



By the Grace of the Gods

15

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Illust. Ririnra


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**“I want
all of you
to beat it.
Out of
the way.”**

“Could he really be the same Glen that Sever had mentioned—the one who earned S-rank with nothing but brute strength?”



“Now *this* calls for a great drink!”

“Let’s cook as much as we can.”

With just a little pinch of salt and pepper, I could eat a thousand pieces of the delicious snake that wasn’t gamey at all.

A dynamic illustration of a young boy with spiky brown hair riding a large, pink, bird-like Mimic Slime. The Mimic Slime has a large, open beak showing sharp teeth and a long, thin, pink tongue. The boy is wearing a black long-sleeved shirt with a yellow and white design on the chest, black pants, and brown shoes. He has a surprised expression with wide eyes and an open mouth. The background is a blur of green and yellow, suggesting high speed. The text "Whoa?!" is written in a stylized, pink font in the upper left corner.

“Whoa?!”

As soon as I gave the instruction, the mimic slime zoomed into a mad dash! I was screaming on its back as it bolted through the village.

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Chapter 9, Episode 10: The Way of the Forest, Part 1

A few hours had passed since I had entered the vast Sea of Trees. There had been no hiccups to speak of, and I could already see the first of the base camps set up by adventurers in the distance. It was an easy structure to spot, standing in a clearing free of towering trees and dense underbrush. Fortified with walls as solid as concrete—perhaps built by several mages—the base was rather imposing. A gateway no larger than the double doors of a main street retailer served as its only visible entrance. A few adventurers were scattered around the base, apparently maintaining the clearing between the wall and the woods.

“This should be close enough...” I muttered. Now that I was traveling alone, there was one thing I had to do to mitigate the effect of my curse before engaging in any social interactions. Simply switching the magic I cast around me from Hide to Holy Space would be well worth the effort.

Normally, Despell—another Light spell—would be called upon for breaking curses, but the curse currently afflicting me couldn’t be broken by mortal magic. Because the curse only affected others *through* me, I’d been instructed to cast spells that would block out, or at least dampen, the curse’s effect, rather than spells intended to break the curse outright.

As I approached without the veil of Hide, the adventurers immediately took notice and began talking among themselves.

One of them whirled in my direction in surprise. “Oh, it’s just a kid. A kid?!”

“Look at him,” another chimed in.

“What’s a little kid doing here?”

“Do you think he walked all this way alone?”

“Are you sure he’s not a dwarf, or elf, or just a really short dude?”

“Even if he was, it doesn’t explain why he’s in the woods alone.”

“It better not be some monster in disguise.”

It was hard to tell if the curse's effect was dampened at all. While the adventurers were not openly hostile, they watched me warily without approaching—far from a warm welcome. Just as I'd decided to all but ignore them and knock on the base doors, a pack of raptors shot out of the woods behind me.

"Raptors!" cried an adventurer.

"They're in a pack again! Watch out!"

"Dammit! I'm getting tired of these lizards!"

"I'm getting tired of this whole forest!"

"Enough yapping! Ready your weapons!"

The panic in their voices certainly didn't inspire any confidence, so I decided to take care of the raptors myself using Dark magic. Marking every raptor charging our way, I cast my spell with the mental image of shooting them an intimidating glare.

The raptors all screeched and turned on their heels, some of them tripping over from their own momentum before taking up the rear of the fleeing pack. After the practice I'd had on my way here, I was able to comfortably cast the spell without an incantation.

"They ran off," an adventurer noted.

"Did that kid do it?"

"Who else could it have been?" One who acted much calmer than the others—their leader, I presumed—acknowledged me with a quick look before ushering his team back to their stations. "The monsters are gone. Let's get back to work."

I considered speaking to him, but he'd shown me no further interest, and I didn't have any good reason to approach him beyond being polite. I passed the adventurers by so as to not disrupt their work.

When I was a few steps away from the doors, one of them swung in to reveal a stolid guard holding it open for me. "Haven't seen you before. Get in."

I slipped through the opening that was just wide enough for me to do so, and

the guard swiftly closed it behind me. Clearly, they were just as wary of monsters inside the base as they were out in the clearing. As soon as I made it into the base's interior—an expansive, undivided room—furnished with a lavishly large heatwood table topped with food and drink, I felt the eyes of the many adventurers beginning to assess me. It was as if I'd stumbled into a bustling barroom rather than a secure checkpoint.

"Take a seat in the corner over there," instructed the guard who'd opened the door. "All newcomers need to show their ID and answer a few questions. I know it's an inconvenience, but that's how we do things here."

"No problem." I obeyed and walked to the chair he indicated. *When in Rome...*

Another guard with matching armor sat next to the chair, waving me over. He held a wooden tankard—filled with some sort of alcohol, judging by the color of his cheeks. "Come sit here."

"Hello."

"Like he said, I just need to ask you a few questions. Make yourself comfortable. We'll send you on your way after we talk for a bit." The guard smirked, catching my gaze lingering on his tankard. "Don't ask what I'm drinking, though. I'm off the clock."

He's working off the clock? "I'm sorry to sour your time off," I offered.

"It's no big deal. This is the gatehouse, bar, and holding room for us guards all rolled into one. Guards and adventurers all hang out here, whether we're on the clock or not. So someone off duty handles interviews like this that are—sorry to say it—just going through the motions. We rarely see new faces around here anyway." He gestured to the room. "Are you hungry? I'm not going to buy you anything, but we got all sorts of meat and drink if you have the coin. You can also buy new wares or have your own fixed... You can get your hands on just about anything here."

Taking his word as to how the guards handled their work here, I scanned the room again. Even though we were in the middle of the perilous Sea of Trees, food was plentiful. In fact, their meals looked a little heartier than the average bar or restaurant in Gimul.

“Not what you were expecting?” the guard asked.

“No. I thought supplies, food or otherwise, would be harder to come by.”

“That’ll be the case the deeper you go into the forest. This, on the other hand, is a trading post. We’re the closest settlement to the outside world, so the Merchant’s Guild and Dragoon Guild regularly come in to trade for the forest’s loot. We’re flush with food and drink, even if they’re marked up to cover the cost of hauling them in here. But that won’t be a problem for you, will it, kid?” With a smirk, he chugged from his tankard, making himself look less and less like an official guard of said trading post.

“What makes you say so, if you don’t mind my asking?”

“Something about your attitude and the way you carry yourself. But your biggest tell is how clean your clothes are,” he answered.

This town was still a considerable walk from the edge of the forest, rife with rain and dangerous monsters. According to my interviewer, most adventurers arrived here completely filthy no matter how well they had prepared for the trek.

“You’ve barely got a splash on you, other than a little dirt and monster blood,” the guard continued, “which makes me think that you’re not only capable enough to fight off monsters, but you’ve avoided them altogether for the most part. Without running or hiding, you pretty much just walked all the way down here. Did I hit the mark?”

“Bull’s-eye.”

“You stick around this place as long as I have, you pick up a thing or two.” He cast a look across the room to a few laughing adventurers who lifted their tankards. This felt more like a warm welcome, so I lifted a hand in return. “Mud and blood are usually unavoidable when you explore the woods, and you can always count on something jumping out at you that you didn’t prep for. Anyone who’s been here a while has learned that the hard way. So, when someone makes it this far looking as clean as you do, we notice them. And we welcome them. On the other hand, those guys outside—you must have passed them on the way in—they won’t make it much farther. They’ve gotten this far, so they’re not helpless, but they’re not adapting well to the Sea of Trees.” He explained

that the newcomers had barely made it to this first checkpoint. Too afraid to turn back on their own, they were now trying to tag along with the traders who frequently visited the base. The problem was that the traders couldn't afford to give up precious space on their caravan for free when everything they could purchase from the Sea of Trees offered a great return on their investment. This conundrum left the failed explorers felling and weeding the clearing outside—under the supervision of a veteran explorer of the forest—to earn enough money to buy safe passage out of the woods.

“Keeping up the clearing is something that has to be done anyway, and there are plenty of rotating rookies to take on the job, but it's far from lucrative. Even though their daily wage could feed a family of four for a week outside the forest, it'll net them little more than pocket change here. Like I said, everything costs a premium. If you can handle yourself in the woods, I recommend going foraging. You'll find bushes of rare herbs pretty close by. Plants that are commonplace here can fetch a small fortune from an herbalist. Other than that, heatwood seeds make for easy souvenirs, even if they won't make you rich. Seeds are pretty easy to find on the ground, and if all else fails, you can always find some in the guts of most monsters you kill,” the guard rattled on, alcohol loosening his tongue enough to offer me unsolicited advice.

Would taking heatwood seeds out of the forest really be such a good idea? I couldn't help but wonder.

“What's the matter?” he asked.

“I was told that heatwood was invasive,” I said.

I knew that there were no restrictions against taking heatwood seeds out of the Sea of Trees. In fact, there weren't any restrictions regarding the forest that I could find, even after paying the Adventurer's Guild good money for information on every aspect of this place. I only knew that, back on Earth, harvesting and relocating invasive species was sometimes illegal.

“That's almost true,” he said. “They only grow like mad in the forest and just outside of it. Apparently, heatwood needs a warm climate full of magical energy to grow. They won't even sprout if they stray too far. Even if they do sprout, they won't grow tall, and they're not like treants that attack you if you get too

close. Heatwood is just a tree that happens to be a little harder, but far from impossible, to chop down. Especially where monsters don't attack as often as the raptors do in our woods."

Every plant needs a specific environment to grow in, I realized. The spread of heatwood seems uncontrollable in the Sea of Trees, where the environment is perfectly suited for their growth, and monsters indirectly protect them from being cut down. Maybe they're not considered a threat outside of the forest?

"That's how higher-ups of the guilds and the government see it," he answered. "For the past ten years, they've been able to keep the Sea of Trees contained just by cutting down the heatwood saplings that pop up around the perimeter. They have no problem keeping the expansion in check as long as they don't try to deforest an established part of the woods. Not only are there no laws against taking heatwood seeds out, but I've met a few merchants who came into the woods at a noble's request just to gather as many of them as they could."

Some nobles, whether passionate arborists or collectors intent on getting their hands on a variety of rare specimens, were willing to invest a great deal of money into a heatwood nursery. That much wasn't too surprising, since heatwood could only be found in the Sea of Trees. The guard had never heard of a noble who'd turned a profit with such a venture, though. They either cut their losses and abandoned the project or were keeping their nursery alive at a great burden to their coffers. Magical medicine required to facilitate heatwood growth accounted for the bulk of that expense, so I would probably be able to keep a nursery going if I wanted to. After opening the trash plant, I had an oversupply of scavenger-slime fertilizer, anyway. So much so that using it on my farms and giving it to my slimes hadn't put a dent in my stock. The oversupply wasn't an immediate concern, though, as I'd been stashing the excess in the abandoned mines.

If there are no laws against it, growing heatwood trees could be a great use for all that fertilizer. I'll have to be careful not to let them spread out of control, of course.

"Long story short, don't overthink it. Rake in all the cash while you can." The guard seemed to remember his task. He set down his tankard and took up a

small notebook that had been left open on the table. “Well, let’s get that interview over with. Show me your guild card. And for formality’s sake, I’ll ask you why you came here.”

I doubted that they had any reason to record my answers outside of that little notebook, and I had no reason to hide my intentions even if they did. “Here’s my guild card,” I offered, “and my final destination is Korumi village.”

“All right, Ryoma Takebayashi. You’re headed for Korumi village.” The guard paused. “Where is that, exactly? I’m betting it’s a village that got swallowed up by the forest, but I’ve never heard of it.”

“It’s located—”

Just as I was about to describe its location, someone said from behind me, “Korumi village? That’s a place I haven’t heard of in a long time.”

I turned to find an old man holding three tankards in each hand.

Chapter 9, Episode 11: The Way of the Forest, Part 2

“Sutem,” the guard greeted the elder with six tankards. “You know this place?”

“I can’t remember the last time I’ve heard of it. Hold on a minute.” Sutem walked to the table nearby, handing off the tankards to the adventurers seated there. For a moment, I thought he was wearing leather armor until I recognized it as a barkeep’s apron.

“He used to be an adventurer who roamed the Sea of Trees. Now that he’s retired, he runs this bar. No one knows these woods better than Sutem.”

“I’ve only been around the longest.” Sutem picked up a barstool with one hand and produced a smoking pipe from his apron with the other, before sitting between the guard and me. He lit his pipe. “You mentioned Korumi village?”

“Yeah. I’ve never heard of it,” the guard said.

“It’s no wonder you haven’t. I couldn’t give you an exact date, but I know that Korumi village was lost to the woods about forty years ago,” Sutem said.

“Forty years? You mean it’s beyond the Edge?!”

The guard’s raised voice and the mention of “the Edge” turned many heads. If the Edge was the base closest to the heart of the Sea of Trees, anything beyond that was nearly uncharted territory, even for its permanent residents. Obviously, anyone willing to venture into that part of the forest was a rarity.

“I’m sure of it. I’m from a village that lay beyond Korumi. In fact, I lived in Korumi for a while. I know exactly where it is.”

“You’ve lived there?” I asked.

“Fifty years ago, I’m pretty sure... The king at the time decided to try and clear up the Sea of Trees as soon as he took the throne. Brigades came and tore up the forest, and the Sea of Trees took revenge. My village, the closest one to the Edge at the time, became collateral damage. We took refuge in Korumi before

our whole village got swallowed up. Now, why do you want to visit a place like that?" Sitem asked.



“To pay my respects and sort out some keepsakes,” I simply said. They asked me to elaborate, so I gave them the same story I usually gave.

The guard raised his brows at me. “You’re *from* Korumi? Didn’t you say this was your first time in the forest?”

“My first time passing through a base,” I clarified. “Not my first time in the Sea of Trees.”

“Oh, *obviously*,” the guard snided. “Is Korumi even livable?”

“Who’s to say it isn’t?” Sutem cut in, to my surprise, before I could get a chance to answer the guard’s all-too-natural question. “Not that I expected anyone to stay there, but back in the day, Korumi was much the same as this settlement—a trading point on the edge of the woods. It took the Sea of Trees ten years or so to completely take over Korumi, which gave what started as a normal farming village enough time to set up defensive walls and moats. The lord built a manor there, and Korumi regularly hosted his militia and troops of the king’s army. There was even a plan in the works to expand the village into a fortified city that would serve as the center of deforestation and defense against the Sea of Trees, although that never came to fruition.”

“So it’s built up enough for people to live there,” said the guard.

“The infrastructure was there, and I believe they were improving it until they finally abandoned the village,” Sutem confirmed. “Besides, Korumi saw plenty of foot traffic for another ten years or so—until thirty years ago. Looting the woods around Korumi was lucrative business, and the crown paid out a sort of restitution to villagers who stuck around. There was something else too... They started a new industry. I can’t put my finger on what it was.”

“Was it black pepper?” I asked. “I obviously wasn’t there at the time, but that was being farmed in the village.”

“Oh, that’s right. Once the forest overtook it, the climate of Korumi became conducive to growing spices. Korumi was booming in those days. More money drew in more manpower, and more manpower meant stronger defenses. Money bought Korumi a certain degree of security. That was until thirty years ago, anyway.”

Some adventurers nearby piped up.

“What happened thirty years ago?”

“Get to the point, old man!”

As I was beginning to suspect, many of the bar patrons were entertained by our conversation.

Sutem continued. “The government-led deforestation project failed. Their attempt not only accelerated the spread of the woods, but came with high casualties. While adventurers like us lined our pockets, the crown was bleeding money.”

“That’ll drive the army and militias out,” the guard chimed in.

“Exactly. But most adventurers, merchants, and generational villagers stayed behind because they had no sense of danger. They were celebrating and claiming that they could make even more money without nobles breathing down their necks or taking a cut of their profit.”

That sounded a lot like normalcy bias. Sutem went on to explain that there was a general sense of false security because Korumi had been so prosperous until that point. Many of the holdovers proposed to hire more adventurers to replace the security of the royal army after they withdrew their troops. Of course, everyone in the bar knew the end of the story.

Sutem blew out a puff of smoke. “If you haven’t guessed already, it didn’t take long for Korumi to crumble. I’d see a few villagers come and trade at the new base for a while until they became few and far between, then none at all. Before you, I hadn’t seen anyone from Korumi in twenty years. The last few parties couldn’t even afford to make a fair trade, so they tried to strong-arm supplies from us. Of course, none of us felt like being charitable towards them after that.” Sutem’s eyes caught mine. “Sorry. I know you’re not like them, since you made it all this way on your own. Still, I don’t think you enjoy listening to me bad-mouthing folks from your village.”

“Don’t be. They never treated me as one of their own, so I feel no need to defend their honor. I took the risk in escaping Korumi because I saw the writing on the wall. After my grandparents—who took me in and raised me—passed

away, the other villagers were only going to treat me as one of them when they'd want to take advantage of me," I explained, leaving out the part that I wasn't born in the village. The gods had told me some details about how the people of Korumi were treated, and Sute's story verified what I was told.

Why is he staring at me like that?

Sute was wide-eyed and slack-jawed, smoke trickling out of his mouth.

"What's the matter, old man?" the guard nudged.

"Nothing's the matter, per se..." Sute asked me, "Grandparents, you said? There was a couple from Korumi who I remember well."

"You knew my grandparents?!" I blurted out in surprise.

After thinking it over for a few moments, Sute said, "I'm not sure if they were your grandparents. An old couple—a dwarf and a human—would occasionally visit the new base. They never once introduced themselves, and I could never clearly remember their faces or voices once they left. They must have been using some sort of spell to protect their identity."

"I'm pretty sure that's them," I said. "My grandfather was a dwarf, and my grandmother was a human. They had a reason to conceal their identities too. Even I don't know too much about their past."

"Many in the forest have a reason to stay anonymous. They didn't seem like they were in hiding or on the run from the law—they always held their heads high, and the lady always spoke politely. No one ever tried to find out who they were. To tell you the truth, we were a bit scared of them. It was obvious how skilled they were. They'd come out of the depths of the forest like they were on a pleasant stroll through a garden, trade a huge pile of loot, and walk right back into the depths. For a while, they were the talk of the base," Sute said in reverie. "So, they're dead," he added, not a question but a statement of fact. Suddenly, he rose to his feet. "Can you drink?"

"Yes," I answered.

"Give me a minute." Sute walked up to the bar.

I turned to the guard, looking for confirmation. "It sounds like he's buying me

a drink?”

“Yeah. It’s like a funeral rite.” He went on to add that death was commonplace here. Too often, he’d shared a drink with someone one day only for them to walk out into the woods the next and never return. Those who perished in the woods were most likely eaten by monsters, so collecting the body was next to impossible. The longer one spent in the Sea of Trees, the more desensitized they became to death, like Suteem was. Still, a form of paying respect to the dead persisted: having one drink in their honor. That would usually lead to more drinks, but only the first—drunk in a single draft—was for the dead. From the second drink on, they would talk of something in their future, like plans for their next hunt. As unfeeling as this custom seemed compared to funerals in the outside world, it was a way to make sure that the death of a friend didn’t turn into a fatal distraction in these lethal woods.

Soon, Suteem returned with six more tankards. “Here.”

“You got me a pair too?” the guard asked.

“Feel free to pay for them,” Suteem countered.

“I would never be so callous to turn down your goodwill,” the guard said smoothly.

Suteem brought the tankards down onto the table with enough force to swirl their contents, though none of them spilled, thanks to the foam of the beer-like drink.

“This one’s yours.” Suteem handed me a tankard. “Let’s toast to your grandparents.”

“Thank you,” I said. No reaction from the medicine slime I kept in my bag meant that the drink hadn’t been drugged. With a prayer for my grandparents and their lasting peace, I lifted my tankard to meet the other two, making a pleasant clank. Then I knocked the tankard back, feeling the liquid slide down my throat and a complex aroma fill my nose. The sweet mist of the drink was accented with the kick of a spice that I couldn’t quite place but rather enjoyed. Despite the thick layer of foam, the drink wasn’t too fizzy, nor was it too cold. Because of that, I easily emptied the tankard in less than ten seconds.

“That wasn’t half bad,” Suteem complimented.

“Thank you. This drink goes down easily,” I said.

“The heatwood barrels give it that unique flavor. We have liquor that’s been aged for a few years in them too. Those are stronger and more expensive, but your grandpa drank them like they were water.” Suteem finished his drink and reached for the second. “Call me a meddlesome old man, but here’s some advice. Know when to turn around. Think with your head, not your heart. If your life’s on the line, leave your friends behind. You won’t survive long in the woods if you can’t. There’ll be no blood on my hands if you don’t make it, but it won’t help me sleep any better. Come back here if you don’t think you can make it to Korumu safely. As long as you’re alive, you can always try the trek again. While you’re at it, spend your coin here.” Suteem downed his second drink. He clearly had no more to say, as he began retrieving empty tankards from around the bar.

“He doesn’t usually give advice like that,” the guard remarked.

“Really?” I asked.

“Like I said, he’s probably the one who’s been here the longest. He’s not lying when he says that death doesn’t help him sleep better, but he’s also more used to death than anyone here. He could have said something just because he’s in a mood today, or maybe he owed your grandparents a favor. As gruff as he seems, he always pays his debts,” the guard said. “Well, if he doesn’t want to talk about his past, I wouldn’t prod him about it.” The guard closed the notebook. “I’d say we’ve talked enough to wrap up your interview.”

Despite his offer, we kept talking casually as we finished our second drinks. Eventually, I decided to spend the night at this base, which wasn’t part of my initial plans. While the drinks I had weren’t strong enough to inebriate me, I wanted to be on the safe side. Luckily, this base didn’t seem nearly as dangerous as I thought it would be, and my curse seemed to be successfully dampened. Much to my surprise, my first day in the Sea of Trees concluded without any sign of real danger.

After finishing my drink, I explored the base to find that it was shaped like a hollowed out doughnut. The interior was divided into small sectors occupied by

shops that carried essentials for daily life or forest exploration. There were almost no windows in order to prevent monsters from breaking in, so magical items provided light and vents were dug into the structure to bring in fresh air. Exploring this base felt nostalgic, like I was back in a Japanese subway station, weaving my way through the maze of shops. While I didn't know if other bases had a similar structure, I felt inclined to return once I finished what I came to the woods to do. I might even return here regularly.

The next morning, I made my way across the base to the entrance on the opposite end of the doughnut from where I'd come in. This side hosted another bar where a good number of adventurers were eating and drinking.

As soon as I walked in, I felt many eyes on me, although no one approached me. It must have been rare enough to see a child in the base, and rumor—that I was from the depths of the woods and intended to go back there—seemed to travel fast through the doughnut. Whispers were exchanged throughout the bar—some of which were wagers made on my fate—but none sounded malicious. People here were pretty cut-and-dried. In exchange for a shot at taking home a fortune, they always put their and their friends' lives on the line. Skills were all that mattered here. The strong were accepted while the weak were ignored. Without that kind of uncompromising attitude, they wouldn't have survived this harsh environment. Considering all that, a judgmental glance here and there didn't bother me too much. Those who doubted my skill level would stay away from me anyway, lest they become collateral damage of a foolhardy child.

If I had come here before meeting the Jamils, I might have stayed here for good, I mused. That's how comfortable this place was to me.

Ashton—the guard from the day before—stood at the door. “Heading out?” Apparently, he was on duty today.

“Good morning, Ashton.”

“I'll get this open for you.” He lifted the heavy bolt from the door and held it open just wide enough. I slipped through as he called, “Be careful out there. I'll buy you a drink when you get back.”

“Thanks. I'll see you then!” I answered.

With a smile, Ashton closed the door. Hearing the bolt slide into place, I started walking deeper into the Sea of Trees.

Chapter 9, Episode 12: Midway Point

After a very quick four days, I had made it from the first base of the Sea of Trees to what they called the Edge. The road so far had been truly uneventful. Just like my first day here, I tried to avoid monsters as much as possible while I kept walking deeper and deeper into the woods. There wasn't really any change to my surroundings, save for the heatwood trees becoming almost imperceptibly thicker and farther apart.

There were two noticeable differences between the shallows and depths of the woods, though. The first difference was the monsters. The deeper into the woods you went, the bigger and stronger the monsters got. Not only that, but there were more varieties and just more of them in general. At this point, for example, each raptor was significantly bigger than the ones from day one, and they emerged in packs no smaller than fifty at a time. I was patting myself on the back for making the call early on of not trying to mow through every monster on my very long trek.

The second change I noticed were the bases. Since camping out in the woods was practically suicide, explorers' bases were set up relatively close to each other. I'd passed through six bases over my four days in the woods, never walking more than a day between them. Out of the six, I was only comfortable spending the night in the first one. If I had been desperate, I could have gritted my teeth and coped with a night in the second or third base, but not in any of the bases deeper than that. After the third, they were obviously scarce on resources and dilapidated, which made people in those bases desperate. Long story short, they were lawless zones. If I had stayed the night at any of them, looking like a child traveling alone, I was all but guaranteed to be attacked in the middle of night.

The base at the Edge—where I was now—could hardly even be called a settlement. Structures here ranged from thrown-together huts to half broken tents. It was chiefly defended by human labor: barrier magic and patrols. A few wooden fences and barricades were scattered around the base, but none

looked like they could keep any of the forest's monsters at bay.

According to Ashton, hardly any adventurers stayed near the Edge. Even if they had some reason to come this deep into the forest, most of them would stay near the first base and its outskirts. Anyone who chose to put their lives at risk by staying in the lawless depths of the Sea of Trees had to be an exceptionally skilled adventurer, a hardcore recluse, or someone under dire circumstances that prevented them from living anywhere else.

All of that was running through my mind because I was currently being accosted by a colorful cast of characters. First, a trio of shabby-looking ruffians had blocked my path and started heckling.

"You're C-rank, huh? You know none of that matters here."

"This isn't kindergarten!"

"Give us all the food you got. Now."

"This is our turf, kid. You better pay the toll."

Then, a greasy middle-aged guy stepped in front of them as if to protect me...then turned right around and started lecturing me. "Y-You'll never make it on your own, you know. But I can keep you safe if you come with me..."

There's no use taking them seriously, I reminded myself. *It's a lot easier to ignore them until they run out of fumes.* I'd often employed the same tactic in my previous life, so I was a pro at it by now. The only difference was that I was almost always underestimated rather than envied in that life.

Soon, a crowd formed around me. Well, it at least felt like a group of twenty or so people constituted a crowd this deep into the Sea of Trees.

"You don't see that every day."

"Whatever trick he used to make it down here, it won't work on them."

"Tough luck that the kid ran into *those guys*."

To my surprise, they were not mere spectators. It didn't long for them to burst out in a betting frenzy, cackling at my expense.

"Hey, wanna bet on what happens to the kid? I got a slice of raptor jerky that

says the trio kills him.”

“I got two slices on Greaseball making a pet out of him. The kid has to have some sort of power if he made it this far. It’d be a waste to kill him off.”

“Well, gents, I’m in for a long shot. Four slices says the kid runs...and makes it out.”

One of the more *sensible* gamblers guffawed. “If you want to throw your money away, be my guest!”

Their jealousy, frustration, and animosity clung to my skin like humid heat. I thought for a moment to blame my curse for it, then reconsidered. This place was definitely just a nest of scumbags.

Maybe I should have gone the long way around, avoiding this base and its nonsense. But even a crummy place like this is a precious landmark. Even on relatively safe hikes on the mountains of Japan, plenty of people went missing every year because they veered off the trail under a false sense of security.

To prevent myself from getting lost in the woods and to make my return journey easier, I had been placing stone slimes along my route, which would allow me to jump back with Space magic if worse came to worst. Still, I had followed the official trail to minimize my risk of getting lost.

“Hey!” one of the shabby trio barked.

“Are you deaf, kid?!”

“Wanna die right now, you little punk?!”

Even the greasy guy chimed in. “Y-You need to listen when adults are talking. I better teach you a lesson!”

They must have run out of patience while I chose to save my breath. The four of them all reached for their weapons and took a step forward. As soon as their boots squelched in the mud, a voice boomed from beyond the crowd, drowning out the chattering. “Out of the way, bozos! You’re clogging up the street! I’ve heard enough of your squawking!”

Keeping one eye on my accosters, I glanced to the side to find a bizarre-looking man. His hair—which looked like he had dunked it in a bucket of red

paint—and stature of over two meters made him stand out enough, but his clothes were also peculiar compared to those of adventurers here: a rather ordinary leather outfit that didn't seem to provide any protection whatsoever. This deep in the forest, being in a base was hardly any more secure than wandering outside its borders. Everyone in the crowd was wearing some sort of armor except him, so his only tell as an adventurer was the enormous iron war hammer on his back.

Who is this guy? I wondered.

“G-Glen,” one of the goons muttered.

Another clicked his tongue in annoyance. “Why'd *he* have to show up?”

“Just because you're S-rank, it doesn't mean you own the place. What do you want?” the third snarled.

“You're Glen the S-rank adventurer?” I blurted out. Could he really be the same Glen that Sever had mentioned—the one who earned S-rank with nothing but brute strength? The fact that he was thriving here alone was a testament to his strength. On the other hand, his clothes were more like rags, and his hair and beard looked like they hadn't met a pair of shears or comb in ages. Even his gait seemed completely untrained, like he was any random dude.

No offense to him, but he looks more like a homeless guy than an adventurer. Maybe he's another Glen who looks just like the famous S-ranker.

“I want all of you to beat it. Out of the way,” Glen commanded.

“We're in the middle of something. You won't stand for a kid messing up our turf, will you?” a goon asked.

“Huh? Why should I care? It's up to the kid if he lives or dies. As long as he doesn't get in my way, I don't give a raptor's ass what he does.” Glen towered over the trio. “You know what? I'm walking around this place alone too. Any of you got a problem with that? I'll show you a real problem real fast.”

“Dammit, fine.”

Glen's threat scattered the crowd, and my accosters stepped aside without another word.

“Thank you,” I told him while I had the chance, eager to leave this place behind.

“Huh? I’m going out to hunt and they were in my way. That was no rescue, kid. It wasn’t like you needed one anyway,” Glen said with genuine disinterest, lightly stretching his legs. A moment later, he took off running at an incredible speed, splattering us all with mud and leaving us looking like we were standing next to a puddle when a truck drove by.

“Whoa!” one of them yelped.

Another spat dirt out of his mouth. “Dammit!”

“Not again!”

Apparently that was a frequent occurrence. Even though the encounter had left me intrigued, my first priority was to get out of the base. Using Dark magic during the commotion caused by the mud spray allowed me to escape successfully. From what I’d heard beforehand, that was the last “decent” base this side of the forest, so I wouldn’t be seeking out any more adventurers or bases.

From here on out, it’s the untamed wilderness. Every creature I encounter will be deadly, whether it’s human-shaped or not.

After leaving the base, I walked a few hours through the unchanging woods. Although I personally enjoyed quiet, repetitive tasks like this, I was sure that some people would have found the monotony of the forest unbearable.

As the sun began to set, I stopped to make camp for the night. Of course, I’d prepacked the Dimension Home with everything I’d need—from a cot to a patch of farmland and even my chicken coop. All I had to do now was set up some security measures to be extra careful.

“This should about do it,” I decided. “Cutting Tornado.” I’d chosen a sizable root on a tree a little ways off the beaten path to turn into the entrance, blowing away the underbrush around the trunk with a tornado of slicing wind. My spell wasn’t as powerful as Sever’s, but it could mow the lawn just fine. “Now, Dimension Home,” I cast. “You’re up, huge rock slime.” I brought out the

stone slime that was the equivalent of an emperor slime. Stone slimes evolved into big stone slimes, rock slimes, then huge rock slimes. Their names simply seemed to correlate to their size. The huge rock slime, for example, could pose as one of those tourist attractions in a natural park.

“Voilà! An instant home in twenty seconds!” I declared. Just having the huge rock slime shift its body to create a space within it meant that I had a bare-bones studio apartment with sturdy rock foundations. Not only that, but the slime could also keep watch and close up the entrance if it sensed danger approaching. If I needed to get out, it could make an opening for me on any side. The huge rock slime was potentially the best slime ever to camp out with.

“As convenient as Dimension Home is, it leaves me vulnerable when I go in and out of it.” That’s because I had no way of knowing what’s on the other side until I opened the portal. Without the huge rock slime, I’d run the risk of reopening Dimension Home into a pack of monsters. “But now I can sleep sound... Who am I talking to? I don’t mind traveling alone, but I guess I can’t break the habit of talking to myself. It never bothered me when I lived in the woods, though.”

Perhaps the last four days in the woods were wearing on me more than I’d realized. While the days seemed to fly by, I was only at the midway point between the entrance to the forest and Korumi village.

I should call it an early night and get some rest.

Chapter 9, Episode 13: Monsters in the Sea of Trees

I slept in a little longer the next morning, which helped me feel well and refreshed. Not even the residents of the base on the Edge seemed to venture this deep into the forest. There were no signs of a path, and I often had to slice my way through vines and tall grass. It would take a lot more time and effort to cover the second half of my journey. Still, the monsters of the Sea of Trees did not relent.

I raised my guard at an ugly squawk in the distance. My magic detection picked up a monster sprinting towards me, followed by countless raptors.

“Is that a—?” Just as I guessed its identity, the ostrichlike monster burst out of the trees, bolting right past me. Naturally, the raptors in pursuit of it would take notice of their new prey very soon.

“Paralyzing Mist. Spark Ball.” Before they could reach me, I cast both a Poison and Lightning spell into the air. Paralyzing Mist created a cloud of fast-acting poison that immobilized whatever inhaled it, and Spark Ball was condensed electricity that would shock everything in its vicinity on impact.

The raptors ran into the wall of magic I’d cast, but the spells weren’t as effective as I’d hoped. Through magic detection, I observed the raptors were slowed but not entirely incapacitated by the mist. Those affected by the poison were unable to dodge the sparks, though.

All that, and only three tenths of them went down, I noted. Spark Ball is plenty effective against humans, but a little underpowered against monsters.

There was a benefit to taking down a decent chunk of the raptors off the bat. The rear half of the pack—composed of the relatively less berserk raptors—turned and ran.

I can handle the two tenths left, as long as I don’t get sloppy.

I took care of raptor after raptor, trying my best to kill each of them quickly and painlessly. By the time I took care of the last one, the entire area was

covered in their carcasses, the air permeated by the smell of blood.

“Phew... That’s about fifty of them dead,” I counted. “I wonder how many there were in total, all chasing that one luring ostrich.”

Luring ostriches were native to the Sea of Trees but had no way of fighting off their dangerous predators. Instead, these bolting birds outran them. In fact, a luring ostrich used powerful pheromones to attract carnivorous monsters to chase its tail, only to run past its prey so the pack of monsters chasing it would turn their attention to the unsuspecting victim.

The luring ostrich was commonly described as the weakest but nastiest monster in the Sea of Trees. After being attacked by that flash flood of a raptor pack, I could see why. If I had let the incoming stampede unnerve me, I could have easily been trampled.

“I hate to waste them, but I should probably get moving without cleaning these raptors,” I decided. Luring ostriches always returned to the scene of the crime to feed on their prey. The last thing I wanted was for it to bring back another raptor pack when it did.

I’d walked without stopping until it was an hour or two after noon when I found a particularly large, natural boulder.

I consulted the directions to Korumi that the gods had written out for me. “Walking southeast from here should take me to a lake...”

After walking a while longer, every bit of vegetation except heatwood vanished from the forest shortly before I arrived at a clearing. What lay ahead of me had to be the “lake” that the gods had mentioned.

“I’d call this more of a swamp,” I said. There were muddy pockets here and there hosting aquatic weeds, but this general area needed a lot more water for me to call it a lake.

Still, it’s not easy terrain to walk in. Even now, the mud goes up to my ankles when I take a step. One wrong move, and I could get stuck. Better safe than sorry... I pulled out some mud slimes and the small boat I’d used to snowplow Gimul over winter, along with tools and supplies I was sure to need in this area.

“And we’re ready! All systems go!” Casting slime magic through the mud slimes, I used a torrent of mud to propel the boat. The boat wasn’t going as fast as it did when it was powered by water slimes, but it was smooth enough sailing for me. “I could go as fast as a race boat when I used water slimes, and now it’s like riding a normal motorboat... However fast that is.”

Either way, I was going much faster than slogging through mud on foot. With plenty of magic recovery potions onboard, I could sail right through the swamp. Of course, my experience in the forest so far told me that nothing about this journey would go as expected.

Sure enough, I detected something huge approaching me head-on through the mud. “It can never be easy, can it?!” I immediately swerved left, and an enormous jaw full of teeth—each the size of a human arm—appeared out of the muck, followed by the creature’s head and body. A gator about four meters long—the C-rank gallow moss alligator—swam at me. Horror stories were told of this monster and its jaws powerful enough to tear through adventurers and their heavy armor.

When it turned too quickly for its big stature and tried to chomp down on me, I teleported myself and the boat to safety, leaving behind one of the sticky bombs I’d made for this very purpose. It went off when the gator closed its mouth, gluing it shut as the monster chewed on the substance. Its bellow muffled, the gator began thrashing. While a gator’s jaw closed with devastating force, its opening strength was weaker. There was a chance that the sticky bomb wouldn’t have been effective had the gator swallowed it whole, or had its saliva diluted the sticky solution. Lucky for me, it worked exactly as intended. Now that the gator was confused and lying still, I teleported above its head and plunged my sword into it. A gallow moss alligator wasn’t a threat as long as I could pull this sequence off.

In the end, I made it out of the swamp in four hours, including the time spent cleaning the gator. I decided to call it a day at the edge of the swamp.

The next morning, I walked for about an hour and came to another swamp. Apparently, the patch of dry land I had made camp on was a sort of islet in the

muddy, so-called lake.

I feel like an explorer traveling up the Amazon river... Not that I have any firsthand experience. Actually, “exploring” the Sea of Trees means either traveling endlessly or taking on monsters.

I mud-sailed for another two hours to, hopefully, make it out of the swamp for good. After beaching on solid ground, I moved to stow my boat when I sensed something. I leapt back a step without hesitating. With a rustling of leaves, something fell out of the tree and landed on my boat, splattering mud all over.

“This really isn’t my lucky week...” I grumbled.

The fallen object slithered atop the boat—a green snakelike monster as thick as a tree trunk. There were several snake monsters native to the Sea of Trees, but only one grew big enough to swallow several men whole in one gulp—the A-rank immortal snake.

I shouldn’t be in their habitat yet. I’d have to walk another week towards the center of the forest to get there, I calculated pointlessly.

“Chalk it up to bad luck,” I muttered.

Reacting to my voice, the snake leapt off the boat and slithered right at me. It lifted its head, striking me like a whip. It was even faster than the gator, but I could deal with that. Dodging its bite, I slashed at its underbelly.

I clicked my tongue in frustration seeing that my blade had barely cut its flesh. The immortal snake’s resilience and healing would be much more difficult to contend with. With no sign of the cut slowing it down, the serpent began to coil. With an energy-boosted leap, I escaped what would be a death grip. Shifting energy into my blade, I brought it down upon the snake as I landed, marking a much deeper cut than the first. Yet, the monster immediately countered with the whip of its tail. In the brief moment I spent dodging the tailwhip, the snake’s wound almost entirely healed.

This one’s a lot trickier. But I can take it down. “Cutting Tornado.” The spell tore down trees and brushes, giving me a more open battleground. While I was at it, I made sure to mark a nearby tree so I could return to this place if the

battle took me off course.

The snake hissed, going for another bite. It wasn't difficult to dodge the attack a second time and counter with an Ice-coated swing of the blade. Despite not cutting as deep as the last one, the freezing blade proved far more effective. The snake let out a raging hiss, slithering into position. It no longer saw me as prey, but a threat. Enraged, the immortal snake moved faster than ever: leaping, biting, coiling, and slithering in and out of the heatwood trees. I couldn't deny it had the home field advantage.

I continued to avoid its attacks and inflict icy cuts on its body, but none proved lethal. At most, the magic merely slowed its healing.

If slicing its body won't do any good...

I waited for the right moment: when the snake started to coil right after a bite. With all my strength, I brought my sword down onto the snake's head. Pumping energy into the blade, I pushed through and managed to sever its head from the rest of the body. But the immortal snake still didn't die. More violently than ever, the snake head hissed at me, making me jump. Its body, too, writhed uncontrollably like an earthworm on scorching asphalt. I wanted to destroy its head as quickly as possible, but I had to put some distance between me and the thrashing body.

"How does that even work?" I blurted out, watching the snake regrow its body from its severed head. Surviving decapitation for a while would have been one thing, but this was utterly bizarre. *Maybe this thing's not a snake but a planarian*, I wondered.

A monster's difference in rank signified a drastic difference in threat level, especially for C-rank and above. The last A-rank monster I'd encountered was Reinbach's ignis dragon, so A-ranks really seemed like a cut above the rest.

In a few moments, the immortal snake had regrown its body and tail. At least the tail didn't regrow a head. Still, I was fighting a losing battle.

"Exchange." I sheathed my sword and used the Space spell to summon a new weapon into my hand. This silver lance a little under a meter and a half long was a special iron slime I had kept in the Dimension Home. It was something of a trump card—no creature in this world would survive it. "Sorry," I told the

snake. “I don’t have all day.”

The monster stopped moving as if it instinctively sensed the lance’s lethality. It remained silent, but it was brimming with anger and wariness. It didn’t slither away. Instead, it lifted its head, swayed to and fro, then made its final attack.

I avoided the rapid strike, countering with the lance. Once the lance pierced the snake, I let go of it. The snake stared at the spear in its belly, then me, before rolling belly-up and starting to twitch. That reaction told me that my secret weapon had been effective.

After waiting until I was sure the immortal snake was dead, I retrieved the lance. “Great job,” I told it, and the iron slime reverted to its true form as bloody slimes gushed from the snake’s wound.

I’d concocted a brutal weapon, if I do say so myself. The iron slime lance had a hollow core that I had stuffed with bloody slimes that would suck the target’s blood dry after impact. Nothing with blood in its veins, human or monster, would survive it. As powerful as this weapon was, I’d have to handle it with care. Besides, I didn’t plan to over rely on it and let myself get rusty.

“I’ll only reach for you when I need you,” I said.

This also meant that I couldn’t take on an A-rank monster in a fair fight yet. I moved towards the immortal snake to try and clean it when I sensed something approaching from the woods. Immediately, I braced myself for another battle as a figure emerged.

“You’re—” I started.

“Hey, kid. I know that face,” a familiar, red-haired hulk greeted me.

Chapter 9, Episode 14: Rollercoaster

The hulking man who appeared out of the woods with his war hammer slung over his shoulder was—if I could trust the words of those I encountered at the last base—the S-rank adventurer Glen. With nothing but brute strength, the warrior had earned both the moniker of Raging Dragon and the pinnacle rank of adventurers that was reserved for those who made lifelong contributions to the world at large. All I knew about him came from what I'd been told in the City of Lost Souls...

"Some call me the strongest knight in history," Sever had told me. "The strongest knight of our time, however, is Glen." Sever had served as Glen's opponent during the Raging Dragon's S-rank trial, and lost. His defeat was one of the catalysts for him to seriously consider retirement, Sever had added.

Comparing the strengths of any two fighters—who wielded different weapons and strategies—was no easy equation, but it seemed like I could expect Glen to be as fierce a fighter as Sever, at least.

As I contemplated my next move in the S-rank adventurer's presence, he asked, "Did you kill that snake?"

"Yes. It attacked me," I answered. "Was it your game?"

"Nah. It doesn't die easy, does it? I've killed a few myself. It's such a chore every time. And by the time it's dead, it's nothing but mashed meat. Nothing left to sell. I'm impressed you killed it so cleanly," he said, circling the dead snake and taking it in with genuine interest. Then, he suddenly turned to me. "Cool. Do you mind if I punch you?"

"Did you think I wouldn't?" I blurted out, taken aback by his sudden leap in thought. Maybe something irritated him, and the emotion was amplified by the curse on me. I quickly explained all this to Glen, hoping he'd see reason.

"Whatever curse you're talking about, it doesn't matter. I got nothing against you. Actually, I kind of like you," said the Raging Dragon.

“Really?”

“Yeah. That’s why I want to punch you.”

“You want to punch me because you like me?” I asked.

“It’s fun fighting against a good match.”

“And...?” While I struggled to comprehend him, Glen just beamed at me. True to his word, I didn’t sense a hint of animosity in his smile. He really wanted to fight me for no other reason. *He’s a berserker*, I realized. *They really do exist...* I’d come across all sorts of people in this world, but none had been like him. “Why’d I have to run into someone like this in the depths of the woods of all places?”

“You said that out loud,” Glen pointed out.

Sorry. “When we first met, you didn’t seem all that interested in me,” I said.

“Where’s the fun in fighting losers who won’t go past that place?” he countered, as if it were self-explanatory.

From his point of view, the people of that base weren’t worth his time, and he’d considered me on the same level as them...until he saw that I’d come this far and taken out an immortal snake all on my own. “Now you think I have a chance of being worth your time,” I said.

“Exactly. All right, let’s fight!”

“I never said I would.”

“Man, you’re cramping my style...” Glen grumbled. “Fine. *One* punch. You can’t say no to that.” Would he ever say anything *not* insane?

“I can hit you back, right?” While I wasn’t too keen on going along with the unreasonable challenge, it might be more work for me to talk sense into a guy like this. If a quick sparring session would satisfy and get him out of my hair, great. If he was going to attack me for real, I’d deal with him the same way I dealt with people and monsters who became a threat, S-rank or not. It still didn’t sit right with me, but I wanted to get this over with.

Apparently, my words were exactly what he was hoping to hear. “No duh. What’s the fun in you not fighting back?”

“That again...” I sighed, tossing my lance a good distance aside.

“You’re not going to use that thing?”

“It’s a fistfight, isn’t it?” I pointed out.

“It would have been A-OK with me. But this is more fun!” Glen chucked his war hammer with gleeful abandon, and began rolling his arms and shoulders. Then, he picked a small branch off of the ground. “We start when this thing hits the ground. Cool?”

“That’s fine.”

“Here we go!” Standing a few meters away from me, he made a slight motion, as if merely tossing the branch over his shoulder. However, the branch rocketed all the way to the top of the heatwood trees—which must have been no shorter than forty meters—before finally beginning its descent. The instant the branch hit the ground, a fist was in front of my face. All he’d done was come at me with a right punch, straight and simple. There were no tricks beyond bolstering himself with energy.

I moved on instinct, but his simple punch packed far too much force behind it. As soon as my right palm hit his forearm to deflect it, I knew I didn’t have enough strength to do so. Even though I’d managed to get my left hand as well, all I could manage was to twist away by making our point of contact a fulcrum. By a hair’s breadth, I’d dodged the punch. Feeling cold sweat on my cheek, I threw a full-force kick into his unguarded ribs. I had no time or intention to hold back at all, but the impact I felt on my foot told me I’d done no more damage than a light tap. Using the momentum of my foot being pushed back by his muscles, I managed to put some distance between us. After a successful dodge and counterattack, all I had to show for it was the slight tingling in my hands and foot. There was something else just as astonishing, though.

“He’s that fast with zero technique?” I couldn’t believe it. His punch had no subtlety or sign of any training. He seemed like he’d fought his fair share of fights, but almost as a street thug instead of any kind of martial artist.



A simple punch with no tricks beyond using physical energy nearly caved my face in. My shock began to ebb, rolling back into admiration for the unbelievable strength of an S-rank.

“Gah! Dammit! I screwed it up!” Glen shouted. I readied myself for a fight, but he only kept barking, “It would have been more fun if I’d given up a few more hits! But I was the one who said one punch... Oh, well. It’s over.”

Apparently, he wasn’t going to fight me further, and didn’t even seem that upset about this outcome. He was apparently the type to adhere to his own rules and promises, even if he didn’t really listen to others when they talked. As much of a pain as he was to deal with, he wasn’t a sinister slime bag like the guys at the base on the Edge.

Seeing how frustrated he was, I couldn’t help but ask, “You want to fight me that badly?”

“Huh? Of course I do. Most of the time, I don’t need more than one punch. They can’t dodge it. They just go flying. Once in a while, I find someone who can take a hit, but they can’t hit back. You know how rare it is to find someone like you? I’m missing out by not fighting you right now,” he grumbled, like he couldn’t stand to be bored anymore.

“Oh...” *I figured him out*, I thought. *He’s too strong*. He was so strong that even most people who fought for a living—let alone anyone who didn’t—never stood a chance against him. Because most of his fights ended in one hit, he asked to punch me—not to fight me. For him, it was much rarer to get into an actual fight.

“And then the eyes,” Glen added. “Even the ones who can take a punch lose their will to fight after I punch them. At that point, it’s no different from punching out someone in one hit. You know the type. Like the guys who were squawking when we first met.”

“Oh, at the base,” I confirmed.

“Ever since I beat the crap out of them, they won’t start anything. They’ll yap that rank doesn’t matter until they run for the hills when they get one whiff of a rematch with me,” he snarled.

Those guys at the base really did have weasel energy. They weren't weak by any means, but stronger than most thugs or thieves I'd encountered outside of the forest. And yet, they'd turned into sniveling cowards in Glen's presence. Glen's point was that those guys would never try to punch up.

"But you were ready to fight me when I started shouting," he said. "Unlike those chickens, you kept both feet on the ground, like you think you could kick my ass if I gave you a reason to. You have more cards up your sleeves, don't you?"

That was a little surprising. He'd seemed carefree, like he paid the world around him no mind at all, but now...it seemed that there was more to this S-rank adventurer than met the eye.

Like he said, as absurdly powerful as Glen was, I had a few ideas on how to deal with him. I could retrieve the bloodsucker lance instantaneously with Space magic at any time, and I could also wield the mud around us through the mud slimes that still remained in the area. Even if I couldn't defeat him, I was sure I could manufacture enough of an opening for me to flee with Space magic.

"Ha! I like you more and more," said Glen. "You're saying you'll kick my ass if I give you the chance. Gah! I really should have made it last longer!" He bellowed to the sky, scratching his mud-speckled head. Then, like a shrimp snapping up, he turned his eyes to me. "What's your name? I never asked."

There was a light in his eyes that gave me a really bad feeling about answering him, but I did. "Ryoma Takebayashi."

"All right, Ryoma! I'm going to tag along for a while!"

"Why?!" I'd missed my chance to run—not that I'd really had a chance—and my encounter with the S-rank Raging Dragon ended in a worse fashion than I could have imagined.

Chapter 9, Episode 15: Glen the S-Ranker

Despite not knowing the way, Glen the S-Rank adventurer plowed through the woods without hesitation, bellowing with laughter. “This makes the walk a lot easier!”

Since he practically gave me no choice but to walk through the forest with him, I had no reservations about letting him lead the way and double as a human shield...or a bulldozer, by the way he cleared a path by wiping out weeds and vines with every swing of his hand. Even though I was using soil slime magic to make it easier to uproot the vegetation, it was an impressive display of strength.

“Are you sure you want to go with me?” I asked. “I won’t ask you not to—I’ve given up on that—but don’t you have a quest, or, *anything* to do?”

“As long as there’s monsters to hunt, I don’t care where I go. I was just wandering around when I bumped into you, and it’s all the better if you’re headed deeper into the woods. Some of the monsters we’ll run across are bound to fetch a good price. Besides, you won’t catch me taking quests from the guild without good reason. I go where I want, when I want, and fight whoever I want. I’m not dealing with the guild and their endless lists of ‘go here’ and ‘hunt that.’ I make enough by throwing the monsters I’ve killed to the guild and letting them handle the rest. And once you’re S-rank, they’ll lend you cash anytime, no questions asked. They almost never bug you about paying them back either,” he said.

“It sounds like you regularly borrow money.”

“Oh, yeah. This time, I apparently racked up more than usual. My lender came begging. I was in a slump for a while, staying in the city. With all the food, booze, and chicks... Who knows how much I spent?”

He was out here to repay his debts, but didn’t even know how much he had to repay. And he’d accumulated those debts just so he could party away. Apparently, he was an S-rank jerk too. Both in strength and character, Glen was

something else. *I thought I'd been acting selfishly lately.* Compared to him, I was an altruist.

The S-rank grunted in frustration again. "Can't remember. Whatever. I'm going to pay it back, anyway. They wouldn't be lending me money if they thought I wasn't good for it."

"Sure, but won't they take advantage of you if you don't know how much you owe them?"

"No problem. You just have to go beat the crap out of anyone who tries to rip you off. Soon enough, no one will try!" he boasted.

I shouldn't have expected anything less brutish from him. If he hadn't been protected by his S-rank status, he would have been imprisoned on assault charges. Then again, maybe I was looking at it the wrong way. Regardless of his rank, Glen might have only been a free man because of his absurd strength.

"Anyone who seeks you out for a fight must be as reckless as you are," I said.

"You think so, huh? There's a good number of them," he said.

"Really?"

"The ones that try to make a name for themselves by beating me aren't so bad. They fight me fair and square, and they don't try again after I punch them out. The ones I hate are the leeches, going on and on about this opportunity or that, trying to get rich off of me. Ever since I got S-rank, there's been more and more— Something's coming at us. Ahead," he added casually.

After counting slowly to ten, I finally detected the monster horde he was talking about. Just as I wondered how far his detection reached, he gave me more information about them. "There could be a big one in the back, Ryoma. Let's clean up the little ones in the front first!"

"You got it!" I answered, just as raptors jumped out of the woods in all directions. Because of our position, I readied myself to take on the ones that circled through the woods to flank us from behind.

"Out of the way!" Glen bellowed, whirling his giant war hammer and mowing down a handful of raptors. One that had been spared the hammer leapt at him,

biting down on his arm. “Your breath stinks!” With the shake of that arm—without so much as wincing—Glen sent the raptor flying and crashing into a heatwood tree.

Watching him fight, I was beginning to understand how he was so strong. Just as I’d guessed from our brief battle, he was bolstering his strength with physical energy. It was entirely possible for him to be wielding some other power I wasn’t aware of, but the primary source of his strength was undoubtedly physical energy—channeled with incredible expertise. No physical energy fighter I knew, myself included, could completely contain the physical energy coursing through their body, resulting in some amount of it trickling out during battle. When a fighter prepared a powerful attack, the leak became particularly visible, like rising steam.

Glen, on the other hand, didn’t let a single drop of energy leak as he fought. There was no doubt that he was utilizing it—his speed and strength would have been impossible to achieve otherwise—but none of it was being wasted. He wielded physical energy at maximum efficiency, and that showed in his defense as well as offense. Glen didn’t bother to dodge or block the raptor fangs and talons that would have been lethal against the average adventurer. It’s no wonder he wore no armor—there was no armor more durable than his bolstered body.

“Take care of the small ones, Ryoma! The big one’s mine! If you’ve got the free time to keep glancing at me while you fight, you’ll have no problem wiping them out!” Without waiting for my confirmation, he leapt forward—literally. He jumped several meters with a single move, then zigzagged through the heatwood trees without touching the ground, using their trunks as footholds. Following his aerial path ahead, I spotted the leader of this particular pack. Each raptor here was much bigger and stronger than the ones on the rim of the Sea of Trees, but Glen’s target was so enormous that its head poked out from the thick branches of trees above.

Before even half a minute had passed, though, a gurgled roar sounded through the woods. Glen had made quick work of the monstrous pack leader. With their leader slain, the few remaining raptors scattered into the woods.

After collecting the carcasses of the raptors I took out, I followed Glen’s

grunts into the woods to meet up with him. Beside him lay a tyrant raptor—an advanced species of the raptor—with its head smashed in. The enormous monster encased in thick scales reminded me of the T. rex from the dinosaur movies I’d watched on Earth.

“I’d heard of the tyrant raptor, but I didn’t realize it would be so big,” I said.

“It’s not hard to take it down,” Glen said. “It’s got more muscle than the little ones, but it’s slower for it. Unlike the snake you fought earlier, it stays dead too. It’s a good moneymaker.” He was dragging the carcass into a small fanny pack he wore under his shirt. It was bizarre to watch a T. rex carcass being stowed into that tiny pack—comically so, in contrast to Glen’s stature—with the help of Space magic that it must have been imbued with. “Did you figure out why I’m so strong?” he asked suddenly, apparently in reference to me watching him earlier. When I honestly explained what I took away from him, he laughed heartily. “Going back to what we were talking about, plenty of wannabe fighters—adventurer or not—come up to me, asking how I got so strong. How they could train to be like me. Why should I teach them jack? It’s annoying because they think they’re entitled to advice.”

“Okay. I would be annoyed too,” I admitted.

“I don’t get how to *use* physical energy either. I was just born this way.”

“So you’re doing that subconsciously?”

“Guess so,” the S-ranker said nonchalantly. “It’s really rare, apparently. I’m not a scholar or anything, but physical energy is just your life force, pretty much. Everyone has it. The technique comes with controlling it—making it do what you want it to do.”

So his physical energy was always on. Even now, when we were just talking, his body was as powered up as it was during the battle. Because of the continuous application of physical energy, Glen went on to explain, he was protected from all sorts of threats when exploring the woods.

For example, I protected myself from leeches and venomous insects in the woods by covering most of my skin and applying special bug repellent. Glen’s skin was simply impervious to stingers and teeth. Even when something managed to break his skin, he added, the minor injuries or venom had no effect

on him. Even when it did have an effect on him, he was cured of it in minutes.

“Your physical energy boosts your immune system and self-healing too...” I interpreted.

So far, the physical energy channeling Glen was born with sounded like an extraordinary gift for the lucky brute, but he went on to add that it had its drawbacks. Like he said, energy was a form of life force—their internal strength. Expending it would lead to exhaustion, or even death in serious cases. Being drained of magical energy caused adverse physical symptoms like that of an illness. Physical energy drain affected the body in a similar way, just more severely. Most people who manipulated physical energy—myself included—would pass out before the expenditure caused any serious damage.

Glen had no control over his physical energy, though. He couldn’t turn it off, even if he were to pass out. When he was growing up, the constant flow of physical energy became a strain on his body, the boost in his strength preventing his muscles from growing naturally. His condition was so rare that no one had a clue how to treat it. His parents—who were commonborn and far from wealthy—could only try and feed him as much as they could so he could replenish some of the constantly draining energy.

Glen went on to say that he and his parents were mistreated in his village because of it. “Mom and pops would always say that the villagers were happy to help us. I was too young, so I only remember how annoyed they looked. After crappy harvests, some of them told off my parents. ‘There’s no extra food for a kid who could drop dead any day. The sooner the better, so there’s more food for us,’ or something like that. That got me to start hunting monsters outside the village for food, so I soon had plenty to eat. But then a bunch of them came out of the woodwork, demanding I share my game with them to repay them. Just so I’m clear, we never took food for free. Mom always paid a fair price, and pops—he was a blacksmith—took on jobs for close to nothing in return. Pops once said that he could go out into town and fetch five times the price he was offering the folks at our village. But I don’t hold a grudge against any of them. Mom and pops agreed to a price and paid it to feed me. There’s nothing I could say to take that back. By the same token, that was all business. And now they’re asking for charity? Tell me they’re not entitled pricks for that!”

“I know the type,” I admitted. “And the type who try to push off the hard work on others and reap the reward for themselves.”

“Right? When those types swarm around you, it pisses me off. It’s the same thing as starting a fight, whether they see it that way or not,” Glen said, no hint in tone that he was bothered by those events in his past. It seemed that he really was over those experiences, and was just making a point with them. “Humans are pretty much the same, anyway. The whole world’s full of selfish pricks, so why should I hold back? I do what I want, when I want, how I want. That makes life fun and easy.”

I considered his words. To be honest, I saw where he was coming from. I’d made myself a hermit in the woods because I’d grown tired of human society too. I didn’t have it boiled down quite so clearly as Glen had, but I couldn’t really argue against his philosophy...not that I intended to.

“I do agree that it’s more fun,” I conceded.

“Oh? We’re more alike than I thought. I would have pegged you for more of a stick in the mud.”

“Most people are sticks in the mud compared to you.”

Glen guffawed. “You got me there, Ryoma! I’ve never met anyone as easygoing as me!”

I pretty much insulted you... I thought, noticing how Glen had a habit of skipping a few steps in conversations. But it never felt like he was hiding or lying about anything. If he was laughing, he really wasn’t offended by my comment.

Glen’s voice continued to ring through the dangerous depths of the forest. Although unexpected, I was beginning to enjoy my outrageous new companion.

Chapter 9, Episode 16: Camping Out with Glen

On our way to Korumi village, Glen and I came to a wide, murky river.

“We’re gonna cross here?” Glen asked.

“No. We’re going to follow the river upstream for a while,” I said.

“This way, huh?” Glen began confidently stomping along the river with me in tow. “Pretty far, this place. Even I haven’t been this deep into the woods.”

“Do you come to the Sea of Trees often?” I asked.

“I wouldn’t say often. It’s a good place to make a few quick bucks because I don’t have to go looking for strong monsters—they find me.”

“Not many places are teeming with A-and B-rank monsters... What a hellscape this forest is,” I added in realization.

Glen scoffed. “Says the kid who’s walking through the place like it’s his backyard.”

“After coming back here and seeing it with a fresh pair of eyes, I can see that it’s no place for a well-adjusted person.” The Sea of Trees was pretty much uninhabitable for humans. It finally clicked with me why my mentioning having lived in Korumi or of my intention to return there was met with such surprise. Anyone who knew what this forest was like would rightfully doubt my sanity for wanting to go back.

Suddenly, branches the size of average tree trunks threatened to crush us from above while roots like jagged spikes shot out of the ground below. I evaded both attacks with Space magic and sliced into the massive tree before me, sending a blade of air up along the trunk to sever a burl high up. At the same time, I heard a splintering boom from the next tree over. The branches and roots halted where they were.

“Damn, I did it again,” Glen muttered as he climbed down from the tree, not sounding too concerned.

“Are you okay?” I asked anyway.

“I’m not hurt, if that’s what you’re worried about. I put a little too much force behind it.” Glen held up his giant war hammer—bent halfway down the shaft. Judging by how sturdy the war hammer looked and the sound of an impact that resembled a cannon blast, he’d put in more than “a little” too much force.

“I don’t think you can bend that back,” I said.

“It’s supposed to be the toughest make in the royal capital’s weapon shop. Still too brittle.” Glen added that, because his use of physical energy was done subconsciously, he struggled with manipulating the flow of energy consciously. As a result, his physical energy boosted body often overpowered his weapon. He chucked the broken war hammer into his fanny pack like he’d done it a hundred times before.

“Do you have a spare?” I asked.

“That *was* my spare. No sweat. If I don’t have a hammer, I’ll throw my fist around.”

Apparently, he’s broken at least one other war hammer on this outing. He’d be just fine, I was sure. He’d have no problem brute-forcing through the forest like he had so far. “Any tool’s a hammer,” as the saying goes.

“That one was a tie,” Glen said.

“We’re not in a race,” I reminded him. “What do you want to do about these treants? Elder treants, maybe, seeing how big they are...”

“Either way, they take up too much space. Even my pack won’t fit the loot from them on top of all the monsters I’ve killed so far,” Glen said.

“Same goes for my Space magic.”

These twin treants—if I could call them that—spawned from a pair of giant heatwood trees that would take a good while to loot. *Maybe we should leave them behind and come back later if we have the chance... Wait a minute.* “We should camp here,” I suggested.

“Sure. Monsters might skirt around treant territory.”

“Their roots are firmly planted, so they won’t crush us overnight. We have a

water source too—that stream nearby.”

“All right, it’s your call. I don’t know the way to where you’re going.” Glen pulled out a thick drape of fabric from his fanny pack and wrapped it around him like a cape. He rolled onto one of the heatwood treant’s roots.

“You’re not going to sleep like that, are you?” I asked.

“Sure am.”

Glen’s idea of camping out was so haphazard that a normal adventurer would have been eaten alive by bugs and leeches in his place. This was just another entry in Glen’s series of feral tactics to pierce through the Sea of Trees. Earlier, he’d let himself get drenched in the rain only to shake himself off like a dog once it let up. When I’d asked how he was going to deal with hypothermia, his only answer was “food and willpower.” He’d survived so far, so who was I to judge him? He wouldn’t catch me doing the same, though.

On second thought, I decided to summon a huge rock slime and had it turn into a makeshift hut. I wouldn’t be able to relax for the night if I’d left my traveling companion exposed to the elements.

“A slime room, huh? I didn’t even think of that. Plenty of adventurers whip up a wall with Earth magic, to shield them from the wind, but that’s about it.” Glen was walking in circles around the hut to take it in, just like he’d done with the immortal snake. He seemed more interested in my idea of camping out now.

Maybe I’ll spruce it up a bit, I thought. The interior’s all up to my slime, so there’s not much I can change. To make it more comfortable... I knew what to try. I summoned filter slimes through Space magic and put them in the hut’s air hole. Once I asked the huge rock slime to adjust the size of it, I had a sort of screen window that doubled as an air purifier. It would keep bugs out and could still be closed up quickly if a monster were to come sniffing. Then, I placed a bucket in front of the air hole.

“You’re gonna eat that ice?” Glen asked, peeking his head out of the entrance.

Okay, the content of the bucket kind of looked like shaved ice, but... “They’re slimes,” I said. Specifically, an ice slime evolved in the cold wave over New

Year's and a snow slime I'd been given by those kids I'd saved from kidnapping. "Both of them hate the heat and love the cold, but their natures are slightly different."

The ice slime was better at staying cold and preventing itself from melting, making it the more heat-resistant of the two, with a preference for Ice and Water. Its gelid body could cool its very immediate surroundings—a block of ice that wouldn't melt too quickly. On the other hand, the snow slime was more susceptible to heat. With an affinity for Ice, Water, and Wind, this pile of snow could produce a slight flow of air—it could cool a decent area.

"What does any of that mean?" Glen asked.

"Let me just show you. Step inside for me."

Once Glen was inside, I had the huge rock slime close up the entrance and set up a light to illuminate the pitch-dark interior. Then I asked the snow slime to feed itself—powdery snow swirled from it.

"Oh?"

"Can you tell the difference?" I asked.

"Yeah, it's cooler in here," Glen answered. "No, it's just not muggy like it is outside."

"The snow slime is dehumidifying the hut."

Heat and humidity were two of the worst contributors to exhaustion in the woods. Humidity—or water in the air—could be condensed into rain or frozen into snow. The snow slime making a meal out of humidity-turned-snow made the air in the hut drier.

"The smaller the room, the more effective. Its purpose is only to gather water in the air, and it'll weaken if I push it too far. I'm protecting the snow slime with the colder ice slime next to it. A layer of barrier magic helps keep the air in too."



I let a magic barrier that kept coldness in without choking the airflow cocoon the two slimes in their bucket, and powdery snow began to fall from a tiny cloud within it. If the slimes had been kept in a glass sphere instead of a wooden bucket, it would have been a snow globe.

“Yeah! Feels like I’m outside the forest!” Glen cheered.

“High humidity on its own can feel awful,” I said. “The entryway is closed right now, but the slime will open one for you if you want to leave. Just put your hand on the wall.”

Now that I’d checked shelter off the list, I moved on to food—a quick and dirty instant meal. It was too cramped in the hut—because Glen was too massive—so I decided to heat it up outside. A quick Wind-magic mowing and Earth-magic paving turned our little clearing in the Sea of Trees into a campsite. Once I started a fire and set a pot of water on it, I just had to wait for our meal to heat while I had a cleaner slime wash me from head to toe.

Glen groaned. “Mrm— This stuff is great! I didn’t think I’d get my hands on food this good here!”

“Chew with your mouth closed, at least. And I have plenty more where it came from,” I said. There was a gluttonous look in his eye as soon as he opened the pouch I gave him, and he’d been inhaling the food after his first bite. In this kind of environment, even food on par with a simple, home-cooked meal could feel like a three-star dining experience. By the looks of it, the S-rank adventurer would agree with me. “I’m glad you like it, though. I almost expected you to turn your nose at it and whip out a filet mignon from your pack.”

“If I did, it’d be cold. And rotten. If it’s only going to be a day or two, I might pack some fresh food from town, but it’s only dried meat and bread if I’m going in for a long time. This is some sort of ration, right? Where’d you get it?” Glen asked.

“Through a connection I have with a certain noble,” I answered vaguely. “They’re not on the open market.”

“Cool,” Glen said. “That certain noble doesn’t mind you showing it off?”

“They’ve told me that they would rather have me save my energy than try to

keep this secret by wasting time cooking meals I don't have to or settling for poor-quality rations," I explained. The Jamils told me this because they were primarily concerned with my well-being, but even from a strictly business standpoint, losing me and all my ventures would be a lot worse than leaking the secret of one proprietary invention. Besides, the other day they'd told me that they were going to expedite the manufacturing of these pouches because of the monster attacks and extreme weather last year. The pouches had been experimentally used as food aid for neighboring nations and had been given to Sever and Remily on their adventures.

"No trouble, huh? That makes it go down easier," he said, cheeks stuffed with food, without a hint of concern. Suddenly, he pulled out an ornate liquor bottle from his fanny pack and popped its cork. It was such a fluid, natural movement that it took me a second to realize he was chugging it straight from the bottle. I held my tongue, though. This was hardly out of character for him. I doubted that he'd die from it. *If he's passed out in the morning, I'm leaving him behind.*

"Ahh! You need a good drink to go with good food!" Glen exclaimed, thoroughly enjoying what looked to be a strong and expensive liquor. Then a thought seemed to cross his mind—a rare occasion—and he reached into his fanny pack.

"What are you looking for?" I asked.

"This stuff is good, but I'm craving more meat. I thought I had some more dried meat in here..."

Knowing that his unique gift made him burn a ridiculous amount of calories, I'd already prepared ten pouches for him—apparently, that wasn't enough. *Immortal snake meat is edible*, I recalled. *It'll still be some time until I'm out of the Sea of Trees. Better to make good use of it now.* I asked the grave slime carrying the immortal snake carcass to spit out the headless carcass for me, saving the rest of the carcass for later. Cutting up the huge serpent alone would be quite the task.

While I was taking on cleaning and cooking the snake, its smell drew in several monsters that were promptly chased off by Glen. He might have been free-spirited and unpredictable, but I couldn't deny he made for a trusty ally.

Wow, that looks good. As soon as I dropped the bâtonnet-cut snake meat onto the heated metal plate, fat sizzled off of it. Even without any added spices, grilled immortal snake smelled as appetizing as a yakitori skewer dipped in sauce.

“How much longer?” Glen asked, staring intently at the hot plate, having been lured back into the hut by the scrumptious aroma.

“I don’t know how long to cook them for best results. As long as they’re cooked through, they should be good,” I said.

I took a bite out of one of the seared bâtonnets—it practically melted in my mouth without being too fatty. “It’s delicious,” I said.

“Yeah, it’s written all over your face! Gimme some!”

“Let’s cook as much as we can,” I agreed, adding more and more meat onto the hot plate. With just a little pinch of salt and pepper, I could eat a thousand pieces of the delicious snake that wasn’t gamey at all.

“Now *this* calls for a great drink!” Glen said, then his expression soured. “What a waste... I’ve been crushing these things into a pulp.”

“You did turn yours into a patty,” I joked.

“Blades just break against them. By the time I kill it, it’s usually a dirt-and-meat-ball. I’ve never tried eating that before.”

We kept eating the delicious snake, until Glen finished his liquor and reached into his pack for another. “I’m almost out of booze too... You got any, Ryoma?”

“If you don’t mind home-brewed liquor.”

Glen laughed. “I should have asked what you don’t have! How much of it?”

“Just the batches that are ready for consumption? More than you can count.” I briefly explained how my goblin familiars were on a distilling kick, obsessively stocking up the stuff inside my Dimension Home.

When I passed him a two-liter bottle of white liquor, Glen chugged the whole thing in one go. “Not bad. Tastes good. Hits good. It goes down easy, and...it *seeps* through you, or whatever. I like it. How much do you want for it?” The look on his face did a much better job at conveying how much he liked the stuff

than his words did.

That feeling he mentioned was probably due to the nutrients in the liquor. White liquor was distilled much like Japanese sake was, and a fresh batch had a similar taste and nutrients—like amino acids—as sweet sake. Back in the Edo period, cold sweet sake was a popular drink in the summer. A bottle of cold white liquor should have been just as effective of a coolant.

How much did I want to charge for it? No idea. I told Glen that I'd never intended to do anything with these except drink them myself, and he took out five more bottles of the liquor he'd started with. "Then trade me for the rest of mine. I never looked at how much they cost, but I went to the best liquor shop in town and told them to give me something good, whatever the price, so it should be decent stuff. For your batch plus the food. What do you say?"

"I can get fifty bottles right now. Double by tomorrow," I offered.

"You got a deal!"

I gave him all the bottled white liquor I had from my Item Box. Neither of us knew the value of either side of the trade, but that kept things nice and simple. As long as we were both happy with it, there was no math involved.

"Oh, if you're looking to buy some in the future, you should go to Fatoma. It tastes so much better when it's made by professional distillers," I said.

"Fatoma, huh? I've heard of the place, I think, but I've never been. Might be worth a trip."

Then, chugging liquor and chowing down meat, Glen went on to tell me a lot of stories about his adventuring. None of them were very instructive. In fact, I was confident that only he could have gotten away with many of the things he did. But the stories were entertaining nonetheless.

There was just the two of us in a hut in the depths of the forest. Because he was so self-centered, I didn't bother trying to be too polite. Occasionally chasing off monsters, we continued our raucous, easygoing barbecue late into the night.

Chapter 9, Episode 17: Homecoming

The next morning, we were marching through the forest at a much faster pace than yesterday because of one reason—Glen was at full power.

“Take that!” he shouted from ahead, taking out yet another monster unfortunate enough to cross our path.

I had been a little concerned after the sheer volume of liquor he’d drunk, but he woke up more energetic than ever, saying, “Nothing gets you going like eating a belly full of food and swimming in booze!”

Even though he had a stockpile in his fanny pack, Glen must have had to restrict his diet in the Sea of Trees—which dampened his strength because of his unique condition. If I wasn’t watching him storm through the woods now—thanks to the bottomless feast and decent sleeping conditions I provided last night—I would have never believed that he was at anything less than full strength yesterday.

“Wait,” the Raging Dragon said, abruptly stopping in his tracks. This was out of the ordinary, because he hadn’t so much as paused for any monster so far.

Last night, he’d told me that there were two factors that contributed to him reaching S rank. One, of course, was his automatic power-up, but the other was his Sixth Sense skill. Sixth Sense wasn’t a rare skill—even some non-adventurers had it. Glen’s Sixth Sense had been honed by his experience of surviving certain death scenarios—which he would get himself into because of his impulsive behavior—with nothing but his signature brute strength. Now, he could apparently sense dangers ahead, albeit in a very vague way.

“Something annoying’s coming up,” he said.

“Annoying? It’s not like a very powerful monster, then,” I interpreted.

“Yeah. A real pain.”

A bunch of weak monsters, then? I guessed. Raptors were often on the move, though, and Glen was the type to charge into raptor nests. *What other*

monsters are in the area? “Does it feel like we’ll avoid them if we go around?”

“Probably,” Glen said.

“Then they may be gluttonous flies.”

“What’s that?”

“In short, they’re large, carnivorous flies. Relatively large, anyway. They’ll get as big as five centimeters. The problem is their piercers. They swarm on any animal—dead or alive—each tear off a piece of its flesh and fly back to their hive. Rinse and repeat until all that’s left of their prey is bones,” I explained.

Gluttonous flies were like flying piranhas, but more terrifying for a few reasons. Firstly, the prey was usually eaten alive because each bite was so small. One bite could cause infection because the flies fed their larvae by leaving the chunks of meat to rot in their hive. And even if someone were to survive the encounter with the flies, the bleeding from the bite wounds usually drained their stamina and lured other monsters to them. Staying away from the territory centered around their hive was the usual way to avoid an encounter, but there was another way. Fortunately, Glen noticed them from quite a distance, so it wouldn’t be difficult to pass through their territory with the right preparations.

Within the barrier I set up to repel rain, I set up another layer—of Lightning magic targeting insects. Then, I just set up a stone slime where we were now in case of an emergency.

“That’s all it takes?” Glen asked.

“Gluttonous flies have powerful bites, but they’re just as frail as normal insects,” I said. That’s why their method of attack was a hit-and-run: swarm, bite, flee, repeat. We would turn their nature against them, using ourselves as bait to make them fly into the Lightning barrier, kind of like an old-school fly zapper. “Even if that doesn’t work, we can jump back here with Space magic,” I added. “Even though, I don’t think you’d be fazed if they were to bite you.”

“Yeah, I don’t sense any danger. Just a lot of work.”

“Besides, the rafflesia hotel that’s symbiotic with the gluttonous flies is very valuable,” I said.

“Ya don’t say.” Glen charged ahead, faster than he’d gone all morning.

Soon I heard disturbingly loud buzzing, and a cloud of small bugs swarmed us, but the flies zapped into smoke as they flew into the barrier.

“What’s the monster I’m looking for?!” Glen roared over the deafening buzzing.

“Rafflesia hotel! Look for a bright red flower! It serves as their hive, so it should be in the direction where flies came from!”

“I see it!” Glen said, sprinting in that direction. “Got it!” he called.

I chased after Glen to find him grabbing a vine wrapped around his neck to tear the rafflesia hotel off of a tree.

Completely undisturbed by the flies making a desperate swarm to protect their hive and larvae, Glen walked over to me and held up the flower. “This is what sells, right?” he asked.

“Uh— Just the petals. We should cut them off and leave the rest.”

The rafflesia hotel, nearly dead, writhed its tentacle-like vine stretching out of the giant flower with a hole in its center. Thanks to Glen, I got a close look at the hole and the hundreds of wriggling larva within. *Gross*. I swiftly sliced off its petals with my sword and chucked the rest of the hive against a tree far away.

We rushed out of gluttonous fly territory, where we stopped to have cleaner slimes scrub us down.

“This is nice,” he commented.

“Are you starting to see the charm of slimes?” I asked.

“It’s quick and easy. Not that I hate taking a bath, but what’s the point of wasting time?”

“Yes. You definitely don’t seem the type to just...relax and enjoy things.”

Now that Glen mentioned it, the cleaner slime was a great bathing alternative for those with busy lives. If I had one in my previous life, I definitely would have gotten used to the convenience. Taking a bath was a nice way to relax at the end of the day, but sometimes there’s not enough time.

“How much will these petals go for?” Glen asked.

“I’ve only ever read about the rafflesia hotel,” I prefaced. “But they would easily pay for a mansion.”

“With one stupid flower? Nobles pay out the nose for stupid crap, don’t they?”

“It only grows this far into the Sea of Trees. That coupled with the gluttonous flies make it too dangerous for most people to even attempt harvesting it. Considering that it’s probably rarely on the market, the rich may see any price as a good price.”

Rafflesia hotel petals were treasured because they were used to create a dye for a specific shade of red called noble blood. There were few stories out there explaining the naming of this color: how the color was a vibrant red that resembled fresh blood, for example. Or how the rafflesia hotel was a metaphor for nobles exploiting the people through taxes.

I was telling Glen these stories as we carried on...until Glen sensed something else ahead.

“That’s...a human?” Glen hedged.

“This far in?”

“Yeah. They’re alone too...if it’s really a human.”

Glen and I had been on our own until we met each other, so it wasn’t out of the question to think someone else was here, but... “Undead?”

“Doubt it. The Undead feel like this...ooze. Don’t you have any guesses, Professor Ryoma?”

“The only humanoid monster I know is the Undead. Nothing from my research of the Sea of Trees either,” I said.

With how close we were to Korumi, it thought it was possible for an Undead to wander over here. For now, we decided to put a pin in identifying the threat and started moving again with caution.

Eventually, we found a male adventurer wearing armor marked with dents and scratches all over, bleeding onto the roots of a heatwood tree. He wasn’t

moving. Just when I was beginning to think him dead, the adventurer groaned.

“Light Ball.” Without a second thought, I fired a Light spell at the body. Even though Glen said he hadn’t sensed an Undead, I had to be sure. If he was human, he might have been too gravely insured to speak for himself. With the added danger of other monsters being drawn to his blood, this was the quickest way to see if we were dealing with an Undead.

The ball of light found its mark, but nothing happened. He didn’t writhe in agony nor turn into dust. If he really was a human in dangerous conditions, it was nothing short of a miracle for him that we found him still in one piece.

“What do you want to do?” Glen asked me. “It’s sketchy.”

“I can use healing magic. I’ll approach him.” Keeping my guard up, I did just that. I called to him as I did to make sure he was conscious, but he could only groan in reply. I made it next to him without being attacked, or anything. With the help of a slime, I examined the man: he was wounded all over, but there was nothing out of place about him.

“High Heal.” I cast the spell to his arms and legs where he was bleeding out the fastest. But something was wrong, and it took me a precious second to realize—the bleeding didn’t stop.

The man crumpled to the ground, as if all the bones in his body melted away. He arched his back way too much and bounced like a worm, trying to jump onto me. I instinctively punched it away with a Wind-powered fist, and it slammed against the heatwood trunk behind it like a rubber doll. In the next breath, I laced my sword with fire and sliced the thing in half from what appeared to be its right thigh to left midriff.

The monster—whatever it was—remained unaffected, and made a run for it. It didn’t grow back body parts like the immortal snake, but watching what still looked like a man’s torso ditch his legs and scurry away with its arm was straight out of a horror film. Then, the monster suddenly shape-shifted into a small luring ostrich.

I made a sound in realization. Even as the monster sprinted away as fast as a real luring ostrich, I knew I couldn’t let it get away—not anymore.

“Barricade! Binding Ivy!” Barricade created a wall of trees to wall the monster in while the ivy entangled it. Because these Wood spells relied on existing vegetation, they were very difficult to pull off where there were few trees but very powerful tools in the Sea of Trees.

“Not so fast!” I yelled as the monster deformed again in an attempt to escape its bind. Before it could get away, I performed the familiar contract.

“It stopped,” Glen noted. The monster had stopped, having formed a magical connection with me—it worked. “What is that thing?”

“A slime, apparently.”

With a monster appraisal, I could see exactly what kind.

Mimic Slime

Skills: Mimicry (10) *Mimicry Memory* (2) Rapid Movement (8) *Attract Carnivores* (2) Maximize (7) *Minimize* (7) Predator (3) *Consume* (4) Ingest (4)

“Level 10 Mimicry... I only noticed because it reverted to its slime form for just a moment when it shifted from a human torso to a luring ostrich,” I said.

“Huh. What a weird slime,” Glen said. “It looked human on the outside, at least when it wasn’t moving.”

“It was human on the inside too. I couldn’t tell it wasn’t human even when I examined it inside and out to staunch the bleeding. Well, seeing how it tried to run away in ostrich form, it may be able to use the skills of whatever it’s mimicking... The Rapid Movement skill, and even the Attract Carnivores skill would belong to a luring ostrich.” I ordered the mimic slime to shift into a luring ostrich again, and had it do a couple laps around us. It was just as fast as the real thing.

“That’s incredible... Think of all the ways that could come in handy,” I muttered to myself.

“Forest full of party tricks,” Glen grumbled.

I assumed that the slime’s Mimicry Memory skill would allow the mimic slime

to recall the shape of what it's mimicked in the past. However, when I asked the mimic slime to show me what it could transform into, it could only change into a luring ostrich and a raptor. Apparently, it hadn't met whatever conditions it had to meet to commit the form of the adventurer to memory. It was surprising to see a single slime have both the Maximize and Minimize skills, but that accounted for its ability to change its size in the process of mimicking. In its original form, the slime was the size of a basketball. If it couldn't change its size, its mimicry wouldn't trick anything. As for the Predator skill—

“Are we going?” Glen urged.

“Oh, sorry. I'm very intrigued by this one.”

“Research, research, research, huh? You academic types.”

“Wait,” I said. “Did I tell you I was researching slimes?”

“No, but I have someone, acting like you are now, who's really pushy about me taking his quest. After seeing you pull out all sorts of slimes since yesterday, it was easy to piece together.”

That made sense. S-rank adventurers were sure to attract government-level quests, which could include acquiring samples for government-funded research. Not that I thought Glen would accept that kind of quest in a million years.

With our threat neutralized, we carried on through the woods. I could hold off my curiosity for when I'd have ample time to research the mimic slime.

We walked for another four hours, until we reached a spot where most vegetation—other than heatwood trees—was crushed or trampled over.

“It's easier to walk through here,” Glen said.

“We're almost at a lake.” This lake was home to many large species of monsters. One of them was the cannonball rhino: a massive species—with an average length of five meters—that formed a herd. Monsters of that size would leave a noticeable trail, naturally.

“Big monster territory, huh? What rank is this cannonball rhino?” Glen asked.

“B, if it's alone. Its hide is much tougher than steel armor, and it resists magic.

It's also very fast for how big it is. An adult cannonball uses Neutral magic to boost its strength."

Sturdy, heavy, and powerful: that was a deadly combination that could come charging at us. Taking a cannonball charge head-on was almost always lethal. I'd even read a record of one stray cannonball rhino charging through city walls—leading to its common name, wallbreaker rhino.

"That being said, unlike most creatures in this forest, the cannonball rhino is docile. This would be the one time we should try to avoid monsters as we pass through," I said.

"Fine. But if they find us, it's fair game, right?"

"If it can't be helped..." I sighed. I shot my shot, but I seriously doubted that Glen would ever try to avoid a monster, much less hide from one. I could only pray that we wouldn't cross paths with a cannonball.

"Nothing here," I noted of the lakeshore we'd come to. "Good." Now was the time to get out of Dodge. "If we walk eastward along the lake, we'll come to a stream. If we follow that up as quickly as we've been going, we'll make it to Korumi in an hour."

"So we'll make it before sundown," Glen said.

I checked the direction with the compass I'd packed, and we headed east.

We were attacked by a few monsters along the way, but nothing rattled us at this point. If anything, the blade rats—flying squirrels with razor-sharp skin—were a little annoying. In contrast to their adorable appearance that might charm many hearts in a pet shop, they were assassins of the forest, silently gliding right for our throats. After dealing with the gluttonous flies and blade rats, I was reminded that even small monsters could be incredibly dangerous.

"Hey... Those are Undead monsters ahead," Glen said. "Lots of them."

I had sensed that there were fewer creatures around as we progressed. In other words, our paths so far had been teeming with the vitality of the Sea of Trees. Korumi village was close.

"Here they come," Glen announced.

“I’ll take care of the Undead with Light magic,” I said. “You make a path for us.”

Hearing our feet crunch the grass, a zombie turned our way. This one was clearly unalive, with its guts disemboweled and throat torn out.

“Light Ball.” There was no need to wait for it to approach us. My spell landed right on the zombie’s head, blowing it to smithereens. That was one opponent down.

As we walked along the stream, we took on one Undead monster after another, most of them zombie beasts. It was like all the monsters we’d faced so far came back to haunt us as zombies, hissing and shrieking and growling. It almost felt like I was playing a boss rush, but one that wasn’t fun at all.

“It stinks!” Glen shouted. “Why am I punching zombies bare-handed...? Why are there so many of them, anyway?!”

“They’re spawning from Korumi,” I said.

Firing Light Shot left and right, we tore through the Undead to carve a path until...

“The gate!” Glen declared.

Four years since my reincarnation and six days since stepping back into the Sea of Trees, I finally made it back to my birthplace in this world.

Chapter 9, Episode 18: Collecting an Inheritance

A heavy gate loomed before me, a relic of Korumi's former glory. Remnants of the crumbled walls stretched out in either direction, most of them taken over by vines or heatwood roots. Even in its ruined state, a flicker of a memory lingered here.

This wasn't the time for sightseeing, though. As we approached the village, a familiar murk in the air—like the one I felt in the Starving Gallows—threatened to drown my spirits. It was leaking out of the gate.

"Don't go through the gate!" I called out to Glen. "Go right along the walls! We need to find a secure spot!"

"Got it!" Glen bolted right, spearheading a path for us.

"We're close!" I said after a while. "Let's break into the city from the next crack in the walls!"

"The next—? Screw that, I'm going to make one!" Glen declared, already beating down the wall of vegetation growing over the rubble. Every boom of his fist was drawing more Undead to us, but he was digging fast, judging by the bits of rock he was shoveling behind him.

"Flash Bomb," I incanted, using an explosion of Light magic to buy us more time. "He does make a great ally," I muttered to myself.

"One more!" Glen shouted, blowing an entrance to Korumi wide open. I saw him land from what must have been a jump kick, and followed him into the village.

Some Undead were wandering about, but my attention was drawn to a house. Of course, the absence of (living) humans in the village had taken a toll on it over the years. Most of the village had been reclaimed by the Sea of Trees—except for that one house and its surroundings. Other than the bed of weeds around the house, it was left relatively undamaged, making it stand out like a beacon in the ruined landscape.

“Holy Space. Dimension Home.” Now that we’d made it, I created a safe space for us with the Holy Space I’d learned from Remily, and brought out all the light slimes and grave slimes I had. Slimes were too slow to help us in combat while we were on the move, but now that we could hunker down, they could utilize their full potential. At this point, the battle was already won.

I had the grave slimes lure in the Undead with Attract Spirits and swallow them up. The light slimes and I took care of any Undead that resisted with Light magic. Glen and I handled any non-Undead monsters that showed up, keeping the slimes safe.

Everything went smoothly, though I noticed that more Undead were resistant to Light magic than the ones in the City of Lost Souls. *Is this because of that monster?* I wondered, but decided to brush it off for now. There were too many things for me to do.

“Let’s clear the interior and make camp here,” I said.

I had the grave and light slimes merge to serve as our guards as I stepped into my grandparents’ house—my childhood home, if I could call it that. It was no surprise that the house looked like a hurricane had gone through its minimally decorated interior. Surely, no one would guess that the Sage and the God of Military Arts used to live here. Although the house was pretty spacious, it was just a rectangular box topped with five chimneys. It was built with stone walls and heatwood lumber—most likely by my grandparents’ Earth magic. Although the house looked decrepit, the walls were steadfast. Even though its owners were long gone, I felt protected. The floorboards and ceiling panels were rotting, but that couldn’t be helped.

Just as I thought so, a loud creak sounded behind me. “Holy crap, I almost stepped right through it...” Glen said. “This place is a mess, huh? Yeah, it’s old, but it’s also been ransacked—not by monsters. By humans.”

“I think you’re right. By the end, the people of this village were just like those in the base where we met,” I explained.

“Oh. That type.”

“The people who lived here were too strong to be messed with, but once the house was abandoned...” I looked up. A built-in cabinet near the ceiling had its

lock broken, like it was smashed over and over again with a dull axe or something. A monster couldn't have done that.

"Those types will steal anything that's not nailed down as soon as they get a chance. Wait, you've been here before?" Glen asked.

"I guess I never told you. I used to live here. In this house, back when other people still lived here," I explained, and Glen nodded. It was kind of incredible that he'd come all this way with me without knowing why, but he probably didn't care what the reason was. Fortunately for me, he didn't ask a lot of questions. "I think they did take anything that wasn't broken," I said.

"Cleared you out, huh? Not even a spot for an Undead to hide in—!" Glen cried out as he finally stepped on a floorboard too rotted through to hold his weight. He was obviously uninjured, though his left leg was stuck in the floor up to the knee. "This is no good. I'm heading outside. Can't fight for crap in here. I'm borrowing your slimes to clean up monsters."

"Okay. I'll tell them to take care of them as long as you pile them up somewhere." I walked farther into the house, checking for Undead monsters and blocking openings along the way...until I reached the last and most important room in the house.

Three hearths of varying sizes lined the wall of the room littered with fragments of a broken cabinet and desk—where my grandmother, the Sage, had mixed her potions. Three of the five chimneys of this house belonged to those hearths, while the other two were located in the kitchen and my grandfather's smithy.

"Here it is." I walked up to the largest of the hearths that could easily fit an adult inside it. I scraped out the ashes and half-burnt logs. It was quite the chore to clean out the deep hearth, but I eventually found the bottom—and a circle with two divots carved into either side. This was the entrance to where my grandparents had hidden their inheritance. I stepped into the hearth and put my fingertips into the divots before lifting straight up. With a grinding sound, I gradually began to pull the stone pillar out of the hearth. When the top of the cylinder came up to my thigh, it finally popped out, leaving a circular hole that led to an underground corridor. Placing the cylinder on the floor next to

the hearth, I chucked a Light Ball into the hole. It illuminated a stone-built corridor about three meters deep, with enough irregularities in the stones to provide footholds on the way down. After clearing the air down there with Wind magic to be safe, I climbed down into the corridor.

Another Light spell showed me how short the corridor was, leading directly into a large room. Despite it having been abandoned down here for years, there were no cobwebs or even piles of dust. The gods had reassured me that there would be no traps, but the place was obviously enchanted with some sort of magic. Maybe the house was less affected by vegetation because this basement prevented any plant from rooting too deep.

“It’s like a warehouse,” I muttered. The basement contained bookshelves stuffed to their brim and barrels full of weapons along with boxes and bags that could contain anything. Between me and the room full of stuff stood a stone desk with a very conspicuously staged book atop it. I picked up what was more like a booklet, written by my grandfather Tigral. Although his handwriting was less than stellar, like he’d just casually jotted his thoughts down, it was clear that this was a message written for the person who found this place—a message to be read after his death. “I should probably sit down...” I did so and started reading.

The booklet began with the abridged story of how my grandparents came to this village. Heavily abridged, if I was being honest. It began with how they’d earned their monikers and were showered with praise and adoration from the public, which I already knew, obviously. I had also guessed that they were constantly solicited by nobles and merchants for favors and business opportunities, and that some of those solicitors didn’t entirely have my grandparents’ best interests at heart. Examples of such behavior soon turned into prolonged complaining, so I skipped ahead to where they, like me, grew tired of normal society and moved to a place so remote that almost no one could find them, and those who did couldn’t drag them out. Any secluded location would have done, but after traveling the lands, they decided on Korum. In the struggling village, their class and fame meant nothing. As long as they contributed to the defense and income of the village, the other villagers didn’t bother them.

“Nowhere else was better suited for Meria to study medicine to her heart’s content, away from prying eyes.” That concluded the introduction of the booklet. The rest was about their inheritance. “My wife has gone before me, but I sense I’ll be with her again soon. I have no use for the items in this room. I can’t stand to get rid of them, nor can I let my wife’s research and keepsakes of our lives together be taken by that greedy village leader. So, I hid it all in this basement.’ Okay.” After that, he had officially written that the first person to find the room could claim everything in it, followed by a list of the items. He also wrote that he wanted somebody from outside the village to find it, and for that person to pass on his wife’s research to someone who could make good use of it. Finally, he included cautionary footnotes about a few of the items in the room.

“I’ll take good care of these, Tigral. And Meria, I’ll be honored to carry on your studies. Rest in peace, you two.” I gave a silent prayer for their souls, and moved everything they left behind into the Dimension Home. I’d go through it later when I had more time.

Chapter 9, Episode 19: The Hunt Starts Tomorrow

After gathering my inheritance, I stepped outside. “Glen— Whoa.”

“Took you long enough,” Glen said, having built a veritable mountain of Undead monsters in front of the grave slimes. “These things are bottomless, no matter how many I crush. Give me the room from yesterday and the slime that washes you up, will you?” he requested, covered in blood from his fists to his toes. I could imagine how uncomfortable he was, so I helped him clean up so we could sit down and have a conversation.

“Thanks. I can finally relax,” he said, after the cleaner slime washed him up.

“You were covered in blood.”

“Soaked. Why are there so many Undead here anyway?” Glen asked.

The monster, of course. I’d have to explain that to him. “There’s a monster that’s been living in a manor in the center of the village for a long time now. That monster has the power to create Undead monsters. The other reason I came here is to take care of that problem.”

“Avenging your fellow villagers?”

“No, I wasn’t that close to them,” I said. “I thought I’d clean up the place while I’m here. And take home a few plants growing around here. Even better if I can fix up the house and make it a base of operations.”

“So I’ve got to punch more zombies...” Glen said, twisting his face in disgust from his experience today.

“I know. There’s something I found in there.” I took out one of the weapons from the basement. The shimmering, black-gold hammer was even bigger than the one Glen was using before. As soon as I saw it, I noticed this weapon exuding a sort of presence that reminded me of dad’s swords. All the weapons in the basement commanded deference, but this hammer was something else. I didn’t really have plans to use a weapon like this, though, and Glen’s way of fighting those zombies seemed like a health code violation.

“So, I thought you could try this out to replace your broken hammer,” I said. Even if it turned out to be a mediocre craft, it had to be better than punching zombies bare-handed. I was happy to lend it to him since he was helping me clear out the Undead.

When Glen saw the hammer, he seemed to sense something too. He solemnly took up the hammer and lifted it. He swung it a few times, with both hands then with one, a little slower than his usual movement, like he was test-driving the weapon. Then, he walked to the nearest heatwood tree...and swung with a powerful exhale. A section of tree bark the size of a wall caved into a massive crater.

“I don’t know if I should be impressed by your strength or the durability of the heatwood tree still standing... But you probably—” *broke it again*, I was going to say, before I saw Glen’s grin and the intact hammer in his hand as the dust of the impact settled in the dim lighting. “It withstood that impact?” I asked.

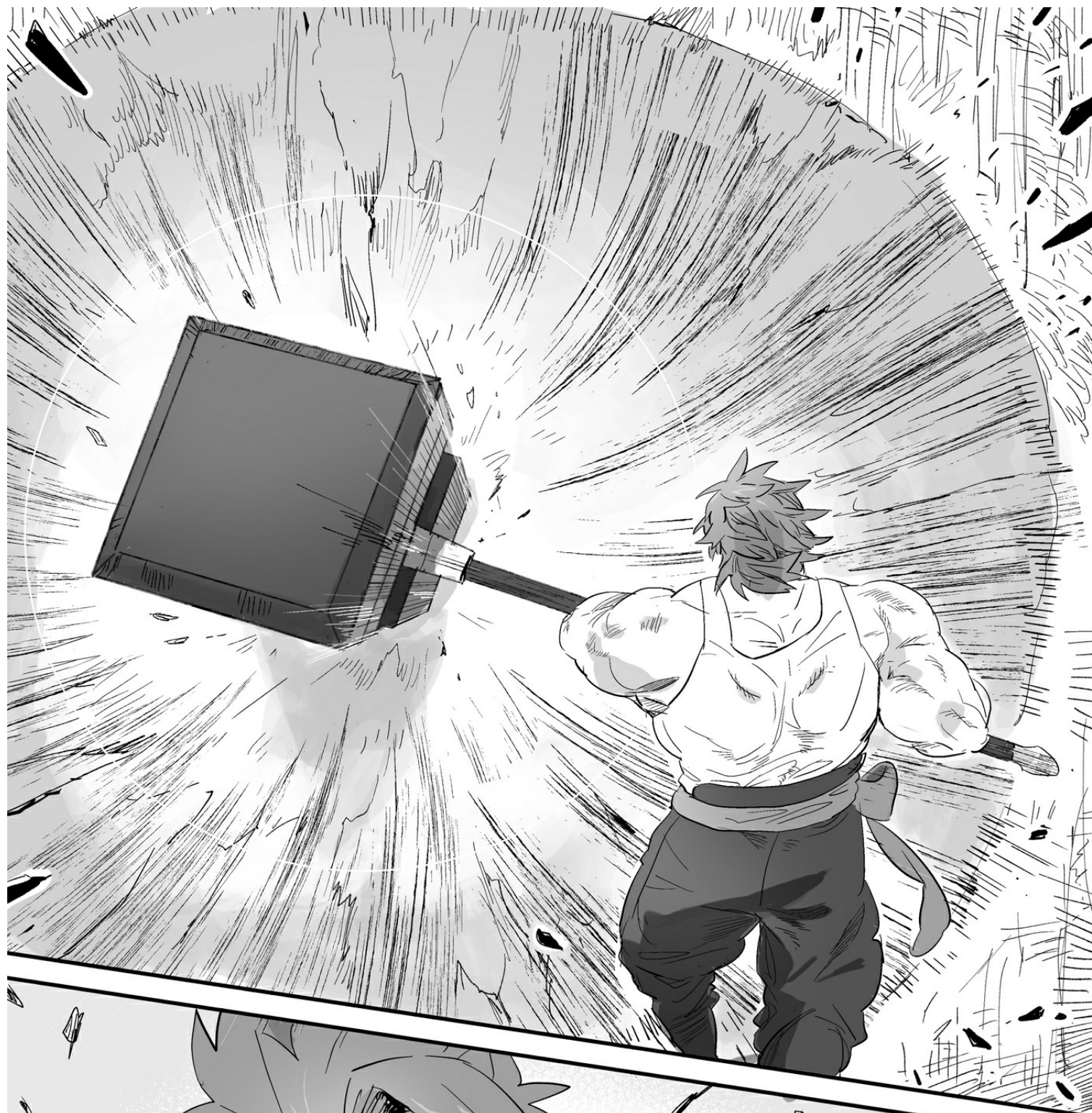
“This thing rocks! Where’d you find it?!”

“In this house. It’s one of my grandparents’ keepsakes,” I said.

“Keepsake? Who were your grandparents, anyway? This is adamantite, right?”

“You can tell?”

“Adamantite is just about the best material for making heavy weapons like this,” Glen said. “Even I know that. Actually, it was used to make my old hammer.” He took the broken hammer from his fanny pack with one hand. Upon closer inspection, the material looked very similar, except for a slight difference in color. “The difference in color is the difference in purity. The guy at the weapon’s shop I got this from said that adamantite’s too hard and durable to make things with easily, so they make an alloy with steel and other metals. They said their full-time blacksmith made this thing with the purest adamantite alloy they could make. He was bragging that there was no other weapon out there with purer adamantite. Now he wasn’t lying when he said that... But yours is purer, isn’t it?”



I had no expertise to answer that. If Glen's story was accurate, it meant that the hammer was made of adamantite more pure than the commonly accepted maximum. *This might cause more problems than I thought.*

"Do you want that, Glen?" I asked.

"Huh? Of course I do. But this is your gramps's keepsake."

"It's yours, as long as you keep where you got it from a secret. Like I said, I'll never use it. Not that I couldn't try, but I could never use it to its full potential. That would be a waste." I'm certain Tigral would have wanted his weapons to be put to good use by someone who knew what they were doing, especially if it really was such an excellent piece. Who would be a better candidate than Glen?

"Hm," Glen grunted. "I get that it's only trouble for you. Some jerk offs could try to scam you out of the thing. I'm not shy about taking gifts, so if you're giving it to me, I'm taking it. Trading it for my silence is a little too good of a deal for me, though... All right!" Glen took out another hammer from his fanny pack—the one he must have broken before using the last one. "Take these hammers for starters."

He'd explained that these hammers were made to order in the royal capital's most expensive weapons shop, crafted with what was considered the purest adamantite alloy available. On top of that, the handles were embedded with magic items in an attempt to protect the weapon from Glen's full strength. Turning the hammer into a magic weapon wasn't an option, though, because adamantite was an insulator potent enough to keep magic out of the alloy. The magic item in the handle only coated the surface of the hammer with magical energy, but even that much required the use of expensive high-fantasy metals like mithril. Broken or not, these hammers were hunks of precious metals.

"You can get more than the sum of their parts are worth. Nobles pay out the nose for weapons I use up. It apparently makes enough that the guy at the weapons shop told me he'd pay *me* to trade in a broken hammer for a new one. You know what, I'll sign my name on it too," Glen said, revealing a part of celebrity and collector culture in this world. Off the wall he might have been, but Glen seemed to have earned either fame or infamy through this strength. "And... I can't think of anything else. I'll owe you one, how about that? I'll help

you out once when you need it—on the house.”

“A free quest, you mean?” I asked.

“That’s right. Normally, I don’t take a job I don’t like from anybody, unless the pay’s ridiculously good. You give me this hammer, and what you want me to do will be at the top of my list. Of course, I’m not counting the Undead hunt here. Put me in that room again tonight—that’s good enough for me. This isn’t your freebie. Oh, but don’t ask me to do anything I can’t, like use my brain.”

There wasn’t anything I needed his help for now, but a free voucher and priority pass for an S-ranker’s time was a pretty good deal. This IOU could really benefit me in the future. “Okay. That hammer is yours under those conditions,” I agreed. “There’s nothing I can request of you now, except for your silence about this place.”

“No problem. When you’re S-rank, there’ll be a few secrets you keep for your clients. What do you want me to say if they ask about it?” Glen asked. “There’ll be a few people with too much time on their hands who’d like to sniff out where my new weapon came from. My usual weapons shop will have the next hammer ready—knowing I’d broken mine already. If I don’t go and buy it, he’ll come and sell it to me. He’ll take note of my fancy new war hammer. I’m going to keep your secret the best I can, but I’m not a good liar.”

“I’m sure he will if one of his regulars comes back with a war hammer that tops his best work... You can tell him you found it in the Sea of Trees, or something,” I suggested. Many people had braved the forest in search of fame and fortune. It wasn’t uncommon for lost equipment to be found, and I technically found it in an abandoned house in a ruined village, so it wasn’t entirely a lie.

“Sure, I’ll say that if anyone asks,” Glen said.

“Thank you... Now that that’s settled, let’s have dinner. The hunt starts tomorrow.”

“Now you’re talking! Any meat left from yesterday?”

“Plenty,” I said. “Do you remember how big it was?”

I started making dinner. Pouches of instant soup just had to be put in boiling

water, so I could focus on using the barrel I'd prepared after dinner last night and a pair of woks I'd made with alchemy.

"All right, let's fry stuff!" Glen caught up when I started pouring generous amounts of oil into the woks. Like he guessed, I was going to fry some immortal snake tenders. The barrel contained snake meat that had been marinating in my experimental sauce made from various spices and white liquor lees. I'd let the barrel sit in a cool, dark place overnight to let the flavors soak in.

I warmed the oil in the wok until it began to boil, stirring it with long chopsticks. Then, I began frying an egg-and-flour-dusted snake tender, which soon turned golden brown in the crackling fryer.

I pulled it out when it looked right, and put the next tender in its place. After letting the first piece sit for a minute or two, I refried it in the second wok.

"Hey, that looks done," Glen said, hungrily staring at the woks.

Ignoring him, I cut a lamon into wedges to squeeze over the fried snake tenders once they were done. In Japan, a popular debate at the bar was whether to squeeze lemons onto fried chicken or not. Personally, I liked both options. The more variety I had in seasoning my food the better. True to that spirit, I was adding another flavor. I poured the sauce I'd prepared the night before into a small dish, then added a clever chicken egg, vinegar, and onion. Once I topped it with spices, it became a tartar sauce that would pair great with the fried snake.

Once all the tenders were fried, I piled them high on a platter with a side of lamon wedges and tartar sauce. Just as I tried to pick a nugget off of the platter to make sure it tasted good, Glen's big hand snatched it away as if he couldn't wait another second. When I bit into my own, the freshly fried tender was hot enough to make me pant through my mouth, the savoriness exploding on my tongue. Combined with the perfect texture of the crunchy skin and juicy meat, this meal knocked my socks off!

"So good... Is this the same meat as yesterday? That was good, too, but I know that good meat is supposed to taste good. This stuff is great, and I don't know why," Glen said.

"Yesterday, I just grilled the slabs of meat I'd cut out. It was surprising to me

that the simple steak tasted good on its own. For today's dish I've used plenty of spices—and a technique that softened the meat,” I explained. And yet, the flavor of the immortal snake wasn't lost in my array of spices. It was distinctive enough that I almost wanted to add even more spices...and I really wanted some rice to go with it. “Hot Water.” I generated some hot water with magic, and poured it into another instant food pouch containing freeze-dried, cooked rice. In Japan, this had been common as a type of ration even back in the olden days. The only difference was that the rice used to be dried naturally and was now dried with machines. This was a wonderfully convenient invention, letting me eat steaming rice after only a few minutes of rehydration.

Catching Glen's glance, I took out extra pouches of the rice and cooked more tenders while I waited for the rice to be ready... And all the while Glen kept eating nonstop and started drinking the white liquor I traded to him yesterday. “It's easy to heat up the soup,” I said. “Don't wait for me.”

“Yeah, that much I can do. But I need more of these...tenders? Do you have more of this sauce too?!” Glen asked as his hand continuously moved food and drink to his mouth. Even though the snake tenders disappeared as quickly as they were plated, Glen was enjoying it so thoroughly that I felt flattered as the chef. No wonder those mukbang videos had been going viral. *Is this how people who run those biggest food challenges in their restaurants feel?* After watching Glen enjoy it so much, I wanted a drink myself.

“What pairs with tenders and rice...?” To start with, I took out a batch of pure alcohol I'd extracted from the failed white liquor batches that didn't quite make the cut. I'd originally prepared this as a disinfectant, but unlike companies in Japan, I didn't add any preservatives to avoid paying a liquor tax on rubbing alcohol—I could still consume the alcohol. “Freeze.” I chilled a glass with magic, then cast “Sparkling Water... It worked!” I exclaimed. I'd managed to create carbonated water from the combination of Water and Wind magic. With a pour of pure alcohol and a squeeze of lamon slice, I just had to stir the drink well, and I had myself a lemon sour, or I guess a lamon sour.

I sighed in satisfaction. This was reminding me a lot of a cheap bar I used to go to on obligatory outings with friends during my broke college student days...not that my life really changed after graduation. *I need to be careful*, I reminded

myself. This was a deadly combination for an infinite loop of tenders, sour, rice, and repeat. Fried meat, rice, and booze—it was an unhealthy but cheap and delicious menu.

“What’s that combination? It looks awesome,” Glen commented.

“I thought you’d say so.” I gave Glen a serving of rice and a glass of lemon sour along with the additional tenders, and he was clearly hooked.

His hands and mouth were moving rapidly. When I finally couldn’t fry the tenders fast enough to meet his demand, he began eyeing the bottle of pure alcohol, saying, “I never liked booze that just burns your throat going down. But drinking it like this isn’t half bad.”

“You don’t drink cocktails? Use any chasers?” I asked.

“I got no qualms with it, but a lot of dwarves—my old man included—can’t stand mixing anything with liquor, so I never got into the habit of drinking cocktails. I like stronger stuff, but another reason I never got into it was because I never found a mixed drink I liked,” Glen said.

“To each their own, of course... Wait. Are you a dwarf?”

“Huh? Yeah. Dwarves can come in a range of heights, and maybe my condition made it so I grew taller than the average human. The more you eat, the more you grow, they say. Very few people could tell I was a dwarf off the bat.”



“Now that you mention it... Even though you’re huge, your proportions are dwarflike. The thickness of your arms, and your torso...” I said. If I took a picture of a dwarf and enlarged it on a photo editor, for example, I thought I’d end up with a photo of Glen. Was that offensive?

“You’re losing sight of what’s important, Ryoma. More meat! And rice! And booze! Take whatever monster loot I have with me,” Glen pressed.

“Fried snake and lamon sours, coming right up,” I said, mocking the tone of a waiter. If last night was a barbecue party, tonight was a bar party. Nostalgia hit me for real as I remembered my days working as a part-timer at a bar.

Chapter 9, Episode 20: Prep

The next morning, after a leisurely breakfast, I kept the fire going so I could try out spells to help the Undead move on from this realm. Soon enough, Glen came back from his outing—dodging Undead in his path—with a huge swarm of humanoid and animal Undead on his tail.

“Welcome back,” I greeted him calmly. “How did it look?”

“I did a lap around the village along the walls. Like you said, the house as big as a castle in the center is the nest—more Undead the closer you get to it. I thought there was a swarm here, but it’s nothing compared to the horde up there,” Glen said.

“That many?”

“I didn’t even try to count them. From what I’ve seen on my run, the human Undead go out to hunt too.” Glen had seen zombies and skeletons building traps and hauling back their game from hunts. They gathered their prey in the plaza before the central manor where they were butchered, divvied up, and devoured. After their meal, the bones of their game were carried into the manor before reemerging as new Undead. As I’d expected from knowing the abilities of the monster that dwelled in the manor, Korumi was going down the same path as the City of Lost Souls.

“The City of Lost Souls, huh? I’ve heard of the place, but I’ve never been,” Glen said. “There was a whole Undead settlement around the big house. And these Undead seem more...human than the ones in other places.”

“I noticed that too. I was trying to lure the Undead in with magic and purify them. Some zombies and skeletons moved away from me like they knew what I was doing.”

Remily had told me that some Undead retained memories from their life. From what I’d been told, the monster in the manor didn’t just create Undead, it chained down the souls of the dead and bound them to the village—a process

that left the Undead with more of their memories intact, although not enough to retain their humanity.

“We need to deal with the source,” I said.

“About that. Whatever’s in there is whacked out. I can’t touch it,” Glen said, much to my surprise. Although I was hoping Glen would take a back seat, I thought he was going to go all charging bull. Glen must have read that thought on my face, because he said, “You think I go around pummeling any strong thing that crosses my path?”

“You don’t?” I asked with genuine disbelief.

“I’m not going to chicken out just because someone’s stronger than me, but I’m not fighting something I can’t land a punch on. There’s all sorts of strength in this world. I got a bad matchup against the type that sets a bunch of traps or keeps running no matter what. The monster in that house is something I can’t punch, right? That’s the feeling I get.”

Glen was right. Its power lay in manufacturing the Undead and powerful Dark magic specialized in seizing the minds of its enemies and showing them hallucinations. Its magic was so powerful that it could overpower any magical item designed to shield the wearer from mind attacks—armor would be useless against it. Trying to outnumber the monster would be too dangerous—allies could be turned on each other by the hallucinations. That’s why the gods told me that I—with my resistance to attacks against the mind—was better off alone than the best army in the world would be.

Although I doubted that Glen saw through that much, he seemed to have sensed how dangerous this particular monster was. “I wasn’t *born* this strong,” he said. “I’ve lost to plenty of humans back in the day, and I know to pick my fights sometimes. If you’re still going up against that thing, I got no right or reason to stop you. Can’t help you if things go south, though.”

“That’s all right. Even though I have no intention of dying, I’m not going to drag you into my suicide mission.”

“But you do think it’s suicide. What’s your plan, then?” Glen asked.

“First of all, let’s get rid of as many of the Undead as possible. There are

probably more inside the manor, so I'll draw out as many as I can. The fewer there are to interfere, the better my chances will be. The monster lurking in the manor won't leave its nest because it can't. If we cause a ruckus outside its door or damage its walls, it'll probably send out whatever Undead it has to protect its den."

"So I just have to crush everything that pours out of there," Glen said.

"Some of them, perhaps. We can be more efficient about it with the help of the grave slimes."

To simplify my plan, I would prepare a giant pitfall with grave slimes at the bottom, then guide a horde of Undead into it. Glen and I would bait the Undead and keep them from running.

"I'll dig the pitfall," I said. "All I'd like you to do is to run around the village to lure in the Undead, use your hammer to pick off any that try to run away from the pitfall, and stay out of the manor."

"Easy enough. Speaking of traps, I saw that flower from yesterday at the opposite end of the village. What was it called, the expensive one that makes a rare dye or something?"

"The rafflesia hotel."

"That's it! A whole section of the wall was covered with them. The flies didn't get me because I ran straight through, but they swarmed the Undead chasing me. Can you use them?" Glen asked.

I could imagine that the slow zombies—literally walking dead meat—were the perfect meal for the gluttonous flies. The abundant food source could have contributed to the overgrowth of rafflesia hotels. I'd been told that the monster of the manor could resurrect fallen Undead, but seeing how many Undead were in the village—and that the grave slimes wouldn't be able to contain them all at once—it might be worth it to put a dent in their numbers before cornering them into the pitfall.

"Let's do both," I agreed. "I'll start on the grave slime pitfall. Can you try and lure some of them to where the gluttonous flies are?"

"You got it! Do you mind hooking me up with that barrier from yesterday? It's

annoying when they buzz into my face,” Glen requested. I obliged, and he bolted into action without hesitation. “I’ll be back for lunch, whether it works or not! Have it ready for me!”

And he was gone, demanding a meal on his way out. Not that I minded, since he was helping out and I knew how much fuel—food—his body required. I’d been planning to do all this on my own, so I appreciated any help.

“Let me get to my work, then.” First, I’d need to pick out the right spot for the pitfall. Although my bait-and-drop strategy was simple enough, I wanted to set it up a little closer to the Undead epicenter.

“Cutting Tornado.” With the merged and enlarged grave slimes in tow, I left our bubble of safety and ventured into the center of the village. While I’d gotten the hang of fighting humanoid Undead, zombie beasts—particularly smaller ones that hid in the underbrush—were harder to deal with.

That’s why I was clearing my way with the Wind spell as I went. Funny enough, this was the first time I’d used this attacking spell to actually attack something, even if I still doubled it up as a lawn mower. I wasn’t hung up on that, though—the spell was wonderfully convenient.

“There it is.” In the distance, beyond the bushes torn to shreds by miniature tornadoes, I could see the old manor towering over what used to be the houses of other villagers and the remnants of a barricade. The manor—if I could even call it that—was enclosed by fortified walls in all directions, watchtowers looming at each of the four corners. The relatively short watchtowers with few windows reminded me of prison towers I’d seen in movies. The rugged fortifications were surrounded by a fancy brick and iron fence adorned with ornate designs. What seemed so out of place was the perfectly manicured garden between the walls and the fence. After watching for a while, zombies emerged from the manor and began weeding and cleaning the garden.

“Undead servants still keep the manor...!” I realized. That was confirmation enough that the Undead retained their memories. I turned on my heels, deciding to dig the pitfall at around the halfway point between the manor and my grandparents’ house.

Once I was there, I got straight to work. I called up my usual roster: soil

slimes, spider slimes, an emperor scavenger slime, huge rock slimes, and huge bush slimes—amalgamations of weed slimes. I instructed each group of slimes on their task: the huge bush slimes would clear the grass for the pitfall and replant it to hide the trap once it was done; the soil slimes and I would dig the pitfall with slime magic while removing any weeds, roots, and rocks; huge rock slimes would eat the dug up rocks and reinforce the pitfall by detaching parts of their bodies; emperor scavenger slimes would support and guard the other slimes while they worked; and the spider slimes would help camouflage the pitfall once it was finished.

Once we started, the slimes worked as efficiently as heavy machinery. The huge bush slime, for example, stretched itself as wide as it could and cleaned up a huge square that was twenty meters wide on each side. It wasn't surprising, since the huge bush slime was as large as an emperor slime to begin with, but it was impressive that it could still move around in the shape of a giant, flattened square. It was oddly satisfying, too, to see a wide area of grass vanish at once as it slowly swept across the overgrown patch of land like one of those industrial agricultural machines. The magic of the soil slimes alone dug up the earth as fast as a fleet of construction machinery, and the huge rock slime could reinforce the side of the pitfall with beams without needing concrete. With all of them working together, they managed to dig a fifteen-meter-wide and four-meter-deep square hole in the ground.

"This could practically be a dungeon on its own," I said, impressed all over again by the abilities of my larger slimes in particular. I'd talked with Reinhart about construction projects like building new roads and villages. My slimes could drastically shorten the timeline of those projects. Finishing public projects too quickly could cause problems on its own, though, so I wouldn't offer my slimes' service unless they asked me to.

"We just need to dress it up and we're done. I'll have the grave slimes wait in the hole, and have the huge rock become a central pillar, just tall enough to peek out above the ground..." Weed slimes spread out atop the web the spider slimes wove between the central pillar and the edge of the pitfall. Encouraged by the emperor scavenger slime's fertilizer and my Wood magic, vegetation sprouted from the wood slimes. Once the soil slimes coated the area, I couldn't

tell the difference between where the pitfall was and the rest of the village.

“It’s so perfect that I’m afraid I’ll fall in if I’m not careful... Maybe I should make a safe house.” I had the spider slimes weave layers and layers of their web between a pair of heartwood trees close enough to the pitfall. Then, I laid the tree roots dug up from the pitfall onto the web. By volume, even ordinary spider silk was five times as durable as steel. It felt like spider slime silk was at least as durable. Once I further solidified the wooden floor, threw a roof above it with the same process, and used the weed slime vines to reinforce and camouflage the platform, I’d whipped up an instant tree house!

“The silk shrunk a little bit, maybe from the humidity... Still feels sturdy, though.” Most Undead would be heavy enough to fall into the pitfall on their own, and the huge bush slime could make the smaller ones fall manually. Now, I only needed to lure the Undead here... *I know who can help.* “Come on out, mimic slime!” Excited by my bright new idea, I called it out of Dimension Home. The slime that emerged from the bright portal was decently bigger than it was when I’d completed the contract, thanks to the variety of food I’d given it last night to see what it liked.

“Self-defense or not, I did cut you in half... I’m glad you’re back to full size.” Although the mimic slime turned out to be omnivorous, it showed a preference for meat. I’d mostly fed it raptor meat—which I had in abundance after taking down so many on my journey—but it seemed to enjoy all meat equally, except for rotten and Undead meat.

My guess was that its diet tied into its ability to shape-shift. Because it shifted its internal organs and bone structure as well as its appearance, I imagined the mimic slime shaped its body according to the DNA of its target, rather than simply masking. *If only I knew more about this stuff...* All I could do now was make an educated guess.

“No sense lamenting about that when I can’t do anything about it.” I turned to the mimic. “Can you transform into a luring ostrich?”

The mimic slime immediately shifted into the ostrichlike monster—we were communicating just fine. Once it memorized the shape of a target, it clearly didn’t have to ingest its meat again to transform into it. I wondered what

conditions had to be met for the mimic to “memorize” a target’s form. Perhaps it had to intake a certain amount of their meat, or remain transformed as the target for a certain amount of time.

“Can I ride on your back?” I asked, and the mimic bent its ostrich knees so I could climb on more easily. I straddled its warm back, covered in feathers as soft as down. No one would guess that I was riding a slime. “Take a few steps for me. Do you think you can run like this?”

It began trotting one, two, and then three steps. We didn’t have much room in the tree house, but it was enough to see that the mimic could easily move with me on its back. Actually, I was more nervous about my ability to stay on the unsaddled ostrich. Could I stay on as long as it didn’t run too fast?

“Only one way to find out,” I muttered, using Space magic to transport us to ground level, and told it to do a short run to my grandparents’ house and back. As soon as I gave the instruction, the mimic slime zoomed into a mad dash! I was screaming on its back as it bolted through the village. I hadn’t expected the mimic slime—well, the luring ostrich it had morphed into—to have such powerful legs. We were backtracking the route I’d walked that morning at—ten times the speed? Twenty times?—I couldn’t tell. The world around me whizzed by, just like the time I shared my vision with a limour bird. That had been like watching the view from a bullet train window. Now, I was riding it. Soft feathers cushioned me enough that the ride didn’t quite rattle my teeth. *I feel the Gs, so it’s more like riding a rollercoaster...* I considered. *A rollercoaster with no safety restraints. If I fall off, will I survive?* I was no longer straddling the ostrich but holding on for dear life. Anxiety fueled the beat of my heart as we whipped through the dense woods.

It had taken me about ten minutes on foot to get from my grandparents’ house to where the pitfall now waited. Although it felt like I was on the back of the mimic slime much longer than that, it couldn’t have been more than a minute or two. I’d reached two conclusions from my ride: one, the mimic slime was an efficient mode of transport; two, I would never use it to run around and lure in the Undead—it was too dangerous for so many reasons.

Chapter 9, Episode 21: The Manor in the Jungle

“So that’s how that happened,” Glen said, watching the mimic slime sprinting through the grass with a trail of following Undead. Now that it was noon, he’d come back for lunch and asked how my morning was.

“Unfortunately, I’d be little more than dead weight on its back,” I explained. “That mimic slime survived this long in the woods, and it can run faster without the extra weight. It’s much easier and safer this way. Besides, it draws in more Undead than I can. The humanoid Undead move as if to hunt the ostrich, and pretty much all the beast zombies fall for the luring ostrich’s power.”

“Huh. Sounds good to me. I get to enjoy my lunch in peace,” Glen said.

“We can relax since both the pitfall digging and Undead luring are being automated by the slimes.” I’d spent the extra time on cooking lunch. Yesterday’s fried snake left a little to be desired on the flavor side, so I used plenty of garlic and sandwiched it in fresh-baked bread and crispy greens, served with a side of fries. Just in case he didn’t want fried food two days in a row, I’d prepared egg sandwiches and potato salad sandwiches, but Glen had no qualms with whatever food I served him.

Just when I was about to finish my sandwich, a vision poured into my head. “Oh!”

“What is it?” Glen asked.

“The mimic slime is being chased by some living raptors. It must have accidentally lured them along with the Undead. It’s on its way here.”

“Time to work off this lunch,” Glen said. Just like that, we were ready to catch the raptors in pursuit.

“Here they come,” Glen said.

“I see them. I’m going to separate the living ones from the dead. Holy Flame Curtain.” I cast the spell just as the mimic slime darted past. A thin sheet of fire laced with Light magic draped in the air.

Frenzied by the luring ostrich's pheromones, the pursuing horde didn't run or go around the flame. It didn't burn the live raptors too badly, though. I'd prioritized the size of the curtain over the heat of the flame. The zombified raptors, however, were another story. The Light in the flame damaged their legs, sending them tumbling to the ground before they burned to ash. So, only the live raptors made it through the curtain of flame. Those we could take out like we always did.

"Take that!" Glen bellowed. Charging raptors were normally a dangerous torrent that threatened to trample over their enemies, but they couldn't have made it easier for Glen. Whirling the adamantite hammer, he knocked raptor after raptor aside.

With magic and sword, I picked off any raptor fortunate enough to avoid being crushed by Glen's hammer. By dividing and conquering, we took out the raptors in less than a minute.

"Done and done," Glen announced. "You're going to leave that fire like that?"

"It should be fine with all this humidity in the air. And the fire only spread because of my magic. It won't grow too large on its own. Even if it did, the daily downpour will extinguish it," I said. The initial plan had been for me to do all of this alone. When I studied and prepared wide-range spells, I was careful to choose ones with minimal damage to my surroundings. "The Undead nearby disappeared more quickly than I anticipated," I added.

"Huh? Yeah, the village was surrounded by Undead when we first got here. You think the live raptors came sniffing once the Undead dwindled?" Glen asked.

"I think so. I only told the mimic slime to run along the inside of the village's perimeter walls. Before, I'd accounted for a minimum of a day to take out the Undead around the village. At this rate, we could start dealing with the manor," I said.

"Sooner we get it over with, the better."

So, we decided to sack the central manor that afternoon. When we set out to do just that, we encountered very few Undead along the way.

“Not completely gone,” Glen noted.

“No zombie beasts at all. The ones that are left are Undead that used to be villagers—noncombatants that don’t even go out to hunt.” I pointed at one of the decrepit buildings close to the manor that must have been a blacksmith’s forge. A skeleton silently clanged hammer to anvil within what had become more a pile of rubble than a house.

A zombie sat at a broken loom in another building, going through the motions of weaving thread into fabric. Even in death, they mimed their life in perpetuity.

“They never fought for a living, so they don’t attack. That’s why they never took the bait,” Glen said.

“Let’s leave the remaining Undead to the slimes. My grave slimes from the pitfall can handle the Undead, and if I leave an emperor scavenger with them, they won’t be killed by other monsters,” I said.

“If the Undead hightail it from the village, they’re not our problem,” Glen said.

We marched right up to the manor, and as expected, we didn’t meet any resistance on the way. The villagers-turned-Undead all recognized us as the enemy. Every time we got close, they scurried off towards the manor. What gave us more trouble was the state of the roads. The Undead had apparently tried to maintain them, but it was a drop in the bucket—there were piles of sandbags and metal fences in the grass that got in our way. In fact, some Undead were tripping over those structures that were probably meant to be barricades. We carried on, the grave slimes sucking in those Undead as we went.

“Hey, do you get the feeling that we’re the bad guys? Like we’re here to snatch them or something,” Glen said.

“I was thinking about that. That’s exactly what it’s like for them, I suppose. If we follow the theory that they don’t know they’re dead, they find strangers raiding their village, chasing them down, and locking them up in a slimy jailhouse,” I said, feeling a twinge of guilt as I heard the words out loud. This was no different from a monster hunt, though. And this would help their spirits move on too.

While I was explaining all that to Glen, we made it to the gate of the manor. Naturally, the manor was defended with a metal fence and heavily reinforced double gate.

“So go ahead and hit it anywhere—as hard as you can,” I said.

“You got it!” He had his hammer raised so fast that I could have sworn he didn’t even wait for me to finish my sentence. One swing, and a grading clang reverberated through the air. Glen clicked his tongue. “This crap again,” he muttered amid the clanging.

I couldn’t blame him for griping... The same blow had blown a crater into a heartwood trunk yesterday. The gate was hardly bent. What’s worse, the metal bent back into pristine shape as if I’d played a tape of it in reverse.

Then, the voices of countless lost souls cried out from within the manor, every window clattering in their cells, creating a cacophony as if the manor itself were screaming.

“Finally, we get a reaction,” I said.

“I swung to break through that damn gate,” Glen said.

After a few seconds of wailing from the manor, a deluge of armed Undead poured out of the doors. Most of them were visibly Undead like zombies and skeletons, equipped only with a simple spear or bow. Amid the horde, though, I also spotted advanced ghouls and Undead more powerful than them, as well as Undead that looked no different from a live human going by looks alone.

One of them, clad in a noble’s armor, bellowed from the head of the Undead army. “You villains! First you attack our villagers, and now you insult us by hammering our gate!”

“Come say that to my face!” Glen bellowed right back.

“I sort of expected that reaction, but I didn’t expect them to speak so clearly...” I said. I’d heard of some Undead muttering a specific word or phrase but none that could articulate this much—almost like he was still alive. If their souls were really bound to this realm, that shouldn’t have been surprising. Still, they weren’t alive. They were Undead.

“I am Baron Alice Destoria! At the behest of His Majesty the King, I led a platoon of pioneers to explore the Sea of Trees, and this is the most strategic location for a base! Consider this—attacking our base is tantamount to treason!”

“How dare you come ransacking our village?! You’ll regret this!” another Undead shouted.

“Why are you doing this?! God weeps at your barbarism!” a third said.

Those indistinguishable from humans tended to speak more clearly, but there was no cohesion to what they were saying. Rather than repeating what the monster in the manor told them to, they seemed entranced in their own world.



“Blah blah blah... What’s the call?” Glen asked.

“No changes to the plan,” I said. “Let’s throw some attacks out there until they come all the way out. Holy Flame Curtain.” My answer—a wave of flame—was blocked by Baron Destoria’s shield. Even the embers scattering from the impact seemed to burn the other Undead, but the more alive they looked, the less they were affected by the fire of Light magic. Their moans of pain triggered a volley of arrows and magic from the manor window, so I ducked behind an emperor scavenger slime.

“Hey! Keep your eyes on me!” Glen barked, running along the fence and dragging his hammer along the fence while the Undead on the other side were trying and failing to skewer him with their spears—Glen was moving too fast for them as he countered every attempted stab with the swing of his hammer. “Come on, come on, come on! Quit poking at me from your little hiding places, you cowards!”

Meanwhile, I was casting Flash Bombs from behind my little hiding place behind a slime... *Oh well. I’m sticking to the plan—safety first.*

After some time of attacking the manor, the gate finally creaked open.

“Finally, they’re out of their den!” Glen shouted.

Undead flooded through the gates, but they weren’t a problem once they were beyond the gate. Glen continued mowing down Undead with his hammer as usual while the emperor scavenger slime used its enormous mass to crush swathes of them at a time, the grave slimes capturing the immobilized Undead in its wake.

After ten minutes or so, Glen approached me as he smashed the horde around him. “Hey, Ryoma. There’s your invite.”

The manor gate was left open, but no more Undead were coming out. It was the perfect opportunity for me to make my way into the manor—too perfect. “I have to go in sooner or later,” I said. “If everything goes well, I’ll be out before sunset—by noon tomorrow, latest. If I’m not out by then, consider me dead.”

“You can’t clear the house until you take care of that ungracious host, right? Leave the outside to me,” Glen offered.

Trusting Glen and the slimes to handle the Undead out here, I stepped through the open gate, then the front door. As soon as I made it into the manor, the doors slammed shut behind me and locked—like a horror movie cliché. I glanced back at the door for a moment before turning back around. When I did...

“This kind of illusion...” I said, genuinely astonished. I had stepped into a bare-boned manor—old but sturdy. The blown-out entrance hall had a grand staircase leading up to banistered hallways stretching to either side...or at least, it was supposed to.

None of that was there when I turned back around. What I saw was a sliver of smoggy sky squeezed between rows of skyscrapers. I stood on a perfectly paved asphalt road bustling with men and women in business attire who all looked exhausted. Japanese street signs and billboards fought for my attention at every glance I made.

It was a typical Japanese street where Takebayashi Ryoma had walked countless times. Part of me felt nostalgic—happy, even—to see something like this. Another part of me wished I had never seen it again.

Chapter 9, Episode 22: Parlor Trick

“This is the station closest to my office...” It was just an illusion. In one blink, the door that had closed behind me turned into the familiar train station. There was a man arguing on the phone with whoever he was waiting for, and the stench of vehicle exhaust hung in the air. Everything I could see, hear, and smell seemed impossibly real. “I don’t have much time,” I realized.

“Chief!” a familiar voice called from the right, just as I raised my guard.

I whirled to raise my sword, only to hold up a worn briefcase. It took a moment to register that the hand gripping the briefcase handle—and every other part of my body—had reverted to my old self.

“Sorry to keep you waiting,” the portly man in a business suit said. “What are you doing?”

“Tabuchi,” I noted. As far as I could tell, the thing in Tabuchi’s form showed no signs of attacking me.

Tabuchi watched me curiously and spoke with a voice identical to the one I remembered him having. “Anyway, I’m glad I found you. Let’s go.”

“Where?” I asked.

“Where? The resignation party, of course!”

“Resignation?”

“Let’s get going,” Tabuchi urged. “We can walk and talk.”

What is he talking about? I wondered, but he still showed no inclination to attack me, so I followed him.

“Doesn’t this feel strange?” he asked. “When’s the last time you’ve been outside during the day, off the clock?” I had the same thought the first few days after being reincarnated. “Actually, it’s been a while since you left, so you’d be more used to it than I am. It’s been a rollercoaster since you left us, Chief.”

“Rollercoaster?”

“Well... You know how the company went under,” Tabuchi said, more as a statement.

“It went under?”

“Today, we finally wrapped up everything,” he said. “So we decided to go out and have a good time. And we couldn’t celebrate without you. Oh, and I know I’m jumping the gun...but congratulations on your new job!”

“New job...”

“You told me on the phone. A cleaner’s, right? Complete career change, but there’s no overtime, you said. And you said that your coworkers are great—nothing like our old department head.” That was the truth, at least. It was an insult to the staff at the laundry shop to even compare them to that piece of work. “Speaking of, did you know he was hospitalized?”

“No, I didn’t,” I said.

“The place was pure chaos after you left. The first thing was the mountain of work that he used to pressure you into doing. At first, he’d yell at us to divide and conquer it on our own...but we still couldn’t get it done. He tried taking on his fair share, and ended up in the hospital from ‘overworking.’ Before it got to that point, though, he was pretty pissed about the extra work. Yelling at us only stalled the real work we were doing, so he started throwing tantrums at the nepo babies. They had it easy, didn’t they? Always complaining while barely working. And their nepo status kept them off of the department’s head radar...until it didn’t. They received a few ‘verbal warnings’ and they ran for the hills.”

“I...kind of feel bad about that,” I said, realizing that all the work I’d left had to be divided among the team.

Tabuchi shook his head. “Don’t. They all had it coming for passing the buck to you all these years. They should feel bad for making you do all that work alone... Well, the same goes for me and the other members of the team. Everyone wants to apologize. You’re the only reason work got done at all at that place, where unpaid overtime was expected.”

“Is that what they said?”

“Yes. Everyone knew for a long time that you’d been covering for the rest of the team, working nonstop with your superhuman stamina. You made it a little more bearable for all of us. It’s not that we didn’t know how much you did until you left. We just...had gotten used to it. We trusted that you could take care of everything, and took advantage of that. That’s another reason we want you there so badly—to show how sorry we are,” Tabuchi said.

“I’d always wondered if they knew.”

“Of course we did. All of us. Otherwise, none of us would have made it that long. Our health—physical or mental or both—would have given out along the way.”

Soon, we arrived at our destination—a familiar eatery down an alley. It stood halfway between the station nearest to my office and the next one over. That wasn’t the best location, but they were open late and served good food. With how often I never made it back home for the night, I’d come here quite often. Tabuchi slid the door open—the familiar bell clinking as it opened—and I followed him through it.

“Welcome! You have a reservation,” the hostess greeted, recognizing us in an instant. She’d been working here for at least eight years, though I couldn’t remember the exact length. It was quite a long stint for part-time work.

“Over here, Chief. Come on,” Tabuchi urged me into a private room, where my old coworkers were already partying.

“There he is!”

“Chief! Tabuchi!”

“We started the party without you!”

“Are you already drunk? I don’t blame you—now that we’re finally unshackled from that place.”

“I’ll go get water!”

“Come sit down here, you two. No sense standing about,” Baba—who’d been close to retirement—called from the corner.

“Hello,” I greeted.

“It’s been a while,” he answered. After a moment of awkward silence, as I moved to meet him in his corner, he spoke again. “It is awkward, isn’t it? Strange. We saw each other every day in the office, and we’d been out drinking countless times. Is it because we haven’t seen each other for some time?”

“That’s probably it.”

“Have you been well?”

“I’m healthy, at least. My health was the one thing I could count on. And now I have wonderful people in my life,” I said.

“Is that right? Great to hear,” Baba said.

This *was* awkward. Baba was someone who’d excelled in sales for a long time. After some kind of confrontation with the higher-ups, he got bumped over to our team in development. The fact that I joined the company earlier than his transfer and my experience in the field were the only things that made Baba my subordinate when he was much older than me. Dependable and hardworking, Baba had always been someone I trusted in the office, but we’d never been too close outside of work.

“I’ve been meaning to apologize to you,” he said.

“About work? Tabuchi gave me the whole spiel.”

“That too, but there’s more. Back when I first started working under you, I was far from friendly. There must have been plenty of times I’d caused you stress.”

“Well...” I hesitated. Back when we first met, it wasn’t common for someone to have a boss younger than them. While things had improved by the time I was reincarnated, Baba must have faced prejudice and ridicule when he first transferred. With that in mind, I chose my words carefully. “To be honest, I wasn’t sure how to supervise someone older than me, and it took me a while to figure it out. I’d be lying if I told you it wasn’t stressful,” I began as Baba listened quietly. “But the stress lessened with time. Even though you had no experience in development, you always followed directions and learned fast. There’s a lot I learned from you, like how to take responsibility for my work and how to behave like a mature adult. Forgive me for the comparison, but it was nothing

compared to putting up with our department head and the nepo babies.”

“Yes... Compared to what they’ve done, perhaps you could forgive most things.” Then, I thought I heard him say “Thank you.”

Before I could turn my attention back to him, the room exploded in excitement.

“Chief! The surprise guests are here!” Tabuchi said.

“Surprise?”

“After you left work, we got a call to the office from someone who couldn’t reach you. Who hasn’t seen you in a long time.”

“All right.”

“I can’t wait to see the look on your face!” Tabuchi rushed to the private room door, and I followed him with my eyes, wondering who was on the other side. After glancing my way once, Tabuchi threw the door open.

I couldn’t help but stare at the two figures standing there. It didn’t matter that it was all an illusion. My eyes were glued to them, and my muscles threatened to lock up.

“Mom? Dad?” I blurted.

Mom smiled at me, and dad looked away. Slowly, mom walked over. “It’s been too long, Ryoma. You never come home anymore, or call for that matter. Why didn’t you give us your new number instead of making me call up your work?” She turned to the others. “I’m so sorry about that,” she said, while I dumbly stared at her. “Don’t you have anything to say, after all this time? Like father, like son, of course... Come over here,” she told dad.

“Yeah...” Dad stalked over to me. In how slow he walked, I clearly saw that this man—who’d never shown interest in anything but swords—only came here after much deliberation. “I...was too hard on you.”

“Your father wants to apologize. After everything, we don’t blame you for wanting to avoid us... Can’t we live together again?” Mom’s voice took root in my head, binding my heart and silencing the world around me. Slowly, her hands reached out to grab mine. “Then, we can be—”

Before she could finish, I brought my sword down onto her head.

Chapter 9, Episode 23: Bag of Tricks

From my mother's face, her mask of surprise split down the middle, magical energy swirled like dust disturbed by the wind. She became someone I didn't recognize. In the next breath, I cut down my father and spun, running my Light-magic-coated blade through the other things wearing the skin of my old coworkers. Tabuchi alone avoided the sword with an ethereal movement, and backed up to the door.

"Why?" it asked, Tabuchi's familiar voice replaced by an ancient growl. None of Tabuchi's friendship remained in its eyes, an icy glare now in its place.

The illusion had shown me release from my old company, respect and camaraderie from my colleagues, and the parents I'd long lost. Its tactic was apparently to project illusions that mirrored its target's desires. To be honest, I might have fallen for it if I'd experienced that before I'd spent much time in this world.

"Why didn't the illusion work?"



“It did,” I told the monster. “Everything I could see and hear and smell was just as I remembered them. Astounding, really.” It was all the more irritating because of how lifelike the illusions were. Having the monster wield my dead mother’s image like a puppet wasn’t a fun experience, to say the least.

Sensing my anger, the thing wearing Tabuchi’s form cringed, then vanished. The world was painted over, the restaurant fading away to reveal a dim, stone-built corridor. Even the smells of food and drink had disappeared into the familiar, damp air of the Sea of Trees.

“The illusion’s not totally broken,” I noted. Even though I was presumably seeing what the interior of the manor really looked like, I was still in my old body and the sword still appeared to be a briefcase. My mind was clear, though. There wouldn’t be an issue for me to wield my sword without seeing it, when I knew its shape so well.

This manor was initially built for the first village leader of Korumi, who was a relative to the lord of the area. It was a sizable residence from the beginning, because it included functional areas like file storage and gathering halls. Later, at the height of the kingdom’s attempt to deforest the Sea of Trees, the manor was lent out as a base of operations, which came with the addition of barracks and warehouses being built around it. As the forest fought back, though, they had to downsize the base until it became what it is now—an expansive estate with the original house in its central courtyard—the lair of the monster that lurked here.

“I thought you’d take me right to you if I played along...” I spat, choosing not to dwell on my mistake anymore. According to my research, this corridor led directly to the courtyard. As soon as I took a step forward, the world shifted again—to the interior of my old office. *Of course, the monster’s going to fight back. But what does it hope to accomplish by—*

“Takebayashi!”

“You...” I groaned.

Speak of the devil, it was my old department head. “Is that how you greet your boss?!” I didn’t even feel a hint of nostalgia with him. In my previous life, I might have apologized for my attitude. Now, I was just staring at the guy,

whose temper boiled in the blink of an eye. He shrieked like a heated kettle, his oily bald head glistening and his gut jiggling with every boom of his voice... Why was the illusion so unnecessarily detailed? “What are you looking at, you useless maggot! Stop dicking around and get to work!” he shrieked, dropping a fat stack of papers on my desk from out of nowhere. Per usual, there was enough to guarantee I’d work unpaid late into the night. “I said, stop dicking around! Get in your chair and—” his command was cut short with a squelchy yelp as I instinctively slugged him in the gut when he tried to force me down into my chair. He crumpled to the ground.

“How did you strike...?” the same gravelly voice asked before the department head vanished and the world shifted again—the hallway of my old office just outside the break room. Through its open doors, I could see a pair of young female employees.

“Ugh. I’m exhausted. Takebayashi needs to get off our backs.”

“Facts! Don’t be talking smack when you got no idea what it takes to keep our faces and nails fire. At least the greasy department head keeps his mouth shut about it.”

“Say it, girl. Doing makeup right takes time. What’s wrong with touching it up at the office once in a while?”

Now I remembered. This was after I’d finally said something to them about it. I’d never said that makeup itself was the problem, just that it was unprofessional to wear such heavy makeup at the office. And taking a few minutes to fix their makeup was one thing, but they’d only spend thirty minutes at their desks before going to fix their makeup for two hours. Even when they’d return, the cycle continued after another thirty minutes until the end of the work day.

“This is totally a hostile work environment,” one of the girls continued. “You think we can sue and fire his ass?”

“Ooh, that’d be lit!”

More calmly than I thought I could, I stepped up behind the cackling girls and decapitated them. “Get a grip.”

“Why...?” the two severed heads asked, their voices overlapping...before everything faded away.

I was the one who wanted to ask why. The monster wasn't attacking me, nor was he trying to incapacitate me somehow. With Tabuchi and Mom, I could chalk it up to the monster trying to lure me into a pleasant illusion, but the other two illusions had been nothing but a reminder of irritating moments in my previous life. They were just annoying at worst. It was eerie that I couldn't figure out why he was showing me these.

Suddenly, the department head and a group of the nepo babies materialized.

“Hey, get this done too! By tomorrow morning!” shrieked the department head.

“Yeesh, he's getting chewed out again. How old is he? How pathetic is it that he's almost forty and stuck this low on the ladder. He spent all those years without learning jack. That's what happens when you just do what you're told.”

“How's it worth living like that? Couldn't be me.”

“I know. What if we taught him to min-max like us? We're going to inherit our parents' companies sooner or later. It'll take our genius to make that bump on a log functional.”

“Nah, bro. That'd be a waste of time. Boomers are stuck in the last century, anyway. If we're going to go through the trouble of coaching someone, we have to get a good return on that investment. Some washed-up boomer just isn't worth it.”

“You're a waste of oxygen! You wannabe financial bros never lift a finger around here!” I shouted.

As painful memories flooded back to my mind, Undead sprouted like mushrooms from the floor, walls, and ceiling. The world around me rapidly flickered as each memory replayed.

“Teacher! I'd rather work alone than pair up with Ryoma!”

“You're a disease. Your existence alone makes the life of everyone around you so much worse. Why can't you understand that?”

“There are so many people who damage their health and quit this job. How come you hardly take time off? I bet you’re not doing your fair share, passing the buck to your team all day. That’s just unfair, don’t you think? I expect your output to triple, starting this month.”

“Mister Takebayashi? We received a call from one of your neighbors. Can you come down to the station with us?”

“You think you deserved to—what? *Talk* to people like you’re their equal? Know your place.”

“Why don’t you just kill yourself?”

“Ryoma. People need failure. It builds character. It strengthens the body and mind. That’s why, as your teacher, I will never think you’re good enough. No matter how hard you work, and no matter how good your grades are. It hurts me more than it hurts you, but I need to crush your spirit now. This is true compassion. Naturally, you understand, don’t you?”

Memories were flickering in and out so fast that they were beginning to blend together, turning into a maelstrom of verbal abuse with no context. Although I understood the words being hurled at me, it soon seemed futile to try to comprehend the meaning behind them.

Suddenly, I was over it. “Shut up,” I spat, cutting down silhouette after silhouette closing in on me—one, two, three, four... There was no need to put names to their faces. Before they could utter any words, I sliced through enemy after enemy. Casting a web of magical detection and physical energy in all directions, I began to hone in on the movements of my enemies and the path of my blade. Sound began to fade away.

I never particularly enjoyed swinging a blade. It didn’t do me any good in my previous life because I was too busy with school or work. In fact, some people even mocked me for it—I was too old to play with swords, or something. Still, I kept up my training until my death because I could focus on the movements. The dojo was the only place I could leave the stress of life behind. Long story short, the sword was my escape.

I was on autopilot now, my body moving sharper than ever. The feeling of lethargy that had been creeping up my body since I walked into that first

illusion was now gone.

“How?!”

“How can you move?!”

“You could never do this before!”

Screams of all vocal tones echoed, as if countless elders, children, and women were crying out—but I could tell they all belonged to the monster. With that last shout, I finally caught on. The series of painful memories wasn't to simply irritate me. Every aggravating illusion had been a replay of my own memories. Even in the beginning, while he took liberties with the details to appease my desires, the building blocks were all from real memories. In order to project these illusions, the monster had to be reading my memories, and maybe even my thoughts. If the monster had seen all my memories from my previous life, it made sense that it expected me not to fight back. No matter how angry I'd been, I'd never used violence unless I thought someone's life was on the line. I wasn't even sure if I'd ever had so much as a clever comeback to the countless nasty comments I'd received in that life. When the department head gave me an unreasonably high workload, I shut up and did it. When girls talked behind my back in the break room, I quietly walked away. Everyone else must have thought I'd never raise my hand to them, no matter how much they berated me. Just like any of them, I was willing to bet, the monster thought I'd be helpless in the face of those memories.

Am I wrong?

The monster groaned.

“Sounds like I'm right!” I declared, and the world around me shifted again. Now, I stood in the dojo at the house I grew up in. As soon as my dad appeared in the center of the space wearing his gi, he swung at me with his wooden sword—the same movement I made to cut the illusion of my mother in half a few minutes ago.

I parried it instantly, but dad quickly stepped forward and tried to swing the pommel into my throat. Pivoting a half-step back, I shifted to stand parallel to his extended arm, thrusting my sword at his neck—just to have him knock it off course at the last moment.

“How annoying,” I muttered. Dad’s illusion moved just like he did in my memories, using the same forms and movements that had been drilled into me.

“Is that the best you can do?” dad said while our swords clashed, his voice dripping with disappointment. More than ever, I vividly remembered this moment in my past. Then, dad grew taller— No, then I became a kid again, holding my own wooden sword and wearing my own gi, just like I did back then. Glimpses of dad’s face told me so clearly that he only trained me out of a sense of obligation—it was a perfect mask of annoyance. Considering how accurate the illusions had been so far, I wondered if the disappointment in his voice and annoyance on his face were unedited details from my memory.

“You recreated it too well,” I said.

I caught his blade aimed for my heart and twirled it away before sliding my own sword up to its neck—and severed it, though there was no physical resistance of flesh and bone. Dad faded away. He’d only dominated me in the dojo when I was a kid. If the illusion had completely recreated both of our skills from the time, dad’s illusion would have knocked me out before I could even get a chance to notice what his face looked like or what he’d said. I’d trained for over twenty years after his death, though, and now I’d lived through real, life-and-death combat. Once I got over the subconscious hesitation to fight him, he wasn’t much of a threat as long as I kept a calm head.

“Now... You’ve gotten on my nerves enough. Show me your face!” Pouring all the physical energy I could into my blade, I swung through the wall of the dojo. The illusion shattered into reality. Before me stood a door that should lead to the core of the manor. I could have peeked through the deep gash across the door, but that wasn’t necessary because it loudly swung open.

A courtyard lay beyond the door, and an ancient figure—practically a skeleton—stood in the center of a cadre of Undead bearing familiar and unfamiliar faces.

Chapter 9, Episode 24: Memories of a Monster

The monster was born out of magical energy. With no parents or bloodline, perhaps it was more of a phenomenon than a living being. Even the monster itself had no memory of its birth. One day, it just simply existed.

When the monster came to be in the ruined manor deep in the Sea of Trees, it had no sense of purpose or self. What it did know was the long history of Korumu from its establishment to its demise. With only the faint flickers of memories to go on, the monster managed to spend its earlier years wandering the manor. As an entity born of magical energy, the monster didn't require any sleep or sustenance. It spent its days snaring the souls of villagers trapped in the village and giving them rotting bodies with which to reenact their lives. On the rare occasion when something living found its way into the village, the monster welcomed it into its throng.

The monster had noticed Ryoma shortly after he and his companion arrived at the village. When it sensed the commotion of the Undead in the village, the monster wasn't concerned at all. In fact, its heart swelled with excitement.

What's going on? Will they come in?

When it saw Glen running through the village the next morning, the monster was elated to discover the newcomers were human. It wasn't often that humans found their way this deep into their woods—only a handful of adventurers and outlaws who overextended and lost themselves in the forest had come before. Hardly any creatures of the woods, let alone any humans, had wound up in the village since the monster began releasing hordes of Undead.

How long has it been? What kind of people are they?

When Ryoma and Glen began luring Undead to their trap, the monster watched from the manor window. It knew that humans proactively hunted Undead, but it had never seen anyone trap such a large horde as they did. It was a risky endeavor for them, according to how the monster remembered humans normally went about hunting Undead, but the pair of humans survived

—they were powerful adventurers.

The realization turned to wariness when the humans approached the manor. The monster sealed the gates and called in as many villagers as it could to fortify its defenses, but none could hold up in a fight against the humans. Even more dismaying, the monster couldn't retrieve the villagers' souls.

They're not...coming back.

The villagers were taken out on a daily basis by the various dangers of the Sea of Trees. Whenever beasts of the forest destroyed a villager's temporary body, the monster only needed to retrieve their soul and place it in a new one. That was why the villagers could reenact their lives and go out to hunt despite the deadly threats that lurked in the woods—why the monster had structured its village this way.

So, the monster was beginning to wonder why the souls of the villagers didn't return to it when they were taken by the pair of humans. It decided to open the manor's doors to lure them in and make them villagers—that would let the monster read their memories and discover what happened to the souls of those captured by the adventurers.

When Ryoma stepped into the manor, though, the monster was astonished at how difficult it was to read his memory. The fragments it had been able to pick up featured a type of civilization he'd never known. Memories of a world beyond its comprehension were shocking enough, but it was even more astonished by the gods' request that had brought Ryoma here.

After giving bodies to the souls of the dead villagers and watching them reenact their lives, the monster knew enough about the gods. Although it had never spoken with or seen a god before, it understood that they were beings on a plane above itself. Now, they had sent someone who seemed like a young boy on a mission to exterminate its existence. At that point, the monster recognized Ryoma as a clear threat and utilized its full power in an attempt to subdue him.

Why...? Why?!

Its plans had failed, and the monster stood face-to-face with Ryoma with nothing but a small portion of the villagers to shield him from the unstoppable swordsman. The illusions it conjured only served to enrage Ryoma, who'd sliced

through familiar faces that contributed to the best and worst memories of his life.

“You’ve shown me enough trash for a couple of lifetimes,” Ryoma said.

The monster grunted. “Take out that intruder!” it commanded with the voice of a skeletal elder, sending the villagers to swarm Ryoma—who dodged all of their attacks with expert fluidity, cutting them down with his Light-coated blade.

What is he after? What will he do next? The monster attempted to read Ryoma’s thoughts and failed. *He’s too fast!*

Ryoma’s mind had been difficult to infiltrate from the start, and his movements were now directed by reflex rather than thought. Ryoma’s concentration in the battle made his reaction time too fast for the monster to do anything about them, even if it could tap into Ryoma’s thoughts.

Fortunately for the monster, the souls of the villagers slain in the manor returned to him, unlike the ones he sent beyond the gates. It was impossible for the monster to leave the manor, so retreat wasn’t an option. He called upon and resurrected villager after villager to sic on the intruder, casting illusions on their faces to disguise them as people from Ryoma’s memories, hoping against hope that some of them would slow him down for even a moment.

“Give it up, already,” Ryoma said.

Still, the monster fought back the inevitable with every ounce of its power. The skill level of a villager varied depending on the life they had lived, but the monster couldn’t afford to be picky. As it summoned any soul it could get its hands on, the monster couldn’t shake its confusion.

Why? Why? Why?

In short, the monster was too inexperienced. His knowledge of how people lived their lives when Korumu thrived was just that, and didn’t amount to any real experience of a life. It had only been in its current form and able to snare human souls for a few years. Because of its powerful ability, the monster had never faced resistance like this—someone who could withstand its power—nor did it ever have a mentor in combat. Ryoma was the very first thing in its

existence that didn't go its way.

What can I do? What can I do?

This should have been an even match. No human, the monster supposed, had unlimited stamina or magical energy. As long as it could infinitely resurrect the villagers, it had an edge in a match of attrition. Still, an indescribable fear tormented the monster, even more than the knowledge that Ryoma had been sent by the gods to kill it.

Then, one of the villagers slowed. Its temporary body with no life to lose and no heart to falter, wrapped in a perpetual illusion, trembled. It wasn't an attempt to rebel against its commander, but an instinctual response. While the trembling villager tried to the best of its ability to hold off Ryoma, the trembling spread through the others like an infection. Little by little, Ryoma was closing in. Some villagers even froze in place.

I know this. I don't know it, but I know. No, no, no, no, no, no—

Shaped by their souls, the villagers retained memories more than other Undead, making them act on their emotions, which had allowed the monster to control them with its illusions. Now, an overwhelming fear was drowning them, illusion and all. The monster, too, felt the dark tide of fear rising as the battlefield approached him step by step.

"What are you?!" it bellowed, utterly useless against its impending doom. *Useless.* The word rang in its consciousness as it finally understood the root of its fear. *That's not human. Whatever it is, it's not human.* It was something the monster knew vicariously but had never experienced—the villagers all had. All living beings instinctually feared that thing that came in many forms and at any time: monster, natural disaster, illness...

It's...death.

Death incarnate approached the monster. Powerful fear surged through its fake skin, the need to run clashed with the hopelessness that there was no escape within itself. At that moment, the last of the villagers fell, and the monster's eyes met Ryoma's.

The monster shrieked and ran before it could form another thought. There

was nowhere to run, yet it couldn't help but try, fleeing behind a door behind itself. But a closed door didn't keep Ryoma at bay for so much as a second. A heartbeat later, Ryoma stormed into the same room.

No no no no no no no...! In desperation, the monster created more villagers in the room. Even if they would end up immobilized with fear, the monster had no other tools in its arsenal. All it could do was summon Undead after Undead with its vast pool of magical energy, slapping on faces that it hoped Ryoma would hesitate to hurt.

"Ryoma! Wait!"

"Slime bro!"

"Ryoma!"

"Chief!"

"Ryoma! Stop it!"

"Ryoma, calm down."

The residents of Gimul, his employees, a child he met on a trip...and the Jamils. People Ryoma met in his second life and who gave him countless memories all cried for him to stop his rampage.

"Cutting Tornado." Every Undead was lost to the violent winds of a tornado, their faces and voices wiped away.

Bearing the wind, the monster saw in its agony—Ryoma sprinting and charging through the whirlwind-cleared path, leading the attack with his swordpoint. In that instance, two thoughts flashed in the monster's mind. *There's nowhere to run, and I don't want to die.*

The monster made its final stand. In the face of death—feeling the blade about to end its existence—the monster created an illusion from the dredges of its power: a recreation of memories that belonged to all the people the monster watched live and die.

With a swell of deep, dense darkness, the concept of death itself engulfed the room.

Chapter 9, Episode 25: The Monster Under the Mask

The monster panted, although it needed no oxygen, and felt its nonexistent heart thunder to the point of rupturing. The skeletal frame of the elder faded into a human-shaped cloud of black mist. Ryoma's blade halted a hair's breadth away from the monster's neck. Its gaze followed the sword from its deadly tip up to the hilt, clasped by hands of burnt flesh, then to the arms with chunks of flesh bitten off to reveal the bone and the torso marked by three deep claw marks gashed from the shoulder down to the side. Topped by a head that had been bludgeoned to a pulp, Ryoma's body was marred by countless other fatal wounds.

"Why...?" the monster asked, hardly believing that its head was still attached to its body.

"Ah, that hurt... I thought that'd kill me," Ryoma groaned, and withdrew his sword. As the monster sagged in relief, Ryoma's wounds vanished. "The pain went away," he remarked. "So it was an illusion... Those must have been memories of the deaths that took place here."

"Why?"

"That again? Well, now we can have an actual conversation," Ryoma said.

"Conversation? Weren't you commanded by the gods to kill me?" the monster asked again.

Wary curiosity flashed on Ryoma's face, much to the monster's confusion. After a few moments of silence, Ryoma spoke up. "Oh. There's a few things I need to say. For one, I'm assuming you read my memory to learn about the gods asking me to come here. What they asked me to do, though, is to deal with your particular power—not necessarily to kill you."

"But they said they'd eliminate me—"

"If the gods had to do it themselves," Ryoma said. "They're so powerful that even the weakest thing they could do would have wiped out the entire Sea of

Trees. That's why they asked me—to keep collateral damage to a minimum. If there was no other option, I was ready to take you out. But I was never going to kill you without a conversation. As long as you release the souls of the dead and promise not to use that power again, I can keep you alive."

"Th-Then why did you come in to kill me?! I know you meant to!" the monster demanded. Its ability to read minds told it that Ryoma's statement now and his intent to kill the monster had both been genuine, much to its confusion.

"Because I knew we couldn't negotiate unless I showed you I could take you out at any time I wanted. And I was ticked off by your illusions." Ryoma added that he didn't know if he could converse with the monster before charging into the manor. Even if there wasn't a language barrier, he hadn't had too much hope for a reasonable conversation—even two humans often failed at that. Since he was going up against a monster that could take out an army, he wasn't going to hold any punches. He'd planned to capture the monster and form a contract before negotiating, but only if he could do so safely.

"And the gods had you marked as a top priority. They wouldn't just take your word that you won't use your powers again if I had no means to back up that claim or any plans to stop you from doing so. It'd be unprofessional on my part not to make sure I could take care of this problem if you chose to renege on our deal. Fernobelia, who's always cautious, and Meltrize, who doesn't know me very well, wouldn't accept me keeping you alive," Ryoma concluded.

"That's why you were ready to kill me... Then what about your task to hunt the Undead?" the monster asked.

"I plan to purify them all—or release their souls, with your help. You're not an Undead, though. You're a tsukumogami—a sort of lingering entity born of the villagers' magical energy over the years. More generally, you're a fairy." To confirm his theory, Ryoma cast Monster Appraisal.

House Fairy (Tsukumogami)

Skills: Mimicry (10) *Regeneration* (7) Illusion (10) *Spirit Manipulation* (6) Lay to Rest (9) *Multitask* (5) Magic Absorption (6) / Soulbind (*)

“Fairies can be born from magical energy found in nature or from magical energy that has seeped from humans into objects—you’re the latter. Well, because the Sea of Trees overtook the village in your magical-energy-storing phase, you’re kind of both, or somewhere in between, from what I’ve been told. In any case, you’re a fairy—not an Undead. And the manor is your corporeal form,” Ryoma said.

“You knew that much and charged in anyway? That’s like running into the mouth of a beast,” the monster said, its tone a mix of disbelief and resignation.

Ryoma pinched his brows slightly. “Now that we’re unmasking you, why don’t you drop that voice? I’m guessing you’re a child under that disguise.”

“How did you know?”

Despite the monster’s lack of expression—its face was a mere silhouette—Ryoma could see that it was taken aback by its tone and demeanor. “Just a hunch I had while we fought. A few times, once you realized I had the upper hand in the battle, your voice sounded younger. In hindsight, your asking ‘why’ to everything seemed like something a child would do.”

“Oh...” the monster muttered, and its shape shifted. Its adult-sized silhouette shrunk to that of a three or four-year-old child, its foggy outline becoming more defined. Finally, it settled into what looked like a child-sized black mannequin that moved and talked.

“Is that your true form?” Ryoma asked.

“This size feels the best. There is no human form I can call my own,” the monster said.

“I guess your true form is the manor itself... Anyway, I told you my goal and how I want to go about this. If you release the souls of the dead and stop using your power—that Soulbind skill, I guess—I won’t kill you and will leave you alone. What do you say?” Ryoma asked.

The monster timidly asked, like a child learning what a new object is called, “You really won’t kill me?”

“As long as you free the souls of the dead. The illusions you showed me weren’t my idea of fun, but I’m not going to kill a kid if I don’t have to. Even

though it was necessary, I was breaking and entering here—I don't blame you for fighting back. Even with the illusions, I was more mad at the people from my other life. It was still a bit annoying that you had to remind me of it all." Ryoma scanned the room and the countless cuts from the tornado. "This is the most important part of the manor, like a slime's core. It's like I'm standing in the middle of your heart—where your power is at its strongest. The last illusion was pretty painful, but it didn't incapacitate me. If you make me come back, I can make it here much faster next time."

"What if I get stronger by then?" the monster dared.

"Then, that's on me. I'll come nonetheless, even if I have to drag you down with me," Ryoma said.

"You're not afraid to die?" the monster asked with audible surprise.

Ryoma gazed up at the ceiling. "Well, I've experienced it once before."

"Oh."

"If anything, it's a miracle that I'm alive now. Part of me thinks that dying would just be going back to how things are meant to be—death still doesn't feel real. Maybe because the death I experienced was sudden. Unlike the villagers here, I never had to wait for death to strike. I've never really worried about it. If I were to worry about it, the fear of death could actually get me killed if I'm facing down a monster, for example. My dad taught me that more than anything else, that I need to push my body to move and kill when I sense my own death lurking... I will never stop wondering how he survived in modern society. Why would he teach a kid that, even as a hypothetical?"

Despite Ryoma's tangent, the monster understood well enough that he wouldn't hesitate to invade its manor again. Even if it were to defeat Ryoma, the gods would retaliate with absolute destruction. A future battle with Ryoma meant certain death for the monster, sooner or later. Its only course of survival was to promise—and follow through with—the release of those souls and to never use its Soulbind power again. And yet, the monster hesitated to make that promise.

"Is there a reason you can't do it, like you don't know how to?" Ryoma guessed. "I gave you my requirements, but I'm sure you had your reasons for

doing what you did. If you need something in return for releasing those souls, I'll try to meet it—as long as it's reasonable. I'm sure we each have a line in the sand we won't cross. Why don't we see if we can find common ground?"

"I'm lonely." The monster began telling its life story, little by little. When it suddenly gained consciousness, everyone in the manor was already dead, leaving only the memories of how the village had thrived before the Sea of Trees overtook it. "Back then...they all smiled. The village wasn't rich, but everyone seemed happy. But everything changed so fast. The village, the people in it, everything..."

As Ryoma had been told in the outermost base of the forest, the deforestation project came with a boom in the economy. But as the forest fought back, villagers became more desperate, neighbors became less friendly, and fights involving weapons were a frequent occurrence.

Listening to the history of Korumi's demise, Ryoma contemplated. *The nature of a fairy born of human magical energy imbued in objects is affected by the environment those objects were in, as well as the character of their owners. When born of objects that are well taken care of in a happy family, the fairy can be a guardian deity that protects and brings happiness to the people it lives with. When born of objects that are abused and broken, the fairy can be a hateful being bent on hurting people. From what this one's saying, it's the former—objects containing the magical energy that would later become its essence spent longer being surrounded by happiness. But before this fairy completely came into being, everyone in the village was gone. That's why it said it was lonely—and probably why it gained the Soulbind skill.*

As if to confirm Ryoma's theory, the monster continued. It spent its days in a reverie of memories left to it, peeking out of the manor window every now and then in search of any survivors. Instead, it found wandering Undead and soils of the deceased. Even before it learned to lure souls in, there were spirits trapped in the village, denied their passage to the gods. But the wandering spirits eventually faded away from the village. The monster longed for their souls—for companionship. Before it realized what it was doing, it had attained its power.

"I see... Your wish, mixed with your magical energy, became a sort of spirit manipulation or a curse that bound souls. Remily once said that anything was

possible with magic, as long as you had enough magical energy to spend. Your Magic Absorption skill must be what the gods were talking about when they mentioned the ability to use the natural pool of magical energy. A few factors lined up for you to get here.”

“I’m not sure... I just don’t want to be alone,” the monster pleaded, sounding like it was on the verge of tears.

After contemplating for a while, Ryoma suggested, “Do you want to be my familiar, then?”

“Familiar?”

“I plan to frequent the Sea of Trees in the future. It’s great for gathering materials, experimenting, and just taking some time off. Having a base camp where I could spend the night would really help me out, and I can teleport to any of my familiars with a combination of Taming magic and Space magic. I’d be able to come see you more easily than just about anyone else. And I need a place to house my goblin familiars. They haven’t caused any trouble yet, but if they keep multiplying like they are now, they might scare the neighbors. That won’t be a problem here. Besides...if I spread the word through the duke, we might find some oddballs who’d *want* to live here. What do you think?”

“I never even thought about that,” the monster said. “People stopped coming, so I thought...no one would ever come again.”

“It’s a tough environment for most, I admit. But that doesn’t bother me. I know I barged in here and all, but I think I brought you a pretty good deal.”

The monster remained silent for several minutes, until it finally reached its conclusion. “I’ll let everyone go.”

“Great!”

“I will...but can you return everyone trapped in your...slimes, I think? The soul has to be in the manor for me to revive or release them. And I want some more time with some of the souls,” the monster said.

“I can get them out of the slimes anytime. As for the extra time, I can’t wait a century or anything like that, but I could give you a little bit of time. We can talk about the details later, but why don’t we form a Taming Contract, agreeing to

set those souls free? Once you're my familiar, we can somewhat communicate from afar."

"Come here." The monster pointed its hand to the desk behind it.

"I thought that desk might be the core of this room—you kept it behind you the whole time," Ryoma said.

"Yes. Every master of the manor used it—the ones who laughed, the ones who yelled, the ones who cried... This room was used for meetings too."

"It carried the history of Korumi village and the magical energy of its villagers," Ryoma said. "Here goes—Taming Contract!" At the casting of his spell, Ryoma sensed the monster accepting the surge of his magical energy. *So far so good. Maybe because we agreed on it beforehand*, he guessed. Binding their magical energy together, Ryoma formed the contract. "Do you feel off in any way?"

"Um... No," the monster answered.

"Then it's a success for now..." Ryoma said. "Now you need a name."

"You're going to name me?!" the monster asked excitedly.

"I can't keep calling you 'the monster.' Especially if we're going to stay in touch. Don't expect a masterpiece, though, I've never been great at giving names..." Intimidated by what looked like a flash of anticipation in where the monster's eyes should have been, Ryoma scanned the room. Soon, his gaze settled on the desk he had used to tether the contract. "How about Korumi?"

"Like this village?"

"You're a fairy born from a manor that kept watch over the village's people and history. In a sense, you're the last member of Korumi village. If you don't like it, I'll—"

"I like it! I like it! I like it! I'm Korumi!" Korumi shouted, sprinting around the room with its arms raised high.

Ryoma sensed Korumi's joy through their bond, and heard rapping from all four walls of the room, just like an effect in a haunted house. "As long as you're happy with it... I'm glad I could end this quest this way." Quietly, Ryoma sighed

in relief that he had gotten through the most difficult part of the gods' quest without harming Korumi.



Chapter 9, Episode 26: Send-off

After taming Korumi and discussing the fine print of the agreement to release the souls of the dead, we returned to the manor's entrance to find Glen waiting outside the open gate while Korumi hid behind me as a young child would.

"Thank you for waiting," I said in greeting.

"Didn't wait that long. Looks like you came out unscathed... Is that the monster you were after?" Glen asked.

"Korumi the Fairy," I explained. "Once I had him detained, we were able to hold a conversation. In exchange for releasing the souls of the Undead, I'm going to let him live. I've already made him into my familiar."

"Huh. If you're good with that, I got nothing to say. That kid's power kept the gate and fences up this whole time, right?" Glen asked.

"The gate? I think so... Korumi?" I asked.

"He kept hitting them. Fixing them was a lot of work," said Korumi.

"Punching through them was a pain because it kept getting fixed up," Glen said. "Never thought such a little thing was keeping it all in place. So, you done here now that you shook hands?"

"I'm afraid I'm going to be a little longer," I said.

The soul Korumi wanted to spend some more time with before releasing belonged to a mother cannonball rhino whose calf stayed in the manor. The pair of rhinos had sought shelter in the manor after being attacked by other monsters beyond the walls, but then the mother rhino died from her injuries. Korumi, who'd watched these events unfold, made the mother into an Undead so she could stay with her calf. Since they were wild monsters, they usually roamed outside the manor, but Korumi could summon the mother if he chose to do so. He could easily release the mother's soul, but he wanted to let the rhino calf spend a little more time with its mother.

“Little rhino got your heart, huh?” Glen said to Korumi.

“According to Korumi, the mother has accepted her own death—as I imagine most wild monsters would. But she’s worried for her calf. She wanted to see the calf join a new herd and, if possible, see for herself if the new herd was strong enough to protect her calf until it grew up.”

“What the...? You’re telling me Undead monsters think like humans?” Glen asked.

“Cannonball rhinos are one of the smarter monsters in the Sea of Trees,” Korumi said.

“What I just told you was a sort of translation or interpretation based on what Korumi had read from the mother’s mind,” I explained.

“So that wasn’t straight from the monster’s mouth—makes sense. Some monsters defend their young and care for them, I guess,” Glen observed. “It’s impressive he can understand what a monster’s thinking, basically.”

“If Korumi were to fully utilize his ability, there would be no language barrier between any species,” I said.

Korumi’s power was way better than any translation tech on Earth—it was like having thoughts broadcasted out loud. His ability to read someone’s memories would be the cause of trepidation for most people who’d want to voluntarily use his power to communicate, but that was a bridge we could cross when we got there.

“Korumi said that the mother and calf rhinos were alone because their original herd fell apart when its leader suddenly went berserk. The same leader regularly prowls the village. Taking it out should be an adequate show of power to the mother rhino,” I said.

“So you’re going to stick around for a while,” said Glen.

“Yes. It’s been coming to the village’s watering hole every few days, and it causes a ruckus every time it does—I’d know right away when it shows up, so it would only be for another few days, max. Would you like to stay with me?” I offered.

“Yeah. I still got some room in my bag, and it’s not like I got anywhere else to be in a hurry. Getting out of the forest is going to be a lot more comfortable with you,” he said.

“Compared to how you used to camp? I’m sure.” Somehow, it felt like I had a stray dog following me around, knowing it’s going to be fed. Of course, Glen helped me out more than enough for the quick and easy accommodations I could prepare for him. “Speaking of cooking, do you clean the monsters you hunt? I’ve only ever seen you chuck whole carcasses into your magical bag.”

“Chuck ’em and forget ’em,” Glen admitted. “I know it’s better to clean them, but I keep chipping my knives and tearing up the meat and hide every time I try. Eventually, they just started buying the whole carcass from me so I can’t ruin them.” To keep his game fresh, his bag was also imbued with Ice magic. As it turned out, it was a portable icebox.

“Then why don’t you let my goblins clean them for you? One of them practically lives to clean game, so he’d be happy to do it. That should give you extra room in your bag. Any part of the carcasses you don’t want can be used as feed or a reward for the goblins,” I said.

“Really? Then I’ll give you all my raptors for starters—I just want the scales, claws, and fangs back. I’ll sort through my bag and see what I want to give you next. Where do I put them?” Glen asked.

“If you could put them in my Dimension Home for now—” I started, when I felt a tug on my left sleeve. “Korumi?”

“There’s a warehouse here. And a place to clean game,” Korumi said.

“Oh, right. This was the home base for clearing out the forest at one point,” I said.

“It was both a military facility and a shelter for the villagers,” Korumi added. “It should have everything you need.”

I took Korumi up on his offer and decided to clean Glen’s game in the manor. Before I let Glen into the manor, even though I’d already made Korumi promise not to use his power without permission, I had to tell my companion that the fairy could wield his power if he really wanted.

“Meh. Should be fine. It doesn’t feel dangerous anymore,” Glen said, and stomped right into the manor.

Even though the manor was old, Korumi’s regenerative powers and the manual upkeep performed by the hordes of Undead kept the place clean and functional, complete with furnished bedrooms where we would be sleeping for the next few days.

“Are you ready, Korumi?” I asked.

“Yes...”

Leaving Glen to sort through his game in the warehouse, Korumi and I were standing in the courtyard with my grave slimes. The courtyard wasn’t too large, but the outdoor space that used to receive airdrops of supplies performed by monsters was big enough for Korumi to release those souls.

“What do you need me to do?” I asked.

“If you bring out the Undead, I can release them. I won’t make them stay anymore,” Korumi said.

“Then I should prep the fire... Do you know how this spell works? You can read my memories if you’d like.”

After a few moments, Korumi seemed to have done just that. “Understood. Should I explain it to the freed souls?”

“Hmm...” I considered that. “Don’t worry about that. Just wish them peace.”

After we prepared to send off the dead, I had the grave slimes release their Undead little by little. The first ones out were zombies and skeletons that looked the least human. In contrast to their behavior from that morning, they only showed some signs of hesitation before walking up to the smoke without a fight and vanishing into thin air.

“Are you doing all right?” I asked Korumi.

“Yes. They’re gone,” he said simply. Although he seemed a little rueful, he was taking the send-off much better than I expected. Based on his mood during our negotiations, I’d been concerned that he was going to try to back out of it.

“Do you want to share any memories you have with them?” I asked.

“Memories...”

“Only if you don’t mind.”

“I don’t mind. I just don’t have much to say,” Korumi said, and went on to explain how he didn’t interact with the souls he bound all that much. Whenever he turned a bound soul into an Undead, they would become confused from the lingering memories of their life—and especially of their death—or they would show their character, jagged and jaded from their time in the Sea of Trees, and they did not take kindly to Korumi the monster. That’s why Korumi had always shown illusions that mirrored his target’s idea of happiness and desires. In addition to quelling their mental distress, the Undead became captivated by the illusions—without a second glance for Korumi.

Korumi was satisfied, though. Being able to socialize with the Undead was the cherry on top, but he was happy just to observe his villagers. When Korumi said he was lonely, I’d assumed he wanted social interaction, but he just wanted someone to inhabit his space.

“That makes sense, I guess it’s because you’re a house...?” I wondered aloud. That explained why he changed his tune and quickly agreed to release the souls once I asked to use the manor as a base and station the goblins here.

“In that case, the goblins will multiply quickly,” I reassured Korumi.

“I’m excited.”

“They’re cleaning the game now, and they’ll soon start distilling too. Is that all right with you?”

“There are plenty of empty rooms,” Korumi said. “I can tell when pests or monsters come in. I can chase away anything from the grounds with illusions.”

“It won’t be a problem while they fit in the manor, then.”

Undead after Undead emerged from the grave slimes and rode the rising smoke to the heavens. As Korumi and I exchanged small talk and watched the cycle of Undead purification, they slowly became indistinguishable from live humans. Those who must have remained conscious in the slimes exclaimed in

surprise.

“Outside?! No, this is the courtyard.”

“We were outside the gates.”

“Damn! Where are my men?!”

“Oh, gods!”

It didn’t take long for their attention to shift to us, convinced that the battle at the gates was still raging on.

“You! What have you done with my—” They stopped, all of a sudden.

“Korumi?” I asked, guessing that he’d put them all in an illusion.

“They were going to riot. I’m going to explain everything,” he said.

Korumi no longer had a grasp on their souls as far as I could tell. I decided to see what would happen.

Soon, a dozen or so of them began shouting in disbelief, one of them whining louder than the rest. “Liar... It can’t all be an illusion! I’m the greatest thief in the kingdom!”

In life, he must have been a thief exiled to the forest. I was mentally preparing to forcibly cleanse the thief stuck in the glory—if you could call thieving that—of his past.

“Silence, you rambling fool.” A man in full armor, who’d called himself Baron Destoria, grabbed the shoulder of the first Undead.

“How dare you?! Unhand me at once!”

“I know not who you are,” Destoria said. “But you must understand that you are dead.”

“Th-That’s the illusion! The monster is trying to fool us!”

“Fool... Now, I understand. I died in that very moment. Something guides me now...” The baron turned his gaze to me. “You. What is your name?”

“Ryoma Takebayashi,” I answered.

“That is not a name I have heard of... And I should not pry into your identity.

My name is Alice Destoria. I thank you for freeing my soul. My time in captivity was not an uncomfortable one, but my men are waiting for me in the beyond. I shall be leaving soon. If possible, tell my family of my death—and that I fought to the very end.”

“Fortunately, I have a connection with Duke Jamil. I have no personal ties to the Destorias, but I will make sure word reaches your family,” I said.

“A thousand thanks. It does nothing to repay you, but I will be taking this man with me so he doesn’t cause you trouble,” the baron said.

“What?! Speak for yourself! Unhand me! Damn you!”

“How do you call yourself the greatest thief in a kingdom when you can’t even pry my hand off your shoulder?”

“Help me!” the bandit cried. “I’m not ready to— Stop!”

With a firm grip on the self-proclaimed great thief, Baron Destoria disappeared into the smoke.

Once the area suddenly became quiet again, a priestess slowly came up to me. “Forgive me for approaching you, Prophet, to express my thanks,” she said.

“What do you mean by Prophet?” I asked.

“I strongly sense the great gods in you,” she said.

That reminded me. The gods had told me that some humans would notice my connection to them. “Just the other day, I received a blessing from Meltrize...”

“Oh! To have my last moments witnessed by a Prophet—blessed by Meltrize herself, no less! As a servant of the gods, there has been no greater honor. The gods truly have not forsaken us!” she exclaimed, rising to the heavens with a look of euphoria on her face.

“Wait—and she’s gone...” I would have loved to hear how blessings affected magic. I’d have to ask the gods directly next time.

“Hey,” a familiar voice called. I turned to find an old man I’d grown accustomed to seeing—he was the one Korumi had disguised himself as while we fought. Whoever he was, he now scowled at Korumi. “I’m sorry I left you alone,” the elder finally said, and turned his back on Korumi. “Let’s go,

everyone. That's an order." He vanished, followed by soul after soul.

Once the last bound soul was gone, the bonfire rapidly dwindled. Korumu silently stared up at the sky until the last wisp of smoke disappeared.

Chapter 9, Episode 27: Prepare to Return

The next day, I was left with some extra time on my hands. Now that I'd gathered my grandparents' keepsakes and Korumi had released the souls he had bound to the village, I'd accomplished pretty much everything I wanted to accomplish in the Sea of Trees. There was nothing on my to-do list except to wait for the leader rhino to show up.

Glen was off gleefully hunting, perfectly happy with how my goblins had cleaned up his game yesterday. Although I considered tagging along with him, I couldn't leave the village in case the leader rhino appeared while I was gone.

After thinking about it all morning, I'd decided to clear up the ruins of the old village that lay scattered around the central manor and clean up the grounds. "Let me ask you again—are you sure this is okay?" I asked.

"Yes, no problem," Korumi said.

The part of the village surrounding the manor had been used as a reenactment stage to soothe the souls of the old villagers. Now that all the Undead souls were released, it served no purpose. Left alone, there was a nonzero chance that Undead would appear without Korumi's help. Korumi had been the one to suggest we clean it up. If Korumi, who was attached to the village more than anyone, was ready to let go, nothing was holding us back.

This wasn't my first demolition project, and the overall workflow would be the same, but I started by scoping out the area in this environment that was far from Gimul.

"First, we remove the rubble and weeds," I announced. Summoning sand slimes from the Dimension Home, I changed a portion of the ground to sand with Earth magic. In the same way that I had demolished the decrepit orphanages in Gimul, I created a tornado of sand to shave down everything from the weeds to the lumber, rocks, and dirt walls.

"Then, we take care of the sand and remove other materials," I said. With the

magic of my soil slimes, I buried the sand and pulverized rubble. At the same time, this exposed everything that was buried. Metal fences were dug up and set aside, and roots of the weeds were given to the huge bush slime. Now, the entire area was a pristine field. The whole process was wonderfully efficient, even though I took the extra time to pack extra soil around the heatwood trees without damaging their roots to prevent any of them from falling onto the manor. In the end, I had the huge bush slime cover the ground, and all traces of man-made structures were gone.

“That was so fast!” Korumi said in amazement from the other side of the manor’s fence. He looked no different than a little boy watching construction machinery work with complete admiration.

“That was only the first section. We’re going to go over a lot more,” I said.

Seeing how most of the buildings had been made with natural stone and lumber, they would completely return to nature. My process seemed to work here just as well as it did in Gimul, so I’d continue demolishing the rest of the structures. I continued around the manor, clockwise, clearing section after section.

Around noon, Glen returned to the village. “Welcome back,” I greeted him. “How did it go?”

“Didn’t see a cannonball rhino, but it was a good hunting ground—loads of monsters I didn’t see in the shallow end of the forest that needed to be cleaned up. The meat and guts are all yours, and take the rafflesia hotel petals while you’re at it,” Glen said.

“The petals too?”

“Yeah, I never would have thought to grab them on my own, and I don’t even know how to use dye, let alone where to sell it. Sure, I’d probably get a bunch of offers if I asked around, but then I’d have to choose who to sell it to and negotiate on a price... Too much of a headache. Much more simple to go out hunting so I can stuff my bag with game you’ve cleaned up for me.”

I hadn’t thought of it that way. There’d be no skin off my back. “You’ve got a deal,” I said.

“Great. You got lunch for us, right?” Glen said.

“Coming right up.”

I started working on lunch, but then I noticed something.

“What’s that look on your face for?” Glen asked.

“Try this meat.”

“The same snake meat?” Glen took a bite of what I offered. “Hm? Is this a different one?”

“No, it’s from the same immortal snake. I kept it properly, and my appraisal says it’s not rotten, but it tastes kind of bad, doesn’t it?” I asked.

“Well, the stuff we had until yesterday was too good. This stuff isn’t bad, but compared to yesterday’s...”

Compared to yesterday’s meal, this meat was somewhat harder and drier. Since the meat hadn’t spoiled or anything, it might have had something to do with the immortal snake’s regeneration. The half that regenerated might have expended energy and nutrients stored in its body to do so, leaving the meat wanting.

“So if we want the best quality meat, we need to kill that thing in one shot?” Glen asked.

“As long as we sever its head—that’s how we got our first batch. It’s all guesswork, of course. This was my first time hunting an immortal snake. Even when severing the neck, it may have to be in one cut to preserve the flavor. Maybe it’s pretty difficult for normal people to taste the same quality of meat we did,” I said.

“*Normal* people don’t come this far into the forest, and definitely can’t take out an immortal snake,” Glen said.

I laughed in agreement and asked what he wanted to do with this less delicious meat. Glen said he’d eat it, asking me to hunt for the premium cut if I saw an immortal snake again. That would be a priority for the next few days, especially since I wanted some of it as a souvenir for the Jamils and their employees.

The next day, I was carrying on with the demolition of the village when I spotted what looked like a small farm...that had been nearly drowned out by the vegetation of the woods. Most of it was in ruins, except for a vine that wrapped around a supporting pole with grape-shaped fruit at the end.

Considering that thought, I returned to the manor for the time.

“Korumi,” I called once I was there.

“What’s the matter?” he asked.

“I found something that seemed like a farm over there... Oh, it might be faster for you to read my memory.”

“Okay... That’s definitely the black pepper farm,” Korumi confirmed. Maybe I should harvest the pepper before bulldozing the place. Even though it hadn’t been maintained, some vines were growing on their own.

“Do you want to grow black pepper?” Korumi unexpectedly suggested.

“Do you know how to grow it?” I asked.

“I do. That farm was abandoned a while ago, but the farmer built one in the courtyard too. And it has other spices,” Korumi said. He went on to say that some of the former villagers couldn’t let go of the time the village thrived on exporting spices. Even after becoming bound spirits, they continued to grow them in the manor’s grounds. Thanks to the fact that Korumi had to read their memories and thoughts to produce the best illusions, he understood how to grow black pepper and other spices. Using his power of illusion, he showed me how to pick the right branches to propagate. “I’ll show it to the goblins who have nothing else to do,” Korumi said, apparently excited for an excuse to talk to his new goblin neighbors.

Isn’t his power too convenient? I thought. I still struggled to wrap my mind around the fact that Korumi was a self-managing house. He carried with him generational knowledge acquired through the memory of the villagers, and by using his mind reading and illusion abilities, he could communicate with monsters and other species—almost like an ideal version of VR or AR.

Korumi had lost control in his search for companionship, but he was just a little kid. Still, I couldn't help but be reminded that he was still a monster with powers that concerned the gods themselves. Korumi just hadn't thought of how to utilize his powers, but there were a hundred and one ways to take advantage of his abilities.

"Ryoma!" Korumi said, having reappeared. Technically, he'd always been there since he was the manor itself, but anyway...

"You surprised me. What's up? I thought you went to see the goblins," I said.

"I forgot to ask. Do you want to grow rafflesia hotels too?"

"Wait, you can grow them? *Were* you growing them?" I asked.

"It's not difficult," Korumi explained. "As long as the flower is undamaged, you just have to put it next to a support. The only problem would be that no one can live close to it...and you'd have to risk your life to harvest it?"

"Those are pretty serious problems," I pointed out.

"Some of the final villagers tried. They said they were going to make it rich and go back to a normal life," Korumi said.

"That never, ever, works..." Was the cluster of rafflesia hotels Glen had found the relic of this endeavor? Even if they felt desperate and backed into a corner, they sounded just like the people who tried to get out of debt by winning at the casino or lottery. "Sorry, rafflesia hotels can fetch a nice price, but it's not worth making this village unlivable."

"I can keep gluttonous flies away with illusions," Korumi offered.

"Still, I don't want to keep those too close. It's not like I need the money, so I won't get into that anytime soon. If I need one, I could just grab it from the cluster that's already there. By the way, did Glen give you the rafflesia hotel materials and the other stuff he doesn't want?"

"They're all in the warehouse," Korumi confirmed.

"Thanks." There was no reason to rush the demolition project, so I decided to grab those materials first. If he left me a lot of materials native to the Sea of Trees, I wanted to see if any slimes took a particular liking to them.

I went down to the warehouse and tested them out.

“Wow...! I guess I should have expected the plant slimes to gravitate towards these,” I said. Some of the weed slimes reacted to the heatwood branches and seeds found in the guts of monsters, while others reacted to the rafflesia hotel petals. Lobelia the scientist had talked to me about tree slimes before, and I wondered if that was what these weed slimes would turn into. Would the one attracted to the heatwood branches evolve into a different slime than the one attracted to the heatwood seeds? There was one way to find out.

Is there a slime that evolves from rafflesia hotel petals specifically, or would it evolve with any flower? That was an important question to test because of how rare rafflesia hotels were. So much so that for a moment, I considered farming them after all... Before I made any decisions, though, I’d prioritize using the readily available heatwood and see if any slime evolved into a tree slime.

Another material readily available was raptor meat. Caulkin had told me about a slime that evolved from a constant diet of monster meat. Caulkin had gone broke from that experiment, but I could provide that supply for free, simply by making my way back. *It’s worth a shot.* “So much to look forward to... Now I should gather any materials I can that are close to the—”

“Ryoma! Chop these up now!” Glen shouted as he ran into the warehouse.

“Glen? What are you—?!” I found him holding two enormous snakes, one green head in each arm, their bodies coiled around Glen’s in a bone-crushing hold.

“You found more immortal snakes?!” I asked.

“A little ways off from the village! There were bigger ones too! I’ll bring more. Slice them and dice them, will you?”

“Got it,” I said. “Korumi?”

“On it.” Korumi materialized out of thin air, and the pair of snakes fell off Glen’s body and began to sleep on the floor.

“That makes it easy,” I said.

“Good! See you soon!” Glen shouted, and ran back out. If there were more

immortal snakes out there, the village itself had to be close to their natural den. While that also meant the village was more dangerous, it made this place the perfect base for gathering materials. While preparing to kill the enormous snakes, I began brainstorming plans to gather those materials in the afternoon.

Chapter 9, Episode 28: Hunting the Leader Rhino

The morning after the day I spent gathering resources around the village, Glen and I were enjoying a late breakfast, when suddenly, loud hooves thundered outside.

“That’s the leader rhino,” I said. “Shall we?”

“It’ll work off some of that food,” Glen said.

We left the manor and headed to the pond the rhino supposedly frequented. Glen remembered seeing it when he ran around the perimeter of the village, so he led the way. As we approached, I could hear loud crashing and thick huffs of breath.

Concealing ourselves with Hide from a safe distance, I watched a three-meter tall, four-meter wide monster charging into a heartwood tree by the lake over and over. Its rhino horn and long fur marked it as a cannonball rhino, but it was far larger than the average size of the species listed in the document I researched before coming here.

“That’s the leader, huh? Yeah, I’d say it’s acting weird,” Glen said.

“Cannonball rhinos are herbivorous, and they regularly charge heartwood trees to feed on fallen leaves and branches. But that one seems far too excited for just getting a meal.”

“Doesn’t look like it’s eating anything. It’s not fighting anything either. What’s it up to?”

“I don’t know—” I began to say when I noticed a juvenile rhino less than a meter tall hiding in a bush about ten meters away from the larger monster. That had to be the young rhino Korumu was talking about. Just as I cast a Wind spell in its direction, Glen darted their way.

The juvenile let out a shrill trumpet, recklessly readying to charge the large rhino three times its size. Just as the pair were about to make a move, my spell reached them. The tough and magic-resistant rhinos obviously weren’t harmed

by the wind, but all I needed was a moment's distraction.

Glen roared, slamming his hammer into the leader rhino's face, rocking its massive body with the impact. Yet, the rhino didn't let out so much as a huff in pain, glaring at Glen with a promise of violence in its eyes. Funny enough, the leader rhino's thrashing had cleared the area of underbrush enough to provide more visibility. I blinked to Glen's side with Space magic.

"You all right, Glen?"

"Yeah, I smacked that thing real good, and it basically shrugged it off. This village is full of surprises... Awesome!"

"Awesome?!" I repeated. As reliable of a combat partner as he was, I'd never understand how he could enjoy situations like this. "Can you take care of that for a while?"

"Yeah, the small one's all yours." Glen ran, looking for an opening to use his hammer again, while the leader rhino stomped to and fro, trying to knock out Glen with its horn.

Meanwhile, I turned my attention to the juvenile rhino—that immediately trumpeted in an attempt to show its dominance. Behind the little rhino stood an adult rhino—its mother—that must have been hidden from my view before.

Just like Korumi's "villagers," the mother rhino looked as if she were still alive, save for the gaping hole in her neck and crushed hind legs. Obviously, she'd been mauled by the leader rhino. Even though her Undead body was gradually regenerating, she wouldn't be mobile for a while. That's why the juvenile was trying to fend off the leader rhino and was trying to protect its mother from me now.

"Don't worry, I'm not going to hurt her... Of course, you don't understand me without Korumi," I said. As I was considering whether to tame the rhino just so we could communicate our intentions, the juvenile charged at me with a sharp trumpet. No matter how young, the rhino monster wasn't to be taken lightly. I'd be seriously hurt if I didn't dodge it carefully. On top of that, there was no telling when the leader rhino would shift away from Glen. There was only one way I could think of how to keep my promise to Korumi. "This might sting a bit!" I announced pointlessly, pouring all the physical energy I could into my whole

body.

The young rhino charged me head-on, poised to stab me through the gut with its budding horn. An instant before the full force of the rhino collided with me, I threw myself backward as I grabbed its neck and horn. “Stay out of it!” I told the rhino, using its momentum to throw the juvenile behind me as I hit the ground, sending it flying through the air and splashing into the shallows of the pond near its mother with a bleating trumpet.

According to my research, a cannonball rhino would sometimes admit defeat in a fight if they were knocked to the ground or tossed aside—as if they were sumo wrestling. I could do one more thing to keep the little one from attacking me again. “Let’s see... Stay.” I cast a Dark spell, willing it to stay by its mother—instilling just the vague instinct would do, similar to how the Fear spell made its target feel a general sense of fear. All I needed was for it to stop attacking me. The improvised strategy worked—the juvenile kept its guard up, but backed up towards its mother.

“One down, and...” I looked towards Glen.

“Let’s go! Bring it on!” Glen bellowed, while the leader trumpeted, ignoring Glen as it ran in and out of the pond, splattering dirt everywhere. Soon, it began tackling the heatwood tree again as if Glen weren’t even there.

What is it doing that for? If we didn’t deal with the leader soon, I was afraid it would charge the calf.

As if it read my thoughts, the leader rhino bellowed and charged straight towards me. Casting Fire on instinct, I dove into a bush in the opposite direction as the calf to avoid its charge. The leader immediately made a sharp turn, its horn still pointed at me. Using Space magic, I jumped to the side of the pond and let the rhino crash into the tree that had stood just behind me. Astonishingly, its trunk nearly cracked in half, causing the massive heatwood tree to lean askew.

“Just like I thought—a direct hit would kill me.”

“Hey, Ryoma. Something’s off about that thing,” Glen called.

“We knew that already,” I countered.

“No, not what it’s doing—how strong it is. With how tough it is, it’s got to be on the same level as the S-rank dragon I fought a long time ago, but it’s not as fun! Like it’s a weakling jacked up on magic that powers it up.”

If Glen felt that, there must have been some truth to it. I watched the leader rhino again, assuming that its strength was being boosted somehow. In stark contrast to its earlier rampage, the rhino was drooling from its slack jaw, wobbling like it was about to fall asleep standing. I no longer felt a hint of the aggression it showed a moment earlier when it charged at me.

Boosted strength, crazed aggression, sudden drowsiness... I listed the rhino’s conditions in my head, and the solution came to me. “Glen, did you see a purple spot on it somewhere?”

“Purple? Look inside its mouth.” He gestured to the rhino’s mouth with his hammer. Sure enough, vibrant purple spots marred its mouth.

“I thought so.”

“What’s that mean?” Glen asked.

“Most likely, it’s been stung by a doping hornet. Its venom acts as a stimulant and sedative, and it also strengthens monsters that are stung by it. When their hive is threatened, doping hornets sting a nearby monster so it’ll be enraged and take out the threat. The purple spots make the sting recognizable,” I explained.

“Another wacky monster.”

“That said, the only proof they’re in the forest is that rhino. Doping hornets weren’t mentioned in the Sea of Trees files I requested from the guild. They’re rare enough as it is, so they might just have been missed in this expansive forest,” I said.

“No one would bat an eye if a monster’s more aggressive than normal here... How’d you know about those bees if they weren’t in your documents?” Glen asked.

“Doping hornet stingers and honey can be used to make medicine. I learned about them in that context.” Knowing the cause of the rhino’s aggression didn’t change our situation—it was going to rampage again any minute. Now was our

opening to take it down, but it would take drastic measures to take down a monster that practically walked off taking Glen's hammer to its head. "Doping hornet venom makes it numb to pain, but not impervious to attacks. We should be able to wear it down if we're persistent."

"Don't feel like doing that. Especially when it's acting that way."

"I thought you might say that." In fact, I was starting to predict what Glen would say with decent accuracy. To play his way, we'd need to hit the rhino in its weak spot, fast and hard. That meant...

"It's enraged again!" Glen shouted over the rhino's blaring trumpet.

"Binding Ivy!" Using Wood magic to control the vines wrapped around the nearby heatwood trees, I constricted the bleating leader rhino. Each of those vines was surprisingly durable, so they were an effective restraint—for a few brief moments, at least. The rhino was already shifting its weight, tearing vine after vine.

"Mud Puddle!" Shifting water from the pond to the earth below the rhino, I created a slippery pool of mud that kept the rhino from pushing off the ground with any meaningful force. The remaining vines tying down the rhino were stretched to their limit, but all of them held. I rarely had an opportunity to use this spell because I usually chose to fight in close quarters, but I was glad I'd learned it.

"Glen!" I urged, taking the metal slime sheath off of my belt and asking it to change shape.

"Huh? Oh, got it. Let's make it count!" Glen darted up a heatwood tree to gain some altitude, catching on to what I was about to do.

I got into position on top of the rhino's neck by using Space magic. "There." Using some of the vines, I stabilized myself onto the thrashing rhino. Then, I concentrated on magical energy detection, sharing fields of vision with the metal slime that had been forming my sheath.

A hateful trumpet blared as a torrent of information threatened to drown my thoughts—but I held on. "Right here!" With the same method I used to cast Healing magic, I accurately mapped out where the leader rhino's brain was,

marking it by stabbing the sharpened sheath into its head. The metal slime shifted into a solid metal rod with a flat head at its top—a giant nail.

“Here goes!” Glen announced, leaping off of a branch near the very top of the closest heatwood tree. Without needing to watch him, I focused on bolstering myself and the metal slime with physical energy.

The next moment, a shout and a tremendous impact shook me from my hands to my core.



Chapter 9, Episode 29: Goodbye for Now, Korumi

I yelled out as the impact of—what should I call it?—the Glen-powered Pilebunker not only sent the metal slime nail into the rhino's skull up to the head, but rattled the rhino's entire body, tearing up the vines that restrained it. The rhino's dying bleat was drowned out by the deafening sound of adamantite-meets-metal until it was hardly audible. With one last quiver, the leader rhino collapsed powerlessly, sinking halfway into the mud puddle.

I'd blinked to solid ground just before the collapse when I noticed pain shuddering through my arms. The hammer never hit my hands that held the nail. Still, even with the armor of physical energy coating them, Glen's hammer-fall was so powerful that it fractured the bones in my arms.

"Did I break your arms?" Glen asked. "I thought you let go, last second."

"I held it until the tip broke through the skull. Well, if it's only this, I can heal it without much trouble. No harm done."

"You can heal yourself too? After the hordes of Undead we've dealt with, you're starting to look like a zombie yourself," Glen said.

"I get what you're trying to say."

"It's a compliment, dude."

Despite being compared to a walking bag of rotting flesh, we'd pulled off the kill. The metal slimes had made it out too—thanks to the protection afforded to them by Hardening and using physical energy to boost their durability. There was no sign of other monsters either—mission completed.

Could I have dealt with the leader rhino alone? I wondered. Maybe if I'd stabbed its eyeball or the inside of its mouth with the bloody slime spear—anything else would have been useless. Glen also said that this rhino felt as tough as an S-rank monster, and I knew it was made more dangerous by the doping hornet sting. It might be prudent for me to work on improving my damage output in case I'd have to deal with a threat like this solo.

“Oh?”

“Hey, guys,” I greeted the mother rhino—completely regenerated now—as she approached us with her calf in tow. They didn’t make a move to attack us. Instead, the mother reared up on her now healed hind legs, raising her front legs into the air. The juvenile followed suit.

“What are they doing?” Glen asked.

“That’s their way of surrendering, I think.” It stuck out to me during my research because I wondered at first if they’d misinterpreted a gesture of making themselves look big and intimidating. This had to be the gesture a cannonball rhino made when it lost a duel against another. “Because we took out the big one?” I asked the mother and son. “Did Korumu tell you?”

Of course, they didn’t understand my questions—the juvenile’s legs started to tremble from the effort of holding up his considerable weight with his hind legs.

“Tame first, questions later,” Glen said.

“Right. There’s no communicating with them otherwise.” Considering the mother rhino was an Undead, I decided to tame the juvenile—and it went off without a hitch. “You’re okay being my familiar?” I asked. The rhino confirmed with a cute trumpet. “Then, I’d like to return to the manor. And we can let Korumu know what happened.” I steeled myself for the next question. “Will you come with me?” The calf acquiesced again, and the mother looked ready to follow me without a fuss. A stream of emotions too complex to describe came through our bond—maybe he knew what was about to happen.

“Hey, Ryoma. If we don’t pack the big one away now, it’s going to get eaten all up by monsters. How do we split it?” Glen asked.

“Well... The cannonball rhino is all yours. Just let me retrieve the metal slimes,” I said.

“I might have finished it off, but you’re the one who made an opening for it.”

“If I had to guess, there’s no way to split it up, anyway. A normal blade won’t pierce its hide,” I said.

“Oh, got it... Yeah, it’s not worth the hassle,” Glen agreed.

“It’s too tricky to cut, even if I use physical energy. The goblins could never sort it out. Like one of your buyers said, it’d be better to take it back uncut than shred it to nothing.”

The hunt wouldn’t have gone so easily if I’d been alone. Not only did I accomplish everything I set out to do, I gained a familiar out of it—that was pay enough for me.

“Then I’ll hold on to it. The vines are all loose. Can you take care of the mud?”

I siphoned the water out of the mud with magic. While I collected the big metal slimes, I dug out the leader rhino’s carcass. The calf watched quietly while Glen packed it away. There was no telling how he felt about the leader rhino, his former pack leader and the killer of his mother and packmates. At some instinctual level, the young rhino seemed to understand the law of the jungle—survival of the fittest.

“It’s all packed!” Glen called.

“Got it. Let’s head back to the manor,” I said.

With the mother and son rhino, we started back towards the manor where Korumi awaited. Well, Korumi *was* the manor, so...

I entertained myself with useless thoughts like that, until we reached Korumi waiting behind the gate of the manor. “Welcome back,” he greeted us.

“Hey, Korumi. We took down the leader rhino and brought the calf back,” I said.

“Yeah...” Even without a face, Korumi looked obviously sad.

“Korumi. This mother and son can’t stay together forever, but I think we can give them a little more time,” I said, not knowing if this really was the best thing for the rhinos or Korumi.

Picking up what I was putting down, Korumi’s face-shaped outline flicked up to me and bobbed up and down.

“Can you wait inside the manor?” I asked the two rhinos, and they went to stay with Korumi.

“Where are you going?” Glen asked.

“The doping hornet hive should be somewhere near the pond—I’m going to take care of that. It’ll be nothing but a liability if I leave it alone, especially since I will be using the village as a base of operations. Besides, I may get in the way of their goodbye.” I gestured to the rhinos.

“True... I’ll go hunt for something, then.” Glen ran off in the opposite direction of the pond.

An hour later, I found the hive. “That was pretty easy.” I’d expected the search for a tiny hive in the vast Sea of Trees to take much longer. All I did was follow the circular path of destruction that the leader rhino had carved through the woods. At the opposite end of the circle from the village, the oil-drum-sized hive hung from the branches of a particularly tall heatwood tree. Climbing that high would be an arduous task, and I couldn’t afford the risk of getting stung. A Lightning barrier could kill the bees the same way as the gluttonous flies...but it’d be better to let the slimes handle this one.

From the Dimension Home, I brought out the spider slimes and a big sticky slime. I had the spider slimes weave webs all around the hive, layer after layer, so not even a single hornet could escape. Once the webs were fortified, it was time to go on the offensive. I asked the big sticky slime to slither up the tree and encase the entire hive. Naturally, the doping hornets moved to defend their hive, trying to sting venom into the attacker from the inside and out. As long as it didn’t absorb the hornets or let the stingers make contact with its core, though, it wouldn’t be harmed. In fact, every time a stinger met its body, it used its sticky solution to capture and encase the insect without absorbing it. The entrapped hornets suffocated in no time. Once the entire hive was enclosed by the sticky slime without leaving any air holes, the doping hornets within the hive also suffocated within thirty minutes. There were some hornets that tried to escape the encasement, but they found themselves tangled up in the spiderwebs. A few hornets might have escaped, but they were native to the forest, anyway. There’d be no way to exterminate them.

“Good enough for now,” I said. “At least I verified this works.”

I returned to the manor, having collected the dead doping hornets and their hive. This time, the two rhinos stood alongside Korumu to greet me at the gate. The mother rhino loafed on the ground, her legs folded, her calf rubbing up

next to her. But both sets of rhino eyes were on me. Apparently, they were all waiting for me here.

“You’re ready?” I asked the rhinos, and they each answered with a trumpet.

“They are,” Korumi answered for them. “She says, ‘Thank you. Please look after him.’”

The mother and calf rubbed their necks together one last time, and the mother rhino quietly vanished—like she was never there at all.

“Did she move on?” I asked.

“Yes. She’s not here anymore. It’s different from humans,” Korumi said, sounding at peace with it.

The rhino calf stood and walked over to me—another trumpet.

“He’s glad he’s your familiar,” Korumi interpreted.

I crouched down to eye level. “Likewise.”

With another toot, the calf rubbed his neck against mine, just like he did to his mother. At his young age, the calf already accepted that his mother was gone, and decided to start walking on his own.

As his tamer, I’d be the one to watch over him—his new pack leader.

“You’re leaving already?” Korumi asked, the day after I tamed the rhino calf.

“Now that I’ve done everything... I’m not in a rush, but I can’t stay forever,” I said. Even though Glen and I had been living here pretty comfortably, we were still in a danger zone. If I delayed my return for too long, those who were waiting for me back home would think I’d died—that wouldn’t even be the worst of it. If they decided to send out a search party, that could lead to casualties all on its own. “Don’t give me that look—or vibe, or whatever. It’s okay, I’m coming back. I told you I can come back much faster with Space magic, didn’t I?”

“Yeah...”

On my trek through the forest, I’d left stone slimes at equal distances to act

like guideposts for a return trip and emergency exit. I left each of them a jar I'd crafted with Earth magic stuffed with rocks—a food source that would last them for a long time. I couldn't blink from outside of the forest directly to Korumi, but blinking from stone slime to stone slime should let me visit the village and exit the forest again in a single day. I'd explained all that to Korumi and I even let him read my memories to show I meant it—still, he must have felt lonely.

The goblins were still in the Dimension Home too. Korumi could provide ample shelter for them, but they'd soon run out of food and water, which wasn't a concern for Korumi or the Undead. There was still a lot of work to do before the goblins could move in.

I'll be back sooner than later... If only there's something to keep him busy in the meantime, I thought. Then, I looked at Korumi again. When we first met, he'd looked like Tabuchi. He'd appeared to me as the former village elder after that, before settling on the faceless silhouette. "I know. What if you try shape-shifting?"

"Shape-shifting?"

"In my homeland, there's something called an 'avatar.' You take a bunch of preset parts and combine them in different ways to create the perfect look that you want. In games, people often try to make a copy of themselves to heighten immersion... People really go hard with these customizations." Plenty of players spent hours before the game even started. "Even if this is your default look, you don't have to keep that form all the time, do you? It could kill some time until I come back, to try and make your own look instead of just borrowing them from memories."

"I'll try," Korumi said. Reading details from my memory, he shifted from a silhouette to a toddler. Even though he understood the concept of customization, it'd take him some more practice to work in some originality. Surely based on what I looked like as a kid, he had black hair and black eyes, wearing a child-sized tracksuit. Looking at him, it was easy to imagine that might have been what I looked like, had I existed in this world at that age.

"It's like you're my little brother," I said.

“Brother? Brother!” Korumi bounced all around, twisting this way and that to try and look at himself, while I moved out of the way. I wasn’t sure being my brother was such a joyous occasion, but I’m glad he was happy about it.

“I promise you, Korumi, I’ll come back here, as soon as I can. Will you hold down the fort for me until I do?” I asked.

“Okay...! When you come, I’ll show you my avatar!”

“That’s a promise.” I held out my right pinkie—he knew what it meant. I took his tiny pinkie in mine and pinkie-swore. Then, we smiled and said our goodbyes for now.

Then, I joined Glen, who’d waited for me a little ways outside the gate. “Ready?” he asked.

“Thanks for waiting. He let me go in the end.”

“Kids will be kids. He’s not too fussy,” Glen pointed out.

“I guess you’re right. I will be back, very soon.” I turned around to see Korumi watching me across the open gate. Waving at him, I called out, “See you soon!”

“He really looks like a normal kid now...” Glen called to Korumi too. “I’m coming back to hunt when I run out of money! Let me bunk in one of your rooms, will you?!”

Korumi kept waving as fast as he could wave his little hand, a reassuring smile on his face.

To keep my promises both to Korumi and those waiting for me beyond the forest, I hurried to make my journey out of the Sea of Trees.



Special: The Relationship Between Gods and Humans

Just as Ryoma was relieved to have tamed Korumu, the gods sat around their round table, drink in hand, relishing their own relief.

“He pulled it off, somehow...” Tekun muttered, knocking back cold sake.

“That last illusion got me a li'l scared.” Grimp shuddered.

“Illusions don't leave real scars,” Fernobelia chimed in, “but they can produce real pain and suffering. Most humans would have become immobilized from the imagined death, or they would have really died because their body was convinced they had. In most cases, magic like that means instant death.”

“Leave it to Ryoma to come out unscathed... How'd he block the illusion anyway?” Serelipta asked.

“He didn't. He merely mitigated its effects through his natural resistance and holding on to the knowledge that it was all an illusion,” Kiriluel explained. “Long story short, he just buckled down and bore it. Like Ryoma said himself, he was ready to risk his life to attack—knowing that striking the heart of the monster would make it difficult for it to maintain its illusions. ‘Kill or be killed,’ don't they say on Earth? Fighting monsters is always a matter of life or death. In the end, Ryoma settled the matter without any deaths—we should be happy with that.”

“You may be right, but...” Wilieris scowled.

“Aren't you happy with the results?” Kiriluel countered.

“I am. The monster—Korumu—is no longer a problem, now that his powers are neutralized. The issue was that he had obtained such powers on top of humanlike emotions in the process of coming into this world. Overall, this was the best-case scenario. That being said, and I don't mean to diminish Ryoma's hard work, but I don't think he needed to risk his life as much as he did,” Wilieris said, to the agreement of the others.

“That is true...” Gain said. “This was supposed to be an issue we handled on our own. Was there a need for him to risk his life? I can’t say that there was.”

“I hate to say this after he helped us out of the kindness of his heart, but I’m a little worried...” Lulutia said. “In no way is he like those people in the past who misconstrued our words, but he gets carried away, too eager to do a good job.”

“Ryoma always had a habit of pushing himself too far ever since his life on Earth,” Kufo chimed in. “Whenever his coworkers had dates or anniversaries, he’d offer to stay even later to finish their work for them. He never hesitated to sacrifice himself for others. It’s like...he’s too nice of a person and I’m worried he’s going to burn out.”

“He wants to keep on helping us out, right?” Tekun said. “Are we cool with that?”

“No, we’re not *cool* with that... It’s unheard of for a single human to deal with a problem that could have easily demanded our direct intervention. This was an absolute exception.”

“Wilieris is right,” Grimp said. “That monster bein’ deep in the forest was the only thing keepin’ this quiet. If the same kind of monster were to pop up in a populated area, there would ’ave been untold casualties. So much so that takin’ care of that alone would ’ave turned Ryoma into a hero of the entire kingdom.”

“It would be one thing if he was striving for fame,” Lulutia muttered. “But he is trying to actively avoid fame and recognition... It’s a serious problem that he’s such a good help to us.”

Fernobelia, still scowling, said, “In this case, we would have had to wipe out the majority of the Sea of Trees if it wasn’t for Ryoma stepping in. If we had wiped out half the forest, the remaining woods would have been polluted by the blast, extinguishing most lives in the forest and ruining its function as sacred grounds. Although I maintained my position that we should not interfere with human affairs, I am forced to acknowledge the usefulness and potential in their ability to make more detailed adjustments to the world that we cannot.”

“How often do you expect something like this to happen?” Kiriluel laughed. “The most Ryoma will do now is to clear out the Undead and cursed energy with his magic—that’s not a big deal.”

“Did you just jinx us?”

“Shut up, Serelipta,” Lulutia chided.

“But he’s been cursed by the demon lord fragment. Before that, he’d been roped into the conflict about the Jamils—I guess you could say he stuck his nose into it. Something tells me he’s going to encounter a lot of once-in-a-life-time events.”

“I hate that I can’t deny it... What do we think?” Tekun asked.

“I understand your concern,” Gain answered. “But there’s no sign that the Earth god had any hand in Ryoma’s destiny in this world, from what I could see when I looked into it after Ryoma told us about his curse. It’s not impossible for the demon lord fragment to *call* Ryoma to it, but I doubt that sort of power was left in it. Ryoma finding it was a coincidence, no doubt. The fragment was buried shallow enough in a place where humans could access and dig it up with magic—a human finding it was always a possibility. Any one of those knights on regular patrol of the area could have come across it.”

“So that’s Ryoma’s lot in his life, to find himself in the middle of bizarre situations? I’m not even surprised, after he spent his life on Earth being their god’s guinea pig. I feel bad for the kid, but it makes so much sense.”

“Hm... Just to make sure, are there any signs that a new issue of this caliber would start up in Ryoma’s range of activities as of now?” Fernobelias asked.

The gods turned their attention to Gimul, all of Jamil territory, and the entire kingdom of Rifall.

“Let’s see... The demon lord’s curse on him may be the most direct threat to Ryoma. If we’re talking on a bigger scale, that would involve the monsters being more active due to drawing in Earth’s magical energy,” said Lulutia.

“We can’t help the increase in monsters and mutations. When we decided to take in the extra magical energy, we took all that into account. In most cases, humans can handle it on their own with proper preparations. Politics is going to be a bigger problem, won’t it? To be honest, Ryoma’s not going to die in combat. There’s no guarantee or anything, but he’s strong enough to get himself to safety even if he has no chance of winning. What he’d struggle with is

fighting political power in human society,” Tekun added.

“He has made quite a name for himself with all of his accomplishments,” Serelipta said. “The duke is backing him up, but that’s also proving how valuable he is. It’s impossible to keep him hidden at this point, so it’s probably best that he has a noble publicly in his corner.”

“Now that the Jamils are aware he’s a child of the gods, let’s trust they’ll do everything to protect him... For now, it doesn’t look like his situation will escalate to a point where we’d need to intervene,” Wilieris said.

“If it did, Ryoma’d have serious bad luck,” Grimp said, drawing a chuckle from the other gods.

Wilieris stood. “There’s no sense in talking about it. Let’s take another look at the world to make sure that a one-in-a-million like that doesn’t happen.”

“You said it,” Grimp added. “We also gotta check if there’s more demon lord fragments lyin’ around.”

“If there are, they’re using their residual power to conceal them from us. Doesn’t hurt to take another look. Now that Ryoma’s safe, let’s get back to work,” Kiriluel said. “Come on, Serelipta!”

“What?! I’ll enjoy my break a little longer, thank you very much. You can go on and—”

“Work while you slack off?! Not today! You’re coming with me, whether you like it or not!”

“Ow, ow, ow, ow...!”

Kiriluel dragged Serelipta by the scruff of his neck, and disappeared.

“He’s always whippin’ up a ruckus, ain’t he?” Grimp said.

“That’s exactly what the moody slacker Serelipta needs. I will see you later.”

Wilieris and Grimp disappeared, just as Fernobelia stood up.

“Are you going too?” Gain asked.

“I’ll prepare Ryoma’s reward. The quest is as good as completed.”

“Oh, I’d forgotten about that,” Gain said. “Knowing Ryoma, he’ll come talk to

us from the closest church to the Sea of Trees.”

“Then I’ll help,” Tekun offered. “I better take care of the wrapping.”

“That, indeed, is not my specialty. If you don’t mind.”

“All right, let’s go!” Tekun downed his goblet that had been refilled countless times before he and Fernobelia disappeared.

“And then there were three. Shall we get back to work?” Gain asked.

“Checking on Ryoma *is* part of our job...” Kufo pointed out.

“Once everyone was here, it was more of a watch party. I’d feel bad to stay after everyone else has left,” Lulutia said.

“It was loud,” a fourth voice said.

The other three gods turned and found a young goddess sleepily sipping on a cup of tea.

“I didn’t realize you were here, Meltrize,” Kufo said.

“Rude.”

“But you’re usually asleep. Even when you’re here, you barely talk or make yourself known,” Kufo added.

“Just recently,” Meltrize added.

“Come to think of it, you used to stay awake longer,” Lulutia said.

Meltrize went on to explain, reminiscing. Years ago, humans were much closer to the gods. The gods taught the humans various skills, and humans used to seek the gods for advice. The gods used to watch over and manage the world while human civilizations were managed by humans under the gods’ advice. Back then, gods and humans coexisted in harmony.

“But I don’t think our current way is wrong,” Meltrize said. “Humans can prosper without our advice. A child will not walk on their own unless their parents let go. After we decided to minimize our interventions, we didn’t need to spend time considering and imparting advice... Less work meant more time to sleep.” Meltrize said this with a straight face, but the irony of how much she’d simplified the history of their existence in this world drew a small laugh

from the other gods.

“You are right,” Gain said. “It used to be normal to talk to many humans like we do to Ryoma.”

“The world was less stable, so there were more problems to address,” Kufo added.

“We got together all the time to talk through solutions,” Lulutia said. “Now that you mention it, this is like the old days.”

“Yes. I was surprised when I woke up and realized that,” Meltrize said.

For a moment, the gods each seemed to remember those days from eons ago.

“We have a good thing going,” Gain said.

“We can’t revert everything about how we interact with humans,” Lulutia said, “but having this relationship with Ryoma is nice.”

“If we talk to Ryoma about keeping himself out of danger, we and the people around him can keep an eye out for him—that should help a little bit,” Kufo said.

“We can all talk it over. There’s still plenty of time,” Meltrize said.

The four gods watched over Ryoma as he negotiated with the monster of Korumu. Hopeful that there was a brighter future to come for their world, they all smiled.

Afterword

Roy here, the author of *By the Grace of the Gods*. Thank you for purchasing volume fifteen! As I was working on volume fifteen, I reached another milestone—ten years since my first post that started it all.

In Ryoma's world, he finally collected his grandparents' keepsakes, which had been a goal of his since early in the series. In more ways than one, this was a milestone volume. I've experienced plenty of milestones over the past ten years: my first post, the publication offer, when I actually saw volume one in bookstores... With hindsight, I can see how important little moments and decisions had been along the way.

My life has changed a bit over the last decade, mostly around my writing. One of the easier changes to spot is my office. Before publishing, I used to write on a little fold-up chair and laptop I'd used in school. Now, I have a desktop dedicated to writing, situated on a proper office desk and chair.

Personally, I feel a bigger difference in my mentality. I had plenty of concerns about writing full-time... Well, I *still* have those concerns, if I'm being honest. I'll probably never stop being a little bit nervous about this lifestyle.

Over the decade, though, I've grown a little kernel of confidence about myself and my work, which gives me the drive to keep working and branching out. That kernel would have shriveled up and died without everyone involved in the publishing of this series, and of course, my dear readers.

Just as Ryoma's adventure in his world has been rife with new people and places that slowly changed him, I feel like I've grown a little bit at a time through my writing.

Once again, thank you for your support from the bottom of my heart. I hope you continue to follow Ryoma on his journey to meet more new people and see new places.

Bonus Short Story: Elia's Worries

Another school day had concluded in the capital's academy, students filing out of the classroom to enjoy the rest of their day. One girl stayed at her desk, very sluggishly packing up her bag.

Four other girls approached her.

"Elia?"

"Hi, Riela. Girls. What's wrong?"

"We were going to ask you the same thing."

"Miyabi's right. You've been off lately, Elia," Kanan said.

"Specifically, you've been zoning out a lot. Not so much during class or while you're working, but as soon as you don't have a task... Is there something troubling you?" Riela asked.

Elia cast a quick glance around the room at a few other straggling students. "It's nothing serious..."

"We've got time. Let's go somewhere we can sit down and talk," Miyabi suggested.

With no one objecting to the idea, the girls moved to a pergola beside an open area in the academy for students to practice magic in. Now, they were the only ones there.

"So, what's on your mind?" Kanan asked again. "If it's family stuff, or something you don't want to talk about, we'd understand."

"It's not a secret—though I don't want to go around telling all of my classmates. I've been thinking of Ryoma," Elia answered.

"Your friend you told us about. He's a year younger than us, but he already runs businesses and works as an adventurer, right?" Riela confirmed. "You've met him before, haven't you, Miyabi?"

“Yeah, my dad knows him.”

“We only know him from the few times you’ve mentioned him. What happened?” Michelle urged.

“In his last letter, he wrote that he was going to visit the village he was from... It’s in the Sea of Trees of Syrus,” Elia said, drawing looks of surprise and concern from her friends.

“Of all the places...” Riela started.

“I only know that it’s a dangerous area. He really went there?” Michelle asked.

“He’s told me of his intentions to return there before, and father made sure he was ready before he left... He should be fine, but I’m still worried,” Elia said.

“Of course you are,” said Kanan. “Just to make sure, is Ryoma a good fighter?”

“My father and his employees always talked about how strong he is,” Elia said.

“Oh, I’ve seen a monster Ryoma hunted once,” Miyabi said, and went to retell the story from before she entered the academy, when Ryoma had brought back a smash boar. “I’d asked the people that cleaned the carcass, and they told me Ryoma must have taken it down with his bare hands. I didn’t know how strong he was, so I yelled at him because I told him not to put himself in danger.”

“That’s a normal reaction,” Kanan said.

“A C-rank monster’s meant to be hunted by a party of several adventurers,” Riela provided. “No one would expect someone our age to take it down alone. If he’s from the Sea of Trees, I suppose that explains it.”

“If he’s that capable, I’m sure he’ll make his way back just fine,” Michelle said, to the agreement of Elia’s other friends.

“He doesn’t look it, if I’m being honest, but I saw the proof,” Miyabi said.

“Give it some time. He’ll send you another letter like nothing’s happened,” Kanan said.

“To quote my mother, the duty of those who wait is to wait with trust, not

with worry. I know that's easier said than done, but try thinking of what to do when he returns safely," Riela said, passing on the wisdom of her mother who'd married a knight who always put his life on the line.

"You're right. There's nothing I can accomplish by worrying about him. Drawing up a letter to send upon his return is far more constructive," Elia said. "Will you help me with it? And help me choose what to send to celebrate his return?"

Her friends agreed without a second thought, happy to lift Elia's spirits. Elia chose to leave her ungrounded worries aside, and trust that Ryoma would safely return.



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By the Grace of the Gods: Volume 15

by Roy

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