

# By the Grace of the Gods

Roy

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14





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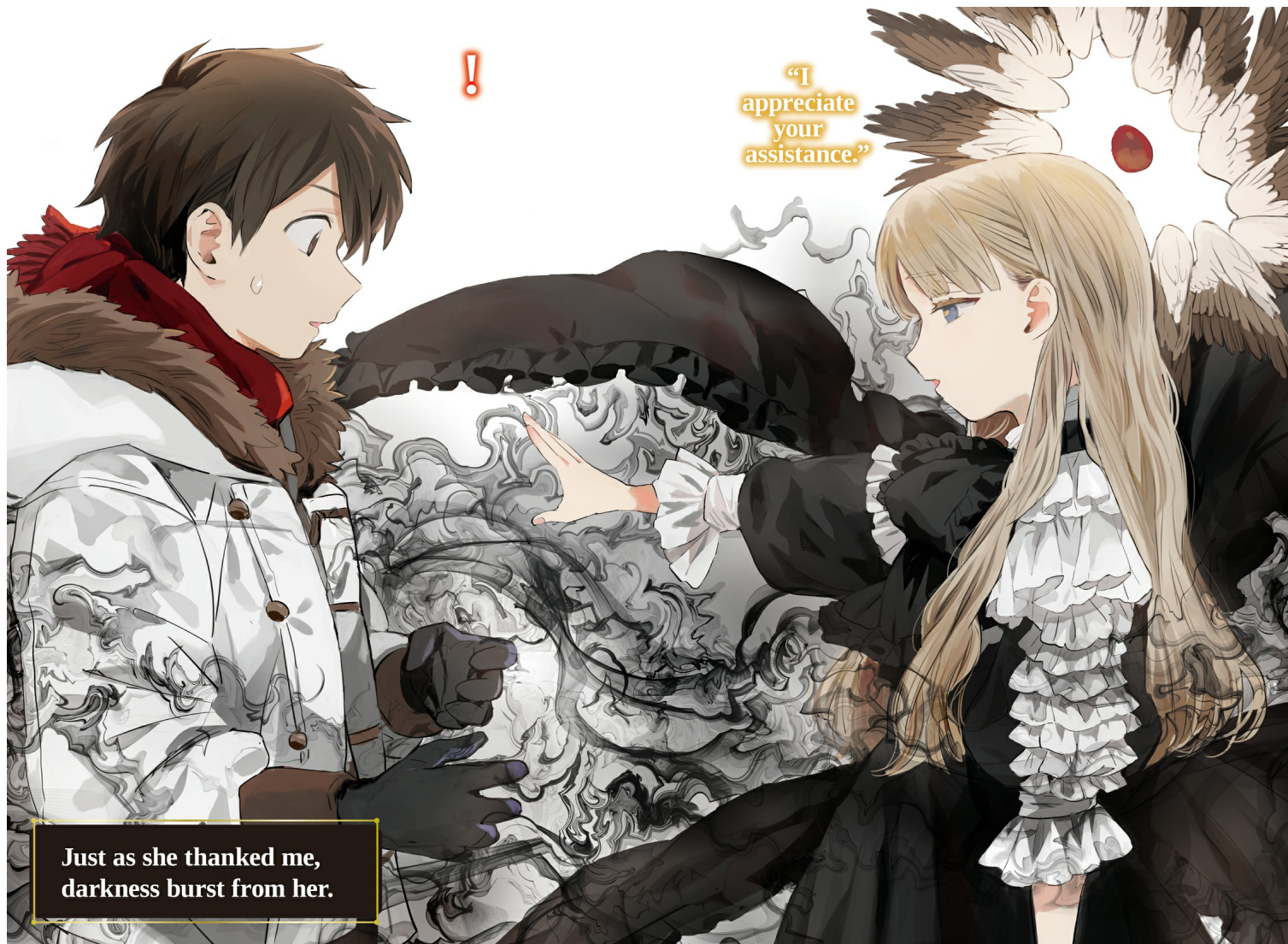






A sudden urge told me to reach out and touch the crystal. Just as my fingers were about to touch it, an indescribable chill shot up my spine, and I leaped back as fast as my heart had started beating. Sweat poured down my back like a waterfall. *What was that? Something's not right about that crystal.*









Soon, the stone slimes  
I'd placed outside notified  
me of my guests' arrival.  
Outside, I found the duke  
and duchess, Sebas, and  
their usual quartet of  
guards. An unfamiliar  
couple accompanied  
them, though.



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## Chapter 8, Episode 18: Let the Raid Begin

The next morning, with a bone-shaking explosion we commenced our raid on the City of Lost Souls. Patches of midnight dew—the grass we were here to collect—grew inside the tower in the center of the city. Two things stood in our way: the enormous gate that loomed as a reminder of when this place was a prison, and the sea of Undead that swarmed beyond it.

So, we'd destroyed the gate first, using up the rest of my dead stock of gunpowder. We peeked around the corner of a structure that stood a little ways down the road.

"Maybe I used a little too much gunpowder... Not that I had any other use for it," I said.

"It's hard to see past the cloud of dust... But I'm sure the gate has been blown to smithereens, at least," Sever noted.

"Yeah, along with a bunch of Undead that were crowding it. Which works out for us," Remily joined.

"Good thing we kept our distance," Reinbach said.

The explosion seemed like the right size, considering that I'd initially set aside that gunpowder to blow up—or at least bury alive—any enemies I might have encountered at the abandoned mines. But that opening wouldn't do us any good if we let the Undead swarm up again. "Secure an entrance."

The hobgoblins that I had brought out of the Dimension Home before the explosion ran into action at my command. Leading the charge was a group of them in armor, each carrying a riot shield made out of hardening solution and a metal slime in the form of a mace. Behind them were another group with lances, followed by a mix of hobgoblins holding grave slimes and regular goblins carrying long-range weapons.

The goblin march was a far cry from the organized procession of a well-trained army, but they managed to secure a position before the Undead could



flood the area again. As soon as the first team of hobgoblins formed a defensive wall with their shields, the following unit shoved grave slimes through the openings between the shields.

Our plan of attack had three stages, and my familiars were the stars of the first. Even after the massive explosion, there were far too many Undead in the city proper for just the five of us to mow through. I reinforced our numbers with my familiars, although that still put our numbers at fewer than one hundred. There was no way for us to count how many Undead monsters filled the City of Lost Souls. We'd estimated there were no fewer than ten thousand of them in total...leaving us still massively outnumbered.

"Coating Light." I coated the goblins' weapons with Light magic that made them especially potent against the Undead. Although I couldn't parallel cast Light Ball spells like Remily could, I was able to send a big batch of magical energy to their weapons—the metal slimes that were also my familiars. This alone would drastically improve the goblins' ability to eliminate the Undead, especially given how many of them I had sent out. With more practice, I might even learn how to cast enhancement spells on all of my troops at once. Besides, the grave slimes would be munching on Undead right off the bat today, so the goblins were only responsible for taking out any Undead that slipped through the cracks. With long-range support from the regular goblins, I expected the hobgoblins to do just fine on their own. If they faced any trouble, one of us would intervene... The chances of them needing any assistance would drastically decrease with time, though. Most likely, the grave slimes would begin to multiply after a few hours of preying on the Undead. The more grave slimes there were, the more efficient they and the goblins would be at taking out those monsters. We'd gain ground slowly but surely as the goblins marched and my grave slimes multiplied, like in an RTS game.

"Holy Space," Remily chanted. "Our rest area is set up too. We're in for the long haul, Ryoma. Take a break when you *start* to feel tired."

"Yes, I will," I answered.

Meanwhile, the Undead were oozing out of the city center, step-by-step. Since dawn had already broken, they had slowed to a snail's pace. Still, the Undead horde, groaning and squelching, stretched far into the city until they



blurred into a crawling cloud that encroached with eerie foreboding.

The goblins sensed it too. I could feel their trepidation through our familiar bond. Nerves could easily wipe away any advantage they had... To raise their spirits, I decided to have them take out the first bunch of Undead with a bang.

Luckily, the wraiths were leading the Undead march. Unlike the ground-bound Undead that were pushing and tripping over each other, the wraiths floated through the air with far more freedom of movement.

“Marksmen, ready!” I called to the goblins at the rear of my familiar unit.

The wraiths, although more agile than the other Undead, were easy targets as the grave slimes’ Attract Haunts skill funneled them in.

On my mark, the goblins raised their slingshots. And these were no children’s toys. I had modeled them after hunting slingshots that were attached to the forearm with a metal frame to allow for improved accuracy and drawing power. Naturally, rubber slimes acted as the “strings” of the slingshots.

“A little closer... Fire!” I ordered, and the goblins loosed their slingshots at once. The pebbles they fired bored large holes in the wraiths on contact, and the flying Undead vanished without a trace. As ammunition, I’d given the goblins plenty of BB-sized pebbles I had created from a nearby crag. With a coating of Light magic, these little pebbles were highly effective against the Undead. As long as there was Light magic on it, pretty much anything could be used as a weapon to take out these monsters.

The goblins were shocked by how easily they had shot down the wraiths, so I said to them, “Weapons coated with Light magic make dealing with Undead a breeze! As long as you hold your formation and remain calm, you can easily take out that horde too! As soon as they’re in range, fire away! We have plenty of ammunition!”

My verbal encouragement, along with showing them how effectively they could defeat the Undead, did the trick for the rather simpleminded goblins. Their trepidation had made way for a sense of excitement as they squealed, ready to take on the next wave of monsters that would approach.

As I watched the pumped-up goblins with relief, Sever gave me a satisfied



grin. “Way to bolster their morale.”

“Thank you. Now that they’ve seen how effective their weapons are, they at least won’t crumple under the pressure. The wraiths can’t flank them by passing through those rock walls before the goblins reach the city, right?”

“That’s right. Wraiths can pass through man-made structures, but not through naturally formed barriers, like boulders, cliffs, or the ground itself. Because they’re incorporeal, magical energy has a more significant effect on wraiths. If they attempted to pass through natural formations, the innate magical energy would overpower the magical energy that is their essence. That’s also why wraiths are even rarer to see during the day than zombies or skeletons. They’re only here now because we’re so close to an epicenter of cursed energy and we drew their attention with that explosion. I’ve even heard of someone who trapped wraiths outdoors under sunlight, and they simply disappeared after a few hours. That should demonstrate how vulnerable they are to magical energy,” Sever explained.

“That much?” Could they be taken out by concentrating sunlight with a magnifying glass? Remily’s laser spell was a concentration of bright light generated by magic. On Earth, there were some cooking appliances that didn’t use any fire or gas, and I remembered watching a few online videos about cooking meat by harnessing sunlight. Using the same scientific principle, it seemed possible to take out the Undead without using magic...or at least to crisp them up.

“Oh? Take a look at that, Ryoma.” Remily indicated something with her staff.

The march of the ground-bound Undead had slowed. Here or there, a zombie or skeleton tripped, knocking over others like bowling pins or becoming a temporary obstacle for those who followed it. It was difficult to get a good look because any fallen Undead soon became trampled, but I had a guess as to the cause. “Are they tripping over the bullets I’ve fired?”

“Looks like it,” Remily confirmed. “There must be charges of magical energy left over in them after going through the wraiths. It looks like this can only benefit our plan...but how much magical energy did you put into each of them?”



“I’m not sure.”

Those bullets were made in three steps: first, using Earth magic, I harvested stones of approximately the right size from nearby rock faces; then, the stone slimes ingested the stones and detached a portion of their body in the uniform size and shape I’d demonstrated to them; finally, the light slimes ingested then ejected the bullets to coat them with Light magical energy.

“So the light slimes were responsible for providing the magical energy, not me... Although, I did model the process, and it looked like the light slimes copied it well. Each of them should have magical energy equivalent to one of the buck shots used for Light Shot. About ten, I think, in terms of numbers.”

“If the amount of magical energy is the same, I’d attribute it to the difference in skill between casters. Naturally, a more experienced mage can produce better results with the same spell compared to someone who hasn’t had that much practice with it. The process of coating something with magical energy is no exception... Are slimes that adept at casting magic?” Remily asked.

“They’re skilled at controlling magical energy, I think. From what I can see, they are very efficient when using magic.”

“Interesting. Once things settle down, I’d love to observe their spellcasting. And I hadn’t realized that’s how you made those bullets. You know, when a slime dies...”

“It does disappear entirely. But unlike regular slimes, it’s not uncommon for an advanced species to produce or excrete something,” I explained. “My theory is that since a slime’s body is composed of magical energy, it simply dissipates when they die. But look at it this way: water magic can generate physical water using magical energy. I think as slimes evolve into advanced species, their internal magical energy shifts to have a more physical aspect.”

“I’m no expert on slimes, but nothing about how spells and magical energy work contradicts that theory... So, it’s like the stone slimes are giving up a portion of their body, but they’re recuperating the lost magical energy by ingesting the natural stones you give them.”

“Yes. Slimes don’t like to part with more than a little bit of their body without eating, and I have verified that pushing them to do so weakens them.” As to



what went on within a slime's anatomy, I had yet to figure that out. I might find out someday that my theory was incorrect, but it was consistent with what I'd observed so far. "Using the same process, I've harvested iron from the iron slimes by feeding them ores."

"Master Ryoma, could that be used as a method of refinement?" Sebas whispered, shock in his voice.

There were a lot of hurdles to achieve that. "Possibly, but I don't believe it would be viable," I said.

"Why is that?" Sebas asked.

"I glossed over this part when I explained the bullet-making process, but this method isn't all that efficient. It yields less material. I'd have to conduct more research to give you specific numbers, but in the few experiments I've run, I'd ended up with at least thirty percent less iron than the amount contained in the ores. Sometimes, the slimes would eat half of the iron in the process." The loss wasn't a problem when there were near infinite rocks I could use as raw material, but it would add up quickly if I were to try to turn a profit from refining iron.

Sebas nodded as he listened, so I continued my explanation.

"I could probably harvest more at the cost of increased stress on the slimes and a smaller scope to the project. If I were to ever discover other ways to mitigate the loss, it might be a different story... Of course, depending on its composition, iron can vary in brittleness and bend differently. I'd need to look into a lot of other aspects, like what kind of uses would be best suited for iron refined this way. There would be a lot of work involved before making this process a reality."

"That makes sense," Sebas said.

Personally, I didn't feel the need to reduce the amount of material the slimes skimmed. When distilling liquor, the portion of alcohol that evaporated was called the angel's share. Similarly, the portion of iron lost in this process could be called the slime's share. If I were trying to maximize my profits, that would be nothing but a waste... But I liked the idea of giving the slimes that were involved that little reward, and I wasn't so desperate for profit that I'd sacrifice



that. There were existing methods of ironworking that functioned just fine, so, even though I had some academic interest in it, pursuing this method was of rather low priority. Truth be told, I'd amassed such a long list of things I wanted to research about slimes that I would never have enough time to get around to ironworking. I had more hands on deck, thanks to my newly indentured goblins, but there was only so much that could be done when I was the only one who could supervise and give direction.

By this time, the horde of Undead was finally getting close. Grave slimes swallowed up one after another as the tide pressed on, the monsters pushing and shoving each other into the slimes. "Here they come! Shields!" I called, as some Undead were pushed past the grave slimes.

Hobgoblins—the first line of defense—squealed and raised their riot shields, pushing back the Undead like they were Black Friday shoppers or commuters on a packed train during rush hour being compressed into the train car.

Since the goblins were occasionally spearing the Undead that pushed through and whittling down their numbers, the situation was still under control enough that I could let my thoughts wander like that. I couldn't let my guard down in case an elevated Undead showed up, but otherwise, it looked like the only thing the humans needed was patience.

"Do you think we'll even get a chance to join the fray?" Reinbach asked. "Those goblins are much stronger than I'd expected."

"Master Ryoma using his vast magical energy entirely for backup and support must be quite troublesome for his enemies, Undead or otherwise," Sebas said.

"I'd say so..." Remily chimed in. "I know you usually like to fight on the front lines, Ryoma, but this is an experience that can only give you more options to use in different situations."

"There will be times when you'll work together with other adventurers," Sever said. "However, the goblins could use some training. That would allow them to perform more complex maneuvers. Take how they use their shields, for example. They need to push with their entire body, not just their arms."

With a lot more experience under their belts, the adults had already switched gears into spectator mode. As they watched, the slimes, goblins, and I fended



off the unending waves of Undead until the sun rose high into the sky.

## Chapter 8, Episode 19: Base Camp and Lunch

By noon, the Undead we had funneled to us through the explosions and terrain had been dealt with, although the process had been fairly time-consuming.

As we'd planned, we then marched into the City of Lost Souls. Now that any Undead in the vicinity of the gates had been wiped out, the ruins were eerily quiet. It was like a ghost town, in the true sense of the phrase. It wouldn't be quiet for long, though. We expected plenty of Undead to swarm from farther within the city once night fell. Stage two of our plan was to secure a base camp.

The city was formed of concentric circles with the tower at its center. Simple, rectangular cell blocks lined each circle, made asymmetrical by marks of repairs and additions. From a bird's-eye view, the city might have looked like the surface of a stump, riddled with bug bites and notches.

Circular paths ran alongside the buildings, connected by long, descending stairs that ran from the gate to the tower. The circular wards doubled as fences that made it difficult for prisoners to clear, especially as each level grew higher the closer they got to the exterior. No zombie or skeleton could climb over those structures, at least.

First, I sent the grave slimes—now that their numbers had multiplied—to block off the paths where they met the central stairs. Then, we cleared the buildings nearest to the stairs, taking out any Undead we found inside, and sealed the buildings off with Holy Space.

Lucky for us, the cell blocks all had a simple layout. We had five of them blocked off without a hitch, when my goblins contacted me about the task I'd given them.

"They're almost ready for the experiment," I announced.

"Then let's make this our last block," Reinbach said. "It's just about lunchtime, anyway."



“That would give us three on either side of the stairs. Let’s get it done,” Sever agreed.

“Ready when you are,” Remily said.

“Here we go. Flash Grenade.” I threw a baseball-sized ball of light through an opening in the building where there must have once been a window, and we all ducked below the opening.

I honed in my magical energy detection when a strong flash and short bursts of cries came from the building. I’d modeled this spell after a flash-bang grenade so we could clear out any Undead hidden in the block. This time, a few slippery wraiths had slipped through the walls to avoid the explosion of light.

“Light Ball.” Remily was ready, though, and sniped them with her spell.

Then Sever and Reinbach entered the building and ensured no Undead remained inside. Once we sealed it off with Holy Space to keep other Undead from making their way inside, we’d cleared the building.

“Nice shot,” I said to Remily.

“You weren’t too shabby yourself,” she answered.

“Try not to get carried away with your experiment after lunch,” Sever said. “Our operation will really kick into gear after sundown. We should get some sleep before nightfall.”

We’d already eliminated countless Undead that morning, but it was only a warm-up for tonight. The real show would begin once the sun went down and the Undead became far more active. Our plan, albeit a bit brutish, was to unleash the spell we came up with yesterday to exorcise the entire city at once.

A certain degree of safety would be maintained, and we’d be ready to retreat to yesterday’s base if things became dicey... But no matter what, we’d be most active late tonight. As Sever had said, I should definitely take a nap at some point.

While I ran the night through in my head, we doubled back to the structure closest to the city’s entrance. Sebas was just about done setting the table, preparing for as proper a meal as we could make in this place.

“Welcome back. Lunch will be served soon,” Sebas said.

“Thank you, Mister Sebas. How did they do?” I asked.

“Those goblins are hard workers. They seemed familiar with the task, so it should be set up well for your experiment. While I could not understand what they were talking about exactly, they seemed to be having more fun tilling that field than they did fighting.”

“Most of my goblins are like that,” I admitted.

Even though they’d grown in numbers, my goblins lived to eat, drink, and be entertained. Not that I was complaining. A tamer was responsible for disposing of particularly disobedient familiars. Regardless, I had no explanation for their obsession with food and merriment.

That being said, I decided to finish up my experiment before Sebas finished preparing lunch. “It won’t take long. I’ll be right back,” I called on my way to the building I was using for the experiment.

Every building in this area was structured the same way, with an entrance to the front (towards the center of the circle) and one to the rear. A hallway pretty much split the cell block down the middle, with cells lining either side of the path. There were no walls or partitions save for where thick metal bars must have once separated the cells, but those had likely been salvaged when they moved the prison.

In an indoor space this spacious, it was all too easy to create a field using my slimes. When I approached the field, the still-working goblins gave me a report. Though I didn’t speak their language, I sensed their intentions. It seemed they had wrapped up most of the tasks I’d given them.

To the left of the central divide, large planters (which I’d crafted using Earth magic) each containing a soil slime and a potato lined the floor. On the right, I had crushed the floor with magic and had the goblins fertilize it and plant the potatoes directly in the ground.

“Okay, let’s give it a shot. Get ready for more watering, please,” I told the goblins, and they squealed in confirmation.

Using Wood magic, I encouraged the plants on the left to grow, and that went



off without a hitch. The sprouts, leaves, and full-grown potatoes all looked in order.

On the other hand, the potatoes on the right barely reacted to my magic. The spell was working, since small sprouts and leaves peeked out of the ground, but the potatoes dried out before they were edible. Dumping more magical energy into them, I was able to somewhat enlarge the potatoes, but their vines and roots were too thin and their leaves too sickly colored. Worst of all, the potatoes it yielded were way too shriveled to eat.





I tried assessing the potatoes, and read, “Potato afflicted by cursed energy.” Even though I’d expedited the growth of these potatoes with magic, they were grown in soil exposed to cursed energy for years and years, which weakened the potatoes’ growth. What’s worse, food afflicted with cursed energy could cause discomfort, pain, or even death. It was inedible.

“Yeah, these won’t do,” I said aloud, much to the goblins’ disappointment.

Making a mental note to clear out the afflicted potatoes, I tested the better grown potatoes, and...they were definitely edible. The conclusion I drew was that the difference in soil was, indeed, the main cause. The cursed energy in the air was cleared by Holy Space, and the water I used had been produced by Sebas’s magic, so I was practically growing potatoes in a clean room.

“I’ll get rid of the dud potatoes later. Thanks for working on this,” I told the goblins. “I’ll take care of the rest, so you guys can take turns for lunch.”

Squealing in simple joy, my goblins ran off. Just as I turned to pack before lunch, I felt eyes gathered on me.

“It worked,” Reinbach said.

“I’ve only tested one batch. With the right setup, food can be grown with slime magic even in a place like this,” I said. “I’ll continue experimenting after lunch with food we’ll use for dinner. It’s possible that cursed energy would seep into the potted soil over time. Of course, that can most likely be addressed by coating the planters with Light magic... Other people could produce these results too. I’m not sure if it’ll yield enough profit to justify the effort, but I’ll pass it on to Duke Reinhart later,” I said.

“Many villages have been forced to relocate when cursed energy made it impossible for crops to grow. If these results can be reproduced with practice, it will save many people and villages. Grave slimes and your new Dark spell can drastically reduce the danger of hunting Undead too. I see a bright future,” Reinbach said.

“The one drawback of your new spell was that crops had to be burned. Being able to locally grow food means saving the money and manpower spent on delivering rations, and making these operations more efficient,” Sebas chimed

in.

As the previous duke and his assistant who'd had experience managing these projects, they both seemed excited by the idea.

"Now that we've established that... Is there anything you want, Ryoma?"

"Lord Reinbach, isn't it a bit too early to discuss payment?" Sebas said.

"Our engineer has earned a reward for merely informing us about the grave slimes. With the right use, they are very helpful in hunting Undead."

Reinbach's offer was appreciated, but there was nothing I wanted for the moment. If anything I'd been given way too much already. For example, Reinhart had already guaranteed that I'd be reimbursed—plus a hefty reward—through several payments for any expenses I had over the New Year's fiasco, and I'd even earned a partial tax exemption now that I was the duke's engineer. It was almost scary how much my income was snowballing...

After contemplating for a few moments, an idea came to me. "A new laboratory, perhaps. Free access to a place like this would be very useful in researching grave slimes, and I was wondering how I'd feed them when we return."

"There were more than a thousand by the time we stopped this morning. I was amazed," Remily said.

Since I was used to slimes multiplying, I was more amazed that the grave slimes had only gone through a portion of the Undead in the city, even after devouring that much.

In any case, feeding numbers of that multitude was a difficult task in and of itself. Slimes wouldn't die or anything even if they didn't get food that they liked. They simply ate what was available and evolved into different species. That would have been fine if I didn't plan to observe the grave slime as a species over a long period of time. A reliable source of Undead would be a great help.

"It won't be a problem if they can get by with animal meat," I said.

"But in case they *need* to feed on the Undead..." Reinbach finished my



thought. “There are a few places within our land that are afflicted by cursed energy, so securing one for a new lab won’t be a problem. Reinhart would be pleased that you’d be taking one off his hands. That won’t be an appropriate reward, however. Even if that’s all you want, Ryoma, it’s not a good look for us.”

“Anyone who doesn’t know you will think Reinbach saddled you with another mess to clean up,” Remily said.

“Why don’t you just take cash?” Sever suggested. “What’s the harm?”

“Actually, I’ve been told to spend more money,” I admitted.

My new position came with a hefty salary from the duke, and my businesses had inadvertently grown as a result. Now that I was an engineer, my laundry shop was practically government subsidized.

I even had a budget from the duke for my research (which, of course, was funded by taxes) so I needed to keep my finances an open book if I wanted to avoid giving anyone an opening to accuse me of any fraudulent activity.

“So, I hired a few tax collectors and lawyers who used to work for the duke,” I said.

Back on Earth, fraud and embezzlement were practically an everyday occurrence among government officials, and each of them were crucified by public opinion. And now I could be on the receiving end of that outrage if I didn’t play my cards right. I’d been told that a normal business owner only had to pass the Merchant’s Guild’s annual inspection, but I wanted to be extra careful. As part of my reward from the duke, I’d requested an introduction to those specialists.

“And these tax collectors told you to spend more money,” Remily said.

“Slime farming allows me to grow my own grains and vegetables. Now that I’ve started making alcohol and other products out of my crops, I’m completely self-sustaining when it comes to food... And I can build pretty much anything that I need, so I barely use any money other than my business expenses.”

Last year hadn’t been a problem, apparently, because of those expenses and my tax status. But, they’d advised me to intentionally spend more money this

year. Since any taxes I'd pay would only benefit the Jamils, I didn't mind paying into the system, but...

"Reinhart saw through me," I said. "Before sending out his tax collector—Mister Stoia—to work for me, the duke told him to stop me from overpaying taxes at any cost, and to make me spend money on myself. Also, he'd informed me that there is such a thing as donating too much to the church, so he put a cap on that."

Stoia, as perhaps any tax collector should, took his job very seriously. My half-baked loopholes had all been crushed. He also told me that a tax collector's job was to collect the correct amount from citizens, and overpaying taxes, just as underpaying them, was not acceptable. Besides, now that he worked for me and my shop, his newfound purpose was to maximize the shop's profits by saving on taxes wherever we could.

I'd wondered if dedicated fans of idols felt the same way I did. Maybe because I was never too well-off on Earth, I really felt no reservation about paying my dues. I had more than enough to do so. My passionate speeches only seemed to tire Stoia, though.

"In the end, he said that I might be the first business owner he'd ever seen who tried to overpay taxes without a hidden agenda to evade greater charges or to bribe the duke."

"No duh," Remily said.

"I understand I'm privileged," I said. "I just don't have experience with having this much money. Truly, I don't know what to do with it, other than to start a new business and keep the cycle going."

"You say you don't know what to do with your money, but you're utilizing your capital effectively," Sever said.

"Starting new businesses and investing for your future is a valid use of money," Reinbach agreed.

"They're held together with advice from talented business owners and the hard work of my employees," I said.

I wouldn't be where I am today without the help of all those people. On Earth,



I couldn't dream of running multiple businesses like this. Without them, I'd only ever hoard my money too.

"Lunch is served," Sebas said.

Our operation was only beginning, so I'd gladly enjoy the meal and keep my strength up.

## Chapter 8, Episode 20: The City at Night

Light lingered on the city as the edge of the sky began to darken. Closer to the center, some early rising Undead monsters were crawling out of the woodwork, which meant it was time to get to work. We'd set up everything we needed after lunch, and after a vial of magical potion and a power nap, I was fully recharged with physical strength and magical energy.

"Like we discussed, leave the defense to us and the slimes," Sever said.

"No sweat, Ryoma. Focus on your spell," Remily added.

Those encouraging words kicked off our operation.

From a bird's-eye view, the section we had cleared in the City of Lost Souls looked like a mirrored E with three horizontal lines crossing one vertical that was the central stairs. Our first step was to block all eight entrances to our perimeter—where the zombies and skeletons would most likely come through—with grave slimes. They had multiplied to a total of 1,745, now combined into seventeen big grave slimes. I placed two at each entrance and one next to me, ready to jump in where extra defense might be needed. The only defenses on our perimeter, by the way, were the grave slimes and the Holy Space itself. Since our plan was to retreat to last night's base camp if our operation failed or some unexpected situation arose, I had the goblins sit this one out to keep our numbers low for a swift retreat.

When dealing with Undead, no ally was as reliable as a grave slime. If we were only here to wipe out the Undead, rather than experiment with magic or pay our respects, we probably could have just multiplied the grave slimes and set them free into the city.

"Now then..." I placed the dishes I'd prepared on a stone dais—well, more like a large table—in the center of the stairs. These were offerings to the Undead, similar to the food offerings at *La Ofrenda* during the Day of the Dead. On tonight's menu: sautéed potatoes and dried meat, a simple ham and veggie sandwich, instant soup, and a salad. To drink, I offered water and goblin-made

white liquor. I did offer a few sweets and some fruit too. Maybe any food was good enough for the starving Undead, but a proper meal might bring them peace a little more easily.

The spell I was about to cast was all based on my own memories and concepts of religious ceremonies from my previous life, so not even Remily and her experience as a former royal sorcerer could provide me with any advice. The only way for me to improve it would be to contemplate how each casting went and adjust accordingly. I'd construct each element of the spell and then combine them, similar to the process of agile software development.

"Here we go," I announced, and started a fire before the ofrenda.

Five grand bowls—modeled after the ceremonial goblets used for sumo champions—formed a line above the fire. If the dishes on the altar were like pictures on a menu to the Undead, this ritual would serve them the edible versions. Focusing on the image of the dishes, I infused the additional ingredients with magical energy and prayers to sate the hunger of the Undead as I started by putting the meat and potatoes into the first bowl.

"They're already coming," Sever said.

"Copy that. I'll put a rush on it," I said.

While I watched the smoke begin to rise from the bowl, I pulled another trick from my sleeve. Reaching for a few bamboo sticks I'd set up along the ofrenda, I called to the smoke slimes waiting within them.

"Can you carry the smoke out?" I asked them.

Smoke slimes were literally composed of air particles. In battle, they could be turned into a remote-control smoke screen.

Tonight, I'd send the food smoke into the smoke slimes so they could carry the scent and magic farther. I supposed the smoke slimes were the wait staff of my restaurant metaphor. One thing I'd have to look out for was the wind—a strong gust could scatter the smoke slimes. While that wouldn't kill them, and I could retrieve them later, I didn't want to put them through too much strain. If strong winds were expected, we'd planned to perform this ritual in one of the structures we'd cleared. Fortunately, only a gentle night breeze blew through



the city. The fire and smoke rising to the cloudless sky made for a mystical picture.

“Go crazy,” I said.

The smoke slimes blended with the food smoke branched out in the air and flowed to the eight entry points, passed the grave slime blockade, and enveloped the approaching Undead, drawing a noticeable reaction from them.

“There’s no rush. I have plenty of food,” I communicated through the slimes.

I’d heard that, in Buddhist philosophy, offerings are multiplied a hundredfold in the spirit world; it wasn’t important to offer a lot of food, but to offer it consistently.

Once I cemented that mindset, the torrent of Undead slowed. A moment ago, there was a sense of desperation as they made for the ofrenda. Now, they seemed much calmer. Some Undead had even halted where they stood, letting the smoke flow over them. Just cooking the meat and potatoes tonight seemed more effective than the whole ritual had the previous night.

“Just streamlining the process makes a huge difference,” I noted.

Remily—who stood by the altar in case of an emergency—said, “It’s not your first time either. Magic is controlled by the mind, so your mindset has a lot to do with it. Just trying it once can give you a big confidence boost. Every spell improves with repetition. If you want to get really good at it, you definitely need to understand the spell and study spellcraft, though. Keep it up, Ryoma.”

“Yes, ma’am.” I focused on the spell again, adding a dash of ground black pepper to the meat and potatoes, which turned into a puff of pungent dust.

The Undead seemed to smell it too. While more and more Undead stopped in their tracks, they seemed more restless. Not in an agitated way like they were during combat, so they must have been appreciating the offering. They were definitely more strongly attracted to the offering now that it was seasoned. Undead from farther and farther away were beginning to take notice.

So, I added the sandwich ingredients—flour, ham, and vegetables—to the next pot. This was a hit with the Undead too. Many zombies and skeletons stopped their march, basking in the wafts of smoke slimes. Wraiths also floated

in the smoke, but in a leisurely way rather than rapidly flying around.

“More Undead are approaching from farther in the city, Master Ryoma,” Sebas warned. “The flying wraiths won’t pose a problem, but the entry points on the ground are about to become crowded.”

“Got it,” I said, commanding the smoke slimes to send smoke into the structures outside of our Holy Space perimeter. Hopefully that would alleviate the traffic, at least for a little bit. Once some of the Undead started to feel satisfied and moved on, there would be more room for the still-hungry ones to take their place.

Their next course was the instant soup, though I could only use the vegetables for the ritual because I couldn’t exactly burn water... Maybe they could think of it more as a roux, with the little water left in the greens.

I moved on to the next bowl, where I put in the fruits and sweets. The adults had contributed their dried fruit rations for this course. Refreshing notes of citrus and the heady aroma of burnt sugar burst into the air.

Judging by the reactions, the sweets were the biggest hit yet. As it’d been with the black pepper, strong aromas seemed to elicit the best reactions. When I watched them closely, I could see that each individual Undead reacted differently. Whether or not that was because of their personal taste...that would be a difficult hypothesis to test, since there was no information about who the Undead had been in life.

In a change of pace, I’d prepared a spirit for their final course. Just like the soup, this wouldn’t burn as is. I could have extracted its alcohol with alchemy, but that would have left out all its flavor too. So, I’d brought its lees—a byproduct of liquor distilling—to burn.

As soon as the leftover alcohol evaporated into the air, the Undead all made a sound at once. They’d been groaning here and there since I’d started, but this was like a primal roar.

The burst of reaction put us on our toes until we reassessed it.

“Hm. Apparently, that was their scream of joy,” said Reinbach.

“That was a little unsettling, but it seems like they barely notice us,” Sever

added.

Some Undead were moving faster now, but they seemed to be trying to gather as much smoke as they could, rather than aggressively thrash about. Besides, once I burned the alcohol into the air, the Undead began moving on at a much faster rate. In the Shinto religion, sake has always been used for rituals and purification. A popular belief is that spirits offered to the gods became powered with spiritual energy capable of purging darkness. Because of those factors, I'd had high hopes for the liquor. Turns out, the Undead were enjoying it even more than I'd hoped for.

"I was just getting started with the alcohol," I said.

"It already looks effective enough..." Sebas noted. "Is it some sort of special spirit?"

"Not that I know of. Locals in Fatoma taught me how to make this white liquor when I last visited. I've been fine-tuning its flavor, but nothing with the intent of using it for this spell."

If there *was* something special about this spirit, that might be how complementary it was to the concept of this spell. Fatoma white liquor was made by steeping grainspear grass seeds—found in abundance by bodies of water—and mixing in an herb local to Fatoma before letting it ferment in a cool, dark place. Although it was so simple that many households in Fatoma used to make it themselves, there were a few tricks to smooth out its flavor. The first was to grind the grainspear grass seeds and soak them in water first to extract their starch. The second was to use only the stem of the local herb by peeling the outermost layer. Even after taking those steps, the first batch would still come out with a grassy taste to it. The final trick was to use that batch as a starter for the next one in lieu of the herb. Each subsequent batch came out smoother, with a more noticeable sweetness from the grainspear and an aroma associated with distilled liquor. I'd progressed far enough that my batches were tasting more like the white liquor sold in shops in Fatoma rather than a home brew.

Actually, this process was very similar to that of making sake. That started by malting white rice or potatoes then mixing it with water to make a yeast starter,



then adding more rice or potatoes until it became a mash. That mash served like that was called a doburoku, and the liquor produced from squeezing the mash through cheesecloth was called a nigori. It seemed pretty similar to Fatoma liquor to me. Improving sake involved a process of shaving off the husks of rice and only using the starch-rich core of the grain, along with using generationally cultivated or scientifically engineered starters.

That was just my interpretation of the process, so I was sure a professional sakemaker would have plenty of pointers for me. For one thing, I could improve it by storing the liquor at a more constant temperature—the quality of my batches was still inconsistent. Still, I had elevated my recipe by taking hints from sake distillation. Because I knew that sake was used in Shinto rituals and that my white liquor was similar to sake, that association could have boosted the effectiveness of the spell when I burned its lees. It made me wonder what would happen if I'd used akumochizake—sake infused with ash—containing parts of ash slime or sake filtered by filter slimes... Or if the effect would be any different if I'd offered it to the gods beforehand. That, I might have to ask the gods about. I had a feeling they would help me out as long as I brought my best batch of Fatoma liquor. That being said...

“Since their reaction differs so much based on *what* I burn, I'll be more selective about my ingredients next time. Fragrant food that is easier to burn and carry would be best suited for a spell like this, and could be prepared in advance,” I said.

What came to my mind was incense. Different cultures had their own versions and ways of burning it, but some form of it was a part of many customs around the world. I took it for granted in my previous life, but incense was one handy invention.

Letting my mind wander here and there, I continued stoking the flame, praying for the Undead to find their peace. As the night grew darker, more and more Undead converged at our base, both on the ground and in the skies.

“It really is strange that none of these Undead are attacking us,” Sever said.

“Ryoma's spell must be more satisfying than attacking us. Why would you go out of your way to eat something mediocre when you have a feast being served

to you?” said Remily.

“Unlike when they were alive, most Undead are driven purely by instinct,” Reinbach offered.

“If they are able to sense the intention of the spell, that Master Ryoma is casting it as a tribute and not to harm them, they may be letting their guard down.”

The adults—currently guarding me in all directions—seemed to sense tranquility in the Undead. Yet, they still remained vigilant enough to jump into action. Their composure was forged through years of experience. Their discussion gave me hints for improving this spell too.

Just when I moved to add more food to the fire, a sudden burst of screams tore through the peaceful night air.

## Chapter 8, Episode 21: Pandemonium

The screams had come from the direction of the tower in the center of the city. Even at a distance and in the dimness of the night, I immediately spotted the origin. The Undead were scurrying in all directions, making a clearing in the sea of them. In that opening stood a small group of Undead, fewer than twenty, wearing ancient but well-made gear that contrasted with the tattered rags worn by most Undead that had any clothes on. The group was pursuing the other Undead, chasing them off with batons and whips.

“Are those the wardens you mentioned?” I asked.

“They worked for the prison in life,” Sever said.

While they were very small in number compared to how many other Undead monsters swarmed in the city, they still acted like punitive wardens, aggressively attacking the others as if to torment them. The other Undead—the former inmates—showed some sign of resistance, but were mostly fleeing like they had in life. Yes, the wardens’ equipment and position in life played a part in them overpowering the absolute majority, but there was something more.

“The wardens move more fluidly than the other Undead,” I noted.

“They must be ghouls or skeleton warriors under their armor,” Remily said.

Ghouls were an advanced species of zombies, and skeleton warriors of skeletons. The anatomy of both advanced species was similar to that of a human corpse, which made them more dexterous and dangerous. Another difference I noted was a form of black mist that seemed to cling to them. Even though they were still far away, I felt a strong distaste for them, more so than I had with any Undead so far. The black mist must be the concentrated cursed energy we’d discussed earlier.

Remily’s expression had darkened, as if to confirm my theory.

“Are they that troublesome?” I asked.

“They’re just annoying,” Remily answered. “Cursed energy is like a cloud of



poison. It's dangerous to get too close, and any Light magic gets canceled out, which means extra work. Their combat capabilities aren't too different from other advanced species. They're slightly more violent, if anything, but that doesn't matter too much to us. Normal Undead are so unwieldy that they're barely as nimble as the average human."

"We were fairly certain of their existence, and it doesn't change what we have to do. The quicker we eliminate them the better," Sever said.

The wardens had sent all the Undead into a frenzy, so it didn't seem like any of them would find peace as long as their tormentors remained.

*Will my spell work on the wardens?* I wondered.

"Let me try," I said, and added more food to a bowl. I could feel the heat of the roaring flame as I prayed for their souls and sent the smoke slimes to the wardens. As close as they could comfortably get, anyway. Something told me that it wouldn't be wise for the slimes to get too close.

The scattered smoke converged, passing through the inmates and down the central stairs like a gray river that concealed the feet of the Undead. When the smoke reached the wardens, they did show a sharp reaction, but...

"I don't think the spell affects them, beyond irritating them," I said.

They let out another scream, and I sensed that their wrath was now pointed at me. Ignoring the inmates they had been incessantly tormenting, the wardens began parting the crowd. Although, they were slowed down by the sheer number of Undead.

"Apparently, the spell doesn't work on all Undead," Reinbach said.

"I agree... I'd attribute that to the difference in their cause of death or to their aggressive tendencies. The spell is merely an offering, so I can't picture forcing it upon anything. Perhaps it only works on those willing to accept it..." I admitted.

"It's possible that it won't work on Undead that feel the urge to torture and kill," Sebas offered.

At the very least, getting rid of the wardens wasn't going to be as simple as it

was for the other Undead. That attempt hadn't produced the desired effect, but I'd gathered good data from it.

Based on the results I'd observed, I decided to change my goal. It was only natural to take a different approach against a different enemy. I'd designed this spell to quell the insatiable hunger of the common Undead. With the right concept in mind, I could probably craft a spell that would do the trick against the wardens.

"There's no sense appeasing their hunger if that doesn't work..." I muttered to myself. "Something that will calm them, or cleanse their cursed energy... If it's like a poison, I'll give them some kind of disinfectant... That could work."

Smoke did have disinfectant qualities. Smoking meats, for example, used that property to preserve the food. There were many methods of disinfection and insecticides that used smoke too. But at the base level, smoke could make you choke and sting your eyes.

Ash generated from a fire had disinfecting and cleansing properties too. Some theories state that the first form of primitive soap used ash left over from burning meat. Fire in and of itself was a method of disinfection, not to mention that fire emitted light.

This time, I'd focus on the disinfecting properties of fire and smoke. Instead of an offering, I was performing an exorcism. My prayers would be to see them freed from the cursed energy and weaken them. Adding the liquor lees that elicited the best reaction from the other Undead, I prayed for the wardens' purification...until another scream came from their direction.

"It worked... I refuse to be shocked by it anymore," Sever said.

"You sounded confident when you were talking to yourself," Remily said. "Does this spell get rid of cursed energy?"

"I worked with the image of smoking out insects and cleaning with ash. What specific effects do you see?" I asked.

"The cursed energy around them has thinned out. If you keep smoking them out, we'll be able to get close to them pretty soon. They seem irritated by the smoke in their eyes too. That's slowing them down. It's affecting the Undead

around the wardens too,” Remily explained.

On the flip side of being able to affect a wide area, the smoke seemed to affect all Undead monsters indiscriminately. I felt a little bad that some inmates were roped into the attack, but they’d have to bear it a little longer.

“In any case, it made it much easier to fight them,” Sever said. “Now, I can handle them alone. I’ll take them on just outside the border of our base. Continue with what you are doing, Ryoma.”

“Got it. I’ll keep the smoke away from where you are,” I said.

With a nod, Sever stepped out of the Holy Space. Apparently, the wardens were nearly at our base too, because Sever jumped right into action.

The ghoul closest to him raised its metal club, which Sever parried with his halberd. The other wardens growled, shrieked, and muttered things like “Kill... Kill...”

“You will all have to go through me. Give me your best shot,” Sever called as the wardens came to a halt, bumping into the Undead around them. Sever pulsed with more magical energy than I had seen in any of the previous battles.

A skeleton warrior took one step in front of the horde, and its head was smashed to smithereens by Sever’s halberd that cracked through its helmet and skull. The next instant, Sever slammed the end of the shaft into the skeleton warrior’s torso, sending it flying. Then he slashed with the halberd in one fluid motion.

With every swing of his weapon, at least one body part of an Undead was blown to bits and scattered with a gust of wind. Even the Undead could not be revived from being ground to dust.





While Sever's fighting style might have seemed reckless, it wasn't. His control of the halberd was delicate and precise. The gusts of wind only blew away the wardens, leaving not only us but the inmates alone.

"He's very excited," Remily said. "Let's hope he doesn't run out of strength in the middle of it."

"I can hear you!" Sever shouted back. "I haven't been so out of practice as to misjudge my own strength!" Still, he showed no sign of slowing down.

We weren't really concerned about him for the moment, as he worked his way through the wardens until there was only one left.

"Punish... Punish... Traitors..." it sputtered.

"You are the last one standing. Find your peace," Sever said as he cut down the final warden, who stood immobile with its weapon in its hands as if it was terrified.

As soon as the final warden hit the ground, the other Undead went wild, like a bunch of extras cheering that the villain of an action film had been defeated. Something like a satisfied laugh at a bully who'd met their comeuppance spread through the sea of Undead.

"Thank you for doing that," I said to Sever when he returned. "Would you like some water?"

"I'm all right. Thanks to you, I saved plenty of stamina and magical energy today. I'd like you to continue your ritual, though... Hopefully, those wardens can find their way to the gods too."

"I will."

I switched my mental image back to making offerings, and the Undead that had been fleeing the wardens began closing in on us again to bathe in more smoke. They still weren't violent, but their movements were more exaggerated with a sense of excitement or freedom now that the wardens were gone. In a strange way, they seemed full of life.

"It's like they're dancing..." Remily noted.

"What?"

“Look at that skeleton there. Or the zombie over there. Even the wraiths. Some are diving into the smoke, but others aren’t. There’s no pattern in their movement, so they may just be wandering,” she pointed out.

“Some are sitting or lying down... Almost like a party,” Reinbach said.

Sure enough, the Undead sitting or lying on the ground to feel the smoke flowing low looked like people sitting on the ground and enjoying a meal, or someone who had too much to drink. The ones frantically moving around were goofballs dancing. It really did look like one big party.

I’d used the concept of a religious ritual, but this spell was an improvisation at the end of the day. It wasn’t meant to be solemn or too dignified. It was even easier for me to imagine a fun party rather than a strict performance of a ritual.

“Maybe we should play some music.” I took out a guitar from the Item Box and plucked its strings to make sure it was tuned. Since I didn’t know what was an appropriate song for a party in this world, I tried out a song I’d learned since coming here.

“Oh, I’ve heard the Semroid Troupe play that song,” Sebas said.

“Yes. I met them during a festival in Gimul, and learned it from them.” Surely, a song they played during a festival wouldn’t be inappropriate for a party.

Like a dance tune played during the summer festivals in Japan, I strummed the upbeat melody, letting the notes carry to more and more Undead, inviting them in.

“Do you think we’d be okay if the grave slime barricade thinned a little bit?” I asked the group.

They reassured me that they could handle that, so I ordered the grave slimes to split. Leaving about ten percent of them to continue blocking the entry points, I sent the others to spread through the city, using Attract Spirits.

“It’s quite beautiful with them lined up like that,” Reinbach said.

Glowing grave slimes lined the central stairs like guiding lights on a runway. They weren’t as bright as the lanterns hung in festivals, but the grave slimes would serve as an effective guide to the Undead in the more distant parts of the

city.

Pouring magical energy into the guitar, I imagined calling the Undead to me with music. *Gather around, gather around. There's fun times and good food.*

Ideas from my previous life, slime farming, Fatoma liquor, the song I learned from the Semroid Troupe... All of these things that I'd experienced came together in a harmony that formed a new magical ritual. Even though it was still rough around the edges and could be refined, it was beginning to take a definite shape.

And that was the fun part. If the Undead souls found peace in it, I could ask for nothing more.

Feeling that sort of fulfillment, I watched the Undead depart one after another. Soon, the moon shone brilliantly in the sky as the night darkened softly around us.

## Chapter 8, Episode 22: Charge

The next day, I woke up at our base in the City of Lost Souls at a time closer to noon than dawn. After staying up late casting the ritual, I'd slept in quite a bit.

After a greeting to Sebas and Reinbach, who kept watch, I took the dishes still left on the ofrenda for breakfast. It'd be a waste to throw it away, and eating the food offerings was a way of paying respects to the dead in and of itself by symbolically sharing a meal with the spirits.

While I was enjoying a relaxed breakfast, Remily and Sever returned.

"Welcome back," I said.

"You're up," Sever answered. "We took a quick look around, and it seems like your spell last night was quite effective. I was expecting to have to spend another day whittling them down, but it seems fine for us to head to the tower."

"Oh? I thought it was unusually quiet around here. All clear around the tower?" Reinbach asked.

"Much of the cursed energy has dissipated from the city, most of the Undead are gone, and those that aren't are calm, somehow. They don't move much more than their eyes when we walk by. For the most part, the Undead are, well, dead. We'll have to deal with the corpses, but they won't be a threat to us, at least," Remily explained.

"Then I'll have the goblins and grave slimes take care of the remaining Undead," I said.

That begged the question: what sort of funeral rite was it to have the grave slimes eat the dead? Considering that some cultures on Earth performed sky burials where the dead were left on an altar for the carrion birds to feed on, I liked to think my way was more respectful than leaving them to rot, at least. It was a slime burial.

While they continued to describe the situation in the city, I finished my meal.

We began our operation for the day when the sun was high in the sky. Leaving the goblins and grave slimes to take care of the Undead strewn throughout the streets, we made for the tower standing tall in the center of the circular city. We had no encounters along the way, and arrived safely at the tower.

“There’s still that feel of cursed energy around here,” I noted.

“Not only is this the center of the City, it was once the gallows. Your smoke didn’t reach inside the tower, it seems,” Reinbach remarked.

Before charging into the tower, we needed to clear the cursed energy one more time. After going through the preparations that I’d gotten used to by now, I started cleansing right away.

“That spell of yours really is handy...” Sever said.

“What’s the usual way to clear cursed energy in a place like this?” I asked.

“Easiest way is to burn it to ash, if it is something that burns. If cursed energy still lingers, we’d source a specialist most of the time.”

“There are exorcists and warlocks who make a living out of dealing with the Undead and cursed energy,” Remily added. “They’re knowledgeable and well trained, so they’re always a safe bet. What little tricks I have up my sleeve are nothing compared to what they can do.”

Remily’s specialty was fighting with Shadow magic, so there must not have been as much overlap between the two disciplines as I’d thought.

And even though I’d learned to clear cursed energy, my method was far more instinctive than studied. “Maybe I should properly study cursed energy if I want to learn more about grave slimes.”

“If you’re interested, I can introduce you to a warlock the duke has a working relationship with,” Sever offered. “What do you think, Remily?”

“With more knowledge comes more options and security. But, if we’re going to get Ryoma a tutor, we need to be careful about who to hire. They need to be someone who can handle him,” Remily said.

“Master Ryoma can already wield some spells at the same caliber as an expert. I would trust them with many things, but not to restrain themselves



from derailing sessions to learn more about his magic.”

Surely, there were many candidates who vied for the duke’s patronage. Anyone who Reinhart picked out must have the prowess and passion for the job. No wonder many of them were nerds in their field.

We watched the tower fill with smoke until a swarm of shadows appeared at the tower’s entrance. A horde of Undead—devoid of cursed energy—came rushing out, only to be wiped out by the adults who made it look so easy.

“Oh!” Remily said sharply, like she’d dropped something breakable. She was looking at her staff with a shadow of sorrow on her face.

“What’s wrong?” I asked.

“I knew this would happen sooner or later... It reached its limit.” Remily showed us the side of her staff where a crack ran through it.

“You said you needed midnight dew to make a new staff... Are you all right?” I asked.

“It won’t hold me back in battle too much. I can use magic without a staff. It’s not like this one was incredibly powerful, or anything.”

She’d said that her parents had gifted it to her when she became an adult, so it was more of a sentimental piece than anything.

“Ryoma, can I burn this too?” she asked, as if to disprove my assessment.

“Isn’t that a memento?” I checked.

“Yes. It was a gift from when I first started working as a royal sorcerer. After a lot of things went wrong, I was jaded and tired... In a moment of weakness, I’d sent a letter home, not expecting any response since I ran off from my village. When my parents—who never left the village unless they had to—came to see me, it was a big surprise. A really happy one.”

I listened along, understanding the sentiment.

“But what’s the point of holding on to a broken staff?” Remily continued. “My memories won’t leave me if I let the staff go. Even in my village, we’d use them with care until we couldn’t, then use them as firewood.”

“Really?” I asked.

“Every time. Besides, no one perfectly matures the moment they come of age. It takes some time for legal adults to really grow up. My parents gave me this staff to help me through the transitional phase of slowly leaving them and becoming independent. It was never meant to last this long.”

A brush of color on her cheeks told me that it was akin to training wheels on a bike. Then, she explained that her staff had only survived this long because she hadn’t been using it every day. The national treasury funded supplies for royal sorcerers, so they were given standard staffs or provided with funds to custom order their own upon request. Remily had used those staffs for work. Otherwise, this staff would have given out a long time ago.

“So, if it can be of use at all, I have no reservations in burning it. Unless it’ll interfere with your ritual,” she added.

“It shouldn’t interfere,” I said. This spell wasn’t designed to quell souls like last night’s ritual, and I knew of a similar custom performed in Japan where hemp wood was burned to send smoke to the spirit world. It would be simple to tie in the burning of her staff.

I told Remily this, and she closed her eyes for a few moments in a reverie, then snapped her staff a few times and tossed the pieces into the fire without hesitation. The staff fragments crackled in the flames, burning fast and bright as they turned to white ash and a cloud of smoke.

“Once those burn out, let’s go in,” Remily suggested. “A lot of the cursed energy has cleared inside. Detecting magical energy should be much easier now.”

“Okay,” I said.

None of us spoke much after that while we waited, watching the fire and smoke.



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Once we'd cleared enough cursed energy, we marched into the tower with light slimes on our heads and an emperor scavenger slime leading the way.

The tower had a doughnut-shaped layout. Starting with the warden and executioner's quarters on the outside, it moved to guard posts, holding cells for inmates on death row, then the gallows in the center.

To prevent inmates from escaping, I'd been told, the passages within the tower were somewhat mazelike. The abandoned structure was dark, but the light slimes on our heads did a fine job of lighting our way.

Whatever Undead were left inside didn't pose a problem either. The corridors were narrow, so once the enormous emperor slime blocked them, any corporeal Undead had no way to escape. The Undead wardens that came rushing to the entrance were being pushed back like a rolling tide. Occasionally, a wraith passed through the walls, where they had presumably avoided any smoke that had filled the tower. But each of them was taken care of with a single Light Shot. As long as I focused on detecting magical energy and could sense a wraith approaching through the wall, it wasn't a difficult task.

"I expected grueling work when we observed the city from the outside, but no such luck," Reinbach joked.

"The slimes have helped us approach this in the safest way... But this is almost too easy," Sever said.

"Oh, Mister Sebas. Can we have some water?" I asked.

"Right away." Sebas cast a spell and generated several liters of water, which the emperor slime happily drank up. After ten seconds, the massive scavenger jiggled, and I sensed that it'd had enough.

"That's enough," it said. Thank you," I relayed.

"I can help with that much any time," Sebas said.

We kept walking for some time after that, through what seemed like a sizable tower. Of course, all the compartments it once housed explained its size.

"We should find midnight dew below the ground level," Reinbach reminded

us.

“It normally grows wild in dark places, like caves. So, the Starving Gallows fits the bill,” Remily said.

“That brings back memories... I used to visit every year while training new recruits. Those stairs are perfect for lower-body conditioning,” Sever reminisced.

“The stairs are that long?” I asked.

“Didn’t I tell you?”

“Only that it was a place where inmates were executed by starvation, but nothing about its structure.”

“All right then, I should tell you, even though it won’t be a pleasant description,” Sever warned before starting.

The only things the Starving Gallows held were a spiral staircase that led deep underground, and a pair of shackles at every step. Every day, a new death row inmate was chained to the top of the stairs, bumping every surviving inmate down by one step. Rinse and repeat, so an inmate would descend farther from the sun every day.

Once the inmates were bumped down and the dead were removed, they received some stale bread and water. At this point, I wondered how the place was called the Starving Gallows when the inmates were fed. The bread and water were not an act of mercy, though, nor were they poisoned.

Here’s the catch: the bread and water were issued only once a day, only enough to feed two-thirds of the inmates shackled to the spiraling stairs, and all of it was placed on the top step. Not only was there not enough food to keep all inmates from starving, the inmates lower on the spiraling totem pole had to wait to be given their share by the inmates above.

Naturally, inmates higher on the staircase tried to hoard food. It was easy to score three meals’ worth as long as you passed on less to those below. Some must have tried to stash as much bread as they could. To the inmates below, those were unforgivable crimes.



At first, the inmates had no problem filling their stomachs. But every day, they would see less and less bread and water. Once pickings became slim, inmates started to steal each other's food.

Their shackles were tight enough to keep them from fistfighting each other, but just long enough to reach their neighbors on either side. If they were lucky, they could knock the bread out of their neighbor's hand. Actions like that triggered more fighting among the inmates, but the shackles kept them from killing each other.

Farther down, where they didn't even receive scraps to fight over, the inmates withered away due to hunger and thirst. Throwing hands at their equally starving neighbors was fruitless, so they shouted insults at the inmates above who still enjoyed a day's meal.

Those who could shout, however, were the still livelier ones in the Starving Gallows. Those who were starved worse lost their sanity and resorted to cannibalism. With their last drops of strength, they reached for the piece of meat on the step above or below them.

Cannibalism wasn't easy, and not just because of the horror of it. Practically speaking, even if an inmate could try and kill a neighbor despite the constricting shackles, any wound they might earn themselves would most likely kill them quicker with infection than hunger. And since they were shackled to the step at all times, there was only one place their excrement could go—where they stood. Their immune systems would have been weakened by starvation, and they obviously received no medical treatment.

Voices of the inmates at all positions along the spiral echoed up the void in the center of the stairwell. From the moment they took one step into the Starving Gallows until their final moment, they were tormented by the threats and curses, and cries of pain and madness.

"It's gruesome," I said. "While I think there's a need for punishment that fits their crime... I can see how those Undead came to be."

"Good. Keep that feeling with you," Sever advised. "When people no longer doubt the morality of their ends, they all too easily justify any cruel and sinister means. Even the atrocities committed in the Starving Gallows were seen as a

form of justice. Criminals were being punished, after all. People applauded the practice, if anything. Turning a blind eye to the abuse of the inmates perpetuated by the wardens was another symptom of that mentality. Some records say that if someone so much as criticized the wardens, they would be subject to their abuse.”

“Another reason the Knight’s Order uses this location for the training of new recruits,” Sever continued, “is to teach them—who will be the executors of justice for the new generation—stories of those who became drunk with the zeal of enforcing justice at all costs. To teach them that the line between right and wrong is never absolute. A knight must carry a sense of justice in their hearts, but they must not become blinded by it. That is how keeping the law turns into acts of savage violence.”

Plenty of examples from Earth came to mind, like the Salem witch trials. In medieval times, I’d heard that executions were a form of entertainment as well as a form of punishment. The concept of *schadenfreude* existed worldwide. Deriving pleasure from others’ misfortune seemed to be human nature, no matter the time or world. Even those not training to become a knight—who carried weapons on their belt and were backed by the extension of the king’s power—would benefit from heeding Sever’s warning, lest they lose their humanity.

“At least that story killed just enough time,” Sever said. While I was contemplating his advice, we’d nearly made it to the Starving Gallows.

After turning left at a fork, the corridor widened. At the end of the hall was a thick and heavy double door that had nearly rotted off of its hinges, flanked by a rusted set of armor on either side.

“It’s a cliché for a reason,” I said, as the suits of armor creaked and raised their lances.

## Chapter 8, Episode 23: The Starving Gallows

“Shadow Bind,” Remily chanted, and two ropes woven of darkness shot out from the floor and wrenched the lances away from the sets of armor. Immediately, both suits clattered to the floor like marionettes with their strings cut.

“They’re detained,” Remily announced.

“That was easy.” I watched the shadow-bound lances flailing on the ground as if unseen wielders were pulling on them. That, plus the fact that I was detecting more magical energy from the lances than from the sets of armor, meant that the weapons were the monsters. Roaming weapons, as they were called, were a type of Undead that moved and attacked the living of their own accord. From what I was told, weapons left abandoned for a long time in an area rich with magical energy and weapons that had taken many—human or monster—lives were more prone to become roaming weapons.

“Where did these sets of armor, or the weapons the wardens were wielding yesterday, for that matter, come from?” I asked.

“Remember how zombies and skeletons regenerate when damaged? Advanced Undead species create weapons and armor as a part of themselves,” Reinbach explained.

“The theory is that they are driven to manifest their living form as closely as possible, equipment included,” Sebas said.

“I see...” I replied as the roaming weapons thrashed about.

But as soon as Remily hit them with Light Balls, they stopped moving. The ropes of shadow released them, and the lances clanged onto the floor like the inanimate objects they now were. Light magic remained highly effective against the Undead, even when they were in weapon form.

Still, my curiosity was piqued by something else. “So that’s Shadow magic.”

“Shadow Bind. As you saw, it’s a spell that binds the enemy with ropes

materialized from shadow. It's one of the more difficult spells, but you can control the ropes you create, so it can come in handy in different situations. Binding an enemy is one, but you can also use it to tie something down, or even as a lifeline if it comes to it," Remily explained.

"I would love to learn it."

"I thought so. Once we harvest some midnight dew, I'll walk you through it. Watch this." Remily pointed to the lances on the ground. "Despell." A dull glow enveloped the lances, then seeped into the weapons. "Roaming weapons revert to normal weapons once you defeat them, but sometimes residual Dark magical energy can harm its next owner in the form of a curse. Despell is a curse-breaking spell. As long as you cast it on them, the weapons are safe to use or sell. Despell is also a good counter against curses made from Dark magic. I'll teach you that one later too."

"Thank you, that'd be great," I said, already looking forward to it. With the Starving Gallows feet away, I was itching to secure some midnight dew and get to that... But judging by the several sources of magical energy beyond the door, it would not be smooth sailing yet. "We have company."

"Not too surprising. This is the epicenter of the Undead," Sever said. "Let's clarify before we go in. Ryoma and I will lead, with you three backing us up from behind. And Ryoma, I'd like you to leave the emperor slime here to reduce the risk of us getting flanked."

"That would be for the best," Reinbach agreed.

"I'll leave you boys to punch 'em and sock 'em," said Remily.

"I agree," Sebas chimed in.

"Me too. I'll separate a king slime from the emperor to come with us, and have the rest defend the door."

Ready for whatever awaited us within, we carefully opened the doors. Three ghouls were already in our faces, screeching as they launched themselves at us. Keeping my wits about me, I sliced through them with Light-magic coated blades and rapid-fire Light Shots.

Just as described, a staircase spiraled down counterclockwise into an abyss.

Each step was wide enough to hold an inmate—about six meters wide and three meters long. Some ways down, I could see even wider landings at regular intervals. They were spacious and sturdy enough not to hinder us in battle. What we needed to look out for was the blown-out center of the staircase. Some remnants on the edge of the steps suggested that there was once a railing, but now there was nothing between us and a terrible fall. We would have to fight along the wall as much as possible and not let any Undead push us towards the ledge.

“Here they come!” Remily called.

I sicced the king scavenger on the rising tide of Undead, but three figures leaped over the slime.

“Light Shot!” Remily shot down one with her magic, then Sever and I took care of the other two ghouls. There were more and more ghouls rushing up the stairs, though. Apparently, most Undead here were advanced species. One of them at the front of the pack raised its claws at me. It was faster than a zombie, but...

“Still too slow.” I swiped with my sword and split the ghoul’s torso before bringing it down from the top of its head to its neck. The Undead fell backwards, and neither moved nor regenerated afterwards. Since the Light-magic coated blade was just as effective against advanced species, the only thing I’d have to look out for was being surrounded.

“Let’s continue down and face the wave at the next landing,” Sever said. “Have the slime take care of the bodies when you can. It’ll be difficult to keep fighting if they pile up.”

We did exactly that, making our way down to the landing while Reinbach, Sebas, and Remily whittled down the horde with magic from a few steps above. I maintained a constant flow of Light magic on my weapon and kept slicing and dicing, not letting any Undead get past us and up to the others. This was the most rigorous and dangerous combat situation we’d been in since arriving at the City of Lost Souls, but I wasn’t stressed about it. My body felt light and limber like it had during my match against Sever...but it wasn’t enough. Just like last time, I felt a slight awkwardness between my physical movement and



spellcasting.

“Ryoma! Alternate magic and sword instead of using them at the same time!” Sever called.

“Got it!” I jabbed my sword in between the eyes of an Undead, then two more rushed at me from either side of the fallen monster. The one on my left was slightly closer, so I dodged its swing, sliced it with my blade, and kicked it away. Then I detached the arm of the other and sliced through its body to buy me more time. “Follow Sever’s advice...” I muttered to myself, then put myself in between the two ghouls and faced the one on my left. Raising my sword above my shoulder, I fired a Light Shot from the sword tip at the ghoul behind me, then sliced the other in half from head to groin. That series of movements went smoothly.

“Good! Cover the gaps in your swordplay with magic, and cover your gaps in magic with your sword! That’s a good style of arcane sword fighting!”

“Yes, sir!” I kept on going, trying to make it second nature.

My glimmering sword cut the enemies that came near, and my spells sniped the ones that kept their distance. I kept looping: sword, spell, sword, spell, sword, spell... Slowly but surely, I was becoming more comfortable with it.

I continued fighting off the ghouls, applying Sever’s words of advice as soon as he gave them, until... After what only felt like ten minutes or so, we made it to the bottom of the gallows, where no Undead remained.

“Is that it...?” I asked.

“That’s it,” said Sever. “Good concentration. After watching you fight like that, I’d be happy to write you a letter of recommendation for the Knight’s Order,” Sever said.

I appreciated the compliment, but I felt like I could have worked out some more kinks if there had been a few more Undead to take down. I’d give myself a C. There was much to learn about combining magic and sword fighting, so that was something I’d have to work on. But for now... “Look at all that.” I pointed out the lawn of matte-black grass growing on the mossy ground at the bottom of the stairs. It was the midnight dew.

“There’s even more here than I expected,” Remily said.

“Not many would choose to come all the way down here to harvest them. Especially considering the Undead outbreak, I doubt anyone has been here in a long time,” Sever said.

“How is the quality? Were they affected by cursed energy?” Reinbach asked.

I plucked one that was growing by my feet and inspected it. “It’s great quality. Definitely good enough for me.”

“Me too,” Remily chimed in. “Midnight dew is pretty resistant to cursed energy. It even repels it to a certain degree. If I’m being picky, I’d like the ones that haven’t been trampled by Undead.”

“With this many, I’m sure we can find enough that are not,” Sebas said, and we all followed his lead to find midnight dew that were left untouched.

Soon, I sensed something strange...something oddly familiar.

“What’s the matter?” Sever asked.

“No, I... Maybe it’s nothing,” I said, unable to find the words to describe what I felt, becoming less confident that I’d felt anything at all.

“If something’s off, tell us right away,” Reinbach said.

“I will.” I shook it off and returned to harvesting the grass.

By the time we’d filled five bags with midnight dew, I had nearly forgotten that feeling. But then I felt it much stronger than the first time. “Everyone,” I called.

“What is it? Something was on your mind earlier,” said Reinbach.

“It’s hard to explain, but... Don’t you feel something?”

“That’s pretty vague... But not as far as I can tell,” Remily said.

“I don’t see any Undead either,” Sebas said.

Even though no one else had felt what I did, they joined me in inspecting the pit of the Starving Gallows.

Then... “I sense it around there.” I pointed to a spot some ways off from the

staircase. It was a portion of the earthen wall that looked no different from the rest that encircled the pit. Yet, I was sure of it. And it was unsettling that I was so confident something was there.

“Here?” Remily asked.

“Do you mind if I dig into the wall?” I asked.

“Legally, that won’t be a problem,” Sebas said.

“The tower’s sturdy, so a little excavation shouldn’t hurt. Just be careful,” Remily reassured.

I had my steel slime switch from a blade to a shovel. Coating it with the Break Rock spell, I started digging. With every scoop of dirt I removed, the strange sensation became more visceral. It wasn’t painful or discomforting, but it definitely wasn’t pleasant. Whatever I was sensing, it wasn’t alive.

I dug and dug and dug, as the mysterious sensation strengthened. I kept at it until I’d dug about five meters in.

“Are you all right, Ryoma?” Reinbach called from the entrance to the cave I’d dug.

“You’ve been at it a while,” Remily added.

“I feel it getting closer and closer. It’s almost— I felt something!” I called back, and leaned closer to see what the shovel had hit. “A magic crystal?”

## Chapter 8, Episode 24: Jackpot?

A line marred what I presumed to be a magic crystal that was still half buried in the dirt wall. To avoid damaging it any further, I carefully dug it out without using my shovel. The crystal was as long as my forefinger and about two fingers wide. Judging by the color, I pegged it for a Dark magic crystal, which was soon verified by an Appraisal.

But it looked like there were more crystals buried here... Several more had been revealed while I was digging out the first, some obviously bigger than the one in my hand. The Break Rock spell on the shovel might have played a part in removing the extra dirt. Regardless of whether what I had been sensing was the magical energy in this pocket of magic crystals, I had to tell the others first.

“I found magic crystals!” I called. “Dark magic crystals!” I tossed the one in my hand over to them.

Sebas caught it and must have Appraised it, because I heard him say with an impressed sigh, “This is indeed a Dark magic crystal. And it’s a Class-1.” That drew an audible reaction from the other three.

Sebas’s appraisal was apparently more detailed than mine. I’d guessed that the magic crystal was of good quality, so I asked Sebas to elaborate.

As it turned out, magic crystals were categorized into three types according to their element and into six classes according to their quality. Light, Lightning, and Wood crystals were Type-1; Dark, Poison, and Ice crystals were Type-2; Fire, Water, Air, Earth, and Neutral crystals were Type-3. Type-1 crystals were the rarest and Type-3 crystals were the most common. Space magic crystals had never been discovered, so they were yet to be classified.

When comparing magic crystals of the same element, its price doubled every time it went up in class. For example, a Type-3 magic crystal would be priced something like this:

Class-1: 32,000+ sutes

Class-2: 16,000+ sutes

Class-3: 8,000+ sutes

Class-4: 4,000+ sutes

Class-5: 2,000+ sutes

Class-6: Less than 2,000 sutes

A staff required a Class-5 crystal or better, but Class-6 crystals were marketed more like batteries that commoners could afford and use to power their magical items. Class-6 crystals were sometimes bundled with crystal fragments produced when processing better kinds, and were sometimes called scrap crystals. Generally speaking, the higher the class, the more magical energy a crystal contained. More magical energy meant it could be used for more applications, which explained their price.

Since Type-2 crystals were rarer, their price tripled compared to Type-3 crystals of the same class:

Class-1: 96,000+ sutes

Class-2: 48,000+ sutes

Class-3: 24,000+ sutes

Class-4: 120,000+ sutes

Class-5: 6,000+ sutes

Class-6: Less than 6,000 sutes

In other words, a high-quality Type-3 crystal could fetch a better price than a lower-quality Type-2 crystal. The magic crystals I found, though...

“So, that’s a Dark magic crystal, which makes it a Type-2. And it’s of the highest class of quality,” I reiterated.

“That is correct,” Sebas confirmed. “High-quality magic crystals are rare finds

and are always in high demand among various professions like mages and artisans. It is quite unusual to even lay eyes on crystals of this quality. And the prices I've given you are the minimum which you could expect to sell them for. By bringing it to the right buyer, you could fetch double or triple that."

*A price of almost 100,000 sutes was the minimum?! That was a whole large gold coin: a small fortune!*

"I need a Dark magic crystal for my new staff, so I'd pay that price, if you're willing to part with it for that much, Ryoma," Remily chimed in without a second thought!

"Um, Mister Sebas?" I called.

"Yes?"

"There's still a whole bunch of crystals buried here..."

This was met with great shock by the adults, then we decided to dig out as much as we could.

From the Dimension Home, I brought out earth and dark slimes to help me with the task. I was only going to ask the earth slimes at first, but the dark slimes were very eager to come out, apparently wanting to take in the magical energy of this place. Occasionally, I'd give the slimes that used elemental magic that same type of magical energy, but that was just a treat. The majority of their sustenance was gained from them ingesting magical energy from the air out of their own accord.

The pit of the Starving Gallows, as it turned out, was a great feeding ground for dark slimes. The earth slimes dug forwards, the dark slimes gathered the magic crystals, and I carried them out. The others, standing outside the freshly dug cavern, took the bag of crystals and went about appraising its contents.

When we'd collected twenty-two Dark magic crystals of varying sizes, the bizarre sensation came to me again, tugging me towards the end of the cave. I cast some Earth magic to dig farther until I found a magic crystal much bigger than the others—shaped like a black pillar about half a meter long—encircled by a smattering of other crystals in varying sizes. It was more beautiful than any of the other crystals, pulsing with magical energy that outshone the rest of the



crystals combined.

A sudden urge told me to reach out and touch the crystal. Just as my fingers were about to touch it, an indescribable chill shot up my spine, and I leaped back as fast as my heart had started beating. Sweat poured down my back like a waterfall.

*What was that? Something's not right about that crystal.*

"Ryoma? You're drenched in sweat! What happened?" Remily called, illuminating me with Light magic.

"I just found a huge crystal. As soon as I got close to it, I felt this horrible feeling—"

"Come on out, Ryoma," Remily firmly commanded.

Trying to walk out of the cavern with my slimes tested my will, as I kept feeling drawn back to the crystal pillar. I focused on reliving the revolting sensation I'd felt to carry me out into the clearing.

"Despell." By way of greeting, Remily cast her spell on me.

Just as I stepped out of the cavern, I felt the magical light sink into my skin, then a rush of relief like I had just been unbound, somehow. Suddenly, my mind became clear, and I realized how foggy my thoughts had been until this point.

"A curse?" I asked, though I was fairly certain. Remily's curse-breaking spell had had an obvious effect on me.

"Dark magic crystal mines are prone to them. Dark magic can attack the mind, after all. Some people are affected by the magical energy in the crystals. It slipped my mind because I never normally mine them myself," she explained.

"Thank you. I should have been more careful," I said. "If I had been alone, I wouldn't have even realized that I'd been cursed until things got much worse."

"No need to thank me. We're a team, so we help each other. Easy as that. Take a breather while I take care of the curse on that crystal. I'll teach you as many defenses against curses as I can, later." Remily stroked my hair, muttered, "Curse Block," and climbed down into the hole.

"Have some water," Sebas said, offering me a glass of water and a towel.

While I chugged the water and wiped my sweat, I watched a brilliant light burst from the cavern, then Remily emerged ten seconds later.

“How did it go, Remily?” Reinbach asked, keeping watch with his back to the hole.

Remily pinched her brows. “Where to start... That was something else, literally. It was a magic gem.”

From what I recalled, magic gems were an absurdly rare item, and the ruby on Elia’s necklace was an example of one.

“Sorry I couldn’t give you much of a break, but can you go collect it?” Remily asked.

As I approached the cavern, Remily cast a protection spell against curses.

When I made it to the end, I could see that the magic gem was a large cluster of black crystals. Back on Earth, I’d seen a small crystal cluster ornament in a meeting room or something, but nothing as big as this one. The fact that I couldn’t even see that earlier really showed how much the curse was clouding my mind.

*These crystals really are beautiful, I found myself thinking. It would make a statement in my home... I kind of want it.*

Mixed with the urge to take the crystals home, however, was an aversion to touching them, even though I didn’t feel a visceral reaction like I did earlier. So, I decided to cast Create Block to surround the gem with cubes of dirt. To get the encasement of dirt out of the cavern, I had the earth slimes widen the entrance before shoving it all the way out using energy meditation.

Once I removed its casing, the three who finally saw the crystal cluster seemed almost lost for words.

“Uh...” grunted Sebas.

“An impressive find, but I’m not sure what to do with it...” Reinbach said.

“If it wasn’t cursed, it would find its place in the royal treasury,” Sever added.

As expected, this magic gem was truly exceptional in rarity, quality, and size. None of the adults—who were well-versed in luxury items—could even guess

how much it would sell for.

*I, for one, can't even imagine a number that high. No sense in selling it when it would cause a scene. I better keep it in my home forever.*

"Ryoma, do you think I could take that magic gem off your hands?" Remily said, out of the blue.

"Take it off my hands?" My gut instinct was to turn down her offer.

*But why? I was just thinking how selling it would draw unwanted attention, and Remily wasn't necessarily asking for it for free... I didn't think I was so attached to the gem already that I'd turn down her offer without hearing her out. Maybe because it's such an expensive thing, I—*

"Despell." Remily's spell cleared the fog in my mind that had resurfaced as I grappled with my conflicting emotions. Yet, the expressions of the adults were clouded. "I had a feeling the curse wasn't broken," Remily said.

"It was never broken? I thought I was just recursed."

"If you had, my Curse Block would have been spent, and it felt off when I cast Despell on that magic gem. It's hard to describe, but... It's like it *let* me break its curse... I think the curse was broken, but I can't be sure, and that's creeping me out. By the way, a common symptom of a curse is an obsession with the item, like wanting to keep it close."

So that was why she'd asked for the gem.

"It's a rare enough piece that I wouldn't blame you for wanting to keep it regardless, so I had more questions ready... But the biggest tell was you realizing the change in your own emotions, Ryoma," she added.

"If we can't be sure the curse is broken, we need to urgently see a warlock or an exorcist, or else a high-ranking priest," Sever suggested.

"Definitely," Remily agreed. "Unfortunately, there's little more I can do. Despell, Curse Block, and a few rudimentary curses I used to practice... Those two are the only spells I know that have to do with curses. A silver lining may be that it's not a curse that's affecting his health, as far as I can tell. Do you feel off at all, Ryoma?"

*Do I?* I considered it. Since the moment Remily explained that my obsession with the gem was a possible curse symptom, I felt much less attached to the thing. Even my befuddlement had cleared with the second Despell. There was nothing off at all that I wondered if the curse really still lingered.

“Then there’s no terrible rush,” Remily answered. “Curses become less effective the more magical energy their targets possess. First things first, let’s get out of here.”

“I second that. This place is too glum for brainstorming,” Sever said.

“Let us go, then.” Reinbach turned to the stairs. “Right... Walking up those stairs will be a pain.”

“We’ll take Space magic back up,” Sebas suggested. “Now that the place isn’t swarming with Undead, it would make for a quick return.”

So, we left the tower behind, having finished our mission to explore the City of Lost Souls and gather midnight dew. Despite the unexpected encounter with a cursed magic gem, I was walking away with no discernible symptoms and a lot of loot to show for it.

## Chapter 8, Episode 25: A Master Class in Curses, and the Departure

It was darker outside the tower than when we had gone in. Nightfall was still hours away, but thick clouds had rolled in, warning us of imminent rain through their scent and moisture in the air. We returned to the building we'd spent the previous night in to discuss our game plan.

It didn't take long for us to agree on spending another night before returning to civilization the next morning. The weather was one factor, but we'd spent more time than expected in the Starving Gallows. Besides, my curse—if I was still cursed—wasn't presenting any symptoms. After a series of battles, we decided to get some good rest for the next day. If the rain happened to let up, I was told, there was a way to get back sooner.

Of course, there was nothing to do with the sudden free time I found myself with; it was too early to cook dinner. While the rest of us were chatting away, Sebas poured tea for us, turning our casual discussion into a leisurely afternoon tea.

Before long, rain began drumming the ground in a steady crescendo until it was a formidable downpour.

*Good thing I returned the goblins and slimes back to the Dimension Home.*

"How do you feel, Ryoma?" Reinbach asked.

"Let me see... I don't feel like there's anything wrong, but I'm recovering magical energy very quickly. I'd spent a lot of it in the tower, but I can feel that I've already recovered about ninety percent of it."

"That could be because this place is rich in magical energy," Remily pointed out. "When you recover magical energy, you're taking it in from nature, through breathing and eating. In places that pool more magical energy, you recover more of it. Cursed energy can get in the way of that, but it's normal if you're recovering faster now. Even though a larger pool of magical energy poses its

own dangers like more Undead and stronger monsters, a lot of mages use these places to train or experiment.”

The faster they could replenish their depleted magical energy, the faster they could get back to training.

*Maybe I should set up a base somewhere where I could come and train magic... Well, I'll be in the Sea of Trees of Syrus soon enough. If it looks like I can pull it off, I'll build one there.*

“If we can attribute my faster recovery to our location, I should be fine. That’s pretty much the only difference I’ve noticed in myself,” I said.

“Years ago, when I’d been injured on a mission, I had someone put a curse on me that numbed my sense of pain. Curses are generally harmful to their targets, but there are situations where they can provide a benefit. Maybe this is one of them,” said Sever.

“It’s possible,” Remily conceded. “But I haven’t heard of any curse that helps recover your magical energy.”

“If all curses are harmful, and this curse recovers magical energy, would it mean that replenishing magical energy could be harmful? Overmagick comes to mind. Do you think that could be what the curse is going for?” If that was the case, spending bursts of magical energy could confirm it.

“I wouldn’t,” Remily warned. “That could be a possibility, but there’s no need to risk making your condition worse just to rule it out. As long as you feel fine, the safest option is to save your magical energy and to rest well.”

Reinbach grunted his agreement. “It would be best for you to sit back until we can get you to a specialist. We can handle the night watch on our own.”

Just as I was about to accept their kind offer, it struck me. The horrible consequence of this curse...

“Master Ryoma? Are you feeling all right?”

“I just realized... If I am to reserve my magical energy, then I can’t...”

“Train or experiment with magic?” Sever finished for me. “You probably shouldn’t.”



“You tend to get carried away,” Reinbach added.

“I was afraid of that...” I admitted. It certainly was a curse if I couldn’t use any magic when I had free time in a location that helped me recover faster!

“So that’s your concern. I can imagine your pain, seeing how you enjoy the process of training in magic itself,” said Reinbach.

“When the Young Miss asked you for advice, I remember how you suggested she play with magic,” Sebas recalled.

“Who knew being too studious could be a problem?” Sever asked. “These past few days, you’ve been toying with spells nonstop.”

A dash of exasperation crossed the smiles of the men. Yes, I’d tried out a bunch of things, but that only gave me a longer list of things I had to try out and discover.

When I said as much, Remily began chuckling. “You don’t have to be so uptight about it. Spending some magical energy won’t hurt. Just not enough to wear you out. Abstaining from things you enjoy can be harmful too. Stress fuels curses. Not to mention that it’s not healthy,” Remily said.

“Really?! Oh, what a relief.”

“Really. Just to be safe, though, only practice your magic while I’m watching. Like Reinbach said, you tend to have tunnel vision,” Remily said.

“Well...” I had nothing.

“Having something you can be so passionate about is beneficial to both your mind and soul. Oh, and I did promise to teach you anti-curse magic. Let’s get started after tea.”

“Thank you, Miss Remily! After today, I feel like I need to be prepared to deal with curses.”

“You do? I’ll teach you Despell, which is a Light spell, and Curse Block, which is a Dark spell.”

“That would be great.”

After finishing our tea and small talk, we moved to a corner of the building

that now served as our camp to begin practicing.

“First, I’ll have you experience a tangible curse.” Remily picked up a stone and incanted, “Illness.” A hint of dark and sinister magical energy seemed to be enveloping the stone. “Hold it in your hand,” she commanded. “You can toss it if you feel uncomfortable.”

I obliged, and instantly felt feverish. As soon as I let go of the stone, I felt myself cool back down.

“There are several categories of curses. The one I hexed that rock with was a curse of ailment. When you’re cursed with it, or hold an item cursed with it, you experience symptoms as if you were sick. The severity of the symptoms all depend on the imagination and skill of its caster.”

“Got it. It seems more intuitive now that I’ve experienced it,” I admitted.

“For your first time, I made sure to cast a curse minor enough and easy to grasp. Now that you’ve felt what it’s like, let’s practice Despell.”

She went on to describe Despell, which used Light magical energy to envelop and soak the target, canceling out the Dark magical energy that powered the curse. It was important to keep in mind that the magical energy used for this curse had properties closer to cursed energy, even though it came from natural and internal magical energy. That distinction allowed for the effective removal of the magical energy used in the curse. With enough skill, Remily explained, this spell could remove a curse from a Dark magic crystal while leaving the energy of the crystal itself intact.

Despell proved to be somewhat more difficult than other spells I’d learned; I was only able to cast it successfully on the ninth try. Just barely, as I focused on the stone Remily had cursed, I felt the same sensation of Despell I’d felt when Remily cast it on me in the Starving Gallows.

“For the record, casting any semblance of it on your ninth try is a great start. With practice, it’ll become more effective. You of all people won’t slack off just because you’re not being supervised... Now that you can cast it, at least, let’s move on to Curse Block,” Remily said, and began to teach me the Dark magic that would protect me from curses.

This one involved coating myself with a layer of Dark magical energy that would protect me from curses. I cast it without an incantation, and it worked on the first try. By my third, I was really getting the hang of it. Like I was remembering, rather than learning anew. Personally, it felt much easier to learn Curse Block than Despell. So easy, in fact, that I grew nervous if I was doing it right. So, I asked Remily to test the strength of my Curse Block with her own curse.

“Yep, you’ve learned Curse Block, now. I’m sure it helped that you were used to casting without incantations, but I also think you have a better inclination for Dark magical energy than Light. Otherwise, I doubt you could have done it on your first try... I bet you still have plenty of magical energy left too. Do you want to try the curses themselves?” Remily asked.

“Yes, please.”

In order to deal with a problem, I’d have to learn more about the problem. Going through that cursing in the beginning already felt beneficial, so I was sure that being able to cast curses myself was only going to help these spells click with me.

“Let’s try the Illness curse I showed you. Hopefully, you’ll never have to use it, but this one can cause different symptoms depending on what you imagine during casting, and it can be used in combat or to capture an enemy.”

“You need to start by deciding what symptoms you want to manifest,” Remily’s explanation began. “Once you do, focus on what that symptom looks like on a person. For an ailment curse, the first step might be to model a symptom after a real illness, like a fever or lethargy. Up to this point, the process is similar to other spells. The next step, though, separates curses from other Dark spells—and it’s the most important part. When converting your internal magical energy to Dark magical energy, you need to imbue it with negative emotions.”

“Negative emotions were the cause of Undead monsters too,” I noted. “Are curses and Undead rooted in the same process?”

“Exactly. Occasionally, when someone passes away, their keepsakes, or house, or even someone who the dead had a grudge against can end up being

cursed. With the right conditions, even someone who has never been trained in spellcasting could trigger a curse. In a way, curses are the easiest form of magic. To go on a little tangent, curses far predate the elemental magic that makes up the bulk of the spells we use today. They have been around since the dawn of human history. They are the oldest form of magic, born out of the intelligence and emotions that separate us from other living beings.”

“The oldest form of magic... I’m interested in history like that as well.”

“In that case, you should buy a book on the subject. The general history of magic is outlined in *The Overview of Magical History* published by the Magic Guild each year. There should be other books that focus on different time periods too. At that point, you’ll be in the domain of magical historians. Given how closed off the Magic Guild is, many of those books are off-limits to nonmembers, but I’m sure you can get your hands on them through the duke.”

*That’s a brilliant idea. If I’m offered a reward for the grave slimes, I’ll ask him for books on magic.*

“Let’s get back on track,” Remily said. “The only unique part of casting basic curses is that aforementioned conversion of magical energy. Once you have decided on a symptom and properly convert magical energy, you can imagine the curse coating the target like Curse Block, or seeping into them like Despell, whichever you can imagine more easily... But before you try casting it, I need to go over a few things.” Her smile made way for a stern look.

Clearly, casting curses came with its own dangers. But that was true of any spell, and even any tool or technology. It was only dangerous if used incorrectly. To heed all the dangers Remily had to warn me about, I focused on her next words.

“If I’m being honest, I’ll know you’ll learn curses very quickly, Ryoma. As long as you don’t use them for evil, you can practice them, fight with them, and even experiment with them, save for a few curses that are illegal to use at all. Learning them will never be a waste. But do *not* get carried away with practicing curses! Because the process demands negative emotions from its caster, it can become overwhelming.”

Even to practice magic, I imagined it would be exhausting to keep dredging up

specific memories of anger or disgruntlement. It didn't seem like an appealing process in itself.

"It should go without saying that you should never push yourself to your limit, but even when you feel fine, give yourself plenty of breaks. During those breaks, do something that makes you happy. Many adult warlocks become overcome by negative emotions. If you were a normal child, I would have just taught you Curse Block. I'm only teaching you curses because I know you're special. Not because you're a child of the gods, but because I've seen that you are far more mature than a normal child your age."

When she put it that way, I agreed that curses weren't a suitable subject to teach children how to use. After that, Remily gave me a few examples of famous travesties caused by warlocks, along with more pointers to cast curses correctly and maintain my mental health. Then, I moved on to trying it myself.

"It worked, didn't it...?" I asked, seeing that the stone we'd been using for practice was clearly emanating a sinister aura. I barely wanted to get near it, let alone touch it. In fact, I was itching to break the curse as soon as possible. While not as visceral as I'd felt during my encounter with the magic gem, it was still quite unpleasant.

"It definitely worked, no doubt about that. What illness did you think about? I doubt the curse would go so far as to kill anyone who touches the stone, but you made something a lot more dangerous than the curse that might be on you now," Remily explained.

My inspiration for this curse had been a strand of influenza I had caught in my previous life. While I was healthy enough that my symptoms were mild, it had hit me right in the middle of the busy season. In hindsight, my immune system had probably been compromised by the stress from the recent promotion. Just as we were about to finish a project, the client requested a last-minute change of design, which our team lead had accepted without requesting an extension, just so he could get props from the client and upper management. That was when my whole team secretly fantasized about killing the team lead. Or at least, I had. Even a plea for an extension was met with comments like "It really shows how lazy you are if you can't buckle down and finish the job on time."

That conversation had been the last straw for our newbie. He called in sick the next day. It was tough being down a man at the eleventh hour, but there was nothing we could do if he was sick. To be honest, I wouldn't have blamed him if he'd faked it. He showed up after lunch, though, his bright-red face covered with a face mask and ice pack on his forehead. He even wore a down jacket over his suit, for crying out loud. There was no disputing how seriously ill he was. I asked him why he'd showed up when he'd already called in sick. Apparently, our team lead had demanded he show up. He went behind my back, when I was supposed to be the newbie's direct supervisor, and called his personal cell. He ended up shouting and threatening all sorts of consequences if he didn't show up.

Soon, the team lead returned from his leisurely lunch, only to spot the newbie and try to chew him out. While the team lead and I butted heads about whether the new kid was faking it, his symptoms grew worse. Finally, I instructed the second-youngest team member to take him to the hospital and then have him go home... A few hours later, I was informed that he was sick with influenza. In the short amount of time the newbie had spent in the office, the influenza then spread itself to the rest of the team, myself included.

I thought delaying the project would be inevitable, but the team lead still refused. Not only that, but he blamed me for not managing the team when it was my responsibility. Therefore, missing the deadline as a result of that would be my fault too. It was also my fault, apparently, that he had to call the sick kid to work to cover for my inexperience as a leader. Since I spat in the face of his kindness, he'd said, I had to finish the project by the original deadline by any means necessary...all over the phone, so he could keep himself safe. Then, he hung up. If he had told me that in person, I might actually have killed him.

In the end, I kept working on the project until the rest of the team returned, and we managed to finish on time. When the team lead used that against us, saying, "See! You finished on time. You just have to stop slacking off all the time!" I wanted to kill him all over again. If I had any strength left after finishing that project...I might have become a murderer.

"Come back to us, Ryoma," Remily said, breaking my reverie.





“Oh, I’m sorry. Long story short, I tried using the pain and anger I felt when I was made to work for five days straight with close to no sleep while I was suffering from symptoms like a high fever, chills, fatigue, joint pain, sore muscles, inflamed sinuses, sore throat, hardness of breathing...”

“That’s dark...” Remily couldn’t find anything else to say to me, it seemed. She simply broke the curse on the rock, calling it a day. I had successfully cast a curse, after all.

Just to be safe, we reassessed my physical condition. She asked me if anything had changed after casting magic and curses, but no symptoms had appeared, as far as I could tell. Without anything else to do, we returned to our small talk... But I could sense that the adults were watching me with even more concern than they usually did.

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At daybreak the next day, I woke up feeling extra refreshed from going to bed early. Other than that, I didn’t feel any different. No sign of any curse symptoms. Enjoying the beautiful day, sunny and clear, I prepared for the next leg of our journey.

An hour later... I was flying.

“This is just...incredible!” I shouted.

“If you keep talking you’ll bite your tongue!” Reinbach called back from where he flew in front of Sebas, whom I was following.

Just going straight felt like riding a roller coaster, so I believed that I might bite my tongue, but I couldn’t help yelling in excitement. Who wouldn’t, when they were riding a dragon for the first time?!

With nothing left for us in the City of Lost Souls, we decided to make our return via the fastest transportation method available. Like hailing a cab, Reinbach summoned a *dragon*.

This dragon—an ignis dragon, covered with bronze scales all over—measured about twenty meters long, with plenty of space to accommodate the five of us with seating and restraints. Still, according to Reinbach, this was a young and

smaller one. That, I wasn't ready to believe. Everything about the dragon was...incredible. So much so that I'd lost some of my vocabulary.

Combined with its enormous size and ability for flight, the dragon came with scales as hard as shields and armor-piercing talons and fangs. Just one would be a devastating threat if I had to fight it. It was considered A rank on a ranking of monsters organized by their danger level. Some dragons, in certain situations, were considered the highest S rank.

When this one roared in my direction shortly after it was summoned, my heart went up my throat. Reinbach soothed the dragon after that, and although I was nervous during takeoff, the dragon was flying steadily now. Because its back was so vast, I felt safe riding in one of the seats on it, feeling its warmth through its scales. I'd daresay that it was more comfortable than an ordinary wagon.

Now that I'd calmed down a bit, I took in the clear view of the horizon. This was my first time flying in this world. Sure, I'd flown on a few airplanes on Earth, but this was completely different. Unlike those flying metal tubes, I felt much safer. Even the wind that ripped past us felt refreshing.

The City of Lost Souls shrank into the distance as we passed over the canyons that looked like a labyrinth from above. Even the rocky mountains looked beautiful from here.

Soon, the dragon began gradually banking to the right. In the direction we had been heading in, I could spot Teresa in the distance. Even though Reinbach's familiar even wore equipment marked with his crest, a dragon was a dragon. Reinbach seemed careful not to plunge the entire town into panic.

Considering that we were flying over the land we'd spent days traversing in mere minutes, we were going at a great pace. It was a perfect cruising speed to enjoy the view.

And I was going to make the most of flying on a dragon's back.

## Chapter 9, Episode 1: Unmasking the Curse

“That was really fast...” I muttered.

We had flown on dragonback for half a day, including occasional landings to rest and detours to avoid flying above cities, and arrived a little ways north of Gimul. Seeing the city gate in the distance was a reality check in two ways: one, that I was back in Gimul, and two, of how fast the dragon had flown. It had taken me a month to walk to Teresa, albeit taking some detours to grind my adventurer rank. If I had gone into the City of Lost Souls alone, there was no way I could have returned this quickly to Gimul if I’d tried. I’d flown on plenty of airplanes, but that didn’t lessen my shock that there was a creature who could fly nearly as fast as one. No wonder monsters were being used for the transportation of people and goods in this world... I’d even say that flying on a dragon felt safer and more comfortable than flying economy.

Currently, the massive dragon was nuzzling Reinbach’s chest, like a house pet begging their owner not to go to work. The gesture was adorable enough that I had to remind myself exactly how dangerous the mighty beast could be.

“Thank you for that. Now get some rest,” Reinbach said. A breath later, the dragon disappeared like it had been an illusion.

That left me wondering if Reinbach had actually used Summoning magic instead. At the very least, I had never seen nor heard of a Taming spell that could summon a familiar. But I had seen Elise summon a large wolf familiar with Summoning magic. To the best of my knowledge, though, Summoning magic did not allow for a master and familiar to communicate mind-to-mind. After watching how Reinbach interacted with the dragon on our journey and their parting just now, it was hard to believe that they couldn’t understand each other.

*Maybe he found some kind of loophole like I did with slime magic,* I mused. *But how?*

“Shall we?” Reinbach announced.

“I’ve readied a carriage,” Sebas said.

I had almost forgotten why we landed here, when the day was still young and the dragon could have flown farther. We were to verify whether the curse was still on me, and to break it as soon as possible if it was. Time was of the essence. As soon as we all climbed into the carriage, it set off smoothly. In ten minutes or so, we would be at the city gate.

“Thank you for bringing me to Gimul so quickly,” I said to Reinbach.

“It’s the least I can do after everything you’ve done for us. Are you sure you want to go to the church for this?” he asked.

“Yes. It’s the safest option, in my opinion.”

There were other things on my to-do list that I would have liked to check off while I was in Gimul, but dealing with this curse was at the top of it. The adults had suggested that I see a warlock, exorcist, or priest. Normally, those would be the only choices for breaking a curse. But I had a fourth option.

“Of course it’s the safest...” Sever sighed. “No one else would think to seek an oracle from the gods.”

“No one other than a child of the gods... I hate to be a nag, but don’t go blabbing around about that, especially to the higher-ups of the church, if you don’t want a world of nuisance,” Remily warned.

“I certainly don’t. I’ll be careful.”

When the carriage rolled up to the city gate, the highest-ranking guard on duty came to greet us. Just as we could see the north gate when we landed, they apparently had a clear view of the dragon. Still, the Jamil crest on the carriage, along with Reinbach and Sebas’s—and even my—presence allowed us to pass the gate with little more than a greeting. I felt bad for wasting the man’s time, but I supposed that was part of his job.

Once we passed the gate, I decided to make myself a little more presentable, since I was going to a church. I asked a cleaner slime to dust me off, and stowed my weapon and armor into the Dimension Home. The church had no rules against being armed on its premises, but it felt like an appropriate sign of respect.

“Can I borrow that slime, Ryoma?” Remily asked.

“Of course!”

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Soon enough, we arrived at the church. At its gates, Bell the nun greeted us. As soon as she saw the crest, she snapped into a deep bow. I told her that I’d stopped by to thank the gods for keeping me safe on my journey, which wasn’t a lie.

She gestured me to the chapel, where a few people were scattered throughout, engaged in prayer. Quietly, I found a seat towards the corner and prayed. The familiar light embraced me, sending my consciousness to the divine realm.

“Huh?” Once the light faded, I found myself in the white void I had grown accustomed to, occupied by Gain, Kufo, and Lulutia. I’d been greeted by more of the gods during my past few visits, so it was a little off-putting to see just the three of them... But not as off-putting as the looks on their faces, their brows raised or twisted with questions. Overall, the air between us was heavy.

If I had screwed up somehow—that was my first thought—the gods said nothing. Actually, it looked like they didn’t know where to start. So, I forced myself to speak first. “What’s wrong? Did something happen?”

“Something’s happening right now, I think,” said Kufo.

“Did you do anything unusual, Ryoma? I sense something strange,” Lulutia added.

“That’s probably the thing I wanted to talk to you about.”

“Then let us hear your story first,” Gain said.

After I walked them through what happened in the City of Lost Souls, I brought out the magic gem encased in rock. Suddenly, the gods’ faces grew even graver.

“Ryoma, you need to hand that over,” Gain said in a deep, commanding voice I’d never heard him use before.

Of course I obliged, although I was surprised to hear him speak like that, and

the rock cluster floated up to Gain's hand. Then, Gain moved some distance away, where he, Kufo, and Lulutia encircled the gem.

"Sit tight," Lulutia said gently, not diverting her attention from the magic gem.

All I could do was quietly sit there and stay out of their way. Even in their usually comforting presence, I was beginning to feel a little nervous. *Seeing how the gods are reacting, that gem must be something serious...*

The gods were glaring daggers at the cluster of crystals as the rocks covering it crumbled away. All three of them raised their hand to the gem. A light emanated from each of their palms and engulfed the magic gem in a giant ball of light. At this point, they finally relaxed a bit. They must have accomplished whatever they set out to do with the gem. As if to confirm my suspicions, the gods exchanged a few words, then Kufo and Lulutia vanished along with the ball of light.

"Sorry to keep you waiting," Gain said, the intensity in his face giving way to contemplation. "I'm sure you have a lot of questions on your mind, and I owe you a lot of answers. But before any of that, you accomplished a great feat, Ryoma. Thank you for bringing that to us."

"Glad to be of service. I'm guessing that wasn't just a cursed magic gem, then?" Judging by the gods' reaction, it must have been something really nasty. I just wanted to seek their advice on it, so I certainly hadn't expected to be thanked just for bringing the thing. A chill crawled down my spine at the realization that I'd been carrying an object so dangerous all the way here.

"No, it was not. If you want the short answer, it's a god."

I could show no reaction beyond freezing on the spot and staring at Gain blankly. "I don't think I heard you right. A god?"

"Yep. Not a rod or a cod. A god, the same as any of us."

"So I did hear you right... How did a god turn into a magic gem and get itself buried in a place like that?" I couldn't help but ask.

"It's a fairly long story..." Gain began.

First, he explained that the magic gem I excavated was host to a demon lord

that once terrorized this world. A demon lord—sometimes called a diabolic god—was a god who broke a taboo and tried to destroy or take over the world of other gods. The distinction was made by their deeds alone and not due to their nature, like the difference between a citizen and a criminal.

This particular demon lord had once managed a world of civilizations and technologies millennia ahead of this one. Humans of that world waged war with said technology, and ruined their world beyond repair.

A god and their respective world hung in balance like yin and yang. Without a world to take care of, a god eventually ceased to exist. Most of the time, gods who lost their worlds would sacrifice a great deal of their power to create a new world as a last resort. Still, their power would gradually recover as their new world developed, so the majority of gods would suck it up and make their new world. On rare occasions, though, a god who lost their world would resort to taking over the world of another god rather than creating one from scratch.

“That explains a lot, but didn’t you say this demon lord was long gone? You told me something like that when I first arrived in this world,” I said.

“Indeed, the demon lord itself is gone. What you found was a nasty memento. I assume it sealed away a fraction of its own power and consciousness in the recesses of that place to keep us from destroying it entirely. The thing you found can be more accurately described as a fragment—or vestige—of the demon lord.”

“Something with enough energy to resurrect the demon lord would surely tip us off before the resurrection...” Gain continued. “But if you hadn’t found that gem, Ryoma, it most likely would have continued collecting magical energy in that pit for perhaps tens of thousands of years until becoming a monster powerful enough to damage the world itself—and the composition of its magical energy. You did this world a huge favor.” Even if the threat it would have posed might not have come to fruition for tens of thousands of years, Gain made it clear that the gem was something that they couldn’t afford to ignore.

“There are people in possession of magic crystals found with that gem. Will they be all right?” I asked.

“They’ll be fine. I took a look a minute ago and verified that the ones they



have are ordinary magic crystals—merely pockets of magical energy solidified in the process of the demon lord fragment gathering energy. No harm will come of them. You, on the other hand...”

“I thought so.”

“Just a fragment of a demon lord can be more than enough... You were right to be concerned, because the curse you alone received was enough for all five of you.”

“I don’t feel any different,” I said. There had been some shivers and confusion when I first found the gem, but nothing since then. I was even starting to convince myself that the curse had been broken after all. “This curse... Or would it be a smiting, since it came from a former god? Anyway, how can I get rid of it?”

“No need to worry. While it’s a tricky curse, another god can remove it with no problem. This is something that we should have spotted and dealt with, so I will take care of it. For now, sit back and have a cup.”

Just as Gain said so, a coffee table materialized with a cup of tea, which I gladly took. It was reassuring to have the gods helping me deal with this.

“I am always impressed by how quickly you accept these things,” Gain said.

“There’s little I can do about a god-level curse on my own, I’d imagine. Or maybe it’s because I don’t really feel like I’ve been cursed. If I was experiencing clear symptoms, I might feel differently about it.”

“Is that so? In any case, you’ve had a terrible run of misfortunes, Ryoma. I thought I’d blessed you with decent luck.”

“Since coming to this world, I have felt pretty lucky.”

“There are few things less fortunate than finding a demon lord fragment and being cursed by it.”

I chuckled at how quickly Gain had shut me down. “Then, I’ll gladly ask for your help.”

“Try to stay relaxed.”

Once I finished the tea, Gain told me to lie down on an examination table he’d

conjured. I tried to relax as instructed, and I could feel my mind fade away, like a deep fog was thickening around it.

## Chapter 9, Episode 2: Let the Healing Begin

"He's up," a voice said.

*Who's there...? A girl? I feel like I should recognize her.*

"You woke him up. He still seems half asleep, though."

*Gain... That's right, he was going to break the curse on me. How long was I out?*

Gain was looking down at me as I opened my eyes. "How do you feel?"

"Fine..." I answered. My mind still felt sluggish, but that was about it. "Is it over?" I sat up to find Kufo, Lulutia, and even Tekun and Fernobelia standing around me. "What are you guys doing here, Tekun?"

"Gain called us over so he'd have more time," Tekun said.

"The longer you can stay, the more thoroughly he can treat you," Fernobelia explained.

*Right! I forgot there was a time limit for my staying here each time.* "Thank you," I said.

"Don't sweat it. Drink up." Tekun passed me a bottle. Every time I saw him, it felt like he was offering me a drink.

"Now?" I asked.

"Bottoms up."

I took a swig, and I felt my body warm, although not from alcohol. "What is it?"

"Medicinal liquor. It stimulates your mind and calms your nerves. Perfect prescription, don't you think?" Tekun grinned.

"It definitely woke me up," I said. Despite Tekun's description, I didn't taste any alcohol in the liquor, but the minty herbs had cleared my mind. At this point, I finally remembered something. "Just now, I saw a goddess I didn't

recognize—”

“Here.”



I whipped around to find a goddess standing there in the form of a girl with blonde hair and blue eyes. With her impassive face and frilly dress, she almost looked like a porcelain doll... Hopefully she wouldn't find my impression offensive. Based on what I'd been told before, she was either Manoailoa or Meltrize. "Nice to—"

"I am Meltrize, the Goddess of Death and Sleep. Nice to meet you."

"The pleasure is mine."

"I'll explain the situation," Meltrize started.

"Wait a minute. You guys haven't met before," Tekun pointed out.

"You have to make better introductions than that," Kufo said.

"I have already been given information about him," Meltrize countered. "He cannot stay here much longer. Discussing the matter at hand should take priority."

Tekun and Kufo fell silent, but I guessed they were still arguing by communicating in a way that I couldn't hear. I was already starting to get a picture of Meltrize's character. I'd had members on my team who always spoke too directly and others mistook their brevity for rudeness. As much as I was careful about it, I had a habit of being too direct myself. My intense facial features had made any directness on my part come across as defiance to those above me and as overbearing to those below me. I felt a kindred spirit in Meltrize.

"I don't need to watch my words as you do," Meltrize said, "because I have no one to offend. But your impression is accurate, for the most part." Apparently, she'd heard my silent thoughts. "It's fine. You did not offend me."

"I'm glad I didn't."

"Let's continue," she said.

"I'll explain the curse on you, Ryoma. First of all, it hasn't been broken yet," Gain said, as if the words left a bitter taste in his mouth, although he was calm enough that the situation didn't seem too dire. "What complicates the matter is that a portion of the demon lord fragment has slithered into your soul through

the curse...like a parasite. Whatever shred of the demon lord remains has no mind, but seems to have acted on instinct out of self-preservation. I could have removed the curse and the demon lord fragment from you entirely, but that would have strained your soul. So, I only removed a portion of it and contained the curse that remains. By repeating this process regularly, the curse and fragment can be removed without an issue. It may be a bit of an inconvenience, but I'd like you to come here on a regular basis. The schedule can be adjusted... But I think a good starting point would be for you to come once a month over the next year."

"Like going to see a doctor? I have no problem with that," I said. "I'm the one inconveniencing you, if anything. Thank you for doing this for me."

"As far as I can tell, it won't damage your health in any way... But I'd like you to be careful of some things until the curse is broken," Gain said. Treatment of an illness usually came with restrictions, so I was ready to follow the doctor's orders. "The curse you're afflicted by—let's call it the Isolation Curse for now—can damage your relationships with other people."

"That's tricky," I said.

"Indeed. To be specific, this curse amplifies negative emotions that anyone may hold towards you. It will beguile their minds so that a small irritation that they may brush off under any other circumstances can grow into an uncontrollable outrage. As a result, it can damage your relationships and isolate you from others," Gain explained.

"Wait... Just to be clear, the curse has already taken effect, right? I flew back to Gimul with Reinbach and the others, but they didn't act any differently. The dragon might have growled at me, but that's about it."

"Because there is already trust between you and them. Again, the curse is caused by a mere fragment of a demon lord. In proportion to what is left of the former god, its power has dwindled significantly. At full power, the demon lord could have easily cast a curse that made everyone else burn with overwhelming hatred for you. Of course, it never would have felt the need to do so if it had retained its full power," said Gain.

"Can we go over who exactly will be affected by this curse?" I asked.



“After what I did to restrict its effect...” Gain went on to describe four conditions.

First, the curse only worked on humans. Monsters and familiars were excluded from the effect. Gain guessed that Reinbach’s dragon had only growled at me because I was a stranger, or because it had sensed the magical energy of the curse on me.

Secondly, this person needed to feel some sort of negative emotion towards me, since the curse could only amplify preexisting negative emotions, not create them out of nothing. Zero times anything was still zero.

Thirdly, the curse wouldn’t work if that person felt positive emotions towards me that were more powerful than their negative emotions. The more the person liked me and trusted me, the less effective the curse would be. This was the reason that Reinbach and the others were not affected by the curse.

Finally, the curse only worked when a person directly acknowledged me. Because the core of the curse was within me, I’d have to speak, touch, or show myself to them for the curse to take hold. Sending messages or letters would not trigger the curse.

I contemplated all of these conditions. “It’s kind of underwhelming.”

“Is...that so?” Gain asked. “I thought this curse would be a particularly cruel one for you.”

True, I did get nervous when I first heard that the curse could damage relationships. But it didn’t seem like it would wreck the relationships I’d built so far, and the curse itself would be moot if I just holed myself up for a year. Besides, before I was reborn in this world, I was an unmarried geek approaching forty. That was a combination that invited judgment in Japan, even though I’d dodged the worst stigma of all: joblessness. I’d had plenty of accusations thrown at me, so I never really had the privilege of a high social standing.

In this world, I’d already left trustworthy people in charge of my businesses and submitted all of the paperwork needed for them to make executive decisions. That made it easier for me to set out to the Sea of Trees, so I didn’t foresee any problems on that end, especially since I could still send letters if I needed to.

My savings would easily cover my living expenses for a year, unlike in my previous life when quitting a job meant not having food on the table. Even if I didn't have that nest egg, I felt confident that I could get by. Of course, not having to worry about money took a huge weight off my shoulders, so that might have contributed to my optimistic outlook about this curse.

"There's plenty of things I'd like to study about and experiment on. I feel like I could kill a year working on those projects," I concluded.

The gods all seemed to agree, except for Meltrize, whose eyes seemed watchful...or utterly uninterested. I couldn't tell.

"You've already spent three years alone in a forest without a curse," Kufo pointed out.

"That makes me feel better, somehow. It's better that you're not worried about the curse, of course," Tekun added.

"Technically, this was the dying curse of a god more powerful than any of us..." Lulutia said.

"It was a streak of bad luck for that demon lord that Ryoma found the fragment and brought it here before it could cause any serious damage," said Fernobelia.

Gain chimed in. "If you're going to be a hermit, I recommend spending the first half of the year preparing for the second. To break the curse, I need to drag out the fragment that embedded itself into your soul. It's a necessary process, but the curse will become stronger the farther it's dragged out."

"In other words, the curse is at its weakest now," I said.

"Exactly. You only need to avoid most contact with others during the last few months of the year. If you have no choice but to interact with others during that time, we can temporarily dampen the curse with magic. I had planned to explain more about that if the prospect of isolation troubled you, but it seems that won't be necessary."

That settled the matter of the curse, at least for now.

Gain glanced at Fernobelia, and the two gods instantaneously swapped

places. Standing in front of me, Fernobelia quietly said, “I have something to give—no, to return to you.” Before I could wonder what that something was, the magic gem that I’d dug up popped into the air between us.

“You’re returning *that* to me?” I asked.

“Yes.”

“I’m not sure what to do with the fragment of a demon lord...”

“Do not concern yourself with that. Any remnant of the demon lord’s power has been extracted and destroyed. Now this is an ordinary magical gem. As the finder, you have the right to it. And to decide how to use it. However, I do not recommend trying to sell it. That would draw you unwanted attention. Crafting it into a staff may be an appropriate use. If anything, consider it your reward for having to cope with the curse,” Fernobelia said.

As long as it wasn’t going to harm me, I saw no reason to refuse, so I took the gem and stowed it in my Item Box.

An arm grabbed me by the shoulder. Tekun was suddenly standing beside me. “You don’t have a staff yet, do you?”

“No. I was just starting to think about getting one,” I said. After Remily had told me the traditional method of crafting a staff, I had vaguely daydreamed about making one once I could find the time.

“Perfect! Use that magic gem. For the staff itself... Didn’t you get your hands on the branch of an elder treant?” Tekun asked.

“Now that you mention it... It’s been sitting in my Item Box since I got it.”

Tekun was clearly not happy with my answer. “What a waste! What’s the use of good materials if you don’t do anything with them? You’ve got the woodworking skill, so try crafting it yourself. You’d have to know what material to choose, and detect its magical energy... You know what, I could teach you step-by-step when you come for your curse-breaking visits.”

“You’re allowed to do that?” I asked.

“It’s no big deal, if it’s just the basics. Technology has to be built upon, generation after generation. It’s my job as the god of artisans and technology to

watch over that process, and give a helping hand every now and again. I don't meddle too much now, but I used to guide humans a fair bit. Take the gift, Ryoma." Tekun laughed, knocking back his drink. It obviously wasn't a big deal to him, but I felt incredibly lucky to be able to receive instruction from the god of technologies himself.

"I'll take you up on that when I come back from the Sea of Trees," I said.

Tekun's laugh cut off, and he gave the other gods a weird look. An awkwardness came over them, except for Meltrize.

*Did I say something wrong?*

"Waste of time," Meltrize said, her patience apparently having run out. She stepped up to me and added, "Ryoma Takebayashi. We request your help."

It was a very concise and unilluminating request.

## Chapter 9, Episode 3: The Gods' Request

"Let me go over everything again," I said, having asked for details to supplement Meltrize's too-vague request.

Apparently, there was a dangerous monster on the loose in the Sea of Trees. More specifically, it was in the ruins of Korumi village—my destination. Although the monster was still young, it had grown rapidly from the magical energy as if it had evolved. Now, it was powerful enough to threaten the balance of the world if left alone. Naturally, the gods couldn't let that happen.

In cases like this, the gods usually resorted to one of two remedies: to command a divine beast—a creature appointed as the guardian of a specific location—to dispatch the monster, or to eliminate the threat themselves. The Sea of Trees of Syrus, though, was one of the spots where Fernobelia had been experimenting with methods of management that didn't involve divine beasts. That ruled out the first option.

Syrus was also one of the sacred grounds of this world that were vital in filling this world with magical energy. With Fernobelia's experiments going well, Syrus generated more magical energy than many other sacred grounds. If the gods were to take this matter into their own hands, the Sea of Trees would most likely be leveled, which would be a shame. The gods explained that there was no method of limiting their astronomical power enough that it wouldn't destroy the surrounding area. Whenever they'd invoked powers like Smiting or Divine Judgment in the past, they had wiped out entire nations or even a small continent. Our brief conversation was enough to make me see that they took using their powers that way very seriously, and wanted to keep them as a last resort. Still, they couldn't leave the monster alone.

"So the honor falls to me, because I was already going to Syrus," I said.

I had no problem with taking on this task. It was just like any other adventuring quest, only it was given by the most trustworthy clients there were. Besides, it was by the grace of these gods that I was fulfilled and content now.

Even if they had their own reasons for bringing me to this world, I still owed them my gratitude and would do anything I could to repay them. I didn't hesitate to accept their request... But now the gods were looking both grateful and consternated.

"What's going on?" I asked. "Is this really something that troubles you more than the demon lord fragment?"

"It is a conundrum that doesn't have a simple solution... We're debating whether or not we should allow you—or any human, for that matter—to shoulder our responsibility," said Kufo.

"It would have been out of the question to make a decision without asking you first. Since the three of us stood close to the middle of the debate, all of us had decided that we should be the ones to ask you... But I was concerned that there would be no difference between us asking you and commanding you. I doubt you would have refused," Lulutia added.

*So it's a contentious issue among the gods, I thought. But that doesn't matter to me, really.* "I'm more concerned that I won't be able to handle this monster. I'd known that going into the Sea of Trees would be dangerous, and I know I'm lucky just to get a heads-up, but this is a monster that you gods consider a threat, right?"

"While I voted against requesting your help, I admit that you'd have a good chance of succeeding. If we had to ask anyone, you would be our best candidate," Fernobelias said.

"Correct," Meltrize chimed in. "You would have a good matchup against the monster, were you to engage in combat with it. I do not mean that you are our only choice. You are our best choice, weighing both your and the monster's abilities. If we were to request aid from the Knight's Order or army of your country, a force of thousands or even tens of thousands would almost certainly be destroyed."

*What kind of monster are we talking about here...? I'd love to know its exact powers.*

"The ability we are concerned with the most is the binding of souls. Souls that are bound cannot rejoin the circle of reincarnation. Some souls have already

been turned into Undead, almost like Necromancy,” Meltrize said.

“And the monster casts those spells out of instinct...” Fernobelias added. “It’s also tricky because it steals from the vast store of magical energy in the Sea of Trees. While the magical energy it can wield at any given time is a negligible portion of how much the forest generates, that’s still more than enough for the monster to functionally have unlimited magical energy to cast spells with.”

So I was facing off against a necromancer with unlimited magical energy. Bound souls plus unlimited magic equals an endless horde of Undead monsters. Taking out the Undead monsters wouldn’t do any good when they could easily be rebuilt. Trying to outnumber the Undead using human soldiers would just give the monster more vessels to increase its army with, like in a zombie movie. But where an ordinary army might not stand a chance, my grave slimes and I just might.

“Exactly. Defeating the Undead by normal means allows the monster to recycle those souls. But isolating the souls in the Undead will prevent more from rising in their wake. Once the monster itself is defeated, those souls will be unbound from it,” Meltrize said.

“Then I’ll have all the time to clean up the Undead... I really do have a good matchup.”

“Your grave slimes aren’t the only reason for that either. Syrus is a hive of powerful monsters and a marching army would be as good as a sitting duck. You need to go in with a small, elite team to even make it through the woods. Any big group would get taken out by the other strong monsters in the Sea of Trees before they even got to the one we need eliminated. By Fernobelias’ design, I might add,” Tekun said.

“Don’t make it sound like I *want* to see bloodshed there. I merely constructed an environment both dangerous and difficult to inhabit so that the sacred grounds would be protected from humans and foreign monsters,” Fernobelias indignantly clarified.

“Same difference,” Tekun countered, shoving his face in his.

Ignoring their quarrel, Kufo said, “Long story short, you have a much better chance of succeeding than an entire army does. And we would like you to carry



this out alone. We've delegated handling something like this to humans a few times, and it wasn't unusual for the person who received the oracle to become way overzealous."

"That's even more likely to happen when we ask a group for help. Not to mention the bad apples who make us their excuse for lining their pockets, or persecuting those who wouldn't join their cause, or waging war on those who don't share their beliefs," Lulutia said. "Those things could not be further from what we want, and I hate to see people suffer because of our requests."

"We have never demanded worship from humans in the first place..." Gain noted. "Of course, I wouldn't want to trade it for ridicule or derision. And shattering their illusion now seems cruel, so we maintain a show of solemnity when we give oracles."

*The gods don't have as much free rein as I thought...* "In any case, I accept," I said.

"Are you sure?" Meltrize asked in her signature deadpan. Somehow, I felt like she was almost encouraging me to change my answer. Of course, I was always going to say yes, and I'd thought that Meltrize wanted me to accept, since she voted strongly to offer me the quest in the first place. "That is more convenient for us," she explained. "But you will also face more danger. You still have the choice to refuse, now that we have given you more context. You could even cancel your venture into the Sea of Trees altogether, and we would not hold it against you." Although she was still hard to read, Meltrize seemed to be concerned for my well-being.

"I'm not agreeing to go because I'm afraid to turn you down. If I'd said no, I'm sure you wouldn't push the issue either. Still, I was always going to accept. It's the least I can do to pay you all back for bringing me to this world."

"I appreciate your assistance." Just as she thanked me, darkness burst from her.

Before I could even react, the darkness swallowed me up from the neck down. Although it came with no sense of discomfort like the curse had, I stiffened at the sudden entrapment.

Kufo quickly called, "It's all right, Ryoma! She's only giving you a blessing!"

“Oh, a...blessing,” I stammered. I’d never been given a blessing like this. In fact, I’d never experienced the actual process of obtaining a blessing before. “I appreciate it, but what made you give me a blessing all of a sudden?”

“Humas offer payment when giving quests. With a blessing from the goddess of death and sleep, you will gain some resistance against Dark magic, curses, and cursed energy. It will subdue the demon lord’s curse on you, and it won’t hurt in your fight against the monster in Syrus. Think of it as advance payment. A proper payment will be given upon your return,” Meltrize explained.

*A blessing that made the job easier and dampened the curse? I’d be happy even if this is all the payment I get. One quest for the blessing of a god seems too good to be true as it is.*

“The blessing is not that powerful,” said the goddess of death. “It’s little more than a placebo. Stay vigilant.”

“Humans always revere our blessings, but they take little for us to give. Don’t feel bad about accepting it,” Fernobelias said. “And I will have your payment ready. We’re sending you into my sacred grounds, after all. If you have any requests, I can make it happen.”

“I can’t think of anything... Dealer’s choice,” I said.

“There’s no rush, but I’ll pick out something for you.” Fernobelias turned to Gain. “That covers the basics, I believe.”

“I agree,” Gain said. “But there’s still some time left. Let’s give Ryoma a few more details on the curse and the monster he is to face.”

The gods and I continued talking for as long as I could stay. As light wrapped around me to take me back down, the divine realm looked a little more peaceful than it was when I came up. If I was able to quell their worries in any small part by accepting their quest, that made it well worth it.

## Chapter 9, Episode 4: The Next Step

When my consciousness returned to my body, I glanced to my side. Reinbach and the others, each engaged in prayer, noticed me. Because I had explained beforehand that I would be receiving an oracle, they understood that a movement on my end meant that my divine visit had ended.

Everyone played it cool and wrapped up their prayers before we filed out of the chapel and into the carriage again, setting course for the laundry shop. On the way, I relayed the information about my curse to them, omitting any mentions of a demon lord since that would only worry them unnecessarily.

“The gods will personally break your curse?!” Sebas asked, as if to make sure he heard me right.

“If we hadn’t known you to be the child of the gods, I wouldn’t have believed it. Do they care for you so much because you’re a child of the gods, or did the title come because you’re so adored by them...?” Sever mused.

“Either way, you must be glad the curse will be lifted,” Remily said. “I wouldn’t let your guard down until it does, but you said there are some workarounds.”

“Yes, I’m not too concerned about it,” I said.

We were on our way to give Carme a quick rundown, then head straight home. There wouldn’t be much he could do today, and the gods had warned me not to interact with anyone I wasn’t close to for the rest of the day. Just as putting the lid on something that stinks doesn’t clear the stench already in the air, there was apparently a sort of lingering smell about me.

“Best heed their advice, when it comes from the gods,” Reinbach said. “Are you sure you can make it through the shop? You told us it’s more popular than before, so there will be more employees.”

“That’s true,” I admitted. “The opening-day employees from my first store shouldn’t be affected at all, but there are quite a few people who’ve started this

year.”

I’d hired some part-time help during busy seasons in the past, but there was currently a more long-term training program in place. After leaving Carme in charge of the shop, I hadn’t stopped by as often as before. Of course, I had vetted and interviewed new-hire candidates myself, so I wouldn’t call them untrustworthy. I just wasn’t as close to them as I was with the OGs of the shop.

“Not to mention more customers,” Sebas said.

“Now that you mention it, this is the shop’s busiest time of the day. If there’s a line out the door, plenty of strangers will see me.”

“Talking this over in the carriage seemed wiser than doing so in the church, but do you want me to change course?” Reinbach asked.

“No, I do need to tell them I’m okay. And if I’m going to explain the curse, it’ll be more reassuring to show that I’m well... Should I use the Hide spell?” I asked.

“Your curse triggers when someone else recognizes you, right? The Hide spell only makes you less noticeable, not invisible. It won’t help you much in this situation,” Remily said.

“You may be overthinking this,” Reinbach offered. “Sneaking in won’t be difficult without the help of magic. Rather, you should focus on making a good impression.”

The carriage rolled on as the adults offered their advice without a second thought...until we arrived at the lot by the laundry shop.

As expected, a line of customers extended from the shop all the way to the lot. Surprised murmurs could be heard from them.

“H-Hey, look at that carriage.”

“That’s the duke’s crest. What’s it doing here?”

“Oh? You’re new in town, aren’t you? This place is famous for being one of the duke’s favorite spots. From what I’ve heard, the shopkeeper’s closely acquainted with the duke.”

“Let’s go,” Sever announced.

“Yes, please,” I agreed.

Just as Sever stepped out, shaking the carriage with his step, I heard a familiar voice call, “Excuse me! Please let me through.”

“Oh! I thought I recognized you, Veldoole,” said Sever.

“Yes, sir! Hudom Veldoole, former knight-in-training!” Hudom saluted, perhaps out of old training habits, standing ramrod straight with his fist on his chest. His face was stiff too, maybe because he felt awkward about leaving the life of knighthood behind. Considering their history, it wasn’t surprising that they knew each other.

“Lord Gardock—”

“That’s enough. I have left my post of captain, and I assume you chose another path in life. Be proud of your work now,” Sever said with the wisdom and care of a seasoned mentor. “Can you show us to your shop?”

Hudom turned his eyes to the carriage. “Shall I take your luggage?”

“That’s...” Sever started, unsure of his words.

“Can you hear me? It’s Ryoma,” I announced.

“What?” Hudom’s eyes widened in surprise. I couldn’t blame him, of course. Who wouldn’t be shocked to see their acquaintance return from a journey, apparently stuffed in a crate? He didn’t know I was trying to mitigate the effect of my curse. Combined with the fact that Sever of all people had brought me back, Hudom’s surprise was completely understandable.



“I’ve been cursed,” I explained. “Physically, I’m fine. But I don’t want to draw too much attention. Can you show us to the meeting room—no, the basement? With how many of us are here, I think that would be the best place to catch you up.”

“You got it.” Hudom seemed to swallow all of his questions for now, and showed us to the basement.

Carme soon joined us. Apparently, Hudom had sent word through the receptionist on the way into the shop. I gave them both the rundown.

“I see... So you only need to be mindful of the curse today,” Carme said.

“That’s the case, because of how my spell works,” Remily chimed in.

I had told them that she was the one treating my curse. While I trusted both Carme and Hudom, I would have to reveal that I was a child of the gods if I were to tell them who was really curing my curse. I wasn’t even sure they’d believe me if I did, but all of us agreed that it would be better if as few people as possible knew this fact about me. Silently, I thanked Remily for playing along.

After asking Remily a few questions, Carme finally relaxed. “While it sounds like an arduous process to break the curse, I’m glad to hear it won’t terribly affect your work or lifestyle. I’m glad you’re safe. Welcome back.”

“Thank you,” I said. “Although I’ve gotten myself cursed in the end, I did make it to C rank, so I feel like it was a fruitful journey. I was hoping to meet up again sometime after tomorrow, and tell you more about it, as well as discuss what comes next. Does that work for you?” I asked.

“There are a few things I would like to run by you, but nothing too urgent. You need to take care of yourself, first. If I’m being honest, I would suggest that you postpone your journey into the Sea of Trees...if I didn’t know there was no chance of you changing your plans.”

With credit to Carme, he knew me too well.

“I’ve postponed it long enough,” I said. “It helps that I’m leaving the shop in trustworthy hands.”

“I won’t hold you back. When do you plan to leave?”

“Let’s see... I’ll get some rest to be safe. In the meantime, I’ll replenish food and fix up my armor. Since I still have to turn the midnight dew into bug repellent and go over a few things with some people... I should be leaving in about a week. Two weeks, tops.”

“Understood. We’ll make adjustments according to that schedule,” Carme said.

“Thank you.”

Having made my report, I climbed back into the crate so the adults could carry me back to the carriage undetected.

On our way to the north gate of the city, we discussed my laundry shop.

“You weren’t kidding about business booming in your shop,” Reinbach said.

“I don’t think you’ve been back since soon after it opened. We’ve had a lot of results since then,” I said. The shop was doing well for a newly opened enterprise even back then, but most customers had come out of curiosity. Now, many of them had become regulars, spreading good reviews around the city. “I do feel very fortunate.”

“It has a nice atmosphere. And the manager seems talented for his age,” Remily noted.

“Carme was someone I was directly introduced to through the Morgan Company. He definitely has the knowledge, experience, and capability to run a business. I trust him wholeheartedly. Of course, my other employees contribute a lot to the shop’s success,” I said.

“The Veldoole boy was very capable when I knew him. As long as he’s fitting in, he must be a great asset,” Sever said. I didn’t have a chance to ask while we were at the shop, so I finally asked him.

“How do I know him?” Sever repeated.

“Did you meet him when he was enrolled in the academy?” I asked.

“That was when we first met. Students of the knight’s curriculum are practically guaranteed to begin training with the Knight’s Order after graduation. So, we scout out and interview students at the academy, which is



where I first met him. That being said, there are few students whose faces I learn before they join the order. There are simply too many, and a good portion drop out before graduation. I remembered him in particular for a few reasons. For one, I knew his father well.”

Hudom had once told me that his father was a royal gardener, so I assumed that’s where Sever had met him.

“I remember him now. He’s the royal gardener’s son,” Remily chimed in. “He kept up that garden, where His Majesty often ran from his studies and hid.”

“Ran? Hid?” I asked.

“Yep. He was a wild child back then, with an uncanny talent for running and hiding,” Remily explained. “He’d give his tutors or guards the slip and hide in the garden or sneak into town. That would send the whole castle into a tizzy, every time.”

“Really...?” That seemed rather irresponsible for the future king. And judging by Remily’s description, it didn’t sound like he simply had incompetent guards either, only that the king was skilled in running away.

“I hate to burst your nostalgic bubble, Remily, but those who remember those times—myself included—blame you in part for his escapades. He would not have had so many if you hadn’t taught him Hide when he was young,” Sever said.

*Remily taught him? That explains a lot... I think.*

“I didn’t expect him to be so good at it, and I was only doing my job. Hide would have come in handy in an emergency, and I was limiting myself to magic that wouldn’t damage his mind or body. You can’t blame me for being a good tutor,” Remily countered.

“I know, but after all the search parties... Anyway, that’s how I knew your employee’s father,” Sever said to me. “I also remembered him because he didn’t join the Knight’s Order. Like I said, those who graduate from the curriculum are all supposed to join. Some unfortunately drop out due to illness or injury, but almost no one walks away from the Order otherwise.”

“He left behind a guaranteed, stable career,” I said.

“Exactly. And while he had every right to choose his own future, I had wanted him for the Knight’s Order...” Sever clearly regarded Hudom highly.

“Hudom said that he didn’t have a good reputation back then.”

“I had heard rumors. One was that he was an impertinent slacker more interested in chasing women than swinging the sword. Many of his classmates had numerous complaints about him. Yet, his instructor at the time—a colleague of mine who’d retired from the Order because of an injury—said he had a watchful eye and a caring heart.”

Sever went on to explain that, while students of the knight’s curriculum were usually talented nobles, they were, of course, children. In an environment full of grueling training, the pressure of expulsion should their grades slip, and high expectations from their family, many of the students became consumed by the curriculum and forgot to enjoy life.

“Everyone needs a break from their work, in moderation,” Sever said. “Veldoole apparently preferred inviting out those of his classmates who seemed to be under too much pressure. But they rarely took him up on his offer and often told him off for it... When they were overcome with training and assignments, his classmates couldn’t see his gesture of kindness for what it was. So few of them understood that taking a night off isn’t a sign of failure.”

“Once they have those blinders on, it’s hard to get them to take time off.” Remily’s nonchalant comment stung a little bit, reminding me of my life on Earth.

“So that’s what happened,” I said.

“While he apparently had a string of relationships...” Sever went on, “I never heard of him treating a woman dishonorably. Besides, the curriculum is designed to build a foundation in these children who are immature both in mind and body until they can withstand proper training in the Knight’s Order. It is only a stop along the way on the path to knighthood. That’s why the Order recruits based on physical potential and a sense of loyalty to our nation, rather than impeccable morals.”

“Many students and their parents believe that completing the curriculum will guarantee them a stable life,” Sever continued. “In reality, recruits from the

curriculum undergo a minimum of two years' training, so those misconceptions are hammered out of them. If not, they drop out before they even become a squire. To become a proper knight, a trainee needs to gain plenty of experience as a squire and be recommended by several knights, including the one they serve. As far as I know, most knights who had heard of Veldoole's escapades laughed about it, thinking that it only showed his potential. 'It's only the curriculum,' they'd say."

While I knew little about the mentality and work demanded of knights, it made sense that the professional knights considered the curriculum's training to be easy compared to what they had to go through. On the other hand, I could sympathize with Hudom's classmates, who felt jealous or outraged by his behavior.

"Good intentions aren't always recognized for what they are... It can be difficult to build relationships," I said.

"As a result, Veldoole found another path in life. While the misunderstandings with those around him must have played a role, I expect he hadn't locked himself into a life as a knight like so many of his classmates had. I'm happy to see him doing well," Sever said.

"There's no concern there," I said. "He's getting good food and enough rest, of course, but he also trains with the other security guards every day."

"Oh? Next time I see him, I'll test his strength... No, maybe I'll train him myself. There'll be plenty of time once I move here," Sever said.

*Sever's moving to Gimul?*

"Didn't we tell you? Sever and I are thinking of moving here from the capital," Remily said.

"No..."

"Probably because they talked it over while you were asleep. Remember the night when we harvested midnight dew?" Reinbach pointed out.

That night, they had taken over watch for the night, and let me sleep in. Little did I know, they were discussing plans to move to Gimul.

“Remily and I are both retired, and we are well-known enough that it makes going into town a little tiresome. Now that we’ve decided to become adventurers, we decided to move towns,” Sever explained.

“We can’t hope to be anonymous wherever we go, but the smaller population should make it more bearable for us than living in the capital. I want to keep an eye on your curse too, and it’ll be easier to keep our story straight if I live close by,” Remily added, and she was right. Having a former royal sorcerer corroborating my story would give it more credibility, as it had back in the laundry shop.

“That would be great for me, but are you sure...?” I asked.

“You don’t need to worry about it. It’ll only be a year until your curse is broken. That’s a blink of an eye for a dark elf. Besides, I look after my apprentices,” Remily said.

“Thank you!” I couldn’t find any other words to say to them.

*If only I could repay them, somehow...*

“It’s a win-win for both of us,” Sever reassured.

“The gods are taking care of your curse anyway, but I do feel like it’s my responsibility to keep an eye on you, as your travel companion and elder... Yet you never call me ‘Master,’ Ryoma. Even though you said you would,” Remily said.

“Right... I forgot all about that.”

“Or you can call me Sissy. Go ahead!”

*That was probably why I had forgotten... I had blocked out the whole exchange after the last time she suggested calling her that. It was still too embarrassing to say, but I did offer to repay her somehow...*

“Can we settle on ‘sis’?” I hedged.

“Well... I suppose it would be cruel to force a boy your age to call me anything. That’ll do.”

And so, I had committed to calling Remily “sis” for the foreseeable future.

“You could have just called her Master,” Reinbach whispered.

“She played you,” Sever added.

Too late to take back my agreement, I had to endure looks from Remily that resembled those of a child who has found a new toy.



## Chapter 9, Episode 5: Prepare for Departure

The next morning, I woke up in my own bed for the first time in a long while. Although I never found camping to be a pain, I couldn't deny that it was very relaxing to be home. Now that I'd had a good night's rest, I could start gearing up for my journey into the Sea of Trees as planned. Base camps set up by adventurers hunting for material would be scattered throughout the woods, but it wouldn't hurt me to pack heavy. First, I went to Digger Armory to have my armor patched up. It had been damaged in my sparring match against Sever.

"Hello?" I called from the empty storefront.

Soon, the shopkeeper Darson sauntered out from the back. "Looks like you made it back unscathed."

"More or less."

"How's the prototype? Did you have any issues with it?"

"It worked great. Today, I came to have my armor restored."

"Restored? Why'd you let your guard down?" Darson asked, jumping to conclusions.

"I sparred with someone I met along the way."

"Traded blades with a master, huh?"

"Yes. If this journey has taught me anything, it's that I still have a lot to learn."

"Would it kill you to act your age for once?" Darson quipped. "Show me the armor." I obliged, pulling the damaged armor out of my Item Box. Darson observed it curiously. "Whoever you tussled with was good. Real good with a lance, or something similar. Good with wind magic too, I'd bet."

"You can tell that much?" I asked.

"After so many years in this business, cuts and dents and scratches start to tell you stories. It's not every day I see a plating of hard lizardhide sliced through like butter. There's a clean cut through the placcate too. Was your

sparring partner someone famous?”

“I think so. His name is Sever Gardock—” Before I could add that he was a former Knight’s Order captain, Darson’s eyes shot up from the armor.

“The last captain of the Knight’s Order?! Why’d you have at it with someone like that?!”

“We happened to be going the same way, and one thing led to another...”

Darson whistled. “That explains these cuts. Speaking of, I heard that he and Duke Reinbach came to your shop yesterday.”

“They did. I met them while I was out of town, and they brought me back to Gimul by dragon. They stopped by my shop before visiting the duke’s residence yesterday.” I took the opportunity to share with Darson what else happened while I was away.

“Huh. Fate’s funny like that, isn’t she? You’re living your adventurer life to the fullest. There’s not much you can do about the curse now. And I don’t have much ground to stand on telling you this, after the trouble I got myself into when I was younger, but be careful out there.”

“Absolutely. I think I got a lucky break this time. Once things settle down, I intend to practice breaking curses,” I said.

“That’s a great idea, if it’s an option. If something happens, let me know. Not that I’d be any help with breaking the curse, but I don’t feel any differently about you so far. Least I can do is listen to your troubles.”

“That would be great. I was hoping you could continue to act as a go-between for me and the artisans in charge of developing my equipment pieces. That would help me a lot as I travel more frequently and as the curse grows stronger.”

“No problem,” he said.

“Thank you. Oh, and those two I was talking about—the former royal sorcerer and Knight’s Order captain—will be here soon. If you could go over the prototype and give each of them one, I’ll pay for—”

“Wait a minute,” Darson said. His eyes glazed with shock. “Did you just say



Lord Gardock is coming here?”

“Uh, like I said, we’ve been traveling together, and we got to talking about each other’s equipment. I’d told them about the prototypes to ask for their help in testing and advertising them when they hit the shelves... Did I overstep—”

“Not at all! That’s no problem at all!” Darson insisted, very eagerly.

“Are you a Sever stan?” I asked.

“Of course I am! Most guys my age wanted to be him. When we were young, Lord Gardock hadn’t become captain yet. He flew all around the country leaving legends everywhere he went. I’ve only met him once, when I became S rank. With all the ceremony and crap going on... The only thing I remember is that I was tongue-tied for once in my life. Barely got a word out to him.”

*So Darson’s quite the fanboy... As long as he doesn’t mind them coming over, that works for me.*

“Maybe we should have stopped by yesterday...” I mused.

“No, my nerves would’ve gotten to me all over again. It’s much better to have advance notice.”

“I see. Well, good luck,” I offered.

“You betcha. This place will gain some cachet if he shops here. He’ll see the best service I’ve ever whipped up.” Darson’s hardened face cracked a grin before a thought seemed to strike him. “Right. The armor makers had a request. You know the fabric we use for the slash-proof undershirts and cloth armor? They want to experiment with different methods of weaving.”

“Experimenting with weaving, rather than materials... Personally, I fully support it. I can fund it as well, but I can’t afford to invest too much if there’s no specific plan in place.”

“They haven’t gotten that far, but they mentioned wanting to study the Striss weave practiced in a region in the north, and to hire a native weaver if possible.” Darson went on to explain that the Striss weaves were soft, thick, and sturdy, to withstand the brutal frost of the north. Traditionally vibrant in color, they were favored by nobles of that region who used them for banners and

battle dress. However, the unique and complex technique of weaving was both arduous and time-consuming. With not enough young weavers willing to learn the craft, hardly any Striss weaves were being produced today.

“An art on the brink of being lost...” I said. “Local nobles might try to monopolize it. Who knows what pushback we might face if we try to headhunt one of the weavers? Let me go through the duke for this one, and I will let you know.”

“I’ll pass the message along. Even if we can get to the point where we hire a Striss weaver to teach them, there’ll be a steep learning curve. None of them expect to master it overnight, so they probably want to take what they can from it. A craftsman never stops learning.”

“I know what you mean,” I said. Curiosity often overwhelmed me when it came to slimes and magic.

“Back to your armor,” Darson said. “Sure, I can fix it up, but frankly it’ll be cheaper to buy a new set. Especially since you can always use your prototype. I can take this off your hands if that’s what you want to do.”

“I’d like to repair it. Even though it’s only been a year, I’ve grown attached to it. Even if I don’t end up using it again, I want to keep it in the best condition I can.”

“No problem.”

“How much will I owe you?”

“Let’s see... Four small gold coins.”

“Here you go.” I took out a bag full of coins from my Item Box and paid the price.

“Pleasure doing business. It’ll be ready in three days.”

“Thank you.”

With that, I set out for my own business.

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As my laundry shop came into view, so did an endless stream of people

flowing in and out of the shop, just like yesterday. Greeting customers in line, I entered the shop through the back entrance where Carme was already waiting for me.

“Were you waiting long?” I asked.

“No, you’re perfectly on time. I only thought to meet you at the door to avoid unnecessary interactions that might trigger the curse,” he explained.

“Thank you. I appreciate your concern.”

“Shall we?”

Carme and I sat down across from each other in a small office, where he gave me a quick report of what I’d missed while I was out. To my relief, nothing catastrophic had happened in my absence, and Carme had dealt with any small issues that had arisen.

His only concern at present was an attitude prevalent in some of the new employees... By “attitude,” Carme meant that they were slightly lax in their work ethic from time to time. Letting it slide too far could cause some problems, but this was by no means an emergency. It was natural, even.

“Even though we have only been open for a year, the public witnessed your bravery in the attack on the city that took place over New Year’s, as well as the duke’s support for your business ventures. The reputation of the business drastically increased. Combined with the very competitive pay and perks that you offer, I suspect there’s a subconscious sense of security in the new hires,” Carme said.

“It’s hard to believe how far we’ve come,” I said. I still remembered how I’d asked the Merchant’s Guild to advertise to prospective employees, only for almost every interviewee to walk out. I didn’t blame them, though, since my shop hadn’t established the reputation it now had, and anyone I’d hire would have had to work for a literal child, for all they knew. Now, Carme told me, there were frequent applicants asking for job openings at the reception, or even advertising themselves. I never expected our recruiting situation would improve so drastically.

“Well, we expected some of that. It shouldn’t be a problem. Please continue

to address it as you have been, for now,” I said.

“Yes, sir. Subtlety pointing out the lax attitude should be all it takes for those willing to improve to begin doing so on their own. If they’re willing, I will offer coaching as requested. I have some experience with this from when I worked at the Morgan Trading Company. In the event that an employee is unwilling to improve their performance, do I have your permission to issue verbal and then written warnings, then to fire them if they don’t address the problem?” Carme proposed.

“That would be an unfortunate circumstance, but yes. It’s not in our best interest to keep people around who not only underperform, but have no intention of improving their performance. Someone like that can bring down the morale of the entire team.”

Even in Japan, I’d met plenty of people—of all ages and genders—who liked to coast through their job rather than work hard at it. Not only did they contribute to a decrease in productivity, their attitude of complacency was infectious. The old analogy of a bad apple wasn’t one I liked to use on people, but it suited the situation well. Carme would have to break the cycle before the infection spread throughout the shop.

“I concur,” said Carme. “It’s already generous to offer them two warnings.”

“Well, it isn’t really about generosity...” I clarified.

In this country, the employer usually held a lot more power than the employee, allowing a boss to fire their workers on the spot—much like the stereotype of an American workplace perpetuated in Japan—which didn’t really happen in Japan. Not that I wanted to restrict Carme’s ability to fire an employee to the point where it was counterproductive for the business—like it was for some companies in Japan—but it didn’t sit right with me to not give any guidelines for firing people when I’d had bosses in my previous life who used the threat of firing to control their subordinates.

From what I’d heard, though, America wasn’t as trigger-happy about firing people as the stereotype in Japan made it out to be. There were laws in America too that protected employees from unlawful firings, so employers always ran the risk of being sued by employees they dismissed. To avoid

litigation, apparently, some companies offered increased severance at times if they needed to fire employees who they feared might bring a lawsuit.

“In any case, please give them those warnings, and be transparent about what warrants a warning from you. If that threshold is blurred, it will be more difficult to give precise instructions about how to avoid a warning in the future. That could lead to misunderstandings and fruitless arguments about what did or did not transpire,” I said.

Setting clear expectations was critical to improving employee performance, as well as protecting the business from accusations that might be thrown at us from disgruntled employees that Carme ended up firing. If the matter became public, we’d want an ironclad defense of the firing by citing repeated violations against the established expectations, as well as those warnings. Drawing out a conflict like that would only bring us negative press and bring down the morale of the entire team. That would lead to a negative spiral of high turnaround, and...

*We will not create a hostile work environment*, I resolved, mostly for my own sanity. I’d sooner find a new job for all of my employees or give them handsome severance packages and close down the shop altogether.

“There’s no need to be so concerned,” Carme said. “I knew what sort of business you wanted to run when I took over.”

“Was it so obvious where my thoughts went?”

“Life faded from your eyes, for a minute. So you’re okay with maintaining this policy?”

“Yes, please,” I confirmed.

“Some employees have also requested to use parts of the documents you’ve prepared that outline your business philosophy.”

“Do you mean...” I started, and recalled the set of papers I’d written for Carme—and any successor of his—when I decided to leave him in charge of the shop. They contained guidelines for running the business and some harassment-prevention pointers. There was no way for me to predict how effective they would be at helping Bamboo Forest maintain a healthy

workplace, but I'd drafted them carefully, hoping that it would contribute to that in some way.

On the other hand, I knew that being draconic about squashing every seed of potential harassment could be taxing in and of itself, and that not everyone shared my outlook on how a business ought to be run. There were expectations and cultures for a business unique to this country, and even this city. I had only wanted the employees to keep that in the back of their minds.

Now that I thought about it... The scribe I had contracted to make copies of the handbook had come to me halfway through the project with tears in their eyes, refusing to turn another page. It must have been a torturous book to read, somehow, because even Carme had cried when he read it, much to my dismay at the time. Did these employees know what they were signing up for by requesting it as a training document?

"The handbook was quite depressing to read," Carme admitted, "but filled with details—especially in the first half—that resonated with many employees, myself included. They were pointed warnings of behavior to be mindful of. The problem was that, as the handbook progressed, the actions of the hypothetical boss became more unhinged with every scenario... 'When your boss slugs you with a bottle,' for example. Employees shouldn't be *expecting* that to happen to them. Your comments and the occasional, personal anecdotes seemed so real, which only made our resonating with them all the more painful."

In the writing process, while thinking of personal experiences to turn into training scenarios, I had wanted to burn the whole thing a couple of times. Could I have subconsciously cursed the handbook? Despite my intentions, plenty of negative emotions were involved, and some magical energy had come out when I nearly cast a Fire spell on the book... *Uh-oh*.

"Do you know where the original is?" I asked.

"I've treated it as a classified document since it pertains to running the business. It's in the locked cabinet over here..." Carme strode over to the cabinet and retrieved a handbook as voluminous as a dictionary.

*Is it cursed?* I couldn't tell. At the very least, it didn't feel the same as holding one of the stones Remily and I had used when practicing curses.

“It’s probably fine,” Carme said. “The copy of the handbook was just as depressing as the original, and everyone who only read the copy felt the same way as I did.”

“That’s a relief... Who’s everyone?”

“Every employee who has been working since the grand opening. Once they read the handbook, they...seemed to understand why you treat your employees so well,” Carme said, adamantly avoiding eye contact. Clearly, I had made them all feel sorry for me.

Stumped on what else to say, I cast Despell on Carme and the book itself before changing the subject rather suddenly.

I did agree to Carme using the handbook for training, and left it up to him to decide how much of the original he wanted to carry over into a new and official training handbook. Seeing how expertly he ran the shop, I had no doubt that he would take care of it with proper nuance so as not to traumatize any new employees.

## Chapter 9, Episode 6: Growth of the Employees

After my debriefing with Carme, I peeked into the breakroom to find Maria, Fina, and Lilyn with their backs to the door.

“Hello, ladies,” I called.

They turned and greeted me all at once.

“Hello, Chief—I mean, Owner?” Maria started.

“Welcome back. Carme told us you made it back,” Fina said.

“It’s great to see you well,” said Lilyn.

“If I ever worried you, I’m sorry. As you can see, I’m back in one piece.” Even though Carme reassured me that there were no issues at work—beyond the document that shall not be named—I was still anxious to hear about how they’d been this past month, or just talk to them again.

“None of us have gotten hurt or sick since we last saw you. We did read that handbook, though,” Maria said.

“That was about the only time I felt depressed. I assume it’s the same for the others,” Fina chimed in.

“My father and I were fine,” Lilyn said matter-of-factly.

“Oh, good.” The fact that I had, albeit inadvertently, left behind the equivalent of an emotional letter bomb had been weighing on me. Finally, I noticed the writing utensils on the table in front of them. “I hope I’m not interrupting a study session.”

“Not at all,” Maria reassured.

“We weren’t so much studying as double-checking,” Fina said before adding, “Oh, Mister Stoia finished the book you ordered. He wants you to come pick it up.”

“Also, Mister Sanchez said he finished the manuscript for adventuring, but the



one for daily living will take some more time,” Maria said.

“Thank you for letting me know. He’s made quick work of it, actually.”

“Their grandchildren were grumbling about how demanding their grandfathers are,” Fina said.

“‘What’s the point of retiring if you’re going to keep working?’ they said,” Maria chimed in.

Those two were very active grandpas, for sure. Mueller Stoia, a former tax collector, and Garcia Sanchez, a former judicial officer, were both introduced to me through the duke. Now, they both served as my advisors for the more technical side of my business ventures. They had their own interests, though, so I’d also asked them to take on some side projects, which included tutoring Fina and Maria, as well as writing books. These were meant to be guides that plainly outlined tips for their trade, like those commonly found back in Japanese bookstores.

Books on law and taxes already existed in this world, but most books of that nature were written for professionals, or for students studying to become a professional in that field. A high level of literacy and extensive background knowledge was required for the reader to really understand them, which gave me the impression that they were not beginner-friendly in any way.

At first, I’d doubted that they’d even had enough time to advise me on my business, let alone the other gigs. As it turns out, they both had grandchildren apprenticing under them to go into the family business, so my jobs were great practice for them. For the price of hiring Stoia and Sanchez, I had their whole firm at my disposal in an incredible stroke of luck. While I sympathized with the grandchildren over their busy schedules, I had no knowledge of what kind of training their jobs demanded. And I had heard that working at the duke’s residence was even more grueling.

“They’ve been helping us a lot,” Maria said.

“They taught us all from scratch... Before I came out to work in the city, I never thought I’d have the opportunity to study anything like this,” Fina added.

“Those are particularly extensive subjects. Knowledge in either field will only

help you if you ever need it,” I offered.

“That time is now!” Fina reached for a paper on the table with uncharacteristic enthusiasm.

Before the Saionji Company began trading with them, Fina’s village was in dire financial straits because they had no one to sell their crops to. That was why Fina had come out to the city to job hunt in the first place. Her experience there must have given her a powerful motivation to study these subjects. As proof of her dedication, every line on the paper she held up was covered in meticulous notes.

“Yesterday, they were teaching us about taxes levied on farming communities,” Fina began, “and we learned that Duke Jamil offers partial or total reimbursement of costs incurred to protect lives and property in case of monster or bandit attacks.”

“I didn’t know that,” I answered, understanding the policy to be a form of disaster aid.

“My father is the village elder, and I had no idea either,” Fina added bitterly. “There were a few times when we hired adventurers to deal with monsters around the village, scraping together what little money everyone in the village could spare.”

“I can’t imagine that they knew about the reimbursement offer but didn’t choose to use it. Did your father or any other adult in the village know about it?” I asked.

“Even if they did apply for reimbursement, we would have still had to pay the adventurers out of pocket first. So it’s possible that I don’t remember when the reimbursement came or my father didn’t feel it necessary to tell me about it because I was still young... But most likely, no one knew about the policy at all.” Fina also mentioned that, according to Stoia, this was commonplace in many smaller villages, where few village leaders had professional knowledge about taxes or laws. It seemed rather precarious for someone who had to lead a village, but they could apparently get by as long as they knew what activities were illegal. On the other hand, programs like this reimbursement offer put the responsibility on the villagers to take advantage of it and not on their local tax

collector, who had no obligation to inform the villagers that such a thing existed. As a result, policies like this that weren't either mandatory or that outlined illicit activities often went undiscovered.

"Even when a leader knows about the policy, their request could be rejected if they don't properly follow the procedure... I wonder if some villages have tried and lost hope of ever receiving the benefits because it was too complicated a process," Fina said.

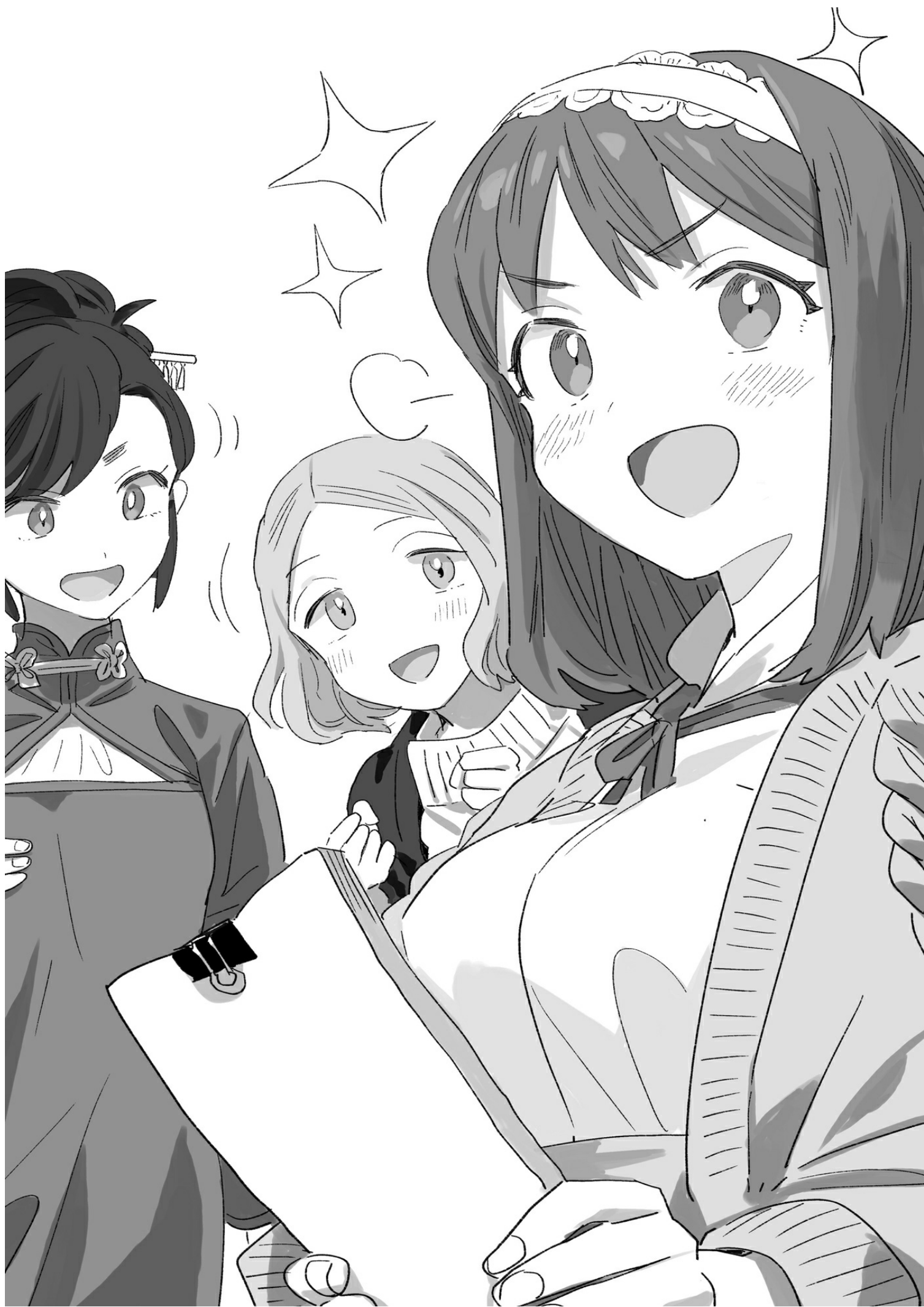
"Unfortunate. If they had known about the policy and its procedure, their lives would have improved."

"Lilyn's right," Maria chimed in. "Mister Sanchez always says that laws are constantly changing, and that too many people are ignorant of new laws and end up violating them, or lose out on benefits because they don't even try to learn about new policies."

"Not learning about those changes could cause a lot of legal trouble for their village," I said. "Laws are so complicated that not much can be done without first studying them extensively...which, of course, must be the hard part."

"Right," Maria agreed. "That's why we need to work hard to study them, and relay that information to our parents in letters."

"Of course, we're going to use that knowledge to help the store too! It's the least we can do after everyone helped adjust the schedule to accommodate us studying," Fina said.



“I’m looking forward to it.” I could have never guessed that these girls would end up like this when I hired them, and I was glad to see it as the business’s owner. Self-betterment should be commended in any situation. “Speaking of betterment, your accent has become less noticeable, Lilyn.”

“Yes. I am getting used to the language. I speak a lot with the employees, especially Jane, who always talks to me. And I greet customers. Father is having more difficulties than I am.”

That could have been due to his age. Not that I discounted the sentiment that it was never too late to start something new, but our memory undeniably weakened with age. That, I knew from experience.

“Dolce has grown too,” Lilyn continued. “We spar during security training. He’s much stronger than before, to the surprise of father and Ox. He talks with Hudom a lot. Having another man close to him in age is good for him.”

“Dolce does work very hard,” Fina said. “He occasionally asks me a writing question and seems to be writing more complex sentences. I’ve often seen him reading during his break too.”

“He said he doesn’t know what else to spend his money on other than books,” Maria chimed in.

“That’s incredible,” I agreed. Dolce had come from the slums, and was barely literate when I first hired him. I’d known that he was learning to read and write in his spare time, but not how much progress he’d made. Seeing how even Fay and Ox were impressed with his fighting, he was quickly becoming a master of pen and sword.

“Did you call me?” Dolce walked in, as if he had been summoned by our discussion.

“We were just talking about you,” I said, and explained how much we were impressed by his growth.

Blushing a little, he shook his head. “I’m far from a master. I can’t read as well as them, and I’m still the weakest security guard. Fay and Ox still need to go easy on me to make it a fair spar.”

“Bad example. Father and Ox are not on the same level as normal security guards. Actually, the whole security team here is way too strong,” said Lilyn.

“I’ve been thinking about that. I’ve only ever lived in my village and this city, so I thought they were normal at first...until I realized that security in other establishments are not even close to their level,” Fina said.

“Only high-end stores and shops in dangerous neighborhoods hire full-time security. At most places, the regular employees handle troublesome customers. Anyone with a decent frame or some experience in fights can handle the bare minimum duties of a security guard. At any other store, you could be the chief security guard, Dolce. You’re strong enough, at least,” Lilyn offered.

“R-Really? I don’t know how things are at other shops... But I hope you’re right,” Dolce finally admitted.

I’d hired him through Jeff when the laundry shop was being harassed and the business was still green. He was already qualified for the job back then, and if he’d improved his craft as much as everyone said, he deserved a lot more credit than he was giving himself.

*With all the work they’ve been putting in, weren’t they interested in a raise or promotion?* I wondered, even though I’d discussed their pay and benefits with Carme to ensure they were adequate.

I asked them about it, but they all said that they wouldn’t know what to do with a pay raise, which I kind of sympathized with. I was in a similar situation, although the numbers were a few digits off.

That’s when it hit me. *Is this how the people at the duke’s residence feel?*

“Are there any other requests for benefits I could provide?” I asked the room.

“If I had to choose... A vacation?” Dolce suggested. “I’m interested in traveling...for fun.”

“Wonderful! Did you have anywhere in mind?” I asked.

“Well, I’ve never set foot outside the city. Most of us from the slums haven’t. You never get a chance or choice to, unless you snag a job that takes you beyond the city bounds, like adventuring or transporting goods. After listening

to everyone here describe their hometowns and the journeys they took to get here, and after reading more books, I became more interested in the idea. That being said, I don't have a plan. I'm not sure where I'd go or what I'd do if I went... I wouldn't know what to do if you gave me a vacation now," Dolce explained.

"I understand. Let's put a pin in that, then. Separate from any official raise or benefit, would you like to go somewhere together, Dolce?" I offered.

After returning from the Sea of Trees—and once I had enough employees to do so—I planned to add more branches to our chain. I'd have to scope out potential locations for the branch. As long as Dolce's days off aligned, I could take him there with Space magic. That'd be only a day trip or an overnighter, so he wouldn't have much time for sightseeing or taking a relaxing carriage ride... Or he could transfer to any new location as a security guard. If it was the norm to not travel outside of work, I could offer him the chance to travel *for* work.

"Are you sure you can...you're allowed to do that?" Dolce asked.

"I'll have to talk it over with Carme, but there shouldn't be a problem. You'll still have a work schedule, of course, and I do need to send people to the new branch. It shouldn't be difficult to include you in the roster of the new branches. Besides, you've been working here since we opened, so you know how I run things and the atmosphere I expect in my shop. You have my trust both as a security guard and a friend, so it would make me feel better to have someone like that on the team for the new branch, not to mention how much it would help the new hires. We'll train them before the grand opening, but minor questions are bound to come up. Having just one person on the team who can answer those questions makes a world of difference," I said.

"That's so true," Maria agreed.

"We had a lot of questions at first," Fina added.

Both the employees and I went through a lot of trial and error to solve problems I hadn't expected. What Dolce experienced through that process ought to be valuable for the new hires.

"We could even make it a temporary transfer, like for the first month or six months after opening. Only if that's what you want, it will be an option. At this

time, I believe our next branch will be in Gaunago. The duke has requested we build one there, so that location will be prioritized,” I said.

“All right. I’ll think about it,” said Dolce.

I made a mental note to bring this up with Carme, and recognized how much I enjoyed seeing how far my employees had come. Even though I was no longer their manager, I would try to keep in touch with them from time to time.



## Chapter 9, Episode 7: Guests

Two weeks passed very quickly as I met and caught up with people all over the city. Fully prepared, I was ready to venture into the Sea of Trees.

Before I took that plunge, however, I had returned to the place where my new life began in this world—my home in the Forest of Gana. I had a few reasons for coming here: it wasn't too much of a detour on my way from Gimul to Syrus; I wanted to make sure I remembered where I came from before I achieved this major goal of mine; and one more reason.

"It's pretty dusty in here, but that's about it... Cleaner slimes," I called, and they scattered to clean every corner of every room and hallway.

Then, I made for the room deep into the house that held nothing but the sculpted depictions of the gods. "I can't believe I've only been gone for a year..." Back when I lived here, I used the room to meditate or train in. Since I'd brought the table and chairs with me, I made quick work of setting them up, making the space guest-ready.

There was still some time left for me to build more sculptures. "I'd only met Gain, Kufo, and Lulutia when I built this place... It's impressive how many more I've met since."

I dug alcoves into the wall, and used the dirt I carved out to sculpt the likenesses of Tekun, Fernobelia, Kiriluel, Wilieris, Grimp, Serelipta, and Meltrize, bringing my total up to ten. There was one more god I knew of, Manoailoa, whom I'd never met in person. A statue of Manoailoa I'd come across once before was too simple to discern any facial features or clothing, so I only knew that the god was humanoid.

*Maybe I'll ask the gods about it the next time I'm in the divine realm.*

After sculpting and cleaning up the space, I still had enough time left to prepare tea and snacks.

Soon, the stone slimes I'd placed outside notified me of my guests' arrival.

Outside, I found the duke and duchess, Sebas, and their usual quartet of guards. An unfamiliar couple accompanied them, though. There was a man in his early thirties wearing a stereotypical wizard's robe, whose well-groomed hair, skin, and beard gave off a gentlemanly impression. The other was a well-put-together woman whose steely composure couldn't quite hide the exhaustion on her face—despite her maid's uniform, she gave off the impression of a city guard.

"Thank you for coming," I greeted.

"You can relax, Ryoma. I vouch for them too," Reinhart said.

"Thank you. Please, come in." Even though this area was relatively safe, we were still in the middle of a forest. There was no reason to wait when I'd already prepared the space for them.

Once inside, I asked the guards to make themselves at home in the foyer, and led the other five deeper into the dwelling.

"My!" Elise let out a quiet yelp, and the other four shared a look of surprise, though Reinhart and Sebas were relatively calm.

The woman I hadn't met before stood quietly, her eyes darting from one sculpture to another. The man was just as quiet, but simply moved his head as he took in the carvings.

"I didn't realize you had a room full of divine sculptures," Elise commented.

"I just made them, except for the three I had made before," I said. "Wait. Didn't I show you this room last time?"

"We never saw this room," Reinhart said. "We wouldn't have wandered around your house without permission, especially when we had only just met."

*That's right,* I remembered. This room didn't need to be cleaned, so I'd had them rest instead of showing them here. Reminiscing about what had happened only a year ago, I offered them the chairs I had set out. Although I'd put out enough for everybody, only the duke and duchess sat down at first, followed by the man. Sebas and the woman seemed content to stand in the corner of the room.

“There’s much we need to talk about, but let’s finish the diagnosis first. Rosenberg?” Reinhart indicated.

The older man, Rosenberg, introduced himself, his voice weighed and steadied by age and experience. As I had been told before, he was the duke’s warlock and the person who was about to examine my curse. I thanked him for his time, and he returned a small curve of a smile.

The examination began with a series of questions, just like a medical one on Earth, except that Rosenberg had held my wrist not to measure my pulse but my magical energy.

“Miss Eleonora, can you give me your honest impression of him?” Rosenberg asked. He must have been told about my curse before arriving.

“My impression of him...? If I have to say, I do feel slightly irritated by him. Although, I’m unable to pinpoint what about him makes me feel this way,” she said.

“How would you describe that feeling? A dislike of his character? Something instinctive? Any descriptor would do,” Rosenberg pushed.

“Instinctive, when you put it that way. Even though he seems like a good person, I keep feeling like... His breath stinks every time he talks, or he has a terrible odor. That’s what it feels like.”

*I stink?* I had to wonder for a moment. While I understood that her description was metaphorical, as someone who—on the inside—was approaching that point in life where I could have started developing an “old person smell,” I couldn’t help but be sensitive about it.



“You don’t smell, Ryoma. It’s all right,” Elise said. Much to my relief, Eleonora nodded in agreement.

“Thank you,” I said.

“I see... Miss Kremis’s assessment was correct. Let’s move on to the next test,” Rosenberg announced.

He conducted a few tests using magic. It felt like his magical energy was searching for something in me, like a detection spell. He gave me permission to ask any questions, so I did.

“This spell uses magical energy that could be used for another curse—in a way that doesn’t harm the patient. By sensing the reaction of the magical energy, I can determine the nature and severity of the curse afflicting you. Determining an accurate diagnosis takes practice. You could call it a sort of detection magic,” the warlock explained, to confirm that what I’d felt was pretty accurate.

After the magic-based tests, he moved on to medical ones. Rosenberg produced a lab flask of clear liquid, and poured some into a test tube. He asked for a drop of my blood, so I pricked my finger with the needle he gave me, and let a drop fall into the test tube. As soon as my blood hit the clear liquid, it turned bright red for a moment before it rapidly darkened to pitch black.

Rosenberg said, with concern, “This curse is more troublesome than we first thought.”

“Not even you can break it, then?” Reinhart asked.

“Not to excuse my inability... But this chemical shows how deeply the curse has seeped into the patient. The darker the color, the deeper the curse has rooted, making it more difficult to break. A reaction like this classifies the curse as level-7, which is the highest on the scale. Even professionals specializing in breaking would have trouble with this one.”

“I see... I always have faith in your abilities, Rosenberg. Unfortunate as the news is, there’s nothing that can be done,” Reinhart said.

“Thank you for your understanding, my lord.” Rosenberg turned to me.

“While breaking the curse is not an option, its symptoms do seem minor. By following a few precautions, you should be able to live normally. It’s also possible that, with time, the curse will weaken and become breakable. Keep your spirits high.”

Rosenberg announced that he’d draft up the diagnosis, and left the room with Eleonora. I’d told them to use the foyer and any other room they needed, so the guards should be able to attend to them now.

I blew out a breath as soon as they left.

“I was afraid I’d made you nervous,” Reinhart said. “I’m sorry about that. And the sudden visit.”

“We wanted to see you before you went into the Sea of Trees, and not just because of the curse. I hope we didn’t impose,” Elise added.

“You didn’t. I can’t say I wasn’t a little nervous, but I had been wondering how the curse would affect strangers, so I feel like this was very informative. Not to mention receiving a warlock’s diagnosis.”

The gods would be breaking my curse, but explaining that to people was too risky. While Remily’s career as a royal sorcerer gave her claims credibility, curses were not in her expertise. Having a written diagnosis from a professional warlock would be a nice backup. I couldn’t be too careful with the demon lord’s curse, even if its effect was dampened by the gods. Reinhart’s offer to visit and have my curse diagnosed was perfectly convenient for me. And I was happy to see the duke and duchess again.

“Knowing that you must have gone through a lot of trouble to make time for this visit, there’s nothing to apologize for,” I said.

Elise smiled gently. “I appreciate that.”

After a few moments, Reinhart took a small, thin tin from his pocket that resembled a business card holder. When its lid slid open, magical energy fanned out from the tin to conceal us.

Reinhart and Elise signaled to Sebas standing outside the dome of magical energy, and he left the room. Judging by the shape of the magical energy and their reaction, I guessed that the tin was a magical item that projected a

soundproofed dome. The duke and duchess were about to broach the real reason for their visit.

“There’s much I’d like to talk about, but one topic is particularly important. My father told me that you are a child of the gods. It makes a lot of sense, if I’m being honest, and I can’t say we didn’t suspect it before. Still, I’d like to hear it from the horse’s mouth. Is it true?”

“Yes, it is.” To prove it, I showed him my Status Board and the title of Beloved Child of the Gods marked on it.

Reinhart and Elise shared a look and just said, “Thank you for telling us.”

Then, we had a conversation similar to the one I had with Reinbach and the others when I told them that I was a child of the gods in the City of Lost Souls. Unlike them, the duke and duchess had had the chance to mentally prepare for this conversation. There were no displays of great relief or tears of emotion. They kept gently thanking me for sharing the information with them.

“Our debt to you only grows,” said Reinhart.

“I owe you both plenty, so let’s call it even. You even accept me now.”

“You might have been nervous to tell us, but this news only connected the pieces in our minds,” Elise said.

“Lord Reinbach said he’d suspected it for a while too. I did lie along the way to keep this secret... And I have yet another secret I haven’t been able to tell you.”

“Honesty is a virtue, but blanket honesty can get you in trouble. Especially in noble society where deception is the name of the game. Everyone is vying for an opportunity to get close to you, at the expense of others. Just the other day —”

“Dear,” Elise stopped her husband, just as Reinhart’s expression was darkening.

Reinhart snapped out of it and gave an awkward smile. I’d seen that expression plenty of times in Japan. The duke was adept at hiding it, but his work must have been really wearing him down. “Excuse me. That was an unfortunate display.”

“I didn’t even realize until just now. And, it doesn’t bother me. Please be as honest as you like,” I offered.

“I’ll take you up on that... Anyway, deception is part of our daily lives. You might have lied to keep a secret from us, Ryoma, but that wasn’t to harm us for your gain, was it? That’s nothing compared to what we deal with. Nothing we’d be offended over.”

“No,” Elise agreed. “I’m not even sure I would call what you told us lies to begin with. The things you’ve told us about the start of your life and your family were all things the gods told you to say to make it easier for you to blend into our society, right?”

“They gave me the basic backstory.”

“Backstory... Well, I understand that’s how you see it as a child of the gods. What sticks out to me is that the gods *prepared* your backstory for you. I wouldn’t dare defy what the gods told you to do,” Elise said.

“From a religious standpoint, I can understand that,” I said.

I’d never followed a particular religion on Earth, but I could understand how people devoted to their faith would be fearful of going against the word of their gods. To Elise, the backstory given to me was another decree of the gods.

“Ryoma receives frequent oracles from what I’ve been told. He’s much closer to the gods than we are, so he may feel differently about the gravity of their word,” Reinhart turned to me. “I do agree with Elise, for the record, and so would many others. Especially those who work for the church.”

“Worst-case scenario, they may even think that *you’re* defying the gods. I think you should keep using your backstory as much as possible. It would mean less trouble for you,” said Elise.

“I’ll be careful,” I said.

Although I’d expected them to still accept me, child of the gods or no, some part of me must have been bracing myself for rejection. After their calm response and advice, I felt a weight lift off my shoulders.

“Still, I know how heavy keeping a secret can weigh on your heart. So, if you



ever feel suffocated by it and want to talk, you can come see us anytime,” Reinhart offered with a smile.

“Now that we know you’re a child of the gods, I hope you can talk to us without worry. We would love to give you any advice when you need it. Never hesitate to ask.”

“Thank you...” was all I could muster.

The topic of keeping secrets had come up when I last visited the divine realm. Apparently, many children of the gods in the past were troubled by it. Tragedies had resulted from some of them revealing the secret to their loved ones, but also from others trying to take their secret to the grave.

No matter how few, having people in my life who knew this side of me was a huge pillar of emotional support.

## Chapter 9, Episode 8: Send-Off

“Given this big secret of yours, I’d like to assign another one of our personnel to work directly for you,” Reinhart offered.

“In addition to Hudom?” I asked. While I didn’t mind an extra pair of hands, Hudom was already assigned to assist me with my engineering work.

*Besides, shouldn’t there be fewer people who know my secret?*

Reinhart clarified that I didn’t need to divulge my child of the gods status to this new staff member. “She’ll have the same title as Hudom: an engineer’s assistant. But she will act more as your secretary, as a go-between for you and your contacts, including me. Hudom could have handled this too, but I think it’s for the best to have someone whose sole job is to deliver information or negotiate on your behalf. I say this because you’ve attained some degree of fame over New Year’s. As you complete more projects as my engineer, there’s a chance other nobles will reach out to you.”

“Even though I’m the duke’s full-time engineer?”

“They won’t try to headhunt you, most likely, but will propose individual jobs framed as favors to them. Even then, etiquette should demand they go through your patron, but plenty of nobles are happy to sidestep me... And those types are always tricky to deal with. Engineers who have a store or workshop in the city are all the easier for them to find and contact. I think you’d want to avoid dealing with nobles demanding an audience with you at your business.”

*At all costs*, I mentally chimed in.

“That would cause me concern too, both professionally and personally,” Reinhart continued. “And your shopkeeper—Carme, I believe was his name—is a savvy businessman but a commoner all the same. Someone of noble status would have an easier time dealing with those who come seeking your talent. Partially because nobles don’t always give respect to those who don’t share their status, but also a noble-born representative would serve as a warning to

not escalate their attempt any further.”

Whether this was a case of fighting fire with fire or leaving it to a professional, Reinhart’s offer was sensible and appreciated... As long as she was someone I could get along with.

“Is she the maid who came with you?” I asked.

“How’d you know?”

“At first, I thought you brought someone I hadn’t met to verify the effect of the curse. But after what you’ve told me, I don’t think you would risk exposing just anyone to me.”

“It’s true that I wanted to test the curse, and I was going to introduce her properly if you agreed to her assignment. Her name is Eleonora Ransor. Do you recognize it?”

I did. Baron Ransor was the noble who held the goldmines that funded the attackers on Gimul. Reinhart confirmed that Eleonora was the baron’s oldest daughter.

“Are you sure about choosing her?” I couldn’t help but ask. “Not that I don’t trust your judgment, but...”

“It’s only natural for you to hesitate,” Elise said. “Let me explain...” she began.

The Ransors were under the thumb of other nobles who long exploited the baron for his lucrative goldmines. Reinhart still considered the baron and his sons—Eleonora’s brothers—decent nobles who tried their best to preside over their territory fairly... Which was why the four houses that controlled the Ransors had a bone to pick with them.

Just to break any sense of defiance in the Ransors, one of those four nobles, Baron Reefled, pressured Eleonora’s father for her hand in marriage...in name only. Eleonora was more of a hostage, shut away in an annex on the Reefled estate while her husband—the heir to Baron Reefled—was busy with his lovers and debauchery. While ladies who married into a noble house often took charge of the estate and its staff, Eleonora was left with little more than menial chores to occupy her time.

After the attack on Gimul, the entire Reefled family was convicted of a slew of crimes and hanged. Ironically, the fact that Eleonora's marriage was in name only ended up saving her life, proving that she was in no position to take part in the Reefleds' crimes.

"So she returned to the Ransor house, when something else happened—that's a different story altogether—and we ended up taking her in when the Ransors pledged their fealty to us," Elise concluded.

"Wow," was all I could say.

"She has my sympathy because of her history, but I didn't let that cloud my judgment of her ability or character," Elise said.

"The decision was also backed by the calculation that betraying us won't be in the cards because of her situation. Perhaps this assignment will mean little to her beyond a change in who gives her orders. Still, I can't help but hope that by working for you..."

"I'd sensed the tension, so a change in environment might do her good," I said.

*First, she'll probably need some time to rest her body and mind, but she seemed like the stoic type, so not having any tasks may stress her out more... She also seemed very capable, so maybe Hudom can help her with her job and keep an eye on her.*

"I would really appreciate an intermediary for engaging with other nobles, and after understanding her predicament, I would gladly accept. Can her formal appointment start after I return from the Sea of Trees?"

"Of course," Reinhart said. "We'll set up methods of communication with her so she can reach out to us if the need arises. Once you're back in Gimul, let us know."

"Absolutely."

Reinhart sank into his seat and reached for his still-full cup of tea. It must have been lukewarm by now, but he still downed the whole cup.

"Would you like another cup?" I asked.

“Please.”

Once Reinhart had a fresh cup of tea in his hand, he smelled the steam and seemed to relax a little. He must have explored a lot of options to protect me. Wanting to express my gratitude, I asked if there was anything I could do.

After some thought, Reinhart answered. “This may not be what you had in mind, but... My father told me about the grave slimes and your spell that purified cursed energy. Did you really want a plot of land full of cursed energy?”

“Just as a lab and feeding ground, so even a temporary lease or permission would be great. I’m not interested in keeping the land, or anything,” I clarified.

“Your experiments alone would be a great help to us. Purifying cursed energy and Undead monsters can cost a small fortune. But it has to be done. As long as they know you can be trusted, any noble would gladly give you permission for that, if that’s all it took to put a dent in the cursed energy and Undead monsters on their property.”

As I’d learned in the City of Lost Souls, there was plenty of demand just for someone to cull some Undead and prevent cursed energy from overflowing, even if it didn’t eradicate the problem.

“From what I’ve heard, you could make a living just by purifying cursed energy,” Elise said.

“That’s what I’ve been told. For now, I only want to experiment with slimes and magic, and see how much I can do. Once I return from the Sea of Trees, I plan to focus on removing cursed energy.”

The gods had told me that cursed energy was harmful to all things in this world, from animals and plants to the land itself. On the other hand, cursed energy also eliminated other harmful things from this world. Like white blood cells in our bodies, it was a force crucial in keeping the world healthy, but too much of it could be damaging. They had followed up by explaining that the total volume of cursed energy in the world was on the rise, and they’d appreciate me clearing some of it.

“Doesn’t that mean...” Elise started.

“The gods have imparted you with a mission?” Reinhart finished, his

expression tense.

This was a misunderstanding too important not to correct. “The gods may give me advice or suggestions, but they’ve never commanded me to do anything, especially for their benefit. Apparently, they refrain from ordering humans around. You two, and plenty of others have helped me through a lot and so have the gods. That’s why I’m going to do what I’m interested in, and hope that I can pay back any part of my debt in the process. Besides, once I’ve gone to the Sea of Trees and come back, I’d need a new goal, and experimenting with Undead and cursed energy is as good as any. That’s all. It’s just to satisfy my own curiosity. Nothing more,” I said.

Looking back on it now, I’d set the goal of heading to the Sea of Trees because I didn’t have a concrete objective, even after I’d decided to stand on my own two feet. I’d just thought about where I’d come from, and made it my goal to explore the Sea of Trees without thinking about it too much. Now, I just wanted to follow through with the challenge I’d set for myself. It felt like a rite of passage for me: a way for me to truly earn my place in this world.

“It’s quite a shock when you describe the gods as if they’re friendly neighbors... But I think I see what you mean,” said Elise.

“If you’re going to be handling cursed energy, I’ll mention that to Lord Rosenberg so he can advise you. I’ll pick out the lab for you too. Do you have any requests? If you don’t, I’d love for you to start with some abandoned villages that could be rebuilt as soon as they’re purified,” Reinhart said.

Since recently mastering long-distance teleportation using familiars as targets, I had no problem with a long commute. Preferably, I wanted a location with no other living person, so an abandoned village seemed to fit the bill.

*Are a few abandoned villages really on the top of Reinhart’s priority list?* I wondered, and asked the duke as much.

He explained that he was currently in the process of building new villages and implementing roads on a large scale. Come to think of it, he and I had discussed starting a village dedicated to slime farming.

“That’s not the only reason,” he amended. “I’m sure I mentioned that the number of monsters has been on the rise over the past few years. So much so

that His Majesty mentioned it during his New Year's address. Specifically, he suggested that us nobles keep a sharp eye on our territories and be ready to defend our people at all times. So, more and more nobles will start preparing for monster attacks. Suddenly bolstering a militia or hoarding supplies can cause panic, and many nobles have a completely unfounded sense of security, so this won't happen today or tomorrow... But we have to be prepared for anything. Chiefly, I want to revitalize these villages to minimize the effect of us preparing for a monster attack," Reinhart explained.

Reinforcing a militia required additional supplies. If Reinhart—and all the other nobles—rushed to gather those all at once, the ordinary people would end up paying the price for it. Fewer supplies on the market would lead to a nasty spiral of buyouts and scalping. It would be inevitable, in fact.

"That's why you mentioned building a village for slime farming early in the year," I said.

"When you told me about slime farming, I was immediately drawn to it, even though I hadn't thought of a concrete plan at the time. Productivity needs to be as high as possible within our territory, but food and medicine are supplies that I can't afford to deplete from the market. When the prices of those two categories hike, people start to die. And travel roads had to be built because it won't matter how many supplies I have stored up if I can't deliver them to where they're needed. These roads would revitalize commerce with or without a monster attack. If we end up with surplus food thanks to slime farming, that can be used to aid other territories," Reinhart said.

"Just so you know, no noble in their right mind would accept aid for free. Not only would that be harmful to their reputation, but a favor can cost more than paying for the food outright. Most of the time, nobles will negotiate a price and handle business then and there—a transaction in the name of aid," Elise added.

The duke and duchess were hoping to enrich their territory with the sales of the extra food acquired from slime farming, or at least subsidize some expenses with it. Either way, they were planning ahead for what was to come.

I then asked if there was a deadline for me to purify those villages of cursed energy, and Reinhart answered no. He'd have a village picked out for me, and if

I ended up purifying it, he'd consider if he wanted to rebuild it.

"How easy is it to build a village from scratch?"

"A small one? Pretty easy," Reinhart answered my question. "As long as there are enough builders and funds, and prospects of getting a return for our investment. We can always hire mages to help level or till the land."

"Besides, a new village can mean a huge opportunity for some people—such as younger sons of farmers who won't inherit their family farm. Starting a brand-new farm may be challenging, but they will earn their own house and a farm by the end of it," Elise said.

While a new home and farm wasn't guaranteed, it seemed like a much safer bet than adventuring. In any case, I was happy to enlist my and my slimes' services for the Jamils.

While I was mulling over the prospect of the new village, Elise had become still.

"What's the matter, Elise?" Reinhart asked.

"Dear, we were supposed to subtly broach the subject of Ryoma's reward. Now, we're the ones who would benefit from this arrangement."

"Yes... How did this happen again?"

The duke and duchess shared a helpless chuckle. The situation seemed familiar to me too, but I still felt like they had nothing to worry about. They were already helping me out big time by becoming my patrons. I'm sure a high status would have made life easier on Earth too. But nobles held absolute power in this world, so they'd already given me a peace of mind I couldn't buy.

"You've already helped me a lot. Referring Eleonora to me being the latest example," I pointed out.

"And Ryoma, you've made it clear how much you appreciate us. But as soon as we think we've repaid a small part of what we owe you, it feels like we owe you double that again," said Elise.

"We know you're only offering out of the kindness of your heart. We're just not used to that, I suppose. When we're dealing with scheming nobles, we



don't act like this," Reinhart said.

"Well, I'm happy you trust me that much," I said honestly.

The Jamils laughed and drank their tea.

"Of course, I'm not complaining about our current relationship. I'm only afraid of ruining it by relying too much on your goodwill," Reinhart said.

"My thoughts exactly," I countered.

Elise chuckled again. "Let's put a pin in this discussion, shall we? I'm afraid we're negating the point of repaying a debt if we're trying to force it into Ryoma's hands."

I concurred, and promised to seek their advice if I ever needed it.

"Does that about wrap up our top secret discussion?" Reinhart joked.

"Hughes and the others wanted to talk to Ryoma before he left for Syrus, so they won't be happy if we keep him to ourselves too long." Elise turned to me. "If that's all right with you."

"Yes... I think so," I said. "I'd love to talk to them too, though I'm not sure how to broach the 'child of the gods' subject... It may take longer than a day to get through the details."

*I was reborn into this world.*

That would only take one sentence. But to have them understand what that meant, I wanted to tell them about Earth, life in Japan, and who I was in my previous life... Now that I was ready to share this secret, and that I wanted to share it, I was overwhelmed with how much I wanted them to know.

"By the time I'm ready to tell Elia, I'll know what to say," I said.

"Understood. When that time comes, we'll set aside all the time you need," Reinhart said.

So, my classified meeting with the duke and duchess wrapped up with a comfortable air of friendship.

Reinhart slid the magical item shut, deactivating the soundproofing spell. He announced a little loudly that we were done talking, and the others soon

returned from the other room.

After that, we discussed all sorts of things together. Rosenberg handed me his written diagnosis and we talked about how I would start purifying cursed energy once I returned from the Sea of Trees. While he seemed a little shocked by it, he enthusiastically pledged his support. To my pleasant surprise, Rosenberg was very friendly. I also found out that there were fewer professional warlocks and exorcists than I'd thought. Low supply and high demand for both occupations made Rosenberg a very busy man.

Eleonora and I formally introduced ourselves, and I noticed that she did look strained. Although Rosenberg had cast a spell on her to protect her from the effect of my curse, she just seemed physically unwell. But when I told her about her appointment as my secretary, she immediately asked for work. Knowing that telling her to "do nothing" might have stressed her out more, I gave her a few simple tasks, emphasizing that her primary job for now was to rest well.

The four familiar guards were as friendly as they'd always been as they expressed how concerned they were when they heard that I was cursed, and how relieved they were to see me looking well. We talked about my plans for the Sea of Trees, and recent developments in their lives...until time slipped by.

"Take care."

"Let us know as soon as you come back."

With short and sweet words of parting that nonetheless conveyed how much they cared for me, the Jamils and their entourage left before sundown. As they were leaving, I had the funny feeling that I was the one walking away to their send-off.

Now, I was all set. I'd set out to the Sea of Trees with nothing to worry about. Then, I'd come home.

## Chapter 9, Episode 9: Into the Sea of Trees

“The Sea of Trees of Syrus...” I said to myself.

After parting with Reinhart and the others in the Forest of Gana, it had taken another ten days’ trek to the southeast to reach the entrance into the Sea of Trees. Even though I’d researched as much as I could about the place, seeing Syrus in person was like standing on the brink of another world altogether. Ahead of me, spreading as far as the eye could see in either direction, were trees with trunks so massive that ten of me could have barely formed a circle around it with arms stretched as wide as possible. Each of them seemed like a tower, which I judged to be roughly 40 meters tall. As enormous as they were, these were still merely the saplings that encircled the rim of Syrus. Trees grew taller and wider as they approached the center until they reached nearly 150 meters high and 40 meters in diameter. These trees were so gargantuan that it messed with my sense of perspective when I first saw Syrus in the distance. I doubted that I’d even be able to see the top of the trees that towered near the center of the Sea of Trees.

Tropical vines and flowers coiled around the trunks of the trees, and the hot, humid air in Syrus clung to my skin. Behind me, though, a breezy plateau was backdropped by mountains. In just a few steps after passing the perimeter of the outermost trees, all of my senses experienced changes: the tropical air, the shift in vegetation, the smell of the wind, the chirping of beetles... It was as if I’d stepped into a whole new world.

*Fernobelia said this place was like a lab... Maybe there’s a boundary that contains the Sea of Trees like a greenhouse or sandbox.*

“Let’s go.” There was no sense in standing at Syrus’s front door any longer. Keeping one eye on my surroundings, I walked into the vast jungle.

A path, somewhat cleared and stomped flat by the occasional adventurers who came to forage for resources, offered an easier walk at first. Still, the dense curtain of leaves and vines veiling most of the forest from view made me keep

my guard up. The trees were spread apart enough that it should be easier to wield a weapon than if I was in most buildings, if it came to that.

Before even five minutes had passed, I heard a faint rustling. “Detection.” Without missing a beat, I sent a ripple of magical energy to search my surroundings. It told me that a swarm of creatures—I counted ten—were darting through the underbrush, trying to surround me. “That was quick.”

Talons swiped out of the bush to my left with a gargled screech. Dodging the talons, I countered with my blade. Blood and a metallic stench filled the air as something the size of a small horse tumbled to the ground—a raptor. It was a monster that resembled a carnivorous dinosaur by the same name.

Immediately the rest of the pack came after me, screeching furiously. While raptors were small among monsters, they were highly intelligent. While the first attempted its ambush, the others had been lying in wait. Once it had failed, they immediately switched strategies. Now, they had me surrounded, using their advantage of numbers to unleash a barrage of sharp scratches and crushing bites. It was a simple tactic that would take some finesse to deal with.

Growling and hissing, the raptor pack encircled me, their green hides camouflaged in the foliage. The trick was to stay calm, and dispatch one attacker at a time instead of charging into the pack. A raptor would attack from a random direction, then I would dodge or parry, and decapitate it in one swift movement. A pile of their packmates’ carcasses must have inspired fear in the surviving raptors, because they suddenly turned on their heels after a certain point, and scattered to the wind.

“Five down, and they run,” I noted. They seemed quick to retreat. Even though taking out half of them sent the pack running, too many battles like this would drain my stamina quickly. I’d need to fight smarter, not harder.

First things first, I decided to collect the ones I did take out. “Dimension Home.” Keeping one eye on my surroundings, I summoned a team of grave slimes to collect the carcasses.

Generally speaking, hunting and adventuring etiquette demanded that the unwanted parts of any kill be buried or burned. Carcasses left in the open could bring disease or other dangerous creatures. However, my research had told me

that there was no problem in leaving anything behind in the Sea of Trees. The place was already crawling with dangerous predators without the help of any leftover bodies. It wasn't uncommon for adventurers to stumble across a monster carcass that was the aftermath of a deadly territorial battle. Spending the time and effort to clean up those carcasses would only make the still-living adventurers more vulnerable...but I still felt bad about leaving my game behind.

"Here they come again."

Presumably drawn to the smell of blood, the raptor pack returned, having doubled their size to twenty. I couldn't afford to take on endless waves like this.

"Fear," I chanted, and it was visibly effective. The Dark spell that had once knocked out the test administrator of the Adventurer's Guild—and even made him lose control of his bladder—sent the monsters running. As long as the dread-inspiring spell was effective on them, I would be happy to chase them away with it if I couldn't avoid a confrontation.

"Oh... I should have signed a contract with one of them."

*I could have made my way through the forest on the back of a raptor... On second thought, raptors were lighter and weaker than they looked to maximize their speed. It couldn't have run as fast with me on its back, and I haven't even learned to ride on a horse without a saddle, much less a reptilian predator with slippery scales. It's not worth the trouble.*

"Thanks for picking them up," I said to the grave slimes. "You guys are so handy."

When I studied the abilities of the grave slimes during the weeks I spent preparing for this journey, I found out that, on top of storing carcasses, the Lay to Rest skill slowed the decomposition of the meat.

The grave slimes would hand over the carcasses to the goblins waiting within the Dimension Home, who would take the game apart into materials and store them away. It was extremely convenient that they handled the lengthy process from start to finish without me having to instruct them.

"See you soon." With gratitude, I sent the grave slimes back into the Dimension Home and set out on the path again. As soon as I took a step, a

sudden downpour broke out of nowhere. “There were really no warning signs at all... The environment’s the worst threat.”

The Valleys of Trell were dangerous in their own way, but the heat, humidity, and sudden deluges were going to wear me down. I’d set up a barrier when I first walked in to keep me dry, but the rain limited my field of vision and drowned out any sounds. That meant that I would be less likely to spot a predator coming my way.

“If this hadn’t been the third time, I might not have noticed.” With another burst of Dark magic, I chased away the raptors that had sneaked up on me in the rain.

It was only easy for me to sense their approach because of magical energy detection and the steel slime serving as my weapon keeping its guard up. If I had nothing but my eyes and ears to rely on, the task would have been a lot more taxing. Good thing Sever and the others had given me a lot of tips in the City of Lost Souls.

Just as I gave my silent thanks to them, the rain rapidly slowed, then let up. Now that the ground had turned to spongy mud, every step had become more difficult. If I hadn’t prepared for rain beforehand, my clothes would have been drenched and draining me of warmth. There were venomous insects and leeches in the underbrush—because of course there were—that were likely to attack anyone not coated in bug repellent, which would be quickly washed away in a few of those downpours. This really was a brutal environment that threatened to trip me up, drain my stamina, give me heat stroke or hypothermia...

“It’s incredible how much they affect the climate.” I remarked about the towering trees all around me.

These heatwood trees—the closest comparison to them on Earth being the giant sequoias—emitted heat along with oxygen during photosynthesis, creating the tropical climate of Syrus. Each tree didn’t produce too much heat on its own, but given how dense and vast this forest was, it explained why it was so hot.

Soon, the air would feel like a sauna again, which would turn into a vertical

draft and form a thundercloud that would produce another downpour...rinse and repeat. Furthermore, heatwood trees acted as an invasive species, rapidly expanding their habitat beyond the borders of the Sea of Trees under certain conditions.

“Fear,” I chanted again, keeping the raptors at bay. “They never stop, do they? And to think it’s recommended to travel in small parties here. It’s got to be tough for most people...”

Most monsters in the Sea of Trees were aggressive enough that they wouldn’t fear a large group due to numbers alone. In fact, a large crowd was only more likely to be discovered and attacked by more monsters. That was dangerous enough for those venturing into Syrus, but merely traveling in a large group in the vicinity of the Sea of Trees came with its own risks. For one, that could draw out monsters beyond the border of the Sea of Trees. In turn, that could lead to Syrus expanding its territory and creeping into the surrounding lands.

As harsh as this might sound, if someone undertrained were to enter the Sea of Trees and never return alive, that was their problem and no one else’s. But, if they were to draw monsters out in the process of trying to flee from them, innocent lives could be threatened. Monsters of the forest were acclimated to the Sea of Trees and preferred to stay in their territory...unless they were chasing prey. Furthermore, heatwood seeds traveled through the food chain and ended up in the digestive tract of these monsters, sprouting into more trees outside the current threshold. When too many monsters left the forest, the Sea of Trees grew in size. Plants and monsters combined, the Sea of Trees defended itself when humans tried to conquer or cultivate the forest. In fact, it occasionally fought back, encroaching closer to civilization. This characteristic had earned the Sea of Trees of Syrus a moniker—the Vengeful Woods.

The Adventurer’s Guild gatekeeping anyone below C rank from entering the woods was an indication of how the guild—and by extension, the kingdom—feared the Sea of Trees’ expansion, exactly as Fernobelia intended. Yet, there was a steady stream of adventurers and explorers ready to dare the Vengeful Woods. Perhaps we were all slaves to curiosity and greed...

“Hide.” I concealed myself with the spell I’d learned from Remily, and proceeded through the woods without slowing down. I’d find out whether the

spell would keep me hidden from the raptors for long.

My destination, for the time being, was one of the bases of operation set up in the forest by adventurers who came before me. Several bases dotted the woods, and they grew more sparse towards the center. Where I was ultimately headed, the ruins of Korumi village, lay closer to the center of the woods than the innermost base, but the journey of a thousand miles began with a single step. The closest base to where I was would supposedly take only a few hours to reach, accounting for the delays caused by fighting off monsters along the way. The trek would make for a nice warm-up.

Step-by-step, I plunged farther into the Sea of Trees, every bone in my body warning me of unknown threats that waited ahead. Anticipation swelled within me, leaving no room for fear. My stride remained unburdened by nerves, rhythmically carrying me into the woods.





## Special: The Gods Take a Break

While Ryoma embarked on his exploration of Syrus, the ten gods sat at their round table in the divine realm, squinting at thin air.

“Found it,” Serelipta announced.

“Where?” Gain asked.

“Right here, at the bottom of the ocean. It’s in a place where we could get rid of it, but I’ll just log its location for now. We’ll know if it moves.”

Gain nodded. “That should be fine for now. Even if we decide to eliminate it, we need to check if there are any other demon lord fragments in the world.”

“Dammit! I can blow that thing to smithereens right now,” Kiriluel growled.

“I understand how you feel, but it can’t be helped,” Meltrize interjected, still staring up at nothing. “Even if eliminating the fragment is possible, that will significantly impact the environment around it. We must first find and monitor all of the fragments, then calculate the effect of eliminating each of them. Based on that information, we must determine the best order to destroy them in... Without calculating that much at the very least, eliminating the fragments will tip the balance of the world.”

Kiriluel knew all that, of course. Still, the process of searching and cataloging the demon lord fragments was so mentally draining—even for the gods—that they couldn’t help but let out grievances.

“I know, I know. This kind of painstaking work just isn’t my thing. It’s bad enough that we have to scour the whole world for fragments the size of a rock, but it’s downright torturous when what little power the fragments hold is working to camouflage itself.”

“I agree that it’s difficult to find them,” Fernobelia said. “It’s concealed the fragments for this long, even from us. But don’t you agree that part of the reason the fragments are so small is because you went overboard when you blew the demon lord up?”

Kiriluel winced for a moment, but soon regained her composure. “How else were we supposed to get rid of that one? It had once been a god more powerful than us, and one that ruled over life, at that. Like Kufo, but more powerful and scummy.”

“I’m offended,” Kufo protested.

Some of the other gods loudly groaned.

“Let’s take a break,” one of them proposed.

“Good idea... I could keep going as long as it takes, but that won’t be good for my mental health.”

“This is gonna be a long haul, no matter how we slice it or dice it.”

“I couldn’t agree more,” Serelipta crooned, halting his work. “Let’s see what Ryoma’s up to... Ooh, he just went into the Sea of Trees.” In a single flourish, he materialized drinks and baked goods for the whole table to begin a watch party of Ryoma’s progress down below.

“He’s already in the Sea of Trees? I hope he’s not rushing to complete our quest.”

“Your concerns are unfounded, Tekun. I reviewed Ryoma’s movements since we last saw him. While we were caught up in our work, plenty of time passed below,” Meltrize explained.

“He’s been prepping for this for a while... Even then, I feel like Ryoma can go from zero to a hundred in an instant,” Serelipta answered.

“He only has two speeds: snail and break-neck,” Kufo chuckled, softening the mood around the table.

“Sooner he can get it done the better, though I didn’t mean to rush him.”

“It’s a great weight off our shoulders just to have the Sea of Trees problem taken off our hands,” Gain said.

“I’m thankful we can focus on dealing with the demon lord fragments. If Ryoma wasn’t taking care of Syrus, we’d have to divide and conquer.”

“We can’t really afford that right now,” Grimp said. “If only Manoailoa would

show up...”

The other gods nodded in agreement, resignation clearly showing on their faces.

“Not going to happen,” Wilieris said.

“If you’re expecting Manoailoa to be a team player, I have bad news for you,” Serelipta said.

“Manoailoa promised to search for fragments...and to call us as progress was made on that front. At least, there’s a willingness to try,” Gain hedged.

“It’s an urgent enough job, for sure. But why do I feel like Manoailoa’s bored of it already?”

“I know what you mean, Kiriluel... We should know better than to expect Manoailoa to stick to a single task or mood for so long.”

“As a god, Manoailoa will at least do the bare minimum,” Tekun said. “Have you decided on what to give Ryoma when he completes the quest, Fernobelia? It doesn’t look like it’ll take him long to produce results.”

Fernobelia crossed his arms and turned his gaze upwards. “I’m still not sure, to tell you the truth. I’m spoiled for choice.”

“How about the...you know, those swords we were saddled with? They belonged to Ryoma’s dad, didn’t they? Just give him those,” Serelipta suggested.

“Denied,” Gain shut down. “Those swords must not be released into the world without careful consideration. They are certainly not a prize to be handed out. If we are to return them to him, it should be on a later occasion, after we observe him a while longer. Besides, Ryoma might have been forced to relinquish those blades upon his death on Earth, but they are his by right. Isn’t it uncouth to call them a reward?”

“How about teaching him anti-curse magic, Fernobelia? It’s your specialty, and I think Ryoma will be very happy with that.”

“I’ve thought about it, Lulutia, but we’ve already made a plan to break his curse over time. A spell to mitigate the symptoms would benefit him in the

meantime, but it was our fault Ryoma was cursed in the first place. I wouldn't feel right to call that a reward either. Besides, his payment should reflect the enormity of the task. What Ryoma is undertaking is a task normally reserved for a god. What kind of reward would reflect a task like this?"

"While Ryoma's skill set allows him to take on this task, we must remember that this would not be possible for most humans to undertake. If word of his achievement were to get out, songs could be written about him," Meltrize said.

"The duke and duchess mentioned this to him, but he has a skewed sense of normalcy because he's been so close to us. Ryoma didn't seem to mind taking on the job, and he even said he'd put effort into cleansing cursed energy. All so he could repay us," Gain said.

"As much of a help that would be, I'd have to come up with another reward..."

"Why don't you keep it simple and just give him a blessing?" Grimp suggested. "Yours would be magic related, Fernobelia. Ryoma'd like that."

"I'd rather not. While blessings are useful, they can hinder a human's personal growth. I am a god of academia as much as I am one of magic. As such, I do not wish to interfere with humans who have a willingness to learn. And that includes Ryoma."

"Leave it to Fernobelia to make a little reward so complicated," Tekun quipped.

None of the other gods dared agree with him, but none rushed to defend Fernobelia either.

"Why don't we just recognize Ryoma as being on *our* side? Humans give each other honorary titles. Since he's willing to keep helping out our world, it'd be a good time for it."

The gods considered Kiriluel's suggestion for a few moments, but Fernobelia was the one to shake his head. "Those affiliated with a church or its congregation would take the designation as a great honor. Ryoma wouldn't. We would be practically shoving a useless trophy in his hands for all the work he is doing for us. Whether it's a tangible object or a piece of information, I want to

make sure it's valuable to Ryoma. Besides, if word somehow got out that we'd distinguished him like that, the humans would undoubtedly cause a whole ruckus, calling Ryoma an agent of our will, and whatnot... Which would be the opposite of benefiting him"

"Right... Some humans can sense our presence too. We'd better not," Kiriluel agreed.

"I thought it was a great idea," Serelipta grumbled. "What's wrong with Ryoma being on our side and helping us out? We could even ask him to retrieve some demon lord fragments if they're accessible."

"Serelipta, you can't rope Ryoma into doing everything you don't want to—"

"That's it!"

"What did you say, Fernobelia?"

Fernobelia had steadfastly opposed asking for Ryoma's help, maintaining the position that the gods should handle their own problems and refrain from seeking any human's help at all costs. Naturally, the gods were astonished that Fernobelia had apparently switched his position entirely. Even Serelipta stared at him with wide eyes, forgetting his own audacity in having suggested the very idea, while Wilieris held her tongue for once.

"Huh? Why are you all staring at me like— Oh, I'm not agreeing with Serelipta. While I admit his idea would be beneficial for us, I can't condone saddling Ryoma with more work because he was willing to accept this quest."

"So what is *it*, exactly?"

"I'd forgotten, but Ryoma can bring in things from the mortal realm, and vice versa. Didn't you say you gave him a goblet once, Tekun?"

With that question, the gods knew what he meant: Fernobelia intended to gift Ryoma a divine relic.

"As long as it's not a weapon, it won't be too dangerous. That's good," Lulutia said.

"All I've given him is what could be used day-to-day. Shouldn't be a problem," Tekun agreed.

None of the other gods opposed this idea, but they soon began discussing exactly which divine relic would go to Ryoma.

So, the gods' debate—and their momentary rest—lasted a little longer.

## Afterword

Hello, Roy here, author of *By the Grace of the Gods*! Thank you so much for picking up volume 14! With new slimes, new spells, and trustworthy adults, Ryoma finally conquered the City of Lost Souls...only to be roped into trouble.

That doesn't bother him, though assistance from the gods doesn't hurt. Ryoma is fast approaching his longtime goal of conquering the Sea of Trees, but he seems to have his eyes set on what comes next.

He also divulged (some of) his secrets to the duke and duchess, and was introduced to his new secretary Eleonora. Considering her tumultuous past, it will be interesting to see how their relationship will build after Ryoma's return.

He had planned to enter the Sea of Trees of Syrus not long after arriving at Gimul. At the time, Ryoma's plans were vague, and he has certainly traveled a long, winding road to get this far... Slowly but surely, the people he's met and the things he's experienced are taking shape within him.

What else will he see and who will he meet in the Sea of Trees? What will he feel and choose to do? How will he continue to live his second life? I hope you stay and find out.



## Iron Slime

- ▶ Steel Slime

## Metal Slime

- ▶ Wire Slime

## Mud Slime

- ▶ Sludge Slime
- ▶ Soil Slime

## Aqua Slime

- ▶ Sewage Slime
- ▶ Ice Slime

## Slimes with no documented evolutions

- ★ Bloody Slime
- ★ Fluff Slime
- ★ Drunk Slime
- ★ Snow Slime

## Magic Slimes

- Earth Slime
- Wind Slime
- Water Slime
- Dark Slime
- Light Slime
- Heal Slime



## Ryoma's Slime Chart

\*▶ denotes a possible evolution. \*All slimes listed branch from normal slime

## **Sticky Slime**

- ▶ Spider Slime
- ▶ Craft Slime
- ▶ Fiber Slime
- ▶ Latex Slime ▶ Rubber Slime

## **Acid Slime**

- ▶ Pearl Slime
- ▶ Shell Slime

## **Poison Slime**

- ▶ Medicine Slime
- ▶ Sting Slime
- ▶ Filter Slime

## **Scavenger Slime**

- ▶ Compost Slime
- ▶ Fertile Soil Slime
- ▶ Grave Slime

## **Cleaner Slime**

- ▶ Deodorant Slime

## **Weed Slime**

- ▶ Aquatic Weed Slime
- ▶ Algae Slime
- ▶ Ash Slime ▶ Smoke Slime

## **Stone Slime**

- ▶ Sand Slime

# Bonus Short Story

## Eleonora Prepares for Her First Day

The day after the duke and duchess met Ryoma in the Forest of Gana, Eleonora was walking down the hall of the duke's residence, her brows knotted together.

"Oh, Miss Eleonora."

"Good day, Lord Rosenberg."

"I was hoping I would find you... Is something troubling you?"

"Nothing as serious as that. Now that my tasks were completed, I was wondering what I should do next," Eleonora said stiffly, failing to mask the restlessness of having no tasks on hand. "How can I help you?"

"Just now, I debriefed the duke on this." Rosenberg showed her a booklet that Eleonora recognized.

"That's the training material Master Ryoma composed," she said.

"Yes, based on his own experiences. He was concerned that he might have accidentally cursed it, so I inspected it as a precaution. I've been told that all contact with him is to go through you. Could I ask you to return this to him?"

"Of course. Is there anything I should keep in mind while handling it?"

"No. There were signs of a curse that must have been active at one point, but it's harmless now. That I can guarantee," Rosenberg reassured.

Eleonora had shared her first impression of Ryoma with the warlock as part of his assessment of the curse, yet she hadn't heard Rosenberg's first impression of the boy in return. Although she knew that he had no need to share his feelings about Ryoma at the time, she was curious about her new boss.

When Eleonora asked him, Rosenberg considered his answer before speaking, "Hard-lived, to put it shortly. Accounts in that document show that he's been

through tough times, especially when it comes to interpersonal conflicts. The fact that there were signs of a curse only emphasizes the severity of his tribulations. Anyone could theoretically cast a curse unintentionally, but the amount of negative emotions you would need to do so would be enough that you could kill someone with hatred alone. At the very least, he is not merely a child spoiled with luck and talent.”

“I’ve heard stories of his accomplishments too. I can hardly believe they were all done by a child... I can’t help wondering if someone else is pulling the strings.”

“I don’t blame you,” Rosenberg laughed. “Are you feeling reluctant to work as his secretary?”

“On the contrary! I never dreamed that the duke would push for my assignment without verifying those stories, nor do I doubt that Master Ryoma himself is responsible for his accomplishments. I don’t have any complaints about my work either. I am already treated better than I deserve under the protection of the duke... Yet, I would be lying if I said I didn’t feel nervous. I’ve never been the cheerful type, and I don’t have any experience in working with children, so—” Eleonora stopped herself. There were plenty more things she was nervous about, but spilling them all now seemed irresponsible, like a sign of weakness.

Rosenberg saw that on her face and gently said, “As far as I can tell, he is very mature for his age. There should be no expectation to treat him like an ordinary child. I’d even suggest speaking to him as you would to an adult, considering what the future has in store for him. More importantly, I think you should spend your efforts on maintaining a pleasant relationship between him and those around him. Conflict is usually drawn to those with exceptional abilities, and negative emotions are the root of all curses. My professional opinion as a warlock is that I want him to master those emotions and keep them from hurting himself or others... And I could say the same of you.”

Eleonora stiffened at those words, and Rosenberg took his leave with a bow.

Left alone in the hallway, she twisted her features again, her gratitude for Rosenberg’s concern and her guilt for accepting it clashing within her heart.

After a few seconds, though, she blew out a long breath and continued walking down the hall. “There’s no sense in standing still. I must keep moving.”

That was how she’d survived. She told herself to keep moving: to keep looking for the next thing she could do. Whether it was a spark of courage or to escape from her anxiety, she didn’t know. Perhaps she would discover that about herself, one day.

Two days later, Eleonora would find herself drawing the concern of others again when her face clearly showed that she’d read through the employee handbook in an attempt to better understand Ryoma’s personality.

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By the Grace of the Gods: Volume 14

by Roy

Translated by Adam Seacord Edited by Ambriella Ceridwen

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