just like that time, it began emitting an eerie aura.

"More powerful than expected, but it is a successful curse," Rosenberg said. "It looks like you won't need to practice the basics of casting curses... At this rate, you should be able to cast an effective and long-lasting one that contains cursed energy." That

commenced our practice. “Just as you imagined an illness from your own experience in the curse you just used, this will be easier if you can leverage a negative emotion aligned with the intent of the curse.”

“My target is that pebble, and my intention is to contain cursed energy... To bar, to pack in, to disrupt...” I contemplated a few choices and decided to try an intention of keeping away or staying out. My life as a hermit in the forest felt like that. I recalled how I felt when I was tired of dealing with other people and let it swell in my heart before casting the curse. “Isolation.” It was difficult to see the cursed energy since I’d just cleansed it from this area, but I could faintly see the cursed pebble repelling it. “How did I do?”

“So well that I am running out of things to teach you.”

Another success at first try. Apparently, I really did have a knack for hexes.



Chapter 10, Episode 16: Forbidden Hexes and Optimization

"It's wonderful that our lessons are going smoothly. I did not expect you to face practically no challenges in practice so far." Rosenberg let out a chuckle, both impressed and unsure of how to proceed as my tutor.

To be honest, I felt the same way. Even though hexes were just another form of magic, they *clicked* more than others. Eleonora and I had discussed last night that I was learning things quickly, but this was on another level.

"Not to doubt your talent, but have you studied hexes before?" Rosenberg asked.

"My introduction to it was when Miss Remily Kremis gave me pointers after I was cursed for doing something ignorant and reckless," I answered. Actually, I hadn't had much time to study magic in general, like Eleonora was saying. Maybe I had an advantage after spending a few decades being exposed to works of fantasy fiction in my previous life. "I grew up reading my grandmother's books. Some of them featured...stories with hexes in them, which could explain my predisposition for it."

"Hm... What sort of hexes?"

The first to come to mind was the straw-doll curse. Other famous examples I could think of were kodoku and inugami, which were dangerous methods. Kodoku involved placing a colony of venomous creatures in some kind of container and waiting until they killed each other and only one was left. The surviving specimen would be used to poison the target. Inugami involved burying a dog alive up to its neck and placing a bowl of food just out of reach. Just before the dog would starve to death, it would be brought out of the ground, only to be decapitated as it reached for the food. The spirit of the

dead dog would be used to kill the target. There were several variations to all of these methods, and some of what I knew about them could have been fiction. Still, I felt like these were all examples of dangerous curses.

I explained all this very loosely...and watched Rosenberg's face grow ever more grave. "Are these curses I shouldn't know about?" I asked.

"No, knowledge of them alone is not a problem. Those kinds of curses were not uncommon long ago, and through studying hexes intensively, one is expected to hear of them at some point. However, those curses—ones that are cast with sacrifice, torture, or killing of living beings—are now considered forbidden. Never use them," Rosenberg warned, and explained why they became forbidden. Sacrifices were basically substitutes for magic crystals. Magical energy coursed through the veins of every living being, so these ritual killings were done for a warlock to boost their own magical energy with that of the sacrifice. Torture was inflicted upon the sacrifice in order to convert their magical energy. Just like using a magic crystal that matched the element of the spell it was meant to power, torturing the sacrifice until it was filled with negative emotion made their magical energy better suited for hexes.

"Now the story of the merchant's son isn't too surprising," I said.

"Warlocks had often lost control of curses cast this way, which is why they are forbidden now. Still, there are those who succumb to the temptation of great power, and some warlocks harm themselves physically or emotionally to heighten their negative emotions and power as part of their practice," Rosenberg said.

Casting a sacrificial curse left a lot of evidence behind in the form of records of acquiring the sacrifice, and in the aftermath of the ritual itself. Warlock or no, casting one against another person was a crime that could lead to an arrest. However, no law forbade warlocks from harming themselves. By gradually accelerating those self-mutilations, it wasn't difficult for them to accept it as part of their training. Furthermore, it was difficult to tell if a warlock's trauma—physical or emotional—was self-inflicted. These reasons were why self-harm was very much discouraged among warlocks, but not

outright forbidden.

"Self-harm isn't good, of course, but it's also impossible to live a life without ever experiencing hardships... Regardless, attempting to amplify one's negative emotions through pain is a dangerous affair. If you ever meet a warlock who invites you to partake in such methods, I hope you never take them up on it," Rosenberg said.

"I won't. What does a normal warlock's training look like?" I asked.

"Meditation and introspection, mostly. For example, when I feel a negative emotion like anger, I face it. What am I angry about? Why am I angry about that? What can I do about it? And so forth."

It was like therapy—or more accurately—self-care. Maybe because of his particular example, which reminded me of an anger management seminar I'd been forced to attend when I was an office worker. "I'm not sure if it's the exact same thing, but I remember being forced to do something like that. I'm also familiar with meditation in the context of martial arts."

"I see. Regulating emotions and taking care of our mentality is a skill everyone needs, after all. Some warlocks offer courses for nonwarlocks as well. Perhaps you have been trained in hexes, Ryoma, without even realizing it," Rosenberg said, apparently happy with that explanation.

It surprised me to learn that some warlocks specialized in counseling and self-care. I supposed it made sense to have a wealth of knowledge about healing emotional scars when many warlocks suffered them as a by-product of their craft of handling negative emotions.

"Which brings us back to your training," Rosenberg said. "Now you have learned the curse to be used after cleansing cursed energy. Luckily, I did prepare for you to practice curse breaking." He gestured behind me.

I turned and spotted Sebas at some distance, standing by a table and set of chairs, producing box after box from his Space magic. There were far more boxes today than there were yesterday, all varying in sizes.

When I took my seat at the table, Rosenberg lifted the lid off the

largest box, showing how it was packed full of smaller boxes. “Each of these boxes contains a cursed object,” he said.

“In all of them? There have to be at least fifty of them right there,” I said.

“Cursed objects can have unpredictable effects when they are left alone. By law of this country, cursed objects must be appropriately treated on the spot or collected and properly stored,” Rosenberg explained. If the item’s owner paid a warlock or disenchanter to cleanse it, they were allowed to keep the object. But if they felt like the object wasn’t worth the money, they would relinquish the item. In that case, through the guards or guilds, the object will be stored in a specialized facility of the landlord so that a warlock or disenchanter could cleanse or destroy it. What was terrifying was that cursed objects could rarely be detected by the naked eye, so it wasn’t uncommon for them to appear in flea markets or secondhand stalls.

“I pulled these from Duke Jamil’s cursed object storage, claiming them for training my new apprentice. Cursed objects are sent to storage on a daily basis, so they are chronically overstocked and understaffed. The workers of the storage facility were very happy to see these go.”

“Isn’t the overstock a problem?” I asked.

“Duke Jamil’s facility still has some room, relatively speaking. Besides, although it would be ideal to process them all within territory, landlords can arrange to send each other objects before their storage facility reaches capacity.”

Warlocks could work for the storage facility by working the day cleansing objects on-site, or checking them out and cleansing them of their own accord as Rosenberg had done. Warlocks were paid out by the object, so green warlocks treated it as a convenient way to earn some extra income.

Once Rosenberg had finished explaining, I tried cleansing the first object by Curse Transfer, and it worked as well as if I’d been doing it for years. I had plenty of magical energy, and there were plenty of cursed objects on the table, so I began cleansing one after another, getting into the groove of it. It kind of reminded me of doing

homework when I was a student, and I enjoyed this style of work. Still, there were so many objects to go through. Rosenberg had brought far more than fifty.

"There is no need to overextend," my mentor said. "If we don't get through them, I can simply return them to the storage facility. Since Mister Sebas was accompanying us, I figured I'd bring more than we'd need."

"It's nice that I don't have a quota, but I can't stand having unfinished work that I can do so easily. I think it'll be good practice, so I'd like to keep at it until lunch, at least."

"If you're motivated to do so, I certainly won't stop you," Rosenberg said.

Cleansing them one at a time seemed inefficient, but leaving a bunch of cursed objects together could sometimes cause a sort of chemical reaction of curses, so it was not recommended to cleanse multiple objects. *Can slimes use hexes?* I wondered. If my dark slime could use hexes, that would mean an extra pair of hands (or appendages, at least).

There was only one way to find out, so I summoned my dark slime with Rosenberg's permission. I placed a cursed ring and a magic crystal to transfer the curse into.

First, I'd model the process. "Watch this," I told the dark slime. "Curse Transfer." I enveloped the ring's eerie magical energy with my own, and drew it out of the ring. Once it was completely extracted, I moved the magical energy to the magic crystal. After double-checking that there was no residual magical energy in the ring, the job was done. I placed the next cursed object on the table and asked the dark slime, "Can you do it?"

The dark slime stretched two appendages and fiddled with a cursed pair of earrings and the magic crystal. Although the slime was giving off a tiny bit of magical energy, there was no sign of the curse being transferred to the magic crystal.

"Maybe not..." I muttered. Because they showed all kinds of reactions and trained on their own, I often forgot that slimes were monsters driven by instinct and had very little sentience. *Maybe they don't have enough emotions to power hexes,* I was thinking as the

dark slime gently placed the earrings and magic crystal on the table. When I picked them up, however, I noticed something. "Lord Rosenberg? I don't think the earrings are cursed anymore."

"You are right. I didn't think the curse was transferred, though. Where did it go?"

"I believe...my slime ate the curse. Curses are dark magical energy warped by negative emotion, and dark slimes like to consume dark magical energy," I said. Even though it hadn't gone as expected, the dark slime still took away the curse. "Let me try something." Imagining a slight flu, I released a trickle of cursed magical energy towards the dark slime in the same way I fed elemental slimes magical energy of their preferred element. Sure enough, the dark slime happily extended its appendage and sucked up the magical energy from my hand. This confirmed that dark slimes consumed cursed magical energy.

Come to think of it, it was consuming the magical energy in the air even back in the City of Lost Souls. That was when we were digging up the demon lord fragment, so I thought it was just feeding. Of course, that spot in particular had been filled with cursed energy. Even without the fragment, the former execution chamber must have been a pit of negative energy that could have easily been rife with cursed magical energy. It was entirely possible that I could have learned about this then and there by being more observant.

"Shame on me!" I blurted out.

"Master Takebayashi?!"

"Are you all right? What happened?"

Eleonora and Rosenberg whirled to me in alarm, confused by my outburst. Meanwhile, Sebas remained completely composed, apparently having tracked my train of thought.

"Oh, sorry about that. I just realized I'd failed as a slime researcher." With a mental note to not alarm Eleonora and Rosenberg again, I turned to my tutor. "Lord Rosenberg, can I use some of the other cursed objects?" Now that it was confirmed that the dark slime consumed cursed magical energy and enjoyed it, I wanted to give it more and see if it would evolve.

After a while of doing just that, it happened. "Here we go!"

Having absorbed a bunch of cursed magical energy, the dark slime evolved!

Curse Slime
Skills: Dark Magic 3, Hex 3, Dark Magic Resistance 8, Hex Resistance 5, Absorb Dark Magic 2, Absorb Hex 3, Jump 1, Consume 1, Absorb 3, Split 1

"No change in appearance," I noted. "Same matte black color, no sheen, same size. I won't be able to tell a dark slime and a curse slime apart by looking at them. Ability-wise, the curse slime has the skill set of a dark slime plus the abilities and resistances for hexes. Is it using Absorb Hex when it eats curses? Even though I didn't have a chance to use it in practice, the dark slime could eat Dark magic and lessen its impact. Interesting," I rambled on.

It would still take me some time before I remembered my original purpose of being out here, and noticed the three adults watching me with a look of resigned acceptance in their eyes.

Chapter 10, Episode 17: Mountainside Infrastructure Blueprint Draft

"Wow, you discovered another new slime?" said Hudom.

As usual, we were exchanging reports of our morning over lunch. I had just told him about my accelerated hexing course and the new curse slime.

"That's not all," I said. "Lord Rosenberg told me about something called a miasma slime." Recalling the Starving Gallows, I'd theorized with Rosenberg that there may be slimes that consumed cursed energy.

That's when he told me that, in locations where cursed energy was especially dense, there were rare sightings of miasma slimes. "Warlocks are recommended to eliminate miasma slimes because they can spread cursed energy, and that is proof that they actually exist. Do not expect to find one easily, but there is at least a chance. However, even if you find one, it may be difficult to transfer the miasma slime outside of the area you find it in. Expect to go through some red tape or need to obtain a special permission."

Cursed energy was a danger to anyone who came in contact with it, so all that made sense. Still, there wasn't a rule against keeping a miasma slime as a familiar. There's no way that anyone had ever attempted to keep a monster that oozed cursed energy as a pet. It would even be too dangerous to use for some kind of crime. As a result, there was no need for a law to prevent keeping one. Loophole or no, that meant that it was legal for me to have a miasma slime. Besides, I believed it would be possible for me to evolve a slime into a miasma slime using the cursed energy of this mountain without having to hunt all over the world for one.

I wouldn't get to test that evolution for a while, though. First, I needed to find a slime that preferred to consume cursed energy. I tried presenting the cursed energy I had siphoned from the soil to it, but the curse slime didn't take to it. Even if it had, I wouldn't try to evolve it until after I thoroughly observed it. Based on how cursed energy worked and what reactions it caused, along with my experience from evolving poison slimes, I expected that any slime incompatible with cursed energy would most likely die. I sometimes fed my slimes poisons out of curiosity, but I'd never kill a slime for no reason. Cursed energy was still magical energy, so I expected miasma slimes to be close to curse slimes in the evolutionary tree of slimes. For the time being, I planned to find more slimes that liked Dark magic to evolve into dark slimes, so I could experiment with whether they would evolve into a miasma slime or another slime altogether.

Depending on whether the miasma slime emitted cursed energy perpetually or only when hunting or defending itself, there was a chance a miasma slime could help store or cleanse cursed energy by ingesting it.

"I will need to have appropriate safety protocols prepared," I said. "Even though I have this testing ground, I don't want to cause unnecessary damage. I would also like to hone my skills of dealing with cursed energy myself in the time it takes for those conditions to line up."

"Good idea," said Mizelia the tiger beastkin. "We don't know about cleansing or hexes, but we did sense something bad in the land."

The other beastkin and Jeff nodded in agreement.

"That's how my morning went," I said. "How was the mountain?"

"We focused on looking for parts of the mountain better suited for your projects," Jeff said, referencing the flatland Cilia and the others had mentioned yesterday. "Like yesterday, the only living things we saw were bugs and small animals. Nothing big or dangerous. It's no place for hunting, but the mountain's safe save for that cursed land."

"We weren't sure how much work you were going to do on the

mountain, but there's plenty of room for farms and buildings too," said Miya. "When it comes to securing water, Hudom has an idea."

"An idea?" I asked. Did he find a river?

"I did find a creek, but it isn't too deep and it runs too far from the flatland. We could secure drinking and household water from it, but it's a little inconvenient. We were saying that, if you want to irrigate any farms, we should dig a well too," Hudom said.

"So you must have found potential spots for a well," I said.

"Right. There are all varieties of trees growing on this mountain, and one of them is called baobark. It's a tree that stores a lot of water in its trunk, and they grow in water-dense soil. They're famous indicators for water mains."

While I tucked in that new knowledge, Hudom went on to add that they had already found a group of baobark. They were quick with work as always. I still hadn't decided how much infrastructure I was going to build into the mountain, but if the creek and baobark cluster were separated, I wouldn't have to worry about water. I could definitely dig up irrigation with magic, and probably the well too.

"When it comes to maintaining the mountain, we should trim the underbrush and take some saplings and branches. Not only does it give away that the mountain has been neglected, wildfires will spread more rapidly," Hudom said.

"Right... We do need to prepare for mountain fires." I hadn't thought of that. If it was only about appearances, I could give the excuse that I hadn't had control of the mountain for long. But if there were a fire that caused casualties, nothing I could say after the fact would do any good. I'd have to make the best preparations I could to mitigate any potential disasters. One thing I could do right away was to build a firebreak. If I recalled correctly, Japanese law stipulated a firebreak with a width of six to thirty meters where all trees were cut down to stop a wildfire when it came to it.

"Oh, Hudom. If the baobark trees retain water, are they more resistant to fire? If they can be transplanted, I was thinking of lining the paths we build with them to protect them from potential fires," I said.

"Live baobark trees are. They dry out quickly when they're cut down, though, and burn easily. We should be able to propagate them with cuttings, and if I can use your slime fertilizer, I can get saplings ready to plant. Do you want me to try?" Hudom offered.

"Yes, please." I didn't know too much about maintaining a mountain, but even I knew that we couldn't just cut down trees without plans of planting more. Otherwise, we'd just be destroying nature like the cursed land was doing. I wouldn't and couldn't do that.

Hudom knew a lot more about plants than I did, so I'd be taking his advice on that front. My job would be to specify my plans for the mountain's new infrastructure. Since I'd have the final word, until I announced at least the general direction of the project, no one could make any specific suggestions or notes.

"Our top priority at this moment would be to carve paths and clean up the mountain. If I release the huge bush slime, it'll take care of much of the underbrush around the cottage. I'll also send out all of my goblins to knock down branches. Once the metal and iron slimes transform, the goblins will have enough tools as well," I said.

"You have nearly a hundred goblins if I recall. They would be a great asset to the project," Sebas said, having witnessed my goblin brigade in the City of Lost Souls.

Just last week, my goblins had surpassed a hundred to a total of one hundred and thirteen. That wouldn't even be close to the numbers I'd need for full-scale development, but that was a great number for our project. "They can perform simple tasks as well as humans, and the hobgoblins are very strong. I think making the paths will be more efficient for me and the slimes to do together, but they can handle the branches. Once we set up paths and clean up the mountain, I'd like to work on the cursed land itself."

Another landslide could hit any minute, which would make cleansing cursed energy more difficult. Fortunately, using the hex I'd learned in that morning's class would let me prevent cursed energy from spreading, with the bonus of using and reviewing the knowledge I'd gained. "And the goblins will try to make alcohol

whenever they get a chance, so they need something they can burn their energy on." On top of white liquor, they'd begun distilling liquor with other ingredients like the wheat and potatoes from the slime farms...and the leftover fruit I'd brought back from the Sea of Trees too. At least, their endeavor also benefited my research sometimes, like when I discovered the drunk slime that liked to consume alcohol mid-fermentation. However, the drunk slime would most likely further evolve into a slime that would aid in the goblins' distilling.

I would always cherish the birth of another type of slime, but if they were so focused on distilling, I would really need to do something about their operation. Staying holed up in the Dimension Home couldn't be good for the goblins' health either. This was a great opportunity not just for the goblins but for me to train.

"Train?" Mizelia asked when I brought up the idea.

"If I have the time. Remember how I went back to my home village the other day? Even though I had no problem crossing the Sea of Trees, I still feel like my damage output is lacking when I'm fighting monsters deep in the forest," I said.

"You went into the Sea of Trees and came back, so you can't really sell yourself short. Are monsters deep in the forest really that bad?"

"Many of them are large and tough. There are plenty of small and annoying monsters, but those I don't have trouble dealing damage to," I said, thinking that I would have had a really tough time against tyrant raptors and the cannonball rhino's boss if Glen hadn't been there with me. I probably could have taken them down with some kind of slime strategy, but that didn't address how I felt my own strength was lacking. While I didn't want to be like Glen, I would like to work on buffing my body with physical and magical energy. Besides, Glen ran off saying that he wanted to buy instant meals, so I expected to see him again before long. When I did see him, I wouldn't put it past him to demand another sparring match.

"Well, let us know if we can help."

"We can use enhancement magic too."

"I'll be there too."

"Thank you!" I told the group. Finding time to train could be a lot

of fun. Restraining the urge to hammer out the details, I brought our conversation back on track. “So the goblins will help us trim the mountains... I would love to see the site with my own eyes.”

“Then I’ll take you there,” Hudom offered. “I’ve been shown almost everywhere we’ve explored, so we can go any time that works for you.”

“Anytime that works... Lord Rosenberg?” I asked.

My tutor smiled heartily. “Ryoma already knows how to perform most tasks surrounding cleansing cursed energy. I’ll continue giving what advice is needed, but the rest comes down to practicing in the field and exploring methods that suit him best. I can help you out if you need me to, so this is up to you, Ryoma.”

With the ball back in my court, I decided to have Hudom show me around the mountain that afternoon. “If that works with you, Hudom.”

“You got it, boss.”

“And, Lord Rosenberg. If I give you the documents regarding the lost spell later, could you look them over?” I asked.

“Of course.”

I’d had the files ready, but I hadn’t had a chance to give them to him since we’d jumped into my cleansing training. Tomorrow, I’d talk to him in detail about it. I’d been subjected to way too many unplanned tasks and changes in jobs in my previous life, but talking it over with the group and making step-by-step decisions made it enjoyable. This was the kind of environment I wanted to maintain while we worked hard to accomplish our goal.

Special: Eleonora’s Long Night

I woke up in my assigned housing. It was still late in the evening before midnight. Moonlight shone in through the window by my head, illuminating the room designed solely to be slept in.

There’s no need to turn on the lights. I climbed out of bed, boiled water with a magical item I brought in, and activated a soundproofing magical item. I waited for the water to boil without thinking of anything in particular.

Once it was ready, I steeped cheap tea in the hot water and sat on the edge of the bed. Breathing in the refreshing steam already warmed my body and relaxed my mind a little...but it didn’t last long. After I drank the warm cup of tea, any lingering drowsiness was taken over by boredom.

“Five hours until dawn. Seven hours until the day really starts... What to do?”

Any diurnal species should have been asleep at this hour. If I could fall asleep again I wouldn’t feel so bored, but that wasn’t in the cards for me. The majority of people could sleep through most of the night, but I didn’t need more than three hours. If I slept any longer, I would wake up groggy from oversleeping.

People often seemed concerned about my sleep pattern when I shared it with them, even though it wasn’t due to any illness, but something that has been part of my life since I was a child, perhaps due to habit. I didn’t even need to sleep three hours consecutively. If I were too busy for that, I just needed to take quick fifteen or thirty-minute naps several times. Even if I sleep less than three hours a night, I could go a week without feeling tired, and I could stay up for a few days in a row without sleeping at all. It was safe to say that I was a night owl.

I did not know why I was this way, but I’d read records of other people like me, including beastkin who lived a similar lifestyle as I

did. My guess was that one of my ancestors was a beatskin of that kind. When I was younger, being different from my peers bothered me. Now, it didn't bother me much at all. It only bored me.

"I think I've read all the books I've brought in...four times? A day or two is one thing, but it doesn't take long to read them all when I have this much time on my hands." Spending the extra time at night was the real challenge for me. Even if we were back in the city, walking outside would have been dangerous, and I wasn't the type to wander around without a purpose. Since most of my neighbors were asleep, I had to refrain from using too much light or making too much sound.

In that sense, I was grateful for the structure of these rooms Master Takebayashi had built. Everyone was given their own room to improve our morale and quality of living, and each room came with its own bathroom. Bored as I was, I could at least move freely around my room.

"It's much better than pretending to sleep until morning in a shared room... But I really don't have anything to do. I used to have too much work, but now there's not enough."

Back in school, I spent the time studying. Even when I joined the military after marriage, there was an endless list of paperwork I could do. That's why I'd brought in a magical item that could light up the room, keep the light within the room, and also soundproof it...but I hadn't had much opportunity to use it yet. I appreciated my new boss, Master Takebayashi, for his kindness, but— No, I couldn't dare complain when I'd been treated so well.

I, Eleonora Ransor, was once married to Baron Reefled. My family was a core participant in the attack on Gimul at the end of last year. My divorce would have been dishonorable enough without it, but my family's scandal only made matters worse. By all laws of high society, my future was looking grim.

Fortunately, I had been spared by Duke Jamil. Because of my mistreatment by the baron, I was absolved from his part in the scandal and treated as an unwilling hostage. Even though I was still made to pay out restitutions, none of my family members were arrested, and we were allowed to keep our title, though that was all

we had left. That decision, however, was made out of political calculation—the duke thought it would be beneficial for House Ransor to remain standing. Otherwise, regardless of my treatment in my marriage, my entire family would have been prosecuted.

If only we had, rather than be spared as a shell of our former state. My grip tightened on my mug, nearly spilling over its contents. "This won't do... My feelings keep turning melancholy when I have nothing to do at night..." Pouring tea down my throat, I washed away the gloom.

It was fortunate that I was taken in by the duke and given a post as Master Takebayashi's secretary. Considering my standing, my treatment was beyond generous. So much so that I'd often wondered the reason for it.

Master Takebayashi's generosity extended beyond my living accommodations and into my work. Most recently, when I suggested that he should first consider his appearance as the duke's engineer, he immediately agreed. If I had made a suggestion in the same manner to my ex-husband or his family, the fact that I had spoken my opinion alone would have irritated them, earning nothing but a sharp reminder to keep my mouth shut. I'd learned to accept no more than that as a wife, but it was a different story when I joined the military. As captain of a unit, I could not hold my tongue or sense when my soldiers' lives hung in the balance. The Reefleds still attempted to refuse any suggestions I'd made, but they couldn't ignore me as they usually did when it came to military business. As a result, it became routine for my suggestions to be torn apart, rejected over and over again, only to make me go through a meaningless revision before it was finally accepted. It wasn't uncommon for me to turn in paperwork after revising a section I'd been told to correct, only for them to demand I reverse the correction and turn it in again.

These were different circumstances. Master Takebayashi wasn't a monster like my ex-husband, and his organization had little room for middlemen. Still, he took my suggestion into action with decisive speed.

"I only made the suggestion last night. By this morning, changes

had been made to the schedule, and he went to inspect the site this afternoon. So many things have happened in less than a day."

Carme had told me that Master Takebayashi was quick to take action, but I hadn't expected this. No one else could have—or even thought to—shorten his studies and practice of hexes to a single day. In addition, he used the spare time he carved out to build these lodgings and even cook for himself. After I gave him those documents, he not only read them overnight but returned them to me with a summary page (complete with cited page numbers) and a map of the mountain that marked important locations from the survey.

This afternoon, he followed Lord Veldoole to inspect the planned locations of new roads and the well. While there, he experimentally deforested part of the flatland to build a barracks for the goblins, which went far faster than I expected. In preparation, Master Takebayashi planned out each step with caution and attention to detail. Some may mistake it for stagnation, but once plans were set into motion, they were completed with astonishing speed. Now, I understood what Carme had told me when he said that I needed to become acclimated to Master Takebayashi's work style—he meant the drastic shift in work speed.

"This isn't something I could have prepared for. If I take a step back and think that we're not progressing, I'll fall behind in no time." His rapid mastery of magic, instantaneous construction projects, not to mention his various objects research and developments... Those were all abilities that would easily prove his worth as the duke's engineer in their own right. "I'll go over plans for tomorrow." I couldn't sleep anyway. Instead of letting my thoughts get the better of me, I'd be better off doing something useful.

I stood from the bed and turned on the magical item I placed on the desk, which immediately brightened the room while coating the window in darkness to keep the light from spilling out. The same item also kept any sound contained in the room. While my eyes adjusted, I fetched my writing utensils and sat at the desk.

As Master Takebayashi's assistant and secretary, I was ready to perform any task demanded of me. So far, I was finding the job even

more rewarding than I'd hoped. I knew I wasn't good at showing or speaking my emotions. I would show my gratitude through my work. If he completed work twice as fast as expected, I would calculate that into my preparations for the next task.

Writing out plans, calculating time frames, brainstorming what else needed to be done... This was how I spent another long night, occasionally stopping to pour a fresh cup of tea.

Special: Break Room of the Gods

One day, three gods appeared in a room conceptualized in the divine realm, all looking very much exhausted.

"I'm so tired!" Kufo yawned.

"That demon lord... Too many fragments..." Meltrize said.

"You can say that again," Gain added.

"Hey if it isn't you three." Tekun, the god of liquor, held up his goblet of sake in greeting.

"Tekun... How did it go?" Gain asked.

"Found one in the mountains of Granmelde. Looks so desolate it's gonna be easier to take care of than the others. Right now, Kiriluel and Fernobelia are whipping up a plan to watch and eliminate the thing. They're better at that stuff than I am. I'm just taking a breather while they're doing the math. How about you guys? You were doing a whole-world scan, right?"

"It took a lot of energy for no results," Kufo said. "The fragments are too weak to stand out, and it's using the little bit of power it has to conceal its own existence... We're not going to find them without a magnifying glass."

"Bummer... We gotta keep looking for needles in the haystacks, huh?" Tekun said.

"For now, yes. This will be a long battle," Meltrize said.

"Good thing we set up a break room..." Gain said, picking up a teapot and snacks from a shelf and setting them on the coffee table.

Kufo and Meltrize took one of each without a word and settled into their seats.

Normally, gods created anything they needed in the blink of an eye...but while they were scrambling to find the demon lord fragments—one of which Ryoma had recently found—using even the slightest kernel of their power seemed like an insurmountable task.

This room was originally created to welcome Ryoma for his

regular curse-treatment sessions in the divine realm. At some point, the tired gods had begun to congregate and rest here.

"There's got to be a better way of finding the fragments..." Kufo grumbled.

"It's the demon lord. Even though he has fallen, he was once the same as us. Not only that, he was a higher-ranking god than us. He knew what powers we have and prepared for them. It will not be that easy," Meltrize countered.

"I know, but... It would be nice if we could dig up just a little more information. For example, if we could at least find out how many fragments are left, that would make us feel better. As long as we find them, we can deal with them," Kufo said.

Because of their nature, searching for demon lord fragments was always a battle with self-doubt. There were several occasions when a god had found a fragment in an area another god had already cleared. Furthermore, the gods were too powerful to eliminate the fragments without obliterating much of the surrounding environment, so they were unable to eliminate them as soon as they were discovered. The gods were forced to calculate the effect on the environment and dealt with each fragment with utmost care.

The gods were juggling several nerve-racking tasks—searching for fragments, watching the discovered fragments, eliminating the fragments, and observing the environment after elimination. In the time it took them to complete one task, another task or two arose. It was like they were running a marathon where the finish line was moving farther and farther away.

"Looking back on it, the first one was easy," Gain said.

"Because Ryoma brought it all the way here to us," Tekun said, sipping from his goblet. "The fragments are only a problem when they're in the mortal realm. If the fragments were here, we could deal with them without worrying about wiping out ecosystems."

Meltrize, looking even more emotionless than usual, chimed in. "It would be more efficient to request Ryoma Takebayashi to collect the fragments. Although unintentionally, he did successfully secure and bring the fragment to this realm. His risk can be mitigated if we give him divine relics to protect him from the fragments."

"Hrm... We've already put him through enough, and I hate to rope him into this affair... But I've started to think that we have no other choice," Gain said. "Not only will delegating the collection to Ryoma take the load off our shoulders, but it will also allow us to destroy fragments that we have not dealt with yet because the impact on their surroundings would be too great. It would be a very beneficial course. But still..." Gain fell silent, and Kufo and Tekun watched with a grimace while Meltrize waited silently.

"Agh, dammit! We're done talking about this! It's spoiling my drink!" Tekun protested.

"This was intended as a moment of rest," Meltrize conceded. "We have a long road ahead, and our situation is not yet dire. I rushed into proposing a decision."

With that, the topic of conversation shifted.

"How is dear Ryoma doing?" Gain asked.

"He started studying hexes. There are some new faces: his warlock tutor and a girl named Eleonora. Like we talked about before, he's working on cleansing cursed energy," Tekun said.

The other three gods stared into the air. That was all it took for them to catch up on Ryoma's actions while they were away.

"He's really good at hexes, considering he only just started to study them. Well, I suppose it is Ryoma we're talking about," Kufo said.

"Naturally. He and hexes are a perfect match. Especially after all the excessive tribulations the god of Earth showered him with," Meltrize remarked.

"Right... Like chaining insignificant misfortunes until he's wrapped up in a big scandal, or making sure he's surrounded by crazy people that only make up a small portion of the population... They clocked in extra time to make sure he was miserable," Tekun grumbled.

"Kept alive but not living a life... Misfortune became normalized. Even when he conjures negative emotions, he stands firm and manipulates hexes as naturally as he breathes. He's gotten more effective with cleansing cursed energy than before." Gain laughed.

"He's more effective and efficient than the last time he did it on instinct. Thanks to studying the basics. But he has a long way to go.

With his natural affinity for hexes, they should be more effective," Meltrize said critically.

"Even though he comes up with and pulls off all sorts of experiments on the fly, he can be surprisingly cautious. He knows he's dealing with dangerous cursed energy, and he needs to prove himself as the duke's engineer, so I bet he's being more careful than usual," Kufo said.

"His tutor Rosenberg harps on the dangers of a curse going rogue. Once he practices more and figures out his limits, he'll get better at it," Tekun said.

While they caught up on Ryoma's adventures, the gods shifted the topic to the lost spell of cleansing. "Maybe he'll learn that spell no problem," Kufo suggested. "I really want him to learn it so it can help him moving forwards."

"I'm not sure... It's simple in theory, but the spell is a little different from the modern magic he is used to. Ryoma undoubtedly has the knowledge and technique, but learning this spell may prove difficult precisely because he has grown accustomed to modern magic," Gain said.

"Humans have developed different anatomies between then and now. Modern humans are less likely to face side effects, so it is not all bad. Besides, he has Korumi the fairy with him," Meltrize said.

"Right. Fairies are masters of controlling magical energy," Kufo said. Regardless of how he'd fare in the testing grounds, Ryoma would visit the Sea of Trees again, where he would tell Korumi of events in the world beyond the woods. If they worked together, Kufo concluded, the lost spell would not be difficult to learn.

"Even if he can't learn it, he just needs to stay out of the public eye until our treatment is done," Tekun pointed out. "Ryoma said he was expecting that, and he's got more people working for him now. Like that Eleonora girl."

"Oh, she looks like she knows how to get the job done. While she has baggage of her own, I think she's a good match for Ryoma," Kufo said.

"Hm... There's her, who excels at processing information, and a boy named Hudom, who is a master at building relationships. Plenty

of people with whom Ryoma has built a connection are in Gimul too. With their help, he won't have trouble solving most problems he's going to experience," Gain said with his whole chest, easing the tension on Kufo's and Tekun's faces.

Watching Ryoma's peaceful life helped soothe the hearts of the gods. Meltrize alone remained eerily silent.

"Hm? What is it, Meltrize?" Kufo asked.

"Nothing."

"Nothing? You might as well have said something's bugging you," Tekun said.

"Something caught my attention. It is not a big deal. I did not want to ruin our break," Meltrize said.

"Now I'm entirely curious," Gain said.

"You noticed something about the fragment?" asked Kufo.

Meltrize's attempt to let this conversation go had backfired. Although she was one of the quietest gods, she contemplated for a moment and decided that it wasn't worth keeping her silence at the cost of an argument. "I noticed something about Ryoma Takebayashi. From what I have researched, he has frequently been caught up in trouble, the most prominent example being the demon lord fragment. That is not something a normal person runs into. That is why I wondered if he was going to be okay this time. That is all."

The other three gods let out a groan of agreement.





Ryoma has a strange kind of luck, so I can't guarantee it... Gain said silently. *It was a shocking coincidence that he came across the fragment and was cursed by it. The same could be said for finding a file within his inheritance in Korumi village that happened to contain information about a spell that could lessen the demon lord's curse.*

Before he stumbled upon the fragment, his city had been embroiled in a huge incident, Kufo answered. *Everything that happens to him is either really good or really bad.*

Now I'm starting to get worried, Tekun chimed in. *Don't tell me something horrible is coming because it's been so calm for him lately.*

Silence fell again until the gods reached a joint conclusion.

"Let's keep watching," they seemed to say all at once.

Afterword

Hello, Roy (author of *By the Grace of the Gods*) here! Thank you so much for picking volume 16! In this volume, Ryoma safely returns from the Sea of Trees, Eleonora officially becomes his secretary, and he gains the warlock tutor Rosenberg—a volume full of new connections and interest.

As is par for the course, Ryoma is making himself busy again by turning his inspection of the new testing grounds into a mountain development project. However, Ryoma seems to be getting used to delegating after spending more time working in groups. That time Carme had to beg him to let employees take on more responsibilities at the laundry shop seems like a distant memory.

I still have a lot to learn myself, but I'm going to keep putting pen to paper so I can continue to grow in any way I can, and so I can continue to bring the story of Ryoma and his friends to you. I hope you continue to watch over them as they carry on their adventures.

Bonus Short Story: Rosenberg's Worries

In the evening of the day Ryoma had mastered the general principles of cursed energy cleansing, Rosenberg was delving into the files regarding the lost magic. The stack was too thick for him to read in one night, even if he gave up on sleep for it.

As an expert on hexes, he naturally had the curiosity and drive to learn about a curse-breaking spell lost to time. Regardless, his eyes and muscles demanded some rest.

"Let's take a breather," Rosenberg said. Still sitting in his chair, he stretched his arms and took out a bag of dried fruit from his luggage.

Plopping a fruit in his mouth, Rosenberg contemplated his reading so far. *I at least have a handle on its concept. It helps that the document is written as well as a thesis.* He reached for another piece of fruit. *Who was Ryoma's grandmother, anyway? Everything from her knowledge of magic and hexes, the decoding of ancient languages and references to astronomy suggests the vast depth of her knowledge. She was no ordinary scholar. There can't be more than a handful of researchers in the royal institution who would come close to her level. Could she have been a famed academic forced into exile? In any case, it's a good reminder that there are many surprises in this world.* Rosenberg was beginning to understand why Ryoma was so favored by the duke. *It makes sense, if he was under the tutelage of someone like this. Actually, that's disregarding Ryoma's own knowledge and studiousness. He is dedicated to his lessons and takes to my teachings quickly, inadequate as they are. Every skill I teach, he immediately masters.* At some point, he had stopped reaching for the fruit.

"What do I teach him from here...?" he asked the ceiling. *He has*

too much talent as a warlock. That much was clear from the moment the duke requested I tutor him. I was shown a document that Ryoma had written that the Jamils believed he had unknowingly cursed. Sure enough, there was a faint trace of a hex on the pamphlet. From that point on, I saw Ryoma not only as my temporary apprentice, but someone I needed to monitor or even detain, if the situation called for it. I had expected him to learn about hexes over time, moving slow and steady to prevent any curses from going out of control. Of course, he'd soon realized his concerns were unfounded. *I planned to focus on controlling curses at first and observe how he operated. As it turns out, Ryoma is at least as skilled as a seasoned warlock when it comes to regulating his negative emotions. Not only is he a quick learner, his curses are remarkably stable. No doubt, he has survived terrible environments. Right now, he has a healthy support system—and he is self-aware enough to open up to his friends. Since he can already control hexes and keep his mind calm, there's little more I can do than offer some advice.*

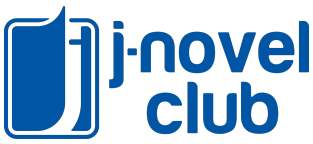
Rosenberg had always been an active warlock, and teaching wasn't entirely in his wheelhouse. He knew there were plenty of warlocks better suited for teaching the craft, but had accepted the role because he was concerned that Ryoma's mental state required urgent attention. Now that he was reassured of Ryoma's stability, he only felt superfluous.

"I won't say that the duke was overcautious in assigning me... Would it be in Ryoma's best interest to find a warlock who specializes in instruction?" Rosenberg wondered aloud. Watching Ryoma dedicate himself to his training and rapidly master skill after skill was rewarding for Rosenberg. On the other hand, he understood how much further Ryoma could improve under the right teacher...which would, in turn, benefit the warlock industry as a whole.

Although he felt a sense of responsibility for accepting the post, he didn't want to waste Ryoma's time by continuing with lessons he thought were beneath his apprentice's talents. And what if—should worse come to worst—Rosenberg squandered Ryoma's talents? He

could never live it down with Ryoma or the duke.

As his personal longing to remain Ryoma's tutor and his logical decision to step down warred furiously in his mind, Rosenberg returned to the records on the lost curse. For now, he would do everything in his power to help his apprentice grow.



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By the Grace of the Gods: Volume 16
by Roy

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