

CHAPTER 1

A BRISK LABYRINTH BUSINESS

The Tempest Founder’s Festival had ended in a resounding success. Those hectic days of preparation and festivities were now a good ten days in the past.

Our VIP visitors, as well as the common folk who visited from neighboring countries, were already gone. The same was true of Fuze and the king of Blumund; they had hurriedly made their departure, promising to discuss matters once they had returned home. Gazel, the dwarven king, had left in a similar rush to build the science-and-technology research team he was planning to send my way.

Meanwhile, Elmesia, emperor of Thalion, was nice enough to purchase one of the lodging houses in the swankiest district in town, near our reception hall. She had a teleportation circle installed in one of its rooms, ensuring she could visit anytime she wanted. That’s the rich for you. When they buy into something, they go all the way. I still remember the superiority-laden smile Elmesia gave the clearly jealous Gazel—chances are he’ll march right back to Dwargon and have their treasury authorize the cash to purchase one of our villas.

Maybe I should be thanking Elmesia. Even better, she agreed to continue employing our local people working there, under the same conditions. Rigurd was handling all the details—arranging for regular cleaning, meals when Elmesia was staying, and so forth.

“Of course, next time I pay a visit, I’ll do so by transferring my consciousness into a homunculus. That might prevent me from enjoying myself to the fullest, but—”

“Your Excellency, we cannot allow such selfishness!”

Once again, the mere fact that Elmesia left her nation’s boundaries sent shock waves across Thalion. Not that it was any of my business, but in Erald’s eyes, it must have been unbearable. Simply mobilizing the Magus, the top-level knight forces protecting Elmesia, presented huge national-defense concerns, apparently.

“Ah, I see. Would that apply to Elen, too…?”

Elen, being Erald’s daughter, was elven herself, although her ears were the regular, rounded human sort.

“No, Elen can visit in person. Homunculi have their flaws, after all. Spending too long in one can have adverse effects on one’s own body.”

“Your Excellency! Please do not reveal state secrets such as this!”

As Elmesia had let me know on the sly, Elen had been using certain potions to change her appearance and travel the world unhindered. This alarmed Erald enough that he apparently assigned a small army to stay in the background and guard her unnoticed.

By the way, it turned out that her companions, Kabal and Gido, were both Magus members, too. Shocking, I know. So after all that whining about deploying the Magus outside the country, he assigns two of them to guard his own daughter? Erald’s such an overprotective father.

“Really? But they didn’t look like anything impressive to me…?”

When I ran Analyze and Assess on Kabal and Gido before, they seemed unremarkable in terms of strength. But when I asked about it, Erald just frowned.

“This is also confidential, but fair enough. Their abilities are actually being restricted by the magical rings on their fingers. Their restraints are lifted only when Elen is in truly, truly mortal danger.”

That was kind of a surprise. So Thalion’s magical tech was a level beyond what Analyze and Assess told me? That said, my Analysis skills back then were a far cry from the accuracy I enjoyed now. Maybe I’d notice the concealment this time around. For that matter, maybe I should stop resting on my laurels just because I analyze something once. Next time I see those guys, they’re definitely being scanned again.

“Please take good care of my daughter, then.”

“Okay! See you later!”

With that, Elmesia and her crew headed back for Thalion, riding a ship pulled by a Dragon Lord for protection.

By comparison, the demon lord Luminus had it easy. With her vast magical force, she could cast Spatial Motion as much as she wanted, so she just poofed her way back home. Apparently, she’d contact me later about the musician exchange we talked about.

Hinata, meanwhile, was still in town, watching the kids study at our church and helping out with battle training. Right now, we had no really suitable teacher for those children. Hinata had been busy keeping the peace in the Western Nations with her paladins, but now we’d be helping out with that, taking over the southern portions, and that opened some time in her schedule.

“If you like, would you mind helping the kids a little? I’m good with magic and everything, but I’m not so hot at teaching.”

“Sure. This town’s been added to my list of Warp Portal destinations, so I can watch them when I’m free.”

She gladly accepted the offer, and believe me, I was elated.

I never had any intention of giving the children back, really. Now that I had my concerns about Yuuki, I figured it’d be better to keep them away from the Kingdom of Englesia for a bit. That’s why I brought them over to Tempest, and luckily, the festival was a good excuse for that.

Their school transfer had already been arranged, which was a blessing in disguise, since it was getting hard to provide much guidance for them in Englesia’s academy. Now that I had Combined them with their elemental spirits, they had grown to be pretty darn strong. They were too much for any normal teacher, and it was about time they had a real instructor watching them.

Yuuki himself mentioned that paladins were a good match for spirits. I kind of inadvertently turned the conversation toward the spirits as we spoke, but looking back, he must’ve known about my plans from the start. I think I was intending to keep that a secret—

Report. You were keeping it a secret.

Y-yeah, I sure was.

And my blabbing it seemed to have rankled Raphael a bit.

I mean, c’mon, it was gonna come out either way. You’re focusing on that too much. No need to get too worried about it.

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Right. Sorry. I had already heard some disquieting things about Yuuki, but I blurted it out anyway. Maybe part of me really wanted to believe him. But I made him privy to things he didn’t need to know about, and I regretted it now. I’d need to be more careful next time.

Thus, I would be taking responsibility for the children’s care—and given the situation, Hinata’s assistance was a godsend. Through the festival, the kids had really taken a shine to Hinata, and I had no problem with her taking the job. But Hinata as a teacher, huh? Maybe I should join the class, then.

So I was seated alongside the rest of the kids as Hinata coldly glared at me.

“What are you doing here?”

“Oh, you know, just observing…”

“Well, you’re in the way. Go.”

“Um, okay…”

And so I was unceremoniously kicked out of school. A real shame.

In the midst of all this, we’d been all wrapped up from the festival for about a week’s time. Things were calmer on the streets again, and the townspeople now had more time on their hands.

So I decided to perform our test launch of the Dungeon now that we had finished fine-tuning it. More than a few adventurers were excited about exploring it; we had already gotten a large number of requests, and I wasn’t about to disappoint them.

It was the start of a busier time than ever for me.

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On the first day of our Dungeon’s soft opening, problems erupted after only a few hours. It turned out that the challengers were a lot more inept at tackling it than I thought. This was something I predicted when we first revealed the Dungeon at the Founder’s Festival, hence why we lowered the difficulty level. But everyone was taking so much time advancing through the chambers—making me realize that something needed to be done soon.

There were no traps in the first floor. Any naturally occurring monsters who might show up were ranked F at the most—total wimps with no real fighting skills, creatures your average villager on the street could pummel. I designed it to help people get used to the labyrinth’s atmosphere, so all it really contained were rooms with treasure chests and monsters guarding them. But I had already removed the traps Ramiris set up, so if you wanted to reach the next floor, you couldn’t count on a handy pit trap taking you there—you needed to make a map.

Even with everything involved, I figured the first floor could be conquered in a day of holing up in there at the most, no matter how slow you were. But in the past three days, the number of parties that made it to Floor 2 was zip. Even Basson’s team gave up after getting hopelessly lost on the first floor—they had already experienced just how big the labyrinth was, but I guess they didn’t bother taking any measures against it.

It was really just exasperating, but if anything, Basson was on the more decent side. Some of the parties were getting killed by the D-ranked monsters I had as room guardians. In fact, not some—a lot. The common theme was people lured by the treasure failing to notice the guardian creatures lining the rooms. I bet even the skeletal archers I had in there were surprised. They had all these adventurers sprinting toward the chests, giving them the chance to shoot them in the backs over and over again.

We’re talking a complete lack of fundamentals. No risk management. But at least those fools were smart enough to form groups. Because just when you think you’ve run into the biggest idiot, another one comes along to show that you’re nowhere near rock bottom yet. Yes, some were even tackling the whole Dungeon solo. That’s beyond reckless and well into the realm of hopeless.

You wouldn’t encounter too many monsters on Floor 1; as mentioned, random encounters were restricted to F ranks only. But even F-ranked monsters could be a threat if you had a big enough group of them. I guess. I mean, I wasn’t entirely sure about that, but to them, they were a threat.

Seriously, if you’re tackling this solo, even finding a place to rest was a challenge. Nobody was keeping guard for you. You’d have no chance to get some shut-eye. And even an F ranker wasn’t completely helpless. Some of them weren’t shy about attacking sleeping humans, so letting your guard down spelled death. I wondered if the solo questers had some ingenious scheme to handle this, but no—I don’t think they really thought it through at all. It was hopeless, and they all were whisked out of the Dungeon without anything to show for it.

Clearly, at this rate, they’d never be able to survive the deeper levels. Floor 2 saw more random encounters in the corridors, including E-ranked monsters. By the time you make it past Floor 5, I think you’d be seeing D rank, even. If they’re getting tripped up at this point, any D-ranked monster would’ve mangled them with one swipe.

Among the more head-scratching cases were people who quit for the most pathetic of reasons—they had no food and got hungry. Save points were located on every tenth floor, and every fifth featured a safe, monster-free zone with drinkable water. We also amply warned people to bring a decent supply of food with them. But no. The other adventurers must’ve looked at the example Basson set for their own preparations, but clearly that was not enough. Adventurers tend to be proud people, I suppose, and they definitely weren’t into listening to instructions. A fair number of them didn’t even bring any rations along—maybe they felt safe, knowing they could be resurrected, or maybe they overestimated their own strength. I don’t know, but regardless, they couldn’t find their way back to the exit, so no wonder they started starving.

Clearly, they had it coming.

And I mean, I get it. I know people want to retrieve as much as they can from the treasure chests here. But if I was seriously intent on killing my challengers in this labyrinth, I don’t think anyone would conquer it in a hundred years.

Still, most of this first wave of customers were broke bodyguards and mercenaries looking for a quick buck, none of them with much exploration experience. No need to panic yet, I thought, as I watched things unfold for three days. But in the end, not a single party made it to Floor 5’s safe zone. I could barely stand to watch.

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We made money from their admission fees, at least, so it was no loss for us. But if this keeps up, it’ll kill adventurers’ enthusiasm, and we’ll lose any shot at repeat traffic.

I figured we needed to reevaluate things from the ground up. This was far beyond expectations. I just wanted to bury my head in my hands.

So I called for an emergency conference.

This consisted of Veldora, Ramiris, Masayuki as an observer, and me; I also invited Mjöllmile as the main businessman behind the Dungeon. Once everyone was present, I spoke first.

“Well, it’s been about three whole days since we opened the labyrinth, but I think it’s safe to say the results have been unsatisfactory. Or really, just crap. If we want this to be any fun at all—um, I mean, if we want our user base to keep coming back to the labyrinth, I think we’ll need to give them some guidance.”

The way things were going, I wasn’t sure anyone would even reach Floor 10. Everything about my plans for this place was in stasis. My conclusion: We needed to offer at least a little bit of strategic help for our users, or we’d never get anywhere.

“Indeed! Rimuru is right. At this point, I’d need to wait until the end of time for anyone to reach me.”

“True, true. And I want people to see all my masterpieces below Floor 50. I think people deserve some hints!”

Along those lines, Veldora and Ramiris were in agreement. Masayuki was still thinking—or really, just standing there confused. I guess he wasn’t too sure why I called him here. The invite came kind of suddenly, so I couldn’t blame him—but he was bound to get into the swing of things soon. I’ll call on him, then.

I turned my eyes from him to Mjöllmile, who looked pretty excited about getting to meet Masayuki the Hero. Maybe that’s why he so eagerly spoke up once he noticed my gaze.

“May I offer my impressions?” Mjöllmile asked.

“Anything’s welcome,” I said. “Give me your worst.”

He nodded. “You mentioned offering hints, but I’d like us to approach that with a soft touch. It’s still only been three days, and our challengers so far have all been from the lower ranks. We’ve asked the Free Guild to invite more seasoned adventurers for us, so I think we’ll see more rated C and above from here on.”

“You think that’ll work out?”

“I do. I have trouble figuring out Sir Yuuki’s motivations sometimes, but he’s always true to his word. He’s been sending magical communication to advertise to Free Guild offices worldwide on our behalf.”

“Yeah, it’d benefit the Guild, too. Anything else?”

“Yes, I’ve been using my own connections with other merchants. We’ve been reaching out to more talented bodyguards, as well as their friends. According to the feedback I’ve received, we’ve had quite a good reaction so far.”

Relaying the news and gauging the results were both key. I had asked Soka, leader of Team Kurayami, to work with Mjöllmile and help him on those fronts. The two of them had led the labyrinth presentation together. Mjöllmile was always good when dealing with people, and they had quickly broken the ice. I was glad to see there was no discrimination involved there.

Soka’s team was now following Mjöllmile’s instructions—and actually, Soei was as well. At the moment, Soei was tracking the movements of Duke Meusé and the people around him, but when that didn’t occupy him, he was meant to help advertise my nation a little. Now rumors of the Dungeon were spreading even to little country towns, places not big enough for a Free Guild post.

“So you don’t think it’ll be too late if we wait for some more talented challengers to travel here from afar?”

“Exactly. We’ve only just kicked this off. In my personal opinion, we shouldn’t expect instant results! Better to settle down and focus on our long-term future. And once the noble ranks worldwide begin to invest in us, we can expect to see challengers ranked B and above before long.”

Mjöllmile certainly sounded passionate. Masayuki gave him some appreciative nods, which made him visibly grin. He must’ve been bursting to show off to the Hero.

But he did have a point. Maybe all Veldora’s and Ramiris’s complaining was making me feel a needless sense of urgency. Even Basson’s band was rated B as a team. With their current equipment, the individual members would rank about a C or C-plus at best, not exactly outstanding. Once we started seeing single party members ranked B or above, I figure they’d be used to labyrinth work without too many hints. Money bought you safety in this maze, so even if we didn’t walk them through every step, I’m sure they’d be able to figure things out through their own experiences.

“Right. Guess there’s no need to panic, then.”

The labyrinth was generating a lot of interest. There were magic crystals, as well as other materials, to harvest from fallen monsters. A lot of people would enter the labyrinth as a way to earn a little spending money, no doubt. And the nobility was even more eager to dive in, it seemed, including some very sensible ones who’d enlisted adventurers back home to go conquer the Dungeon for them. Those kinds of adventurers wouldn’t let greed steer them off course—they’d fully prepare, set up goals, and execute a plan of action. They’d be the minority, for sure, but we figured their numbers would grow in time.

“So what should we do now?” Veldora asked.

“We have a front desk set up in the first floor. Maybe we could offer some guided experiences?” I said.

“Experiences? What d’you mean by that?”

Ramiris wasn’t the only confused-looking one.

“I mean,” I explained, “we could set up a training area that lets you test things out a little. Teach people about traps, have them train in battle with monsters, those kinds of things. That’s a lot more meaningful than just giving out tips, isn’t it?”

I’d also like to set up a gym of sorts, to help us train all the new Tempest recruits we’ve seen lately. It was impossible to get accidentally killed in the labyrinth, so I think it’d be pretty useful to have.

Then a rather unexpected person offered their agreement.

“In that case, maybe you could offer some courses in conquering the labyrinth, too.”

It was Masayuki nonchalantly chiming in. I looked at him, surprised.

“Oh, should I not have butted in?”

“No, no, you’re fine!”

“Ah, well, good. This is a topic I could contribute to a little bit more, so I thought I’d speak up.”

He grinned. He was adapting faster than I thought, but then again, he always was bold like that.

“What kind of classes, though?”

Would we have a big band of adventurers sit down in our meeting hall? Setting up times to give a rundown on the labyrinth seemed worthwhile.

“You know, kind of like video game tutorials.”

“Tu…torials? What are those?”

“It sounds like a dessert. Is it good?”

Veldora and Ramiris pounced on the unfamiliar word. I assumed Veldora had the vocabulary to know it, but maybe not. Languages in this world translated pretty well in my mind, but that auto-translate function only worked if both members of a conversation had a common understanding of the topic.

If Veldora didn’t know what it was, Ramiris certainly had no chance. So Masayuki and I had to explain the concept of a game tutorial.

“I was picturing something like an obstacle course.”

“Yes, like Rimuru said, I think it’s important you experience some of the basic moves you’re expected to know before you enter the labyrinth. If we offer quick rundowns on the basics and divide it into missions, I think that’ll help adventurers retain knowledge better…”

Adventurers wouldn’t gain much from lengthy lectures. A training ground available to all wouldn’t see a lot of use apart from the hard cores. So went Masayuki’s logic—and why he thought a mission-based structure was a good idea. Before being admitted inside, challengers would get to complete a simple set of missions, ensuring they had the barest knowledge required to challenge the labyrinth.

Veldora and Ramiris listened on, looking more and more convinced.

“Yes, that may just work. For my part, allowing this cavalcade of fools to tumble in and die simply bores me. Let us grant them a training area, so their skills can be at least somewhat up to snuff.”

“Yeah, I think so, too! ’Cause if Milim saw this, she’d be so angry that she’d send all these challengers up into the clouds!”

They seemed all for it. And so did Mjöllmile.

“And perhaps after this ‘tutorial,’ we could offer them a line of Tempest-brand weapons and armor to try their hand at. And if some challengers are facing more difficulty deeper down, a set of tougher missions could perhaps be of some benefit?”

This was some really helpful feedback. In fact, maybe we could even release a guidebook. It’d help advertise the town. It could be fun to have some qualified writer tackle that task for me.

Regardless, this lack of labyrinth experience was killing our challengers’ efficiency. Let’s give them at least a few instruments to work with. Otherwise, we’d never find anyone capable of handling Floor 50 and below, when the difficulty really started to ramp up. Plus, for people who really wanna get serious, we could even offer a few “experiences” that get down to the nitty-gritty of Dungeon survival.

Of course, the real Dungeon began at Floor 50, and at first, we planned for Hinata’s Crusaders to be our main customers for those levels. For now, at least, we couldn’t expect much of anything from our adventurers, so Ramiris and Veldora would need to be content having the paladins to toy with.

Thus, we decided to renovate Floor 1 into a general training area. I also made sure to provide a separate entrance and exit for our new soldiers, in addition to the one for Dungeon challengers.

“Yes, that does sound like a good idea. Right. I’ll make it this instant!”

Ramiris was ready to start work, and since we were all in agreement, I was about to wrap up the meeting. But:

“Oh, wait a second, please. There’s something else I’ve noticed.”

Masayuki spoke up again, his eyes sparkling.

“So right now, the only inns and taverns are in the safe zones, right? Don’t you think we ought to offer them on each floor instead? And it’s kind of a pain if there’s no toilets or anything. If you can connect different spaces together anyway, I think it’d be nice to set up a door near the stairways to each floor or something that leads to these facilities. Some adventurers aren’t even bringing a sleeping bag with them, so even if you charged a premium, I think you’d get a lot of customers, you know?”

What?

Is this kid a genius?!

And toilets, huh? I no longer had any need for them, so it completely slipped my mind. All this useful feedback was flooring me. I turned to Ramiris; she confidently nodded back.

“Yes, Masayuki! I’ll take that advice, too!”

“Ah, Sir Masayuki, your observational skills astound me. Such insight!”

“Mm-hmm! I’ll get rid of the safe zones and set up a door leading to a rest stop near each stairway!”



It was kind of like setting up a vending machine selling toilet-paper packets at high prices next to a train-station bathroom that had no paper on hand. Unfair? Yes—but extremely effective. Masayuki’s insight really was sensational.

“Well,” I said with a smile, “if you have any other thoughts in mind, don’t be shy about sharing them.”

Masayuki pondered for a few moments, no doubt recalling all the video games he’d played.

“Hmm… Could we maybe have a portable save point you can only use once? I was lucky enough to make it to Floor 10, but now that you’ve removed the trapdoors, I think it’s taking a lot more time to reach that point. This isn’t a game to the challengers, so I think the time commitment involved is making things a lot harder as well.”

Yes… That’s fair, too. I had to agree with him. The way things were, a journey to Floor 10 would take several days. With his previous idea, we had stumbled upon the notion of making money off extended stays in the labyrinth. Maybe we should think more along these lines?

“Mmm, yes, that child is on to something! I was thinking the very same thing. Humans are such fragile little creatures, so we need to offer a bit of a helping hand.”

Veldora was the first to offer agreement. And who was the very person who designed this hellscape of a dungeon for fragile little humans anyway?

“Well, I can certainly set up disposable save points! But wouldn’t it be more profitable to have adventurers stay at inns?”

So implementation wasn’t a problem. Man, whenever the topic turned toward money, Ramiris was sharp as a tack. I was surprised she had something useful to say.

“No, Lady Ramiris, not necessarily. We should actually price them on the high side. If they don’t have any pressing business, they can always stay at an inn, but I think a lot of people would need to regularly report back to their patrons or whatever. That, and I think some people would want to carry them around as extra insurance, in case something unexpected happens in the labyrinth. It could help sell our return whistles as well.”

Mjöllmile was keen on this, too. I think he sensed a business opportunity. And he was right—you could use them in many different ways. If you were spending several days in the labyrinth at once, you may want to know what’s going on outside. Plus, the idea was to attract mercenaries hired by the nobility going forward, and they may need to file regular reports with their bosses.

And also…

“In my case, my companions beat him pretty easily for me, but the save point on the tenth floor’s protected by a powerful monster, right? I think a lot of people would want to use a save point before they challenge that guy.”

I nodded deeply at Masayuki. To a gamer, saving before you tackle a boss—or a floor guardian, in this case—was common sense. I recalled moments when I skipped that vital step before the final boss, only to lose several hours’ worth of play. Sad accidents like that can be laughed away because it’s only a game, but how frustrating would it be if that happened in real life?

“Right,” I said. “Thinking about it, maybe we’re being a little too unkind.”

Veldora and Ramiris nodded their agreement at me.

“Boy… Ah, right, your name was Masayuki? The advice you provide is quite helpful, yes.”

“Yeah! I’m really amazed! You sure are an otherworlder, aren’t you? Just like Rimuru! It’s gonna be great working with you, Masayuki!”

Somewhere along the line, Masayuki had been accepted as a peer.

“Now, there’s no need to spoil anyone past Floor 50, I don’t think. But in the floors that won’t entertain too many veteran adventurers, I think it’d be a good idea to at least go a little easy.”

And now Masayuki was advising them as a full-fledged labyrinth administrator. That adaptability is probably his greatest asset of all, I think, and I had no objections to his take.

“All right. So let’s set up a rest stop before the stairway on each floor. When you reach it, you can pay a fee or something to gain access to part of Floor 95.”

“And we’ll set up an inn and tavern down there?”

“Right, right. I’m not gonna open up the elven lounge to the general public—that’s still members only—but we could easily set up something similar for adventurers. And don’t forget—we’ll charge a premium for it!”

“Hee-hee-hee! Oh, I understand, believe me, I do.”

As a rule, prices are high in tourist sites. There’s a soda and coffee vending machine at the summit of Mount Fuji, but you’re gonna be paying the equivalent of five bucks for a soda. There’s nothing like eating a cheap box lunch at the peak, but while something like that’s never gonna be gourmet cuisine, if you purchase it on the mountain itself, you can bet it’s gonna go for four-star restaurant prices. So it’s a given that the facilities inside the labyrinth will be pricier than their equivalents outside.

Now the little town we had going on Floor 95 would be more useful than ever.

“But can you really craft disposable save points like that, Ramiris?”

“Absolutely no problem there! Easy-peasy! There are these things called Recording Crystals, and they’re fine for disposable use.”

The item Ramiris produced was actually quite handy. You could use it anywhere in the labyrinth, and it worked exactly like a regular save point. Add yourself to a Recording Crystal, and the next time you die, you’ll be able to restart from where you saved. If you use a return whistle to exit the Dungeon, the next time you go in, you’ll pick things up from your Recording Crystal. That held true even if the structure of the labyrinth itself changes—you wouldn’t reappear in the exact same location, but you’d get transported to the nearest safe place, kind of.

“We can sell those at high prices, too, indeed.”

“Well, actually, I’d like to distribute those a little more widely.”

“How about we mix them in with the rarer items in treasure chests?”

The discussion was humming now.

“Kwaaah-ha-ha-ha! Now I have more to look forward to!”

“Oh, I wouldn’t expect anything to change too quickly, but I do think we’ll see fewer challengers give up.”

Even Veldora and Masayuki were excitedly joining in. This was working out well. We were tackling our problems, addressing them, and debating together to come up with solutions.

Right. That was certainly a worthwhile meeting.

Floor 1 would now house a training area to help people learn the ABCs before tackling the Dungeon, as well as a place for general announcements. We’d provide virtual “missions” for visitors to try out, helping them acquire the minimum knowledge necessary to survive. They were free to undertake this training—or not, as the case may be. Forcing the challengers into it wouldn’t help much. All the risks fell on their shoulders, besides.

We would also set things up so that you couldn’t die in the first floor, either. You never know; we might get some crazy adventurer in here causing problems, and I don’t want our staff in any danger. Besides, I wanted people to experience for themselves what death was like in this space. We’d made it so you were instantly revived on the spot, so maybe it’d be a fun place for kids as well.

For the more advanced challengers, we’d also prepare a room for battle training against a few different types of monsters. We’d put bracelets on the monsters we captured for the purpose, so they could be revived again and again—that way, people could learn how to fight and polish their battle skills. In addition, there was a large gymnasium-style area for the use of our nation’s new soldiers. Maybe, on occasion, it’d be fun to capture a whole bunch of monsters and stage a large-scale group battle in there.

Things would begin in earnest starting with Floor 2. But from there until Floor 4, we got rid of all the insta-death traps and downgraded the rank of the monsters wandering the halls from E to F. The rooms would have just one D-ranked creature, and in the chests they guarded, we’d toss in Low Potions and other useful labyrinth-conquering tools. Equipment and other high-market items would begin appearing on Floor 5.

So we worked on adjustments like these, recalibrating the Dungeon’s overall difficulty. That should help people advance a bit faster starting tomorrow. Video games hold closed beta sessions all the time, after all; maybe launching without a rehearsal wasn’t such a great idea.

…I mean, we did do some testing, but our test party was six people from Shion’s Team Reborn, so the feedback we got wasn’t particularly useful. They had no trouble storming all the way down to Floor 40, before we had the tempest serpent serving as that level’s boss wipe them out. Thanks to that, I had the mistaken notion that the labyrinth’s difficulty level was just right. The traps and minion-level foes were no sweat to them as they breezed their way downward. Based on Team Reborn’s progress, we figured everything was okay—with a little experience, folks would be hitting Floor 50 soon, no doubt.

We needed to select our testers a little more carefully. Shion personally trained the members of Team Reborn, and I guess they’re far more talented than I thought. But we could tackle that later.

“So does that round out the issues? Anything else to bring up?”

I lobbed out the question, already happy enough with this discussion. Everyone had pitched in, and I figured we were done for the day, but…

“Can I say something?” Mjöllmile asked.

“Oh? Something else?”

“Yes. More to do with labyrinth administration, but…”

Ah yes, something about advertising or revenues? I had my concerns about that as well. It was only day three, of course, so I wasn’t expecting to rake it in yet. But Ramiris’s eyes were practically shining at the mention of the topic. It’s almost hilarious how money-obsessed of a fairy she is.

“Ha-ha! We’ve only just started making back our investment,” Mjöllmile said with a laugh, as if defending himself against her. Then his expression grew more serious. “No, I wanted to report to you about our advertising. In order to attract the nobility’s attention, I’ve calculated the amount of the reward purse we should offer. What do you think about a hundred gold coins?”

Oh?

“And that’s gonna be paid in…?”

“We’ll use one stellar gold coin, of course.”

Glad to see Mjöllmile’s reading my mind on that. I had learned from our mistake last time; I needed to get our hoard of stellars changed out. And a hundred gold coins would be about…what, around a hundred thousand dollars?

“That’s not too little, is it?”

It was a fortune to your average peasant, but it didn’t seem like enough to motivate a noble who’s probably swimming in money. Sure, adventurers can pick up magic crystals and rare items along the way, but a hundred gold didn’t seem quite enough for all the effort.

But Mjöllmile simply grinned at me. “Hee-hee-hee! I understand your doubts. But I’ve spread the word that this reward would be given to whoever can make it past Floor 50. We’ll award it to the first party each month to achieve the feat. Manage it solo, and you earn the entire purse; work as a party, and you’ll divide it up among yourselves. And that’s not the only reward…”

As he explained, he had also attached prize money to the boss monsters on every tenth floor.

On Floor 10, that would be a black spider, a B-ranked creature. The first five teams to defeat it would receive three gold coins. Floor 20 housed an evil centipede, rated B-plus, spewing Paralyzing Breath across a broad range—pretty decently strong. The first five teams to beat him got five gold.

Down on Floor 30, we had an ogre lord, another B-plus, along with five of his henchmen. Unlike Benimaru and his kin, these were unintelligent creatures, violent and acting strictly on instinct. Their physical strength was astonishing, though, and they were capable of team warfare to some extent, so tackling them with a fully equipped party was a must. Beating them earned you ten gold, and again, we’d award it to the first five winning parties.

After that, things begin to get serious. Floor 40, as planned, housed an A-minus tempest serpent, boasting extraordinarily powerful Poisonous Breath that could instantly annihilate an unsuspecting party. Even an A-ranked adventurer on Gaiye’s level would have serious trouble defeating it solo. Taking the serpent down was worth twenty gold coins, awarded to the first three parties who managed it, but I doubted we’d be giving out that prize too often.

Meanwhile, on Floor 50, I was planning to have Bovix and Equix take turns serving as floor guardian. They had evolved into magic-born ranked above A, so only a small handful of fighters stood a chance. Make it past that floor, and you earned the big one-hundred-gold prize—a big step up but merited given the difficulty spike.

“All right. That’s actually a pretty well-thought-out plan. It oughtta make for some good advertising, too. Do you think it’ll help encourage the nobles to compete with one another?”

“Precisely, my lord. Announcing the prize winners each month will encourage competition. And challengers can only win a prize once; they can’t be awarded the same prize multiple times, so we can keep things from getting too competitive.”

Makes sense. If you could only get it one time, there was no motivation for people to “farm” bosses strictly for money. This ensured the same small group of people wouldn’t hog all the prizes each month—and since each award had a strict maximum, we could count them as fixed costs in our accounting.

“So do you think we can make a profit doing that?”

“That will not be a problem, no. Based on preliminary calculations from the past three days, I think we could even afford to increase the prizes a little.”

Compared to our earnings, it was pocket change, but the prizes would help encourage competition and speculation among challengers without hurting our bottom line. It was a brilliant strategy. Besides, nobody was going to zoom past Floor 50 anytime soon, so I figured our payouts would be on the low side for a while to come.

“In fact, if anything, perhaps we could have Sir Masayuki beat Floor 50 and play that up in our advertising…”

“Huh?!”

“With your mettle, I’m sure it’s only a matter of time, Sir Masayuki.”

Aha. That Mjöllmile, always looking for another angle. He seemed to have the plan pretty well worked out. Let’s have him keep with it.

“Ooh, I like that. It’ll boost Masayuki’s reputation further, even as it advertises our Dungeon for us. Let’s deploy that once things slow down a little, maybe.”

“That’s just what I was thinking as well. How nice to see we are of the same mind, Sir Rimuru, heh-heh-heh…”

“You’re always sharper than me at this, deh-heh-heh…”

We exchanged self-satisfied smiles.

“Um, if I could interject…”

Masayuki looked like he had something to say. I pretended not to hear.

But Mjöllmile wasn’t done there. In fact, he was just getting to his main topic.

“Now, Sir Rimuru, along those lines, I’m thinking about a potentially even larger project!”

He flashed an evil grin, champing at the bit to reveal his news. I was starting to like that smile a lot. It was proving reliable.

“I’m all ears, Mollie. Go ahead.”

I gave him a friendly smile of my own.

“As I see matters, if we really want to impress the nobility in the local area, I think we should announce that anyone who survives the bottommost floor will earn a hundred stellar gold coins!”

“…?!”

“Oh-ho?”

“What?!”

“Um, how much is that in yen?”

Maybe about one billion? And with the cost of living as low as it is here, it might be worth even more.

“Pretty bold, huh, Mollie?”

“Hee-hee-hee! Such a generous reward should motivate any reluctant challengers to spring into action. They’re all bound to hire adventurers to conquer the labyrinth.”

And that means even more money would be changing hands. The more people gather someplace, the more prosperous it gets. If we can drive people’s interest, potential customers who weren’t interested before may hop on just so they’re not left behind.

“But—but that’s a lot of money!” Ramiris shouted, looking concerned. But the confident Mjöllmile wasn’t perturbed.

“And who was the master of this labyrinth again?”

He gave Veldora a glance as he lodged the almost-taunting question.

“Heh-heh-heh… Kwaahh-ha-ha-ha! It is I, Veldora the Storm Dragon, the very precipice of the draconic races!!”

Veldora made no attempt to hide his opinion of himself.

“Huh?! Veldora the Storm Dragon? That name sounds familiar…”

Masayuki looked a bit pensive about something as Mjöllmile villainously nodded.

“Yes, I’m fully aware of that, Sir Veldora. And I’m also fully aware that not a single soul is capable of felling you in battle.”

“Of course not. Mjöllmile, you are truly an intelligent man! Kwah-ha-ha-ha!”

“Heh-heh-heh… No, no. I’m simply leveraging what I’ve learned observing Sir Rimuru.”

What? Me?

As Veldora and Mjöllmile shared an echoing laugh, I thought over his proposal. We were offering a hundred stellars, a ridiculous amount—but that required conquering the final floor. In other words, beating Veldora. Nope. Not gonna happen. It seemed almost like a swindle to me, but it wasn’t a lie, either. Besides, we still weren’t sure right now whether anyone would even make it to Floor 100.

“Yeah, I do think our labyrinth is well-nigh unconquerable.”

“Right, right.”

“That’s bleedingly obvious.”

“Precisely. Floor 50 is one thing, but the difficulty beyond that is simply unimaginable to me. We have literal dragons! Where will you find an adventurer who can slay a dragon?”

Mjöllmile looked a little floored. The concept even exasperated someone as bold and driven by greed as he. Our labyrinth was well defended, to say the least.

“I doubt we’d ever have to pay out those hundred stellars.”

“No. That’s the whole idea. This is just bait for the nobility, so I humbly believe we can be a bit lavish with the figures we throw around. I understand the paladins will be trying their luck, but I do look forward to seeing the results.”

He left it unsaid, but I’m sure he didn’t think they could reach the bottom. I agreed with him. The money figure shocked me at first, but thinking about it with a cool head, we didn’t have to worry about anyone actually claiming it.

“Mollie, let’s go with it. Make it happen!”

“Very well, my lord.”

“And try to get as many people coming here to take the challenge as you can.”

“Let’s tout it up as much as possible, then! We could call it the Demon Lord’s Challenge!”

Would that work as advertising?

…Actually, wait a second. If I was going to keep calling myself demon lord, there was a good chance that reckless, suicidal people would keep on trying to fight me. It was a pain to deal with each and every one of them—so why don’t I let them take a crack at me if they conquer Floor 100, or something…?

Yeah. Let’s go with that.

“In fact, tell everyone that if they beat the challenge, I’ll give them an opportunity to fight me. That applies to you, too, Masayuki, so if people tell you to take me on, try to change the subject or something, okay?”

“All right. Because honestly, I have no intention of fighting you at all. Thanks.”

“Oh, I know. Well, Mollie, you have my official permission. Have at it!”

“At once, my lord. I’ll just excuse myself, then.”

Mjöllmile is so dedicated to his work. Once the conversation died down, he stood up, offered each of us a quick bow, and left the room.

We could have ended the meeting there, as we all watched him go, but Masayuki looked concerned about something. Curious, I decided to inquire.

“What’s up? Something on your mind?”

“Well, about fighting…I guess people think I’m taking a wait-and-see approach, but I really am gonna have to do that fight sometime soon, aren’t I…?”

Fight…? Ah, the promise he made during the tournament?

“You mean against Bovix?”

“Yeah… After what I said in front of that huge crowd, I can’t really escape it. But if I fight him, I’m absolutely gonna lose…”

I’m sure he would. Masayuki’s unique skill was about as unique as they came, but it wouldn’t be much help in actual combat. Although maybe it would be, come to think of it. It let him win without fighting, after all.

But we would need to consider that Bovix battle. The crowd truly believed Masayuki could win, and so did Mjöllmile for that matter. Masayuki wasn’t shy about playing himself up in the arena, either. It was too late to say never mind.

“Maybe you could train with our kids while Hinata is here?”

“That sort of thing would kill me! All I want is to live in peace, you know?”

He smiled briskly as he stated that rather sad fact. I thought at one point that he needed someone to teach him a lesson, but as a kid who came from Japan at the most peaceful point in its history, of course he wasn’t gonna be this belligerent wild man. I’m not unlike him, if you think about it.

“Well, I can’t have you lose either way, so let me think about that a little.”

“Will you? Thanks, Rimuru!”

“Sure. Just give me a hand when I need it, okay?”

“Of course!”

Masayuki was being cooperative, and his reputation was helping me out a lot right now. If Bovix beat him, I stood to lose a great deal. It was a thorny problem, but we’d have to do something about it. I could try to reason with Bovix, but that didn’t seem fair to me. I’ll work on it.

We chatted for a little while longer before I wrapped up this emergency meeting. The adjustments to the labyrinth were completed before the end of the day.

So we excitedly continued our watch over the Dungeon.

Personally, thanks to the things Masayuki pointed out, I felt like the labyrinth had gotten a lot easier. But considering Mjöllmile’s warnings, I didn’t think it had gotten too easy or anything. How would people react?

First off, of course, there were always idiots who didn’t bother listening to the instructions. They just breezed right along, ignoring the missions completely. They didn’t get far into the ensuing floors, of course, but they just kept on trying, nonetheless. What drove them to do that? Their employers? Their pride? No, the answer was nothing so noble. They had a more calculating reason than that.

When we debuted the labyrinth, the Rare-level sword that Basson’s party grabbed from a treasure chest was apparently a truly excellent piece in their mind. I guess they saw it in a much different way from me.

Rare, in this world, referred to superior magisteel-forged gear that had evolved to exhibit unique capabilities. The magisteel our nation produced was made by taking the magic ore from our high orcs in the mountains and exposing Veldora’s magicules to it. Simply storing it inside the labyrinth made the process happen by itself. This gave us an easy supply of high-quality steel, and we could liberally use it in our own weapons and armor.

Unlike the gear circulating around the Western Nations, we could craft items made out of nothing but pure magisteel. The difference came down to the materials themselves, so even the swords distributed to our regular forces could be classified as Special in make, several times better than the equipment most labyrinth challengers ran around in. Kurobe’s workshop apprentices handled equipment production for our army, a good dozen of them or so by this point, hammering away daily under Kurobe’s careful instruction—and even their gear was equivalent to Special, a level above the Normal stuff sold across the Western Nations.

Now their goods were being placed into our treasure chests. The production failures were disposed of, and things deemed worthy of actual use were brought into the labyrinth. We had a wide range of quality in this gear, and some of it really was excellent. Basson had gotten his hands on something that only barely qualified as Rare. You usually had a hundred-to-one chance at one of those, and as odds went, maybe it was an enticing offer for a lot of people.

By the way, even items from Kurobe’s workshop dismissed as failures could be appraised at the Rare level. They may look like quality pieces on the surface, but if Kurobe called it a failure, it was a failure. “There’s a clear difference,” he’d tell me.

So I looked into this a bit more, and it led to a discovery. Even with gear in the same class, there can be individual differences in capabilities—something Kurobe had picked up on and used to craft his definitions of success and failure.

I decided to compare two Rare-level swords, one from Kurobe and one from an apprentice. The difference was obvious, something I noticed only because my Analyze and Assess skills had improved. If Kurobe hadn’t pointed it out, I’m not sure I would’ve picked up on it.

Different how? Let me give an example. Let’s say I made a copy of one of Kurobe’s works. The results, of course, would be in the same class—but like I said before, I can’t completely copy all its capabilities. They may look the same, but what I produce is still an inferior copy. That’s the difference.

Maybe this happens because I don’t have the blacksmithing skills of Kurobe. But what I can say here is that even weapons come in different levels. Maybe a weapon seller would never notice, to say nothing of an amateur, but I feel like I can tell the difference between these levels now.

To someone who stakes their life on these weapons, differences in capability are important.

In this world, you never knew when monsters might attack you. High-quality weapons and armor were a kind of lifeline. Kurobe’s presentation during the Founder’s Festival must’ve generated a lot of buzz, enough to create a deluge of requests for the goods we’d exhibited. We were still considering how to handle that, but the plan was to make a decision after investigating the market more.

The Rare equipment dropped by the boss on Floor 10 was the best that Kurobe’s apprentices could produce right now. They were inferior to Kurobe’s own work but still on the upper end of what’s generally available worldwide. Adventurers naturally want quality, of course, and I could see why Basson was so delighted. Even Normal weapons, after all, could fetch over ten times the usual price if they were good quality. Once you got into the Special realm, that was more like fifty times. Rare? Obtaining one was a matter of luck more than anything. There weren’t many around to find, and realistically speaking, money can’t buy them.

So it made sense that people were clamoring to enter the labyrinth. And Basson and his gang were even advertising for me at the taverns—“Heh-heh! Look at this, all of you! A sword just as wonderfully powerful as I am!” and so on. The fact that the Floor 10 boss dropped Rare gear spread like wildfire among the challengers, then the merchants, and then around the Free Guilds of every nation. In an instant, people hoping to strike it rich were beating a path to our labyrinth—and that’s what led to where we are now.

I do have to thank Basson’s band for all the free advertising, but you can’t just run in and grab Rare equipment like it’s a trip to the convenience store.

Thus, the people who refused to take our guidance began to lag behind those who completed our missions before tackling the labyrinth. If you had a little intelligence, you’d know it pays to listen to our instructions, after all—and as more people seriously took up the missions, training on the first floor began in earnest. Now we had challengers taking what they’d learned and fully preparing with it, helping our own budget with the equipment they purchased near the front desk.

Then, a few days after we rebalanced the Dungeon, we began to see parties reach the fifth floor. Floor 2 was vast but simple, and the traps up to Floor 4 were more like jump scares than anything really malicious. So long as you kept an accurate map, making it to Floor 5 was actually pretty easy. This seemed acceptable to me.

Floor 5 downward was more of a test of ability. The traps got more hazardous, and monsters ranked D and above made their debut—but the treasure chests also held more valuable items. I wanted our customers to really pound those floors, doing their best to conquer them…but alas, it really was a challenge for most.

To put it simply, fatigue began to be an issue. Keeping a constant watch for monsters is an easy way to mentally exhaust yourself, I suppose. Many people retreated back to the last stairway to take advantage of our rest space; the inn on Floor 95 was doing fabulous business, so that much worked out as planned.

Around when our challengers began to strike a presence between Floors 5 and 8, we started to see adventurers arrive from the world’s Free Guilds, following the rumors. Some of them were seasoned adventurers bearing contracts from noble sponsors, and before long, the whole town was getting busier. With this second wave livening up the old guard, the race to conquer the floors grew frenetic—and with these serious contenders, we also began to see people try to cheat their way to glory.

Yes, people decided to sell maps of the labyrinth in broad daylight. A lot of people (myself included) had no sense of direction, and in a labyrinth, all the strength in the world couldn’t help if you kept getting lost. So I could understand the demand…but I really wished people would have formed parties and assigned mapmaking duties to members instead.

So following an announcement posted in and out of the labyrinth, we began to change its inner structure. The challengers were livid, of course, and we got lots of complaints—but I’m a demon lord. I’m not beholden to them. I needed to show them early on that maps were meaningless unless you made your own. If anything, I was being kind to them—if they didn’t make their own, they’d find it impossible to adapt if a change to the labyrinth rendered their maps useless. Call it tough love.

As a rule, we changed the labyrinth layouts once every two or three days. Completing a single floor took at least a few hours; there’s no way you’d reach the save point on Floor 10 in one go. Thanks to that, the layout changes were a pretty big success. The challengers gave up on selling and buying maps, instead taking a more serious approach to the labyrinth. It seemed like some people plunged in right after a layout change to whip up a map to sell anyway, but I decided to let that slide.

We were pretty happy about the anti-cheating measures. But we sure couldn’t let our guard down. The Free Guild adventurers may’ve gotten a late start at the labyrinth, but some of them wielded Automap, the elemental magic spell that gave them a skillful advantage in exploration.

Free Guild members really were in a class of their own. They were used to fighting monsters, so they were battle-honed and ready for combat. They also knew how to divide tasks among their party members, which I appreciated. Basson’s party was all about fighting, but now we saw groups with each member picked to carry out a particular role—fighters to handle the monsters, explorers to handle traps and mazes, and gatherers with a wealth of knowledge to tap. Balance was the watchword with these parties, and it really struck me how adaptable they all were.

So the adventurers quickly completed the training missions and dived into the Dungeon. Those with ruin-exploration experience were masters at trap removal. They didn’t sprint for every treasure chest they saw. Compared to the bodyguards and mercenaries we saw first, they were quite careful—demonstrating an even more professional performance than I imagined. Seeing them execute such a clear understanding of the rules, I started to think we shouldn’t have reined in the Dungeon after all.

So just a few days after the second wave arrived, someone managed to beat Floor 10. Now the challengers were really on a roll—learning from their predecessors’ mistakes, painstakingly devising countermeasures, and starting to make real, constant headway. And once someone figured out how to handle this trick or that monster, word spread fast about it. People started to imitate the winning formula. I bet people were selling their advice, too. No stopping them, I suppose. If maps were a nonstarter, I suppose information comes next. I really had to hand it to them—and really, the more enthusiastic everyone was, the better.

And the town was starting to see the challengers’ progress as a kind of spectator sport to enjoy over drinks. The shops, the inns, the taverns—rumors spread everywhere, packed with tales that delighted and thrilled.

Among them came word about one party appearing out of nowhere to blaze down the labyrinth at a previously unheard-of speed, a stout and well-balanced group of ten. The first thing they did was add themselves to the save point on Floor 10. One of them joined a party who had already made it that far down; he then put his info in the save point, used a return whistle to go back to the entrance, and then headed down with his own party.

I was anticipating this and had no issue with it, but the speed they proceeded at astounded me. In just three days or so, they had defeated the boss monster on Floor 20. They had talent, no doubt—each one ranked around a B individually, but maybe B-plus as a group. All ten of them showed great teamwork, too, so in terms of real strength, I bet they could earn an A-minus.

But if they’re going this fast, there had to be some kind of trick behind it. I mean, they kept on selecting the shortest routes through each floor, every time…

Understood. Elemental interference detected. An elementalist is utilizing Elemental Communication.

Oh, that…?

An elementalist is a magician capable of harnessing the power of elemental spirits. One of the tricks up their sleeve is Elemental Communication, allowing them to listen to the words of those elemental spirits. If they can talk to wind and earth elementals on a deep enough level, it seems, those spirits will guide them down the correct path to the stairs—and since an elementalist could tap that, a twisty maze of passages was no sweat to them.

Those dirty, dirty elementalists! But sadly, this was fully within the rules. After all, there’s no guarantee the spirit you tap into will always give you the correct path. Besides, there were precious few elementalists in the world, so I didn’t even consider that kind of workaround. As far as I was concerned, this was a perfectly valid approach, one I shouldn’t bother trying to counteract. If anything, I should praise them for coming up with it.

The party’s rapid advance continued anon. Part of our procedure was that whenever a party conquered a new floor, it was announced across town; thanks to that, the party members quickly became household names. The crack team of explorers were collectively called Green Fury, their mystery elementalist serving as leader, and before long, they were rapidly approaching Masayuki’s Team Lightspeed in popularity.

Just as we hoped, the labyrinth was now hosting serious talent. No doubt we’d see more young challengers visit town with dreams of fortune and glory. The labyrinth—currently enjoying a steadily growing audience of challengers—had become a well-oiled machine.

We took this opportunity to gather again. It had been ten days since we reorganized the labyrinth, so I wanted us to confer and talk about any problems that had come up. Unlike before, everything was going great, so the mood was lighthearted—natural smiles all around.

“Ah yes, Masayuki, was it? I always thought you had potential, but now I see you are a mighty man indeed!” Veldora seemed very chipper today, and the moment we were all together, he was heaping Masayuki with praise.

“Oh, you think so? Um, thanks…” Masayuki didn’t seem sure how to respond.

He looked at me, as if to ask “who is this guy?” I did introduce them to each other last time, but Masayuki was kind of nervous back then. I could see it if he didn’t remember him.

“I think I introduced you before, but—”

“N-no, um, people just started talking and stuff, so…”

Oh, did we?

Understood. As the subject Masayuki Honjo stated, no introductions were made.

Oh. Guess my memory was pretty hazy, too. Can’t blame Masayuki then, I thought.

“Ah well, let me do that now. This is Veldora, a good friend of mine. He’s serving as the master of the labyrinth’s hundredth floor.”

“Indeed, ’tis I, Veldora, and I gladly accept you as one of us, Masayuki. Welcome!”

To Veldora, Masayuki was part of the club already. He flashed him a friendly smile. Then Masayuki’s face visibly whitened.

“Ummm… By Veldora, do you mean the Catastrophe that killed the entire army of Farmus…?”

Oh, right, that was the rumor we spread around. I don’t mind telling Masayuki the truth, but it’s kind of a long story and there’s no pressing reason to. Let’s just go with this.

“Yeahhh, he’s kind of a big shot, so try not to rile him, okay?”

“Kwah-ha-ha-ha! Oh, but I am a generous soul indeed, so it takes a great deal to anger me! And if you provide me with sweet treats to eat, I would not hesitate to offer you my protection!”

There he goes again. I rolled up my notepapers and swatted him with them. Punishment complete. Discipline, you know; it’s important.

It must have surprised our local dragon, because he shouted “What are you doing?!” and so on for a bit, but I still had Ramiris to introduce.

“And this is Ramiris, a fairy and someone you could call the ruler of the labyrinth.”

Masayuki had been muttering things like “So I wasn’t imagining it…” In the midst of this, but my voice helped him regain his composure. His eyes turned to Ramiris, flapping in the air.

“Oh… You’re a fairy, Ramiris? And you built that entire amazing labyrinth? That’s really great.”

The compliments were more than enough to get Ramiris going as well. “Whoa! Hey, I like you! In fact, I’ll gladly name you my underling. And Rimuru! Did you hear that? He said that I’m really great!!”

She was kicking the air in my direction, visibly excited as she bragged. God, lay off. If I played along, she’d only get worse. Ignoring the dropkicks she applied to me, I tried to move things forward.

“Yeah, yeah, congrats,” I replied. “If Masayuki wants to be your underling, have at it, I guess.”

A Hero serving as a henchman for a demon lord. Whatever. But this must be hopelessly confusing Masayuki, right?

“Uh… Who is Ramiris, exactly?”

“She may not look it,” I said, matching Masayuki’s quiet whisper, “but she’s a demon lord just like me.”

“Wha?!” he exclaimed, frozen as the beaming Ramiris approached him. Our voices were hushed, but not enough for her sharp ears, I guess.

“Heyaaa! That’s me, Ramiris of the Octagram! Good to become officially acquainted, Masayuki!!”

“H-huh? Ramiris… You’re a demon lord? And Veldora’s a dragon… W-wow. Really?”

Masayuki…

The thought of dealing with a demon lord and Storm Dragon all this time dazed him. I guess I should have explained things fully before making the introduction. That’s on me…but Masayuki had to take some of the blame here. He’s the one who acted all cool and collected at our last meeting. That’s why I assumed he knew them already. It was his nerves of steel that allowed him to keep his composure. I didn’t realize he was clueless this whole time…



They say ignorance is a sin, but sometimes it’s your greatest asset. Masayuki had been accepted by a dragon and demon lord, and he never even realized it. Once again, I couldn’t help but marvel at his luck.

It was Mjöllmile who finally threw Masayuki a life preserver.

“Lady Ramiris, please, none of that. Why, Sir Masayuki would hardly even know how to respond, would he?”

Since he was such a fan of Masayuki, I suppose Mjöllmile assumed that conversation was a joke—Ramiris making unreasonable demands, and the kind Hero unsure how to react. I figured Masayuki’s response would’ve disillusioned him, but I guess that’s the Hero’s skill at work.

…Or maybe not. Somehow, it seemed like Mjöllmile really believed in Masayuki from the heart. Seeing it, or maybe even feeling it, Masayuki smiled.

“This is Mjöllmile, my trusted adviser and the head of Tempest’s financial department. Kind of our minister of finance, I suppose.”

“A pleasure to meet you again, Sir Masayuki.”

“Ha-ha-ha! That’s kind of you, Mjöllmile.”

“Oh, no, I’m just an upstart from the underground…”

“Well, as you said, I’m afraid I can’t join with you right now, Ramiris. I’ve already promised Mikami—um, I mean, Rimuru that I’d give him my support.”

Masayuki lightly bowed at Ramiris.

“I’ll bet,” Mjöllmile said. “Sir Rimuru does have a way of taking advantage of people!”

What had I ever done? And Ramiris was ready to join him.

“Well, if that’s how it is, so be it! You’re so cunning, you know that, Rimuru?”

“Hey,” I nonchalantly replied, “first come, first served.”

Then Veldora started bragging for some reason.

“Kwah-ha-ha-ha! You won’t find many people as dependable as Rimuru. Ramiris, I think you’ll have to give up on ever getting ahead of him. But let’s hear from Masayuki now! We need to proceed!”

I had my qualms about what everyone here thought about me, but—ah yes—we were still making introductions. It seemed kind of moot, though. Everyone already knew his name.

“All right. Masayuki, you go ahead.”

“Okay,” he said with a nod. “I think some of you are aware by now, but my name is Masayuki. I come from the same world as Rimuru, and now we’re working together. People call me a Hero, but please don’t let that cloud your judgment.”

He gave his introduction facing all the others, back straight. I felt like he wanted to tell them he called himself a Hero just as a joke, but with Mjöllmile looking straight at him, I suppose he opted against that.

Highly adaptable as always, he was already back to his usual composed self. Defiant, you could say. They may have met last time, but he was capable of being all smiles with Veldora and Ramiris, which took guts. He really was someone special. Maybe it wasn’t his unique skill Chosen One having its effect on the people around him—maybe a lot of it was just his own personality. I didn’t think there was any way he could wield this much influence with a unique skill alone.

That, I thought as we wrapped up the introductions, we could try verifying later on.

We were all seated. Our last meeting was something of an emergency confab, but this time, things were less urgent. We were all at ease.

“I have to say, Masayuki, you sure are something. We owe all our success to you!” Ramiris started excitedly shouting the moment she was seated.

“Let’s not forget,” Veldora added, “Mjöllmile has done much for us, too. As you said, perhaps we were right not to simplify the Dungeon too much!”

I agreed with them both. Putting our minds together like this was what provided success, no doubt about it.

“Oh, I’m just glad I could help.”

“Yes, and I hardly did anything myself. None of this would be possible without all of your powers!”

After that round of pleasantries, we discussed the state of the labyrinth.

Sales were going great—really great. It made Mjöllmile laugh, although all the work made him cry. Plus, the people visiting town were staying in our inns, enabling the innkeepers and the nearby taverns to run a booming business.

“Here is my report,” Mjöllmile said as he took out some papers. Veldora and Ramiris seemed interested as well, so I made some copies and passed them around. I figured I’d quickly skim over it to see if there were any problems at hand, leaving the detailed number crunching to Raphael.

Right. Let’s see what we have here. It’s times like these that I’m glad I can go into human form. I could read through papers as a slime, of course, but for office work, being human was far more convenient.

According to the data on the report, things had gone smoothly with our labyrinth since our adjustments.

“Looks like our advertising worked well.”

“Oh yes! We’re astonishingly busy every day,” he said, eagerly nodding.

Veldora and Ramiris looked at the report, whether they could understand it or not. For the most part, it was a ledger of our most recent statistics, but there were a few special topics covered as well.

One of these was the Adventurer Cards—the Guild membership IDs that could be used as admission into the labyrinth now that Mjöllmile had received Yuuki’s approval to do so. These cards were magic in nature, keeping track of the bearer’s vital signs and retaining that data in a record, which was quite convenient. They allowed for seamless labyrinth entry, just like how you’d use it at your Free Guild post, so it was easy for adventurers to get to grips with. Hardly any bodyguards or mercenaries weren’t Guild members, either, so the implementation went pretty smoothly.

For the moment, the labyrinth’s admission fee was three silver coins a go. The cards were manufactured by the Free Guild, saving us from production hassles. Our own nation provided basic cards as well, at the cost of ten silver—and while most challengers were Guild members, we occasionally sold these cards to people, too. Between all of that, we were raking in a lot of money just from admission alone.

The report also contained details on the three Ramiris-produced items in the labyrinth. Your first Resurrection Bracelet cost nothing—a freebie so you could see how useful they were. After that, you had to pay for them; but at just two silver coins, they were quite reasonable—especially considering they not only resurrected you but also healed any of the wounds you incurred that led to your death. After debating it for a while, we decided to keep the price low as a service to our audience. (By the way, we had a warning announcement play if you reentered the labyrinth without wearing your Resurrection Bracelet. If you got yourself killed in there, that’s none of my business, but it’d still leave a bad aftertaste in my mouth if that happened.)

To make them easier to buy, the bracelets were sold right next to the front desk, where we had the dead resurrected. Between that and being a pretty indispensable item, they were selling like hotcakes, definitely the most popular out of the Dungeon’s three items.

Return whistles, meanwhile, allowed a single person to instantly zoom back to the surface, a godsend if you got lost. This was insurance for a lot of parties, so it was priced on the high side—thirty silver per whistle. People tried to cheap out on these and just rely on Resurrection Bracelets instead, but I wouldn’t exactly call that smart. Yes, you would be whisked back to the entrance that way, but you could lose your equipment and stuff as well. You’d keep whatever armor you had on, but anything that slipped out of your hands at the time of death was gone for good. Nobody’s literally carrying booty while in a fight, of course; you’d probably drop it in the corridor for the time being. Losing that stuff could make for a pretty hefty penalty. Few people would take that risk just to get back to the entrance, so there was a pretty decent demand for whistles.

Finally, Recording Crystals weren’t selling as well as we hoped, but we did see some clients purchase them in large quantities. At one gold coin a pop—close to a thousand dollars—they were luxury goods, no doubt. And why not? They let you basically turn back time whenever, and wherever, you wanted. And since a lot of people would be focusing strictly on the bosses, letting them go for cheap seemed kind of dangerous for us, so we priced them sky-high instead.

Still, I thought there was a demand for them. In the deeper levels, the difficulty really ramped up from floor to floor; the save points on every tenth floor could very well seem like a trip across the continent. Thus, I figured it’d be a while before we profited from them, but even in these shallower levels, some people were still using them.

We were also experimenting with renting weapons and armor out to people, but that hadn’t turned a profit yet. These were Kurobe-crafted goods, pretty decent quality, and since many people rented them after dying and losing their main weapon, the feedback from them was excellent. With the right word of mouth, I think we could see demand rise soon.

So by and large, things were going well—but just because we were succeeding now didn’t mean we could let our guard down. Right now, we needed to be more prudent than ever before.

The party at the forefront of the Dungeon was continuing to do well, going deeper and deeper without anyone dropping out. They were drumming up enthusiasm among the other challengers, too, people who kept coming back after messing up. That improved our sales, a cycle we needed to keep going. If we can convince people that it’s worth coming back again and again, then even our initial goal of at least a thousand admissions per day seemed surprisingly attainable.

“So, looking at Mollie’s report, I’d say we’re a pretty resounding success right now. But we can’t rest on our laurels. If you’ve noticed anything, don’t be afraid to speak up.”

I wanted everyone to be at attention as I got the ball rolling. Ramiris was the first to react.

“Me!”

“All right. Ramiris?”

“You know the elementalist using Elemental Communication? Boy, I sure never thought about relying on the spirits for info like that! But I can interfere with that, if you want. What do you think?”

“Interfere, huh…?”

I did want to put some obstacles in their way, but it seemed kind of like a coward move to me. The approach this party took was completely orthodox, so getting all evil with them felt like we’d be going against the spirit of the rules. This isn’t a war, or a competition or the like.

“But it’s not like the spirits are being forced into it, are they?”

“No. If they’re providing that much support, clearly the elementalist must have a great relationship with them.”

“Better not interfere, then. I’m not into that kind of thing.”

“Roger! I figured you’d say that, Rimuru.”

Ramiris was quick to back down. I suppose she wasn’t much for it but thought it best to bring it up anyway.

“No, it is not good to lie. But, Ramiris, why not create an elemental-free zone? That Elemental Communication; it works by listening to the smaller spirits that’ve taken root in the area, no? And it can’t work if the spirits aren’t there, yes?”

Oops. That’s some surprising stuff coming from Veldora. He’s normally so useless to me, but sometimes even he says something intelligent.

“Rimuru, why do you look so surprised?”

And he’s sharp, too.

“Oh, no, I’m just impressed as always with you, Veldora,” I said, a little shaken. “That’s a really good opinion!”

“Yes, is it not? My vast expertise has saved the day once more! Kwaaaah-ha-ha-ha!”

Good thing he’s so gullible.

“Well, Ramiris?”

“Sure, I can do that! I’ll just ask the spirits to relocate for me. Without any conscious spirits in the vicinity, Elemental Communication can’t do anything at all!”

I guess that could work. Maybe, thanks to Veldora’s proposal, we could do something about elementalists after all.

“Great. Let’s do that. See, this is exactly why I think brainstorming like this is a great idea.”

“Yes, quite so. You see, my vast wisdom is—”

“Okay, next. Anyone have any other observations?”

I couldn’t let Veldora get further carried away. Time to move on. It wound up being Masayuki who spoke next.

“Do you think defeated monsters could drop items for the explorers?”

Monsters leaving items behind—common in video games but kind of enigmatic from a real-life perspective. And our monsters already left crafting material and magic crystals. Wasn’t that enough?

“Why do we need to do that?” Veldora asked.

Masayuki’s answer was simple. “Huh? Well, I mean, healing potions are, like, surprisingly expensive. High-ranked adventurers use ’em all the time because they can afford to shell out for them, but most people would rather run away from a battle than risk getting hurt. That, and if you die in the labyrinth, you’re resurrected without any of your injuries, so a lot of people just ‘nope’ out of there instead of using any of their potions. So I’m just thinking, why not have monsters drop Low Potions or something when killed, so that everybody has access to them?”

Hmm… It was a valid point. Our nation’s potions served as advertising, and their usefulness to us was starting to expand—but they didn’t come very cheap, no. In fact, sales were starting to stagnate a bit because of the price. Within Tempest, Low Potions cost four silver coins; High Potions were thirty-five, and Full Potions, while not offered for direct sale, would probably need to be priced at over five hundred silver, or five gold coins, if we did offer them. Meanwhile, the cheapest inn in our city cost three silver a night without meals and five with a bath and dinner. A nicer room, used by passing merchants and the like, averaged around ten silver plus meals.

On the other hand, a D-ranked adventurer earned, on average, about fifteen silver coins after a day of work in the labyrinth—maybe twenty, if they worked in a party for more efficiency. That was good, for now; enough to live day by day on, but not enough to prepare for any kind of emergency. The treatment they’d need if they were sick or badly hurt—or any kind of social safety net, really—would be out of the question. Plus, they needed to maintain their weapons, buying new ones if they broke and saving up for better-quality goods.

In short, low-ranked monster hunters lived a hardscrabble life. If they wanted a better one, their only choice was to polish their skills. And in a life like that, four silver coins was a painful investment to make. They need to put money aside for admission, of course, and I sure get it if a potion just isn’t in the budget for them…and yeah, I know they’re gunning for a treasure chest with a major find inside, but it’s not like whatever they discover will make them filthy rich.

“That’s common in games, yeah. I understand what you mean, Masayuki, but…the monsters are naturally generated within the labyrinth, so I think it’ll be hard to have them carry items…”

It’d be a mistake to excessively spoil our visitors, giving them something they didn’t ask for in the first place. I’d like to do something to help, but I think they need to be able to support themselves first. That’s what the Free Guild is there to assist with. From our nation’s perspective, we can’t really provide welfare to people who don’t even live here. It’s not exactly pretty, but you need to be strong to survive—

“I think we can do that,” Ramiris casually commented, just as I was mentally throwing in the towel.

“Really?”

“Sure. Just have them swallow the item right after they’re born!”

If that was possible, it opened up a few possibilities. Maybe we could populate the treasure chests with more useful items and let the monsters drop the junkier stuff for explorers. Junk or not, it’d still be a source of income for the lower ranks—and going forward, I’d like those lower ranks to have something to live on. In a perfect world, people are rewarded for their efforts, and I wanted to make that happen as much as possible.

“Well, no problem, then. If it’ll help people gain more of an income beating monsters, I bet it’ll make them try even harder for us.”

And it’d have the side effect of boosting the trade-in monster-derived materials, as well as providing another attraction for our nation. And once we have some more money to work with, we can divert some of that into welfare programs. I don’t know how much we can do about illness, but serious injury? We could assist with it. If Japan can have universal health care, it’s not a dream for Tempest to have something like it. A system like this is something we’ll want to implement at an early stage in our nation’s development, lest people call it unfair. If possible, I’d like to see that happen sooner than later.

The problem is to figure out who, exactly, we’ll call citizens of Tempest. Labyrinth runners, passing merchants, and people like that aren’t, naturally. Maybe now is the time to register all our citizens and make the ownership of rights clearer to everyone. Tempest is a developing country right now, so we welcome any and all immigrants, but once our nation matures, there might be movements to ostracize noncitizens from our borders. A nation is, in a way, a large cooperative entity—nobody can live alone, so we form communities to help one another survive. We don’t need parasites latching on to our nation, and I didn’t want to embrace anyone who didn’t have a sense of belonging here. It’s hard, after all, for people with different thoughts and principles to coexist in the same community.

Basically, if a citizen belongs to a nation, they have a duty to work for the sake of it. In turn, they can receive certain services from that nation. That being said, people have the right to not belong to any nation, free of civic duty and retaining full, unfettered freedom. If you want to be part of Tempest, come on in; if not, you’re still a welcome guest, but I can’t provide you all the services a citizen would receive. We’ll need to define the difference soon, and I think Rigurd and I need to have some detailed discussions about this.

…See? I can think about serious stuff sometimes, too.

“You think so? In that case, maybe we could mix in some unfamiliar potions—or weapons and armor whose capabilities are unknown? Like, so you won’t be able to determine if they’re high value when you find them?”

Oh, right. We were still in a conference. I hurriedly considered Masayuki’s suggestion. Hmm. I think I see what he’s getting at.

“Ah, like, un-appraised tools and equipment that you can’t use until you get them appraised at the entrance?”

“Yeah, yeah! I mean, I guess you can’t really drink a potion if you don’t know its effect.”

“Oh, maybe some people would. And if we mix in some poison flasks, that’d be another labyrinth trap for us. It’d help warn people about making item appraisal a habit, too. Let’s go with that.”

“Cursed equipment might be tough, but magic weaponry would be pretty neat. Like, you think something is a piece of junk but appraise it to reveal its true colors.

“That’s good! You can’t throw away junk then, and you’ll also need to exit the labyrinth to have it appraised.”

Masayuki and I, with our video game knowledge, were getting excited over this. The idea of actually implementing it was thrilling, and Ramiris and Veldora, overhearing us, seemed to be getting into it.

“If you want to hide the true nature of something, my illusory magic ought to come in handy!”

“Kwah-ha-ha-ha! Ah, how lovely it is to see challengers jump for joy, only to be agonized by doom later. Now things will be even more exciting!”

Yep. Definitely into it.

“Hmm… Yes, and since junk equipment will take up valuable space, people will want to sell it in town in short order. That ought to boost return whistle sales!”

And now here’s Mjöllmile with some more reality-based feedback. And he was right. Anyone would hesitate to toss out un-appraised weapons and armor. Planting that thought in people’s minds would make those people camping out in the labyrinth in search of big finds reconsider their strategy. And since we’re charging admission, the more people going out and in, the more profit we make.

Plus, we wouldn’t be the only ones having fun here. There’s something attractive about the term un-appraised. Your heart can’t help but race as you wait for the appraisal results—real pulse-pounding excitement. Something you thought was junk transforms into treasure before your eyes…and even if it turns out to be junk after all, you’ll still treat it as your own. We don’t need to have a ton of “jackpot” items like that, but along those lines, I think we could certainly mix in some more Low Potions and the like. That’ll help support the lower-ranked customers, although we’ll have to fine-tune the ratios of trash to treasure.

“All right. Well, it’s about time we get to work.”

“Time to push a system update, huh?” Masayuki replied.

Given that we came up with all that only just now, “it’s about time” wasn’t too appropriate. But our last “system update” went just fine.

“Sounds good to me!” Ramiris nodded, as if she knew what we were talking about. I flashed her a quizzical look, and she quickly averted her eyes. I suppose that little sneak was just trying to ride along on the wave. Mjöllmile looked confused, and Veldora was back to his usual shrill laughing, but I didn’t mind. Masayuki and I looked at each other and nodded.

The following evening arrived.

My days were now full of serious work. They were usually spent inspecting projects around town—no, it wasn’t just a leisurely walk, I promise—and each night, I’d receive reports in my personal office. Rigurd was handling a lot of my affairs, but a fair number of them still required my personal approval, so I had an office set up in our government building for that.

“Sir Rimuru,” Shion said as she handed me a sheaf of papers, “here’s your report from Sir Mjöllmile.” She was a hard worker—almost like a real secretary. Kind of surprising.

“Yes, thank you,” I said, trying to sound all haughty as I accepted the report. Mjöllmile was already getting started on what we discussed at yesterday’s meeting.

“Everything’s going well,” I muttered.

“I am delighted to hear,” Diablo said, nodding.

“In hardly any time flat, our tavern sales are up ten percent. I guess it benefits all our citizens if the low-ranked adventurers have more money to work with.”

“Indeed. It’s just as you read it, Sir Rimuru.”

Diablo nodded again as he gently poured some tea for me. It’s not at all like I had read it, actually, but it was pretty much what I hoped for. I couldn’t be happier. Diablo was overvaluing me, like he always did, but it didn’t bother me this time.

I took a sip. “Huh? This tastes different. Did you change the leaves?”

“Did you not like it?”

“N-no, it’s good, but…”

It wasn’t displeasing at all—maybe just a tad stronger on the bitterness than usual.

“I-I’ll replace it at once!” an apparently panic-stricken Diablo said. But he really didn’t need to. It was just fine; no problems to speak of.

It’s just that Shuna always brings her A game when it comes to preparing tea—Wait a minute…

“Hey, is this…?”

“Yes, your chief secretary insisted on preparing it herself. I tasted it to ensure it wasn’t poisonous.”

Um, okay?

That’s a surprise, seeing Shion prepare tea this good. The even greater surprise, though, was Diablo actually cooperating with her.

“I never thought you’d go with Shion on that.”

Poison doesn’t work on me anyway, so I assume Diablo was simply taste testing it, but that made it even more of a surprise.

“I had no other choice,” he replied with a smile. “Sir Benimaru was balking at being her taster every day. It was my first experience ever feeling ill, a chance I’m glad to have had.”



I really don’t think that’s a necessary experience—but this time, I definitely needed to thank him. Shion looked really happy, after all.

She’s really grown, huh? Once upon a time, her home-cooked cuisine was more hazardous to your health than the deadliest of poisons, but now here she is getting tea just right. No magic or skills or anything! Her violin performance during the festival was another surprise—I’m being wowed all the time lately. It truly felt like an emotional moment to me.

“Diablo…thank you.”

“No, no…”

“And Shion? Well done. You did great!”

“Y-yes! Thank you very much!!”

Next time, I think I’ll have Shion pour my refills. It was a little overly bitter, but I was happy.

Then I recalled that I had never delivered Diablo his promised reward.

“By the way, I still owe you a reward, don’t I? You did an excellent job with the Farmus invasion, and here I’ve been giving you menial labor ever since you got back.”

“No, no, it’s my hope to be of service of you, Sir Rimuru…”

“Well, yeah, but…”

I had given Hakuro some vacation time. He was off happily training somewhere with his daughter Momiji. Gobta, I took to our special elf-run club down on Floor 95. He didn’t quite deserve a membership card yet, but I intended to dangle that as a carrot for his future endeavors. (Of course, he was still off god knows where with Milim at the moment. Veldora grumbled a bit about wanting to toughen him up, too, but I hope he doesn’t. That’s just being cruel by that point.) For Gabil, I had a new research facility built, beyond the door that Veldora guarded on Floor 100. He’d be the head of this laboratory, with Vester as his second-in-command. Gabil would be overseeing what had grown into a pretty large research team, so it was a fairly big promotion.

So along those lines, I had given what I thought were appropriate rewards to everyone. Not doing anything for Diablo, someone who worked so hard by my side, was out of the question.

“In that case,” Diablo said as I thought this over, “there is something I would like your permission for.”

He always had the greatest knack for reading a room like that.

“Go ahead. Say it.”

“Very well. I was thinking that I would like someone working under me to handle my more miscellaneous duties.”

“Oh, like making tea?”

I knew he wasn’t a fan of that. I couldn’t blame him. Why would a demon as powerful as Diablo willingly brew tea for a slime? Even I thought that was a bit bonkers.

“Ah, no, not that, Sir Rimuru! Taking care of your personal affairs is one of my most vital responsibilities! I am talking about miscellaneous tasks like razing nations to the ground—someone I could perhaps send in my place to handle that. I, personally, will always be by your side, Sir Rimuru.”

He smiled as he said it.

……Come on. That’s real work, not “miscellaneous tasks.” But to Diablo, I guess taking care of me was more important than waging wars. I really don’t get what’s in his mind sometimes.

“Ah. I see. But I can’t have someone with that kind of power working under you…”

Someone with the intelligence and muscle to take down an entire country? It’d have to be someone like Benimaru or Soei. I wanted to make Diablo’s wish come true, but this was asking a little too much. However, it turns out I was jumping to conclusions.

“No, no, I have no intention at all of standing above Sir Benimaru or anything of the sort. There are some old acquaintances of mine I am considering, so I thought I would invite him.”

So he wanted to hire some people? I didn’t have any problem with that.

“That sounds fine by me, but will you need some money?”

I imagined he would, which is why I asked, but Diablo smiled and shook his head. “No, I doubt they would be interested in money. In place of that, however, they will need some manner of vessel to serve as their physical bodies.”

Ahhh, now I get it. If this is an acquaintance of Diablo’s, it’s probably gonna be another demon.

“All right. Is it okay if it’s something like what I gave to Beretta?”

If Diablo insisted on a human corpse, we were gonna have problems. Things were a bit different now from when I first summoned him.

“Yes, I’ll ensure they don’t complain.”

Then fine.

Ramiris was just bugging me, in fact, about providing physical bodies for Treyni’s sisters as well. I said yes, since they could help us run the labyrinth. Maybe I should craft a few extra bodies while I’m at it, just in case.

“That’s fine by me, then, but is that the only payment they’ll want?”

“That is not a problem. But I think that the protégés I am considering each have a staff of their own as well. I was thinking about bringing them on, too. Is that all right?”

As breathlessly confident as always, I see. It’s like he never once considered the thought of being turned down.

“I can’t pay them, but would they care?”

“If you can provide them with physical bodies, they will gladly serve you, Sir Rimuru!”

He was so sure of it. And if he was, I had nothing to say. But there is one thing I better ask.

“So how many people are you expecting to serve you?”

By his manner of speech, I was picturing a small handful, but I needed to know how many bodies I should prepare to make.

“Well, I was thinking perhaps several hundred; a thousand at most.”

“That’s a lot!!”

A thousand at most? And they’re all demons? What kind of doomsday army was he tryin’ to build?!

“What, are you trying to have a war by yourself?!”

“No, no, I’d hardly expect them to battle me. Even if they did, I doubt it would be a hard fight for me.”

And so deadpan about it, too. Where does all that confidence of his come from?

“Are you…gonna be okay, though?”

“Yes, perhaps there is no need for such a large number. Very well. I will carefully choose among them and dispose of the unnecessary—”

“No, I didn’t mean that! I’m asking if you’re gonna be okay!”

Diablo gave me one of his happy smiles. “There will not be a problem,” he declared.

Well, now it just seemed ridiculous to worry about him. For all I knew, Diablo may very well be stronger than me. If he says it’s not a problem, there was no point in me protesting.

“All right. I’ll prepare a thousand vessels for you.”

“You will, Sir Rimuru?”

“Sure. I need to reward you anyway. So try not to get yourself hurt doing this, all right?” I didn’t think I needed to worry, but I went ahead and said it anyway.

Diablo bowed at me, overcome with emotion. “Very well, then. It pains me to say this, Sir Rimuru, but I hope you will forgive my absence for a period of time as I prepare.”

Part of me just wanted to say “yeah, yeah, yeah” to him. “You can leave things to me for now. Get going.”

Shion sounded like she was showing someone she disliked the door. I could kind of empathize with her. She must’ve been feeling the same way I did.

Wasting no time to strike while the iron was hot, Diablo decided to head right out on his journey. To be honest, I was a little anxious about having Shion be my only secretary, but—hell—Shuna was there for emergencies, and I doubted anything too hairy would happen. Such were my thoughts as I saw Diablo off with a smile.