

CHAPTER 3

THE PREPARATIONS

In a hastily prepared meeting room, two suspicious-looking people sat quietly. Or not exactly—upon closer inspection, there was also a third, smaller figure, a foot or so tall, with dragonfly-like wings on her back. The two other people in the room were seated facing her—Ramiris and two of her servants, Beretta and Treyni.

The small pixie bashed a fist against the small desk in front of her.

“This is exactly why I thought none of this was working!” she groused, rubbing her hand. “I told you we needed to move outta here!!”

“Correct as always, Lady Ramiris,” Treyni agreed, watching her affectionately. “Truly, a most brilliant idea!”

“Right? Isn’t it, though?”

Ramiris gave Treyni a satisfied nod.

Beretta was less than convinced. “One moment, please. Brilliant though the idea may be, where do you intend to move to? And could you explain why?”

Why do I have to do this? he thought. Treyni, his colleague, was a thoughtful, detail-oriented, hardworking woman. She had a good reputation among the spirits, allowing her to manage Ramiris’s labyrinth all by herself. That was something Beretta couldn’t do, and there was no doubting her usefulness to Ramiris. But there was an issue: Treyni, ever the loyal servant to Ramiris, spoiled her far too much. She agreed with everything Ramiris said, never doubting it for a moment. Someone needed to stop this before it led to trouble.

The ex-demon Beretta couldn’t help but laugh at himself a little. Oh dear… I am not here serving Lady Ramiris because I want to serve that role…

To someone like him, who did enjoy Ramiris’s company very much, getting bossed around all the time wasn’t a concern. What did concern him—albeit only slightly—was how his lone coworker here was an unabashed yes-man. Unfortunately, it was an ironclad rule of life that the hardest-working people tended to be the ones who lost out in the end. If you blow the whistle and warn about the dangers ahead, it’s usually your job to clean up the mess that results—something Beretta was about to learn the hard way.

“Great question, Beretta! Listen, aren’t you bored being in here at all? There’s nothing to do for fun in this place. The only diversion we have is building golems, and that’s about it. Barely anyone even comes to visit us! But over there, they’ve got all kinds of stuff. So I figure, you know, I’ll just invite myself over!”

Ramiris put forth what she must’ve thought was a convincing case. It just made Beretta sigh inside. He wasn’t dead set against it himself, but he remembered what the demon lord Rimuru was like and suspected getting his permission would be a problem. If she tried moving there now, he could easily envision her getting thrown out on her ear. Treyni must have known that, but all she had to offer was her unequivocal agreement.

“But, Lady Ramiris, didn’t Sir Rimuru already turn you down once?”

Beretta had to say it. She had already tried it. Without a better excuse, all she’d do was incur Rimuru’s wrath. Maybe Ramiris was oblivious to this fact, but to Beretta, that was the biggest problem of all.

“Come now, Beretta,” his unreliable coworker said. “You’re overthinking this! Sir Rimuru is such a nice young man. He’d never be cruel enough to deny the dreams of someone as cute ’n’ lovable as her!”

Treyni was being far too optimistic. If Ramiris wasn’t involved, Treyni was a capable woman of action, but there was no counting on her now. So since the other two people in the room weren’t using their brains, he tried to find a good way to navigate this. After all, he wouldn’t mind living alongside Rimuru, either.

I suppose that’s why I find even a situation as ridiculous as this exciting…

And it was a lucky thing he had a mask on, because under it was a smile almost childish in its glee.

After I saw Gob’emon go, I headed back to Tempest. I had been using Dominate Space to travel as of late, which allowed me to instantly transport myself to anywhere I had visited before. It consumed a nontrivial amount of magicules, but it was fairly trivial for me considering the energy I had to work with. I was free to use it as much as I wanted now, which made travel pretty simple—although I still tried to regulate my use, since I’d look so lame if I abused it and went into sleep mode as a result.

The moment I was back, Ranga sent me a Thought Communication.

(Master, Gobkyuu and the craftsmen have gathered at the western gate. However…)

He didn’t finish the sentence. What happened? Concerned, I headed for the gate, using Dominate Space despite promising myself to lay off a moment ago. Activating Universal Detect to gain a broader vantage point than what my eyes could give me, I spotted Ranga at the site—and if my destination was within sight, Dominate Space made it easy to rush over. Just a matter of changing my coordinates, really. Really convenient, but kind of hard to use in battle, since it takes a little time to set off. I’m always scared of leaving myself open like that. Besides, I’m trying to conserve it, remember?

This, on the other hand, was an emergency, so I reappeared right next to Ranga. We were outside the west gate, and immediately I spotted Gobkyuu arguing with someone. Universal Detect already told me who it was.

“No, you see, like I just said, we’re officially taking over this place!”

Oh no…

I took cover, listening in on the conversation.

“I know what you said, ma’am, but we can’t really accept that, do you understand? I’m going to ask Sir Rimuru now, so if you could just wait here and keep quiet for a little while—”

“No! We’ve already abandoned our previous labyrinth to come here! Are you going to kick out a poor, homeless woman with no place else to go?”

“N-no ma’am, I… This area is officially the territory of the demon lord Rimuru, you see, so you will need to obtain his permission first—”

“Pfft! Can’t sob story my way in, eh? In that case, I’ll have to resort to force. If you keep nitpicking every little thing, you know Beretta here isn’t gonna take that lying down— Ahhh!”

I couldn’t stand any more of it, so I sneaked up to the problem child in front of me and captured her in my hands. Taking a look at her, I confirmed it was Ramiris.

“What are you doing?”

“Um… Hey there, Rimuru! How’s it going?”

She was avoiding eye contact, clearly understanding she was in big trouble. Whatever she was up to, the small hut behind us clearly had to do with it. Ramiris was claiming the structure as her territory—she had to be hiding something inside. But how did she even bring it over here?

“Lady Ramiris! I’ve brought over some new wood!”

The riddle was solved by Treyni, coming over with an armload of wooden beams.

“Um, Treyni, what’re you up to?”

“Ah! Um, Sir Rimuru! I trust all is…well?”

She froze the moment she saw me. Did it not occur to her that building a hut right in front of the town gate might get spotted pretty fast?

“Can I ask what’s going on, Treyni?”

“W-well, this… It’s not what it looks like. L-Lady Ramiris did nothing wrong, um…”

The Treyni I knew always had this air of authority. Serving Ramiris had completely torn that apart. Like master, like servant, I guess. The only person here who could guide me through matters was likely Beretta, who was currently kneeling before me.

“Beretta, explain.”

“It always has to be me, doesn’t it…?”

Resigned to his fate, he relented.

It all began, he said, with something Ramiris told him.

“Beretta, you traitor!!” Ramiris shouted, freed from the prison of my hands, but I ignored her.

According to Beretta, Ramiris absolutely insisted on moving to my town, with Treyni in full agreement. I glanced at Treyni; she was staring into space and looking supremely awkward. Apparently, she spoiled Ramiris at all times, which I could see from the last time we met, so I believed it. Neither she nor Beretta would dare defy this lady, so they were all but forced into this would-be invasion of my land.

“And also, as Lady Ramiris stated, we came here after sealing off the entryway to the labyrinth we called home before.”

“Right! Exactly! So come on! If you kick us out, we’ll be homeless, Rimuruuuuu!”

She tried to sound as forlorn as possible, despite this being entirely her own doing. “Oh, poor, poor Lady Ramiris,” I heard Treyni lament. Please don’t keep encouraging her…

Either way, though, now I knew the situation. This wasn’t Gobkyuu’s fault at all—it was all on Ramiris and her servants.

“Sorry you went through that, Gobkyuu.”

“No, no, we were fine, but the gate guards had the worst of it…”

He eyed a nearby hobgoblin by the gate, sleeping soundly.

“…Um.”

“Yeahhh, uh, sorry. I got a little excited…”

“That wasn’t Lady Ramiris’s fault! That guard was saying terrible things to her, so I used magic to put him to sleep for a little while.”



What had gotten into Treyni’s mind anyway? She really did cast a spell, I presume for Ramiris’s sake. No wonder Beretta looked so guilty at the moment.

I would listen to Ramiris’s and Treyni’s excuses later. I wanted to learn more from Beretta, but he didn’t have much else to offer. They showed up here, Treyni brought in wood, and Beretta fashioned it into the log hut before me. Apparently, they had been interrupted just as he began work on a terrace in front of the door. This hut was meant to be the entrance to a new labyrinth.

It certainly wasn’t the first time Ramiris had demonstrated a desire to move here. This hut—which served as an entrance to her full residence—was all the real estate she really needed.

“Okay. So you tried building it here, and the gate guard stopped you. He was getting in your way, so you commanded Treyni to put him to sleep, and then Gobkyuu and these other craftsmen spotted you. Do I have this right?”

“Um… No, that’s not… Well, not exactly the case, I don’t think… Maybe?”

“Okay, so I do. Ramiris…”

“Um… Ha-ha-ha-ha…”

Ramiris must not know the meaning of the word no. She knew this was my territory, as recognized by the other demon lords, and that what she did was tantamount to staging an invasion. If war broke out over this, she’d have nothing to whine about.

But I paused a moment to think it over. Having this hut presented to me gave me an idea. Perhaps I should encourage this. Maybe give her permission to make a labyrinth here, even.

My conversation with Mjöllmile flashed before my eyes. We needed attractions that’d keep visitors coming again and again. These could be theaters, arenas, health spas, you name it, but I was still fishing around for other ideas. Do the same thing enough times, and you’re bound to get bored. We wouldn’t hold daily arena battles—I figured the tournaments would be more seasonal, maybe four a year. We could hold beginner-level matches daily, like with horse racing, but I didn’t see that attracting the connoisseurs among the nobility. We’d mainly be appealing to mass audiences—or maybe the adventurers stopping by.

If this town turned into the trade mecca I was planning, waves of merchants would be visiting, with adventurers serving as bodyguards. I wanted Tempest to turn into a base of operations for people like that. Adventurers could make money in assorted ways, one being monster hunting. Perhaps we could build a labyrinth for them and release some monsters inside? Would that attract a decent amount of daily traffic? A labyrinth is a dungeon, after all; if we invited people to help clear it out, that might attract adventurers with a completist bent.

This could work.

I looked at Ramiris, still smiling awkwardly up at me. I wasn’t too sure—okay, I was completely sure I couldn’t trust her, but maybe we could make something out of this. It was time to talk things over.

First, I asked Gobkyuu’s craftsmen to dismantle the hut for me. Since we already had the materials and everything, I decided to have it relocated for use as a break room for the gate guards.

Next, it was time for a strategic conference. We filed into the usual meeting hall, Gobkyuu in tow.

“Um, what is going to be the, er, happening to us?”

Ramiris’s anxiety was making her less and less coherent. Her eyes were fixed on me now, gauging my temper.

“You don’t have to be so nervous. If you’re trying to be polite, you’re failing miserably.”

I didn’t intend to do anything to her, no. If she was willing to accept my offer, I was willing to overlook her excessively bold overtures. But before that, we had to go over a few things.

“Gobkyuu, I was thinking we could build an emergency shelter space under the arena. Is that possible?”

“I’m not sure it’d be safe to have one directly under the arena stage, no matter how we try to work out the structural calculations. Any empty space under the floor would cause a cave-in at the first shock wave. But if we move this space a little, I think we can avoid that problem.”

“All right. I’d also like to have a door built down there.”

“…?!”

“A door, sir?”

“Right. Make it thick and heavy—and maybe put a bunch of carved stone tablets around the frame and stuff. It needs to look foreboding.”

“Would there be another shelter beyond the door?”

“Nah. No need for that. We just need the door, is all. Right, Ramiris?”

“R-Rimuru?! Are, are you saying that—that…?”

Gobkyuu was questioning my sanity, while Ramiris buzzed happily in the air next to him.

My proposal was simple. Basically, I wanted to have Ramiris build a dungeon and let her manage it. If she was gonna build an entrance in a simple wood hut, better to give her something that looked more the part instead, right? And given how all good dungeons extend deep underground, having it beneath a battle arena just seemed right to me. We could use the arena to train rookies during the off days, and I planned to have a potion shop on the premises. If we ran a dungeon on-site as well, I bet a tavern for adventurers looking for a quick pint on the way back from work would be a big hit. We’d make money off them, and Ramiris would have a home, a job, and a little spending money from me. It’d require mutual cooperation from both of us, but I thought it was a pretty neat idea.

Once I finished explaining all this, Ramiris burst into a flurry of shouting.

“Wh-what?! So—so do you mean that, maybe, not only could I build a labyrinth and live here, but you’ll even give me a full-fledged job?!”

“I guess so, if you’re willing to accept that.”

“Huh?! Okay, okay, so you’re saying that, uh, I no longer have to be the ‘jobless shut-in’ people accuse me of being?!”

The proposal must’ve been a big shock. She opened her eyes wide, babbling on like she had been struck by lightning. “I’m so glad, Lady Ramiris,” Treyni whispered, eyes welling up. Beretta, oddly enough, seemed to be smiling at me—I wondered if that fatigue I felt before was just an act. Did he want this? Maybe, maybe not, but either way, if he’s happy, no worries.

After calming down a bit, Ramiris swallowed nervously. “Um… And you’ll give me an allowance as well?” she carefully asked. “Do you really mean that?”

She must’ve been afraid I’d take it back. I’d never do that. I’m not that much of a sadist. Although, I couldn’t give her an exact figure on her allowance yet, since that depended on sales proceeds. Better put her mind at ease for now.

“I really mean it. But I don’t know how much profit we’ll make until we get things going. How about we say you get twenty percent of the profits after I deduct advertising expenses, rent, and other needed expenses?”

“How, er, how much do you think that would add up to?”

“Well, if we can attract, say, a thousand adventurers in a day, that could net you as much as two gold coins, maybe?”

“Gahhh!! That much?!”

“That’s just an estimate, keep in mind. There’s no guarantee it’ll work out that way. None of what I say means anything until we see some real, paying customers. But if you’re planning to live here anyway, it’s not a bad deal for you, is it?”

Ramiris bobbed her head. If she was going to squat on my property either way, she’d be maintaining her labyrinth no matter what I told her to do. It’d be smarter for her to listen to my offer, for sure—it’d grant her permission to stay and be a way to make money. Really, she only had one choice.

Thus, she latched on to my head and did a little dance of joy. I took that as a yes, and I was sure Beretta and Treyni wouldn’t complain. In fact, they were smiling at Ramiris, who was currently busy tripping off to her own little world.

“Eh-heh-heh… I’m gonna be filthy rich now! No more ungrateful bums calling me a deadbeat and a destitute demon lord!”

Ah well. No harm in that. It’d certainly do nothing to damage the faith her two servants had in her. Her sheer enthusiasm for the offer made me wonder just how often she had been picked on in the past. She was more excited than I was about it, so I doubt I had to worry about compliance.

What’s with her obsession over money, though? I didn’t think a lust for riches was a common trait for a demon lord, myself excluded. Was her lack of a decent job the main issue? Her labyrinth wasn’t exactly teeming with visitors. She must have been lonely, with way too much free time on her hands. It’d be great if we could attract crowds of adventurers to this dungeon—for my sake, as well as hers.

We better work out a plan of action fast.

Calling Ramiris back from her mental head trip, I decided to have her help rework our arena plans with Gobkyuu.

The way I saw it, we should expand the open area outside the western gate, where the highway ended, and build the arena there. There was ample pasture space for travelers’ horses, as well as a vast tract of empty land to work with.

Sometime in the future, I’d like to lay rails on top of the highway and run trains up and down it. Ever since I decided to target noble customers for this, I had been considering what to do about our transportation issues. If I could guarantee safe passage for them, I thought it’d be much easier to attract richer tourists. But that wasn’t the only goal. A rail system would make it possible to transport vast amounts of goods in one go, improving convenience and greatly contributing to town development.

That was what I had in mind for the town’s future expansion, so I wanted a spot for the arena that wouldn’t get in the way later on. I could establish a rail station near the spot, hopefully within an hour’s walk of the gate—any farther would be asking a lot from our tourists. Having the arena within walking distance of town also made it possible to offer more hotel options in a smaller area. Unlike my old world, people here did a lot of their traveling by foot. If a journey was up to around six miles round trip, most folks wouldn’t hesitate to hoof it, so a little distance wasn’t a daunting obstacle.

Those were my thoughts behind my proposal for a location, but Ramiris had other ideas.

“Why, though? Didn’t you have empty space within town limits?”

“Yes, but it’s occupied by beastman refugees right now. We have streets of temporary housing laid out for them. I can’t build an arena over that.”

“No,” added Gobkyuu, “we can’t throw the beastmen out of town. I think development will have to wait until after Sir Geld completes work on the new Eurazanian capital.”

“Okay, well, how about we just move them into my labyrinth? I could transplant the entire layout of that area inside it, so it wouldn’t be too much of a burden on them.”

That sounded, to be frank, absolutely bonkers. Gobkyuu and I exchanged glances, unsure we were hearing correctly.

“Er, you mean we’d move the inhabitants in there as well?”

“Um, I can’t move living things around without permission, no. They’d need to willingly go in there for me. But anything inanimate or unconscious? I can whisk it all right over, no prob!”

“Are you serious? So you can move all the beastmen’s houses and belongings inside your labyrinth anytime you want?”

“Yep! You got it!”

She sounded proud of it, as she should. That’s the kind of skill anyone deserved to brag about.

Pressing her for more detail, I learned that this was Mazecraft, one of Ramiris’s intrinsic skills. As the name suggested, it basically made Ramiris the supreme god of any labyrinth she created. It worked over astonishing distances, too, even affecting people and things near the maze entrance. She could even take the weapons and armor off people close by.

It was a crazy power to think of, but it did have its limits. If the target’s equipment had its own consciousness—a sword infused with its user’s magic, for example—Ramiris couldn’t affect it. You weren’t exactly stumbling over sentient objects like that every day, though, so if you picked a fight with Ramiris, you’d better be prepared to get stripped naked first thing. Maybe she really did deserve the demon lord moniker.

“Wow… I mean, honestly, I thought you had, like, zero ability to defend yourself in battle.”

“Sheesh, way to be super-mean! You’re talking to the woman they call the strongest demon lord in the world!”

“C’mon, Ramiris. Calm down. Tell me what else you can do with it!”

Upon further prodding, she revealed some more details behind her abilities. Essentially, I had five questions for her:

1. How many floors down can you build your underground labyrinths?

2. How many days do you need to build them?

3. What kind of monsters are inside?

4. Can you change their internal structure at will?

5. What happens if someone dies in there?

For a change, Ramiris gave me sincere answers to all of them.

For question one, there was no strict floor limit, but realistically speaking, she could max them out at around a hundred.

As for question two, one floor takes approximately an hour to complete. This figure remained steady for subsequent floors, so a hundred-floor labyrinth took around a hundred hours to complete. Any floors beyond that consumed exponentially greater sums of magical energy, hence the answer to question number one.

For question three, you wouldn’t find monsters, let alone insects or other creatures, just arbitrarily inhabiting a labyrinth. Her previous labyrinth had “monsters” in the form of spirits—spirits who remained as part of the floor structure, partitioned off from the physical world but able to come and go as they pleased.

However, it was possible to “seed” a labyrinth with monsters for adventurers to test their skill against. Fill a maze with magicules, and monsters would spring to life from them. Adjusting the labyrinth’s magicule density made it easy to predict the strength of the monsters who resulted, as well as restrict monsters to a certain floor or floors. That made it possible to fine-tune a labyrinth’s difficulty level with some precision. I had an idea of how this magicule infusion process worked, so I’d give that some thought once I had the right container for it.

Regarding question four, the sheer power of Ramiris’s Mazecraft skill meant she could change the entire structure of a floor in about an hour, although floors could not be edited for twenty-four hours after the last revamping.

There were conditions, of course. She couldn’t make something—plants or other organic matter, for example—out of nothing, so structural changes would chiefly result in staid-looking mazes of blank walls. However, if you simply wanted to redecorate a floor with some materials at hand instead of changing its structure, that wasn’t too terribly difficult.

It was also simple enough, by the way, to rearrange a labyrinth’s floor order. This, too, was set in stone for twenty-four hours afterward, but that made it no less useful a tool.

And last but not least, question five. Astonishingly, this depended entirely on Ramiris. If she was keeping tabs on things, she could snap her fingers and resurrect the dead inside her labyrinth. I was just wondering how she handled the corpses of monsters and hapless adventurers, but this sounded like nothing short of voodoo to me. Apparently, she wasn’t sure what happened to monsters born inside the labyrinth, since she had no examples to work with yet, but she had already resurrected quite a few adventurers in the past.

This was why she emphasized not being able to move organic creatures inside “without permission” earlier. This “permission” was nothing too formal; what mattered was that the subject in question knew he or she was going into the labyrinth. Without that understanding, any visitors would be refused entry. In other words, when I went into Ramiris’s labyrinth a while back, that was because I actively tried to do so. If I was carrying a sleeping companion on my back as I ventured inside, we would’ve been blown back at the entrance. (One exception to this was infants. Children young enough to not have their own free will yet were essentially treated as “things” by this rule.)

You could drag someone kicking and screaming into a labyrinth, but only at a great burden to Ramiris, so it was impossible if she resisted you at all. “You wouldn’t want to try it,” is how she put it to me.

So there you have it. Essentially, anyone who goes into a labyrinth was under the tyrannical rule of Ramiris—something they agreed to the moment they stepped through the entrance. If they accepted the rules, Ramiris would keep careful tabs on their status.

“And you know how much we like playing pranks, don’t you?” she said, puffing out her chest. “I just like surprising people and seeing their reactions. If they died, you know, that’d kind of weigh on my conscience. So I do what I can to keep ’em alive and set them back on their way.”

Sometimes, there’d be an unlucky subject who really did die on Ramiris, but it sounded like those deaths occurred outside of her labyrinth. At the very least, she didn’t want to kill me when I was in there. That golem who looked ready to stomp me to oblivion was only there because she knew she could fix me up, good as new, if called to. That made sense to me, although it seemed to lower the stakes of what I went through quite a bit.

“So if a band of adventurers goes in on a monster-hacking run, you can revive them if they die?”

“Yep! Once they’re booted out of the labyrinth, I can resurrect them like nothing happened. It’s a bit tougher if we’re talking a whole party at once, though, so we might need to send them in with some of my revival equipment.”

Equip a specified item from her Mazecraft labyrinth, and dying would just transport you back outside intact. That solved my safety concerns, which was really the biggest problem.

“Excellent! That’s wonderful, Ramiris!”

“R-really? You mean it? I’m really that great, aren’t I?”

“You sure are! Our ambitions are as good as accomplished!”

“They are? Yeah, they are! I was just thinking that myself!”

We looked at each other and nodded.

“I’ll be counting on you, Ramiris.”

“And I’ll hold up my end of the bargain! It’ll be nothing but smooth sailing ahead!”

Smooth sailing, huh? Hopefully the boat isn’t made out of mud. We couldn’t shake on the deal, given our size difference, but I think our minds were linked up well enough anyway.

Accepting Ramiris’s offer, we decided to build the battle arena in the empty space on the southeast side of town, a dungeon spread out beneath it.

Our theater, meanwhile, would be put up on the northwest side, near where all our high-end spa facilities were. We had actually put up a gym, a museum, and so forth among all the luxury lodging over there, so all we really had to do was refurbish a previously built structure for the purpose.

So the dungeon and theater were in place, but we still had no arena. Geld wasn’t around, but I’m sure I could rely on Gobkyuu and his crew. With them, we’d doubtlessly have something in place by the Founder’s Festival—

“I’m not sure we can do this, Sir Rimuru.”

Oh, no? Yeah, guess not. I mean, any normal project like this would require several years of work. Asking for a finished arena in a month or so was kind of insane. Even with monster-level muscle on our side, I wasn’t so sure we could do it, either.

“Yeah… All right. Let me lend a hand, then. I’ll help move dirt around and process the metal infrastructure.”

I may not look it, but I did used to work for a general contractor. I didn’t have that much on-the-field construction experience, but with what I learned imitating the veterans, I wasn’t a total amateur. Besides, I had Raphael.

“Me too! Let me help!”

“In that case, allow me to help, too.”

“As you wish, Lady Ramiris.”

I suppose that meant I had the support of Ramiris and Beretta and Treyni, too.

Let’s get right to work. I opened up my blueprints among the tents that lined the area.

“Hmm… All right. I don’t see a problem with this.”

“Great. Better explain things to your beastmen, then.”

A lot of our nation’s beastmen were out working on remote projects, so I decided to give Alvis and Sufia the full explanation for now. We would meet together this evening.

“If that is what you seek, Sir Rimuru, it shall be done.”

“It sure will. We’ve got no right to complain!”

Once I explained my whole plan to them, they accepted with surprising speed. They also stated that I wouldn’t need to explain it again to the other beastmen.

“Um, really?”

“Sure, Sir Rimuru,” Sufia said. “You’ve given us all food to eat and a place to stay. We’d all be glad to help out with building this arena or whatever.”

“Besides,” Alvis added, “I hear that Sir Carillon will be involved in the festival you’re holding. We all would be delighted to help you out. I am a tad under the weather, so I will leave the rest to you, Sufia.”

“You got it!”

So Sufia would lead the beastmen on this job—and once that was decided, things proceeded at blazing speed. One order from Sufia was all it took to get the beastmen out of their tents. As they all lined up in formation, Ramiris nimbly transported all the tents into her labyrinth. We now had a large patch of empty land to work with.

Still a little wowed by this feat, I used Belzebuth, Lord of Gluttony, to consume parts of the lot I didn’t need and pare it down to a square, flat expanse. The steel framing came up soon after, and once it did, Gobkyuu and his crew stacked up preprocessed stones to fill in the walls. Within the day, we had walls so hardy that not a single hole could be found in any of them. This gave us a sturdy-looking underground space with a large door in the front of it. For someone from my “modern” era, the whole thing was wrapped up with unbelievable speed.

“W-wow,” Ramiris gushed. “My new castle… Oh, right! If you touch this door, it’ll take you to the labyrinth floor where the tents are!”

We all took a trip inside. There, we saw the beastmen’s living space, exactly as it looked up on the surface. Alvis and Sufia couldn’t hide their astonishment—especially since the air was kept refreshingly cool down here.

“Do we even need these tents now, I wonder?”

“I dunno, yeah. I assume it doesn’t rain in here, so I bet we could just sleep on the ground…”

They didn’t seem at all dissatisfied with this. I could see them and the other beastmen experiment with going back and forth between the real and labyrinth dimensions—all it took was a moment’s thought for them.

“So does it get dark in here at night?”

“Sure does,” replied Ramiris. “We’re linked to the outside from here, so I can even make it rain if you like!”

Man. She could do just about anything, huh? But it wasn’t like they were farming crops in here, so I just asked her to set up a normal day-night cycle for me. This whole space seemed a lot more useful than I guessed at first; I bet I could adapt it to other needs, too. We’d have to brainstorm some ideas.

Apparently reassured, the beastmen went off to help with the outside work. They’d pitch in with the arena, evidently, under the command of Gobkyuu. A lot of them were women and children, but that’s beastmen for you—they all wanted to work, and each one was stronger than a human, at least. Gobkyuu was giving them the basic manual-labor jobs, it looked like, but better-trained beastmen were on-site as well now, aiding in construction.

Treyni was supplying logs for the building (don’t ask me how she got them), while Beretta’s precision carpentry turned them into usable boards. He could even cast a spell to dry the wood, which slashed the time involved dramatically. I thought I had abandoned my common sense long ago in this world, but it was sights like these that occasionally made me think Wow, I really am in a whole different world, huh?

If this keeps up, we truly could make it in time for the Founder’s Festival. I had spit out the land I ate earlier to create a small mountain, too, so perhaps we could use that as a field feature in the arena. It should work great.

“Leave the rest to us, Sir Rimuru!” said Gobkyuu.

I nodded, full of excitement over the arena’s imminent completion.

With the main construction now in full swing, Ramiris had been left to her own devices. She needed a job, if only so she wouldn’t start pestering everyone else. And what was she good at? Why, expanding the labyrinth, of course. Better use her while I got her.

“I gotta say, Ramiris, your Mazecraft skill amazes me.”

She had transported everything within a pretty broad stretch of land in the blink of an eye. I didn’t want to compliment her too much, but I had to hand it to her here. The labyrinth itself was pretty amazing, too.

“Hee-hee! Aw, it’s nothing! But right now, though, it’s only this room, the deepest depths where my spirit friends live, and a connecting corridor. I’ll have more levels for you tomorrow!”

It took one hour to build a level, right? Building a vast underground labyrinth that went down a hundred floors would be a pretty tall order even on modern-day Earth. Building up, after all, is a hell of a lot easier. Ramiris’s skill, though, made that possible—and suddenly, some pretty fantastic dreams seemed within reach.

“Okay, let’s go with your limit, then. One hundred floors.”

“Huh?! Do you need that many?”

“Yep. I want to fill it up with traps, and I want enough space to gradually up the monster-challenge level as you go down.”

“I mean, that’s fine by me, but can I ask you something?”

“What?”

“I was just wondering: How do you plan to expand the number of monsters in there? Are you gonna catch them somewhere?”

I suppose her question made sense. It’d take a lot of monsters to fill a hundred levels. But I had an idea. Let’s tell her a little about it, at least so she’ll cooperate with me.

“Well, between you and me…”

I let her in on the secret of how I wanted to structure this dungeon. As she listened, I could see her eyes begin to twinkle.

“Wait, so—so…”

“Right—right. So then, Ramiris…”

We began offering suggestions to each other as we whispered. This was getting exciting. And given it was the two of us involved, we naturally began to go off on tangents we never should have. Before long, we had worked out the concept for our Advanced Dungeon, as we called it. I honestly wondered if we could get away with it, but there’s no turning back now. We had to do it—and Ramiris was itching to start, promising me that she’d build this labyrinth with everything she had.

“You can take your time and rest along the way, okay?”

“Ha! There’s no way I’ll take a rest after hearing an idea like this! I’m gonna do it, lemme tell ya!”

I was just trying to motivate her a little, but I guess I got her really riled up. I’m glad she liked the romance of the idea, at least. I was just as excited. It was like a fantasy come alive.

“Well, do your best. I’ll get everything we need ready.”

“All right. Good luck, Rimuru!”

“You too, Ramiris.”

We were comrades in arms now, grinning at each other.

Exiting the labyrinth, I found the sun was already about to set. We must’ve been talking for a while. Work had finished for the day, with crews cleaning up and starting to cook dinner. I didn’t want to bother them, so I told Gobkyuu and Sufia that I’d see them the next day and took off.

My next stop was Kurobe’s workshop so I could have him give me some of the weapons and armor he couldn’t sell on the market—stuff that was more to his personal tastes. The southwest side of town was currently an industrial kind of area, and Kurobe’s place was there, along with workshops owned by his apprentices. There was also dorm space for the newer pupils without their own sites yet, along with lines of warehouses. There were inns and restaurants for all these craftsmen and apprentices, of course, and overall it was a fairly lively place.

Kurobe’s workshop was dead in the middle of it, and when I popped in, he warmly greeted me, showing me to his storage building after wrapping up dinner.

“Right here, Sir Rimuru. The stuff I have locked up in this warehouse is all pretty unique—not the kinda thing anyone can handle easily, you know. Are you all right with that?”

I nodded my approval. Kurobe was right—not all of it was very user-friendly or accessible. Some of it was locked up because it was too powerful, but a lot of it was just a total handful to use. The armor was a great example—like the suit of mail that sucked the wearer’s magical force to erect a magic barrier. That might sound useful, but it continually sapped your power whether you wanted it to or not, eventually killing the hapless owner. Great defense, but a pretty damn pointless piece of equipment.

There was also a sword that attracted all magicules in the local area like a magnet, making it impossible to cast any spells, and transformed them into explosive force. You definitely got a bang out of it, but it didn’t exactly spare the wielder from the blast. I’d be way too scared to use that thing or the suit of armor that granted the wearer extraordinary physical strength for a limited time. Once that time expired, your muscles all ruptured, rendering you motionless and dead unless you had healing magic on hand…

So basically, you had a room full of equipment that could kill you if you weren’t paying attention. I doubted anybody in town was dumb enough to try any of this unevaluated stuff out—especially because I didn’t want to take responsibility for the fallout—but I thought it’d all work just fine in Ramiris’s labyrinth.

“Yeah, it’s fine,” I told Kurobe. “These actually seem really valuable if you take into account all their different features.”

This was decent stuff, after all. Much of it was valued at Rare or above, with a few Uniques scattered here and there—in the same lineup as the Scale Shield and Tempest Dagger I gifted Kabal’s party.

I picked up one of the items—the Tempest Sword—as I turned to Kurobe.

“It seems like kind of a waste, doesn’t it? Keeping all this high-quality stuff in here just because it’s still in the test stage. Don’t you want to pair some of it with the kind of people who could really take advantage of it?”

I was trying to lead him to the answer I wanted. Kurobe took the bait.

“Oh? Well, you can take whatever you like from here.”

I wasn’t tricking him, exactly, but I did feel kinda bad about it.

Soon, Kurobe’s warehouse was a fair bit emptier. Now I had a set of weapons I could populate the treasure chests in the labyrinth with. They’d be obtained by adventurers who earned the right to them by reaching the level I put them in, so I didn’t lie to Kurobe at all. No need to look a gift horse in the mouth.

Still, I was amazed at his sheer output. There was more here than the last time I had stopped by; I’d say it was at over a hundred items now. Much of it was dicey, yes, but some pieces were just difficult to master. The one common link among them was that they were all superior to anything you’d see in the capital at Englesia, the kind of thing you’d normally only see at auction.

During the Harvest Festival that marked my ascension to demon lord, Kurobe received the unique skill Mastercraft. This was a force that stacked on top of his previous Researcher skill, polishing it further. By this point, he was way past Kaijin. Whenever he got serious about a project, it wasn’t uncommon for a Unique-grade piece of equipment to result. Rare level for sure, at least. That was much of the reason why only his apprentices’ work appeared at public showings.

“Gotta say, though, I’m impressed. I’ve learned forging myself, but no way could I make any of this.”

“Heh-heh! High praise from you, Sir Rimuru. Oh, but lemme give you this before I forget.”

Suddenly serious, the ever-modest Kurobe returned to the tatami-mat room in the rear to fetch something.

“What’s this?”

“Well, it’s something I’ve made you wait far too long for.”

He handed me a long, straight sword, the blade a jet-black in color. Not too long, but not too short—made just for me, at truly the ideal length.

“So this is…”

“Yep. My greatest masterpiece yet.”

At first glance, the only unusual thing about the sword was its black body. There wasn’t some ultra-powerful aura shooting out; it wasn’t generating its own magic or anything. But that’s what I wanted. This blade’s focus was squarely on durability. It’d never break, never bend, and would fully adjust itself to my magical force—without wreaking havoc around me, like with Hinata’s Moonlight sword. It allowed me to be wholly unrestrained in a fight.

“Well done. You’ve made me proud, Kurobe.”

“I’m just as proud of it as you, trust me on that. But the sword isn’t complete just yet. As you know, my weapons usually have a hole at the base, the way you suggested they should.”

I looked at the base. “Oh? I don’t see any here.”

“No. The other weapons get that hole when they’re complete, but not this one. Because once it acclimates to your magic force, it’ll grow…and evolve. And despite that, I built it so it’ll always look like just another sword otherwise.”

He had a right to be proud. As he put it, this sword in its complete state could be a piece of Legend-class material…not that it felt that way presently. The other equipment in the family was still under development, and the magic crystal meant to go into the hole he mentioned wasn’t done yet. No point having a hole if there was nothing for it yet. I would just look forward to that forthcoming moment.

I left Kurobe’s workshop with a spring in my step. I had my own sword, and I also got all the other stuff I wanted. Now I could seed those treasure chests and spread them all around the Dungeon. It’d be kinda fun to insert boss monsters to protect the particularly nice pieces, too. This was almost like designing a real-life dungeon-crawl RPG, and it was unbelievably exciting.

Yeah, you could probably make a mint selling these test items and failed experiments at auction—I’m sure Mjöllmile or Fuze could hook me up with the right people for that. It’d be a surer way of earning income, but I didn’t want that. The key here was to get humans interacting with monsters. I wanted to bring people over here and have them experience everything that made Tempest great—and if they liked what they saw, I’m sure they would come back. This was just one part of that effort.

Plus, this wasn’t just a matter of bribing adventurers with loot and sending them on their way. I already had the next step of the process in mind. Let’s say you have someone hacking their way through the Dungeon, collecting assorted items and bringing them back to the surface. Using non-appraised weapons or armor, I had heard, was considered extremely dangerous. That’s where my little friend Assess comes in. This stuff was made in Tempest, so I naturally knew all about their traits and features. A lot of it would be quite useful to adventurers, assuming you used it right—yeah, some of it was downright dangerous, but we’d offer a buyback service for that.

Money’s meant to be circulated, not kept in a vault or whatever. As long as we purchased the materials we needed and paid for necessary upkeep, we could give back the rest to the adventurers. Word would spread about this over time, and I was sure it’d make our land famous. Besides, filling adventurers’ wallets would improve the outlook for our inns and lodging houses. More people coming to Tempest meant less downtime for places like that, which was important—for business and for advertising.

So the southeast side of town would have a battle arena, with Ramiris’s dungeon underneath. On the southwest, we’d have discount inns and hostels. Unlike the high-end facilities to the northeast, we’d keep things cheap down there, attracting primarily adventurers to help delineate our offerings. Their location would be convenient to the labyrinth, and I was positive it’d be a booming success.

I was worried at first when Ramiris talked about moving here, but maybe that was the right thing to do all along, huh?

We also planned to have at least one or two large-scale events at the arena each year. Mjöllmile was no doubt filling in the rest of the year’s schedule with other things, too—military training, test-your-mettle events for adventurers, and so on. There could be a lot of demand for that kind of thing, I thought. We could have people try to use that training in the Dungeon—a kind of standardized exam, you could say. If you can’t die in there, you could try some crazy stuff you’d ordinarily never dream of attempting.

Realizing how many options were open to us—not just commercial, either—I decided to talk with Benimaru later about them.

I had my seed items, but it was too early to focus on the Dungeon; that could wait until it was done. For now, I wanted to wrap up talks with the one person we needed for the final touches, the whole cornerstone of this scheme—Veldora.

I found him relaxing in my little house a bit removed from town, a nice little Asian-style teahouse. There’s actually a secret to this building—but I’ll go into that later. Veldora was treating the place like he owned it or something, which I didn’t mind that much, but…come on, man.

“Yo, Veldora. Can you do me a favor?”

“Mm? What? I am busy.”

Yeah, busy reading manga, maybe.

“Ah… Too bad. I thought this was a pretty neat offer, too… But if you’re busy, then oh well. I just figured we could use your aura to— Oh, right, sorry. You’re busy. Never mind.”

I pretended to walk away. Leaving what was supposed to be my own house was a little weird, but well, I had lots of places to sleep. Besides…

“Oh, just one moment. I am busy, yes, but if you insist upon it, I will lend you an ear!”

Great, I hooked him. As gullible as always, I see. Like taking candy from a baby. I should start calling him the Gulli-Dragon.

The rest would now easily fall in place. I stood tall, looking as haughty as possible.

“Well,” I started, trying to sound suggestive, “I was thinking about providing a den for you to live in, sort of.”

“Wh-what?! My own place? You mean it?!”

I really got him now. He took his eyes off the manga he was reading, watching me curiously.

“Yep. All for you. But if you’re too busy right now…”

“Wait—wait! No need to be in such a hurry. We’re friends, are we not? I’d be glad to put your requests at the top of the queue! Kwaaaah-ha-ha-ha!”

I had Veldora excited now. Perfect. Might as well go through with the pitch. He almost never listened to people, so these preliminaries really were necessary. A pain in the ass, but I just considered it a little ceremony I conducted to help him be useful for a change.

“Mm, yes, what are friends for, after all?”

“Precisely. Tell me what you want!”

“Well, Ramiris is moving into town, and we’re gonna build her labyrinth right underneath the arena. So—”

“Oh, Ramiris?” Veldora replied, picking up on what this meant. “Her powers are a bit of an unknown quantity to me. I understood them as creating paths that led you to the same spot, no matter where you were. Does she twist and turn these paths around to create mazes?”

“Right. And she can add more floors to these mazes, so I want to fill them with tricks and traps and stuff.”

“More floors? That little girl was more powerful than I thought, then.”

Now Veldora was looking serious, engaged. So gullible.

I then regaled him about the entire story behind our dungeon plan. “But it’d be boring to just have a plain old labyrinth, right? That’s why I want to make it into something really great—like, great enough to be a huge attraction. I was just talking with Ramiris today, but she’s busy adding levels to her labyrinth right now.”

“Oh? And how does that connect to me?”

“Well, I’m thinking we need an overlord to govern the dungeon.”

“An…overlord?”

“Ramiris and I will manage the dungeon itself. On the hundredth floor, at the bottom, there’s a door that leads to the spirit labyrinth that’s Ramiris’s main residence. Don’t you think a door like that needs a guardian, Veldora? Like, the strongest guardian in history?”

“I do! I do! Yes, well said, Rimuru. And you would like me to take this role?”

Just as I thought, he latched on to the offer. The word strongest (when pointed at him) usually made him melt, so I knew uttering it would have the desired effect.

“That’s right, Veldora. And if you’ll take it, you’ll get another bonus out of it, too.”

“Oh? I was already waiting to say yes to you. But let’s hear what this…bonus is.”

Heh-heh-heh. The “bonus”…or really, the gist of the whole thing.

“So you’ve been wanting to let off your aura for a little while, right? You said you were about to hit your limit or whatever?”

“Ah! You mean…?”

“Yes! In the labyrinth, you’ll be free to unleash it all you want. You can go back to your normal dragon form, even.”

“Ahhhh…!!”

“Just imagine, this divinely cool dragon lurking deep in the depths of a forbidding labyrinth—”

“Meaning myself?” he interrupted. “So I’ll be allowed to use my full power on anyone who visits? All Kwah-ha-ha-ha-ha, welcome, you insects and so forth?”

Plainly, he loved it. The lethargy of a moment ago was gone. Dangling that bait in front of him got him monstrously excited. Now for one final push, I thought, as I recalled a little something Ramiris and I had discussed.

“I’ll even put some units in place for you to fight off the adventurers with. That’s right—I’m gonna re-create that game you wanted to try out. Sounds like fun, doesn’t it?”

This, in a nutshell, was what I wanted to make—a real-time (also, real-life) strategy game set in a dungeon. The idea came to me out of nowhere as I’d talked with Ramiris. I’d have units (monsters) in place to tackle adventurers, along with bosses to protect the loot chests. The Dungeon would be filled with Veldora’s magicules, growing thicker as you approached the hundredth floor. The force in the air would be pretty thin up top, so you’d only see minion-level monsters at first, but the deeper you got, the more higher-level foes you’d find patrolling the halls. Even in his former prison, enough magic leaked out to create tempest serpents (rank: A-minus) and other powerful creatures—I couldn’t even imagine what he’d create at this point.

Frankly, the whole “gate guardian” thing didn’t matter to me; I didn’t really expect anyone to make the hundredth floor in the first place. The key to all this was getting Veldora’s aura released. It felt to me like I couldn’t get away with making him keep it in much longer, but if I just left him to his own devices, he might decide to blow it all out in some empty corner of the world. I couldn’t take my eyes off him for a moment, because if he erupted closer to town, maybe my administration and I could withstand it, but nobody else would. With enough magicule concentration, anything below a B in rank would die.

I found it dangerous to rely solely on Veldora’s willpower to keep us safe, so Ramiris’s labyrinth was really a lifeboat in the nick of time. It was a completely sealed space, something I confirmed when I explored it myself earlier, so there was no worrying about magicules leaking out. Veldora’s full aura unleashed shouldn’t faze it at all.

Even in the Sealed Cave, it’d be impossible to resist the aura of a fully revived Veldora—not that I’d bring him down there now, what with our research facility and all. The Dungeon was perfect for him, and for the purposes of my true goal. I wanted him to whip out that aura and go to town with it.

My “true goal,” you see, was to use the large, dense cloud of magicules he’d create and generate monsters with it. The whole plan rode on that idea—Veldora releasing his aura, and me making good use of it. An excellent plan, if I do say so myself. Two birds—no, three birds—with one stone. Not only would it keep him from crashing my house uninvited, it’d also make him useful as a magicule generator for my new monster factory, giving him a job to do so he wouldn’t be such a freeloader. Not that I thought anyone would actually make it all the way to his floor, though…

But what did he think? Veldora stood up, placing his manga in a pocket, then extended a hand toward me, offering to shake.

“I like it. I like this very much, Rimuru. We will have adventurers dispatch these ‘units,’ so they can stand before me, and I can deliver them divine justice. They may try to run from me, of course, but I will never allow them to. Perhaps I could bellow something akin to Bah-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha! You cannot escape me! Didn’t you know? There is no fleeing the Storm Dragon! I always wanted to try saying that, and now I’ve got the chance, don’t I? Ahhh, I cannot wait to begin!”

“Um, yes…”

His imagination was already running wild. I nodded back at him, but now I worried that I’d egged him on a little too much. Is this gonna be okay? Like, there’s really no way someone’ll reach Floor 100, right? I was a little concerned about that, but I needed to push this plan forward.

“…Well, you’re the only person I could ask to do this. Are you in?”

“Of course. Rimuru, you’ve done well to reach out to me. Truly, it is a task only I am capable of.”

He gave me a firm nod. I’m so glad he’s really that stupid. His cooperation, and his reaction, were even better than I thought possible.

The next day, Veldora and I went to Ramiris.

Construction of the arena began early in the morning, and the site was alive with activity. Some of the beastmen that were out on training had come back to pitch in, following Gobkyuu’s orders as they ran to and fro. I didn’t want to wreck their concentration, so we headed for the labyrinth.

The moment we entered, we emerged in the room Ramiris was in. As she promised, she had been busy expanding the Dungeon.

“Hello, Ramiris. Doing well?”

“Ahhh! Hello, Master! It’s good to see you again. I’m doing fine!”

Ramiris looked a tad fatigued but eminently satisfied with herself. I advised her not to overdo it. She was now seated on Veldora’s shoulder; I was glad to see they were still getting along.

I was glad, but it was also a problem, because the sight of Veldora was making Ramiris totally forget my advice.

“Just leave this to me! I’ll do it! I can totally pull this off, guys!”

To calm her down a bit, I decided to start with breakfast.

After that, I asked her about her progress. For now, she had expanded the labyrinth down to Floor 15; at the current pace, she’d reach one hundred several days later. I could decorate the interior along the way, so there was no need to hurry her further.

“The subsequent floors will formulate themselves at this point,” she said. “I’ve got nothing to do right now. Would you like to mess around with the floors that are done?”

Apparently, the floor-making work would proceed on its own, as long as Ramiris had remaining magic strength.

“All right, how about we set up Veldora’s room first?”

The domain of Veldora would be on the bottommost floor. I wanted to get it all set up for him, if only so I could kick him out of my place pronto. For now, that floor was still an empty space—no walls, no hallways, no stairs; just a door in the middle of nothing.

“Wow. Literally starting from zero, huh?”

“This is my room, Rimuru? Because it reminds me of my time being sealed away…”

Veldora wasn’t a fan. I saw his point. I’d feel kind of bad for him like this.

“Not to worry, Master!” Ramiris smiled at Veldora. “I can add stairs and other things easily enough, just by thinking about it.”

“All right,” I said, “how about we all use Thought Communication to figure out what we want this place to look like?”

We connected our minds together, and I showed them what I was currently picturing.

“Oooh! Yes, yes! Quite fine, Rimuru! I knew you were better than that. I suppose I am in good hands after all!”

“Sounds like Veldora’s all for it. Think you can make it into this?”

“You got it! This much isn’t a problem.”

Ramiris wasn’t kidding. In another instant, the space transformed. We were quickly surrounded by walls of thick stone, forming a large chamber with several smaller rooms coming out from it. The main chamber was a square three hundred feet or so on each side, impassive and looking every bit like a boss room. She did it up exactly like I pictured it in my mind.

“Whoa! This is perfect…”

“That it is, Ramiris. I am eminently satisfied!”

“Hee-hee! Glad you like it! Yes, I really am that good, y’know!”

Ramiris didn’t get compliments often enough, I guess, because she looked beside herself with joy. I really was impressed, though. If you tried to physically construct this, it’d take decades, not even years—and she was done in an instant. Plus, since this whole space was under her jurisdiction, she could customize it pretty freely. Astounding. I really started to see her in a new light.

But I couldn’t marvel at her forever.

This chamber was meant to be the reception area for any adventurer who made it here. But it wasn’t just that. In reality, it was a space large enough for Veldora to return to his original form. He needed to be able to fully relax and get comfortable in this space, or we’d never get anywhere. Of course, looking at him lately, he was chill enough in pretty much any physical form, I felt… If anything, being human made it easier to play games and read manga. He liked that form enough to use it to hang out uninvited in my home, after all. Maybe we’d need to build a human-Veldora room, too.

In the chamber was two doors, a large one that connected to the upper floors and another that connected to his private chambers. Ramiris did such a good job crafting my vision, it was literally just as I thought it’d be.

“Hoh? This is my room?”

Letting the curious Veldora look around a little, I took out a set of furniture from my Stomach. Deftly, I laid down a carpet woven by our town’s goblinas, placing a handmade desk and chair set on top of it. There was also a sofa in case he wanted to lie down, as well as a bed that I wasn’t sure would be used very much. The place looked comfy enough to me, and I even copied some manga I knew Veldora would like and filed it all into a bookshelf on the wall. The main chamber was dark and foreboding; this one was a cheerful little studio perfect for young, urban singles.

“Oh, how nice!” chirped Ramiris, looking a bit envious. “I’d like some furniture like this, too, y’know.”



I promised I’d bring her some next time I stopped by. I wasn’t sure what to do about sizing it for her, but judging from how Ramiris was already spread out on the sofa and reading manga, I guess I didn’t need to worry… And whoa, there’s Veldora sprawled in bed and doing the same thing. Guess I made him happy. If anyone saw him in here, the solemn majesty of the main chamber would totally go to waste. I really hoped no adventurers would see him like this, as unlikely as that’d be.

Well, no need to go overboard. We spent the afternoon getting Veldora’s room in order before wrapping up the day.

One week later—the pace had dropped a bit toward the end—the labyrinth was complete down to the hundredth floor. The interior, as I directed, was made out of blocks whose structure could be altered freely, allowing us to switch the paths around once every few days. This way, even if anyone memorized the way down, they’d have to start all over next time. I’m talking truly demonic difficulty here. Selling maps would be sacrilege, I thought. I wanted this to be a true gauntlet, and this way, it’d be a new quest every time—always fresh, retaining its difficulty, never getting boring.

As a kind of fail-safe, I did provide “save points” every tenth floor. It turns out that Spatial Motion was possible in Ramiris’s labyrinths, under certain conditions. This wasn’t affected by the local magicules, amazingly. It made it possible to do things like transport food in and out—super-useful—and it also worked on people, letting them freely travel back to these preset locations. In other words, save points, through and through. Reach one, and you get to start from there next time.

It works on your fellow party members, too; you could cheat a little and bring someone below where they’ve been before. There was some debate about that quirk, but I decided to go with it, see how people used (or abused) the feature, and adjust as needed. Besides, even if you cheat your way down a few floors, you’ll still have to deal with the challenge waiting down there. There’s a boss stationed at every level, guardians that work along the lines of the local boss warlords dotted around the Forest of Jura. I was thinking of making the ones located before save points particularly powerful; if you wanna take those guys down, save points weren’t going to help you.

Basically, someone would need to be strong enough to reach a save point in the first place before they could take others down there, so I didn’t think anyone would try anything too stupid with them. If a problem came along, we could always reconsider. We had some nice bonuses in the treasure chests, after all, so I hoped our visitors would try hard to defeat the bosses on each floor.

Was it okay for our bosses to kill (or be killed), by the way? Sure, that was another key point. Ramiris’s Mazecraft had the power to revive life itself, resurrecting any adventurers who came into the Dungeon. This could be done only with the subject’s permission, but as long as he or she existed as a consenting part of Ramiris’s realm, it was all good. Ramiris was, in essence, the eternal leader of anything made with Mazecraft. If she was killed, the whole thing would disappear, but otherwise, any of her servants could get revived at a save point, and a “servant” was anyone she had forged a pact with or otherwise agreed to the presence of. I still couldn’t believe the power of this skill.

Now I see why she wanted Beretta so bad. Ramiris was no big deal out on the surface, but in her world, she was invincible. It’s just that the invincibility only worked on people who were part of that world. It didn’t work on golems with no free will, including that Elemental Colossus that vanished. Beretta, meanwhile, wasn’t just a puppet—and that meant he was invincible, now that he served Ramiris. She had Treyni, too, now, which made me begin to wonder if I should start worrying about them. Treyni was kind of strong, after all, and if she couldn’t be destroyed, not even Benimaru or Shion could beat her. Beretta and Treyni were still outside, beavering away at the arena construction work, but still…

Thanks to Ramiris’s hard work, the labyrinth was smoothly approaching completion. Once things calmed down a bit, I’d need to talk to her and her servants about keeping the maze defensible. But that’d be later.

“Ramiris, did you make the thing I asked for?”

“Oh, this, right? Here it is.”

This was a resurrection item.

In order to receive the immortal attribute within a Mazecraft world, you needed to give your express permission. But we planned to have tons of people storming in, and if it was open to the general public, it’d be a pain to get everyone’s agreement on paper. Maybe Ramiris could keep track of a small handful of visitors, but if multiple parties were running around at once, she couldn’t keep up.

That’s why I asked if there was a disposable item for single-use resurrection purposes. What she gave me now looked like a regular old armlet, knotted together like a friendship bracelet.

“Did you check to see if this works?”

“Sure did! I tried it out on Beretta last night!”

“Whoa, what are you doing to him…?”

Apparently, Beretta willingly agreed to this, his reasoning being “I am a demon, so even in the worst case, I will not truly die.” I know I asked and all, but this was ridiculous. Thanks to that, however, I knew we had a working bracelet. Treyni had taken Beretta’s core out of his body, and within ten seconds, the corpse was transported out of the Dungeon and fully revived.

“Perfect. I appreciate Beretta being brave enough to try it.”

Ramiris smiled and nodded. “Oh, yes! This was the first disposable item I ever tried to make, after all. I figured it was possible, but I’m just glad it worked!”

This was her first time? So what if it didn’t work? I shuddered at the thought. She could’ve at least tested it on animals or something. I wish she wouldn’t be so rash.

Regardless, we now had Resurrection Bracelets. Ramiris reported that she’d also prepare return whistles that brought you back to the surface in an emergency. We could sell both of these at the labyrinth entrance—buy them or don’t; it’s your choice. Don’t blame us if you die or get lost down there, though. Me, I’d definitely buy ’em. We could work out the prices we’d charge later, but for now, we were all set.

If you think about it, though, these Resurrection Bracelets are just Ramiris’s power in a handy physical form. All it did was put you back at the Dungeon’s entrance in the state you entered it in, assuming you died within the labyrinth. I think we’d better carefully explain to customers that it wouldn’t revive you just anywhere in the world. Some people out there, you know, it’s in one ear and out the other. If they die outside somewhere because they assumed the wrong thing, that’s their problem—but I’d still feel bad for them, so I ought to make sure I get the message across.

So the basic framework of the Dungeon was complete. Not bad for a single week’s work. I asked Raphael out of curiosity if it could make something like this for me, but:

Report. The subject Ramiris’s intrinsic skill Mazecraft cannot be replicated.

It sure didn’t take its time providing that answer. No, only Ramiris could do this, and really, I ought to thank her for camping out on my doorstep.

“Great job, Ramiris. Now we can finally move on to part two of the plan.”

She flitted her wings as she replied, “Hee-hee! Of course! I’m a hard worker when I wanna be, y’know!”

I turned to Veldora. “Well, sorry this took so long, but I think it’s time for you to let your aura out.”

“Ahhh, the time has come, has it? Kwah-ha-ha-ha! I am ready!”

Yes, the moment was here.

The Dungeon had ducts and stairways connecting all one hundred floors to one another. How did they keep things ventilated all the way to the bottom? With magic—and that’s the best answer you can get from me. Maybe we didn’t need those ducts at all, but they were there to ensure magicules would make their way to each floor. And that rush of magicules would happen once Veldora came to that central chamber in Floor 100, assumed his original form, and cut loose.

“All right. Here I go. Hraaahhhh!!”

I didn’t need the theatrical shouting, but I suppose he felt better that way.

Instantly, a spectacularly evil aura engulfed Ramiris and me. I had enclosed us in an Absolute Defense barrier, just in case, but for a moment, it felt like a bomb went off in front of us.

“Phew… Sh-sheesh, that was dangerous,” a shaky Ramiris said. “If you didn’t protect me, I might’ve been blown right outta here…”

Yeah, that was stronger than I thought. The shock wave was packed with an intense concentration of magicules, easily enough to kill a normal person.

“Kwaaaaahhhh-ha-ha-ha! Make way for Veldora!!”

The boss chamber—er, sorry, Veldora’s underground lair—was pretty large, but with the Storm Dragon back to his normal size, it actually seemed a tad cramped. I hadn’t seen him in dragon form in a while, and the sight was just as stately and magnificent as I recalled.

Seriously, if he would just keep his mouth shut, he’d be so majestic.

“Ahhh, such a relief! But oooh, what an onrush that was. If I did that outdoors, there might have been a little trouble!”

He made it sound so casual, but that scenario would’ve been a disaster. And if it was such a “relief,” why were there still magicules coursing out of him?

“W-wow, Master… I didn’t think you’d wreck the labyrinth itself…”

Ramiris was right. The explosion had caved in the walls a bit; the internal pressures had been too much to withstand. And this wasn’t even him attacking!

“Guess you really were holding in a lot, weren’t you? Can you maybe, you know, loosen the valve on it a bit now and then, so it doesn’t come to that again?”

That was just the magicules mixed in with the aura blast, after all, and they came in dense. Veldora’s total energy count must’ve been off the charts. No wonder releasing it was so dicey. Definitely gotta vent a bit more often than that from now on.

Then I was struck with a brilliant idea. Why don’t we build another room in Floor 100 to serve as storage? We could put in the iron ore and so on that we get from the mines, then infuse it with magicules to transform it into magisteel ore in a flash. That stuff’s worth its weight in gold, far more in demand than regular metal ore, and it could become a huge resource for us.



“Ramiris, can you make another room connecting to this chamber?”

“Sure! No problem!”

She was already hopping to it. Next time I stop by, I’ll bring in some of the metal ore we have in storage around town.

As I schemed internally, the magicules gradually began to distribute themselves around the Dungeon, just as planned. Most floors still didn’t have walls or internal structures, so there was nothing stopping them from diffusing into every corner of the labyrinth. The magicule count on Floor 50, even, still surpassed what you saw in the deepest part of the Sealed Cave.

Now we’d just have to wait for monsters to start appearing. At this rate, I could expect some real juggernauts.

Veldora spent the rest of the day releasing his magic and chilling dragon-style in his lair, and the next day, I brought Beretta and Treyni with me.

“Ah, Rimuru,” he purred to me, “last night was the most enjoyable one for me in ages.”

“Oh? Good. Keep releasing as much as you want from now on, okay? No holding back. Just never do it outside of here, okay?”

“Kwah-ha-ha-ha! Oh, I understand.”

Did he? I wasn’t sure, but I had to take him at his word.

Discussing matters like this would be awkward, so I had him go into human form for a moment as I explained the current situation to Beretta and Treyni. I wanted to get right to work, but before that, I needed to make one final check with Beretta.

“Beretta, you swore to Guy that you’d serve Ramiris, correct? You still feel the same way now?”

He gave me a surprised look. I wondered if, under the mask, his expression actually changed a bit.

“…Sir Rimuru, I apologize if this is rude, but as I stated before, I wish to serve both you and Lady Ramiris.”

“Yeah, I remember, but doesn’t that go against what you promised Guy?”

“…It does. I was alone at the time, and—”

“No, no, don’t worry about it. Ramiris wound up here in town anyway, just like you wanted. She’s gonna help run this labyrinth for a while, and I expect you’ll be happy to help us out, right?”

“Of course!”

“Great, then serving her is pretty much the same as serving me anyway.”

I had been thinking about this ever since I heard about that—the idea of having Beretta just switch his allegiances to Ramiris, if he wanted to. That’s what he promised Guy, likely the strongest of all demon lords, and I don’t think Guy appreciated people who broke their promises to him.

“If that is what you wish,” he briskly replied, “then I will work under Lady Ramiris.”

Wow. Everything turned out the way he wanted, didn’t it? Ah well. I wonder where he learned to scheme like that…

Understood. The answer, of course—

I didn’t need to hear that. Raphael just doesn’t let up, huh? Who does it think it is? Ugh. Maybe Raphael’s the real schemer here.

…

It sounded a bit sulky about that, but I wasn’t about to start caring.

“Excellent. From now on, Beretta, you will work as Ramiris’s servant!”

“And her servant I shall be, but I still remember the great debt I owe to you, Sir Rimuru. If you seek anything from me at any time, please, just say the word.”

“I will. Thanks.”

I then undid the master lock set in Beretta’s core, handing the role over to Ramiris. With that, I could only take credit for creating him from now on. I’d get to give him orders again if something happened to Ramiris, but otherwise, Ramiris was his sole master. That came as a relief. Now Guy had nothing to whine at me about, and I could certainly trust Beretta to keep Ramiris safe.

Besides, this labyrinth was proving useful in many more ways than I originally guessed. On the surface, it was advertising to get adventurers to visit town. Underneath, it helped Veldora let off steam—and generate the massive magicule counts needed to turn metal ore into magisteel ore as a byproduct of the process. The maze would be a great springboard for future research into the nature of magicules, and all in all, this was a much more vital asset for Tempest than I thought at first. Treyni protecting this asset alone made me nervous, so having Beretta around put my mind very much at ease.

As for Ramiris herself, the new master of Beretta… Well, this sudden event was making her weep tears of joy.

“My little Beretta, now my full proper servant…? Now I’m no longer all by my lonesome forever…?”

“Um, Lady Ramiris, you have me as well?”

“Oh! Yes, I do, Treyni! We’re turning into a really big family now!”

She loved the concept, darting around and flying circles around Beretta. Treyni watched on with a warm smile. Being alone must’ve pained that demon lord for a long time, huh? Her “family” was just two people, still, but it must’ve been big enough by her standards?

The sight worried me. I could rely on Treyni well enough, but she spoiled Ramiris way too much. It’d be a tough job, I knew, but I wanted Beretta to be the one “sane” person keeping this crew together. He had his conniving side as well, but I was sure he wouldn’t let me down.

“Beretta, don’t worry about me as much. Take care of Ramiris. Protecting her is job one for you now.”

“Yes sir! I swear it on my life!”

I’ll trust him on that. He’s trustworthy enough. Ramiris and Treyni alone might find it rough going, managing all the monsters we’ll find in this maze—with Beretta around, all problems are solved.

This was perfect. Veldora and I watched as Ramiris carried on with her little happy dance—silly, but charming in a way.

With the master-servant relationship set in stone, Beretta was now immortal inside Ramiris’s labyrinth, no Resurrection Bracelet necessary. The same was true of Treyni. Resurrection Bracelets and return whistles were temporarily infused with Ramiris’s skills, but as her servants, the two had no use for those items at all. They were free to revive themselves at any of the pre-positioned save points available, so they wouldn’t be flung out of the labyrinth after every death. In addition, they could teleport, more or less, between any save point in the Dungeon.

In some ways, it felt like Ramiris’s Mazecraft was more beneficial to her servants than herself. I mean, being able to resurrect yourself as many times as you like… That’s downright scary. She had only two people working for her now, but what if that number started going up? The labyrinth was going to be teeming with monsters shortly; if she had full control over them, they’d be a virtual army for Ramiris. There wouldn’t be any calling her a pip-squeak then—not without serious consequences! And oh man, what if they had the immortal attribute, too? You just couldn’t downplay this threat.

Really, in terms of the defense it offered, Ramiris’s skill couldn’t be more superior. People just never worried about it because, you know, this was Ramiris we’re talking about. No big problem—just a lovable, lonely, tiny pixie. I’m sure she’d never even think of commanding an unstoppable army of invincible monsters or anything. Probably.

Now on to the next step—the labyrinth’s internal structure. With a hundred floors to fill, coming up with a maze for each one seemed daunting, but we’d just have to plug away at it, I suppose. It’s not like the maze itself was the main challenge to visitors.

The first floor of this labyrinth was basically a square, about eight hundred feet to a side—roughly the size of Tokyo Dome, although the Dungeon as a whole gradually got smaller as you went on, forming a sort of inverse pyramid. With Veldora releasing his aura at the bottom, I wanted a structure that got the magicules distributed as efficiently as possible. We were free to adjust the size of any of the floors, however, so we could change anything that didn’t work. It was really an anything-goes kind of thing, beyond the realm of all common sense. Better not think too carefully about it.

Into this labyrinth, we could install the following traps:

• Poison arrows—Venom-tipped missiles that fly in from out of nowhere

• Poison swamps—Vicious-looking and causes damage and status ailments if you fall in

• Rotating floors—Confuse your sense of direction. Mapping is key, people!

• Moving floors—Running by themselves. Pretty scary.

• Bladed wires—Strung at neck level along the path, neatly slicing off your head if you walk through without noticing. Lethal if paired with a moving floor.

• Pitfalls—Causes falling damage and pangs of fear once you see what’s waiting for you down there

• Mimic chests—Think you found a treasure? Sorry, it’s me!

• Exploding chests—Think you found a treasure? Kaboom!!

• Magic rooms—Hello! About time some prey stepped in.

• Closed rooms—Start a fire inside one, and…

• Dark levels—It’s common sense to bring a torch with you, right? If you didn’t, I can sell you one at an exorbitant price.

• Low-ceiling levels—You sure don’t want to run into a monster when you’re crawling on all fours…

• Levels with special ground effects—Whoa! What’s a volcano doing in this labyrinth?!

…and so forth. Combine them, and you could implement pretty much anything imaginable.

“Nice work, Ramiris. You can craft these kinds of traps with your skill?”

“Sure can! As long as it’s within the labyrinth, I can set up nearly anything!”

She was probably right. We were on the hundredth floor right now, but the composition of gases in the air was little different from the surface. Everything she accomplished with this reminded me once again of the power of Mazecraft.

“By the way,” she asked, “what’s this closed room thing? Does that count as a trap, really?”

I gave her an evil grin. “Well, in the air, there’s this gas called oxygen. People, and most living things really, breathe this to bring it inside their bodies, although sometimes you see exceptions like me or Veldora. If there’s very little oxygen in the air, taking a single breath could asphyxiate you—and maybe even kill you instantly. So you gotta be careful in rooms like that. That’s the golden rule.”

Simply sealing off a room is not terribly dangerous, but if you start a campfire or something, you could drain all the oxygen from the space and even replace it with poisonous gases. Best not to leap right into any old room you find in labyrinths or hidden areas, you know? You need to analyze the atmosphere inside first, asking whether there’s poison gas and measuring the oxygen content. That’s Adventuring 101 right there—if you can’t do that, you’re not gonna live for too long. This world runs off magic, so you ought to at least have wind-based magic to circulate the air around.

I explained all this to Ramiris in the easiest terms I could think of, but she didn’t really get it.

“My. Certainly sounds like a mean trap anyway. If it doesn’t affect us, I suppose I don’t have to worry about it. But you… You’re scary sometimes, you know that? You’ve always given me that impression. But you’re still a great guy to have around! I sure never would’ve come up with this…”

Once she knew it couldn’t hurt her, she was all smiles. I appreciated the compliment, although it embarrassed me a little. A fellow gamer back in my old world would be well used to traps like this. But this was real, not some theme-park attraction. It put real lives on the line. I had no idea how many days it’d even take someone to conquer a dungeon like this. Was it possible in two or three? Plus, if the walls and geography were constantly changing, you’d probably opt to storm multiple levels at once to reach the save point at every ten floors. Someone like me—invincible to poisoning, no need to breathe or eat or sleep—could treat it like a footrace, but normal people couldn’t. Even heroic champions needed to rest now and then.

I had to admit, this labyrinth was starting to look pretty forbidding.

“Hey, you think this dungeon might be a touch too difficult?”

“Really?” Veldora replied. “I fail to see the problem.”

“Yeah, Rimuru! This is no big deal at all!”

Ramiris and Veldora were just laughing it off. Maybe I’m fine after all, I said to myself as I switched my focus to maze design.

Several days passed. Ramiris buzzed around, crafting all the traps we’d need, and Beretta and Treyni installed them for us. Veldora and I, meanwhile, brainstormed ideas for the mazes, coming up with several patterns and setting them up so we could easily change them in and out. Things were going smoothly, but once we began considering the ground effects we could add to floors, Ramiris brought up an issue.

“Oh, no, I can’t do that. I don’t have the massive amounts of energy it’d take to keep it all going!”

She quickly threw in the towel, and she had a point, admittedly. Basically, I was picturing floors where you’d potentially run into natural disasters—fires, floors covered in ice, howling winds. I guess volcanoes were asking a bit too much. I was assuming we could do anything with magic without considering the practical issues.

“Yeah… Sorry, Ramiris,” I apologized, throwing in the towel. “I probably went too far—”

“Well, how about we find some Fire or Frost Dragons, tame them, and bring them in here? I could even catch ’em for ya!”

This voice sounded familiar to me. It belonged to someone who shouldn’t have been here. I turned around to find a pair of platinum-pink pigtails framing a face staring right at me. It was Milim.

“Uh… What are you doing here, Milim?”

This was, I remind you, the hundredth floor, the bottom of a freshly designed dungeon. It wasn’t open to the public; there shouldn’t have been any way to get inside. So why was the demon lord Milim grinning at me in here? (Raphael apparently noticed her but didn’t report to me about it because she didn’t pose a threat. I know I gave the initial order, but maybe I should reconsider. Raphael was so inflexible like that. It annoyed me.)

…

But that could wait. I had Milim to deal with.

“Ha-ha!” She met my eyes as she stood proud, sticking out her nonexistent chest. “You looked like you were doing something interesting here, so I stopped on by. You got guts, y’know, trying to shut me out of the fun!”

Her wardrobe was as revealing as always, but it actually covered more of her body than before. Shuna and the goblinas had been designing her outfits, so maybe she’d developed a shred of fashion sense. The massive Dragon Knuckles dully shining on her hands didn’t match too well, though.

Very Milim-like was all I could say. She really was still a kid. But I didn’t mean to keep her away from the action. If she wanted to help out…

“Heh. Milim, huh?” Veldora gave her a glance. “This is noble work, performed by grown-ups; it is far too complex for children like you. This is not a playground. Stay out of our way!”

He shut her down before I could even respond. This was work, more or less, but it sure didn’t feel that way to me.

“My master is right!” shouted Ramiris in a fury. “We’re on work duty right now, so go away and bother someone else for a change!”

Alas, Milim simply snatched the pixie out of the air.

Ramiris needed courage to try that with her, but she also needed strength to back it up. I’m sure not that brave.

“What do you mean, it looks ‘interesting’?” I retorted. “I’m planning a huge festival, remember? And I’m even gonna accommodate the request you gave me in your letter, too.”



“Huh?! You didn’t ignore my letter?!”

“Of course not. I’m inviting demon lords to this event, y’know. I’m not about to piss them off for no reason.”

Milim looked a bit peeved, although contented that I didn’t forget about her request.

“Wait a minute, Rimuru!” Ramiris shouted, livid about this treatment at Milim’s hands. “I’m a demon lord, too, you know! Part of the Octagram with you and Milim!”

“Oh yeah, Ramiris, I didn’t even need to send you an invite, huh? Not after you decided to just up and move here!”

“What? You moved here? Wait a second… Ramiris, are you living with Rimuru?!”

Ramiris began to a panic a bit. “Y-yes! Yes, I moved here, okay? So the invitation doesn’t even matter! I’m not alone any longer, and I’m living with Rimuru and everything, too!”

Great. Panic or not, that statement was bound to be misunderstood.

“Aw, that’s no fair! I wanna live here, too!!”

“Ha-ha! Tough luck! I’ve got a job here, remember? I’m helping out Rimuru! I’m not some overbearing, unwelcome houseguest like you!”

“What? How dare you say that! Why, I oughtta—”

Milim was ready to duke it out right now. Ramiris, despite how hopeless her chances were, refused to stand down. Me? I just watched it unfold.

Fortunately, this was just a verbal spat, limited to the two trading insults with each other. Neither had the vocabulary for this kind of contention, which made it kinda cute in a way. Ramiris occasionally accentuated her disses with a flying kick to Milim, who kept trying to grab her out of the air. It was kind of like a game of tag, and from the side, this almost looked like they were playing at recess. Apparently, they’ve known each other for a while, so perhaps this was just their way of expressing affection.

Their squabbling came to a close within moments, however—Shuna had just arrived with some sweets in tow, took one look at the two demon lords, and shot them a firm rebuke.

“No sweets for anyone who’s bickering!”

That immediately shut them both up.

A couple slices of cake later, and everything was roses. They were awfully chummy now—but more importantly, I needed to grill Milim over why she came here in the first place.

“So, Milim, what are you doing here?” I asked.

“Hee-hee! I told you! You looked like you were up to some fun stuff!”

“Um, is that really it?”

“Uh-huh. But now I’m really glad I came. This cake tastes so good, and I like what you’re doing with this labyrinth. I had no idea Ramiris could make herself so useful!”

“Ha! Sure showed you, huh? I’ve got untold powers at my disposal, you know. You just never noticed!”

You didn’t, either, Ramiris, I thought. But…man, Milim really has a keen nose for underground scheming like this. You literally can’t hide anything from her. She had two ex–demon lords in Carillon and Frey to deal with, but she still had the time and wherewithal to look into stuff all the way over here. Logic just didn’t work with her. She shouldn’t be able to get in here, but maybe it wasn’t unusual at all for Milim. Maybe I shouldn’t have been surprised.

“All right. We have had our dessert— How about we get back to work? You can enjoy this, too, Milim, if you stay out of the way.”

Veldora was being unusually mature and accommodating. Come to think of it, a fight between him and Milim would be a serious problem. Milim was going easy on Ramiris, I could tell, but it’d be a different story with this dragon. If they started to tangle, this whole labyrinth would fall apart. Good thing she was on Veldora’s good side for now.

“No complaint there, Master,” Ramiris said. She and Milim actually got along pretty well, in my eyes—that fight just now must’ve just been some friendly teasing.

“All right!” exclaimed an excited Milim. “I won’t get in your way. Gimme all the work you want!”

I figured I was safe in accepting that offer, but one concern remained—something I needed confirmation for.

“Well, I don’t mind if you join in, but—”

“Great! This looks like so much fun! I wish you called for me back when you were planning it!”

“Right, right. But Milim, what about the people working under you? Did you get permission from Carillon or Frey to come here?”

She was a free spirit, to be sure, but she was also a demon lord—one with two ex–demon lords in her stable and all of Clayman’s old land to rule on top of her own. Even with Carillon and Frey running things in her territory, she had to be a lot busier than before. Did she really have the time to go poking around my domain for fun?

…Huh? Me, you ask? Hey, I got talented people working under me, so I got time for projects like this, yeah. I’d just get in their way if I bothered them. Besides, I had a fully valid motive for this plan—a desire to attract more visitors to Tempest. This wasn’t playtime for me, I promise.

But who cares about me? Milim was the issue right now, and my question had just caught her out.

“Well…y’know. I’m really smart and stuff, so… Not like I ran away from my place ’cause I don’t like studying or anything!”

…Aha. Frey must’ve been researching the state of Milim’s domain and teaching her about it. That must’ve bored her so badly that she fled her own country.

“Wait, no!” she blurted out before I could even answer. “Don’t say it! I’m staying here and helping you, and that’s that!”

Sharp as a tack, that girl. I should really contact Carillon or Frey about this, but…ah, who cares? Not like they’ll get angry at me. I’ll just pretend I didn’t know any better.

But back to what she said earlier…

“All right! That’s your mess to clean up, as far as I’m concerned. You’re the one who’s gonna get yelled at, not me,” I said to her. “But what about those dragons you mentioned? You said you could bring them over and tame them? Is that really possible?”

“Huh?! Y-you really think they’ll be angry at me? Um… Eh, whatever. It’s not an adventure without a little danger, as they always say!”

She was acting like a child willing to do anything to avoid doing their homework. But that was the path she’d decided to take, and I suppose it was my job to watch over her. She may’ve been conflicted over it, but she elected to goof off anyway.

“But dragons, huh? Sure, you can tame ’em. I can do it for ya, if you want!”

Now her mind was entirely on our project, talking about taming dragons like it was catching butterflies with a net. I couldn’t ask for anything better.

“You’ll do that for me? So what types of dragons are there? Will they be anything like Veldora, or…?”

Hey, if she’s offering, then I’m happy to take her up on it. I kept my questions pretty casual as a result, but Milim and Veldora were quick to respond almost in unison.

“Um, Rimuru, those are two completely different things.”

“Very different,” Veldora intoned. “I will not allow you to bunch me in with those lizards the way Luminus does!”

They both had strong objections that then segued into an equally intense explanation of the nitty-gritty of dragonkind.

“The draconic species of this world is nothing more than monsters created from broken-down elements in the body of Veldanava—my elder brother, the Star-King Dragon, and the most powerful of our kind,” Veldora began.

Basically, the difference between regular dragons and Veldora’s kind involved the difference between a material life-form and a spiritual one. Regular dragons, as monsters, have a physical presence in the world. They were called dragons since they resembled the ones of myth and legend, but in essence, they were closer to dinosaurs—big, mean lizards.

There were only four True Dragons in the history of the world, three of which currently existed. The Star-King Dragon Veldanava—Veldora’s older brother and Milim’s father—perished following certain unspecified events, and he hadn’t shown any signs of reviving ever since. Dragons had eternal life, so something really serious must’ve gone down with that guy…but that was outside the scope of this conversation.

Veldanava was the origin of the monsters known as dragons—or to be exact, the Spirit Dragon that he gave Milim as a pet. With what I heard from Elen before, I suppose this Spirit Dragon died and subsequently became a Chaos Dragon, and then the essence of its body spread far and wide. The remnants of this essence were still birthing Lesser Dragons to this day in areas with high magicule concentrations; if you had enough bits from the Spirit Dragon to work with, they could even create Arch Dragons.

The most powerful among these Arch Dragons were called Dragon Lords, which came in four types depending on the element it was affiliated with. These Dragon Lords, who boasted human-level wisdom, had spent several centuries as Arch Dragons before making the evolution, and with their strength, they could tap into some of the powers of the original Spirit Dragon. With their extended life spans, Dragon Lords were a step closer to spiritual life-forms, although they couldn’t resurrect themselves from death the way Veldora and his ilk could.

The Sky Dragon I defeated a while back was one of these Arch Dragons, classified as a Calamity-level threat. A Dragon Lord would be even stronger than that, maybe up to a demon lord’s powers—about as strong as Clayman or a high-level spirit. That level of magicule energy should be more than enough to wrangle the floor effects I wanted for this labyrinth of mine.

“Whoa, whoa, whoa,” Milim interjected. “I may be incredible, but not even I can tame a Dragon Lord!”

Getting an intelligent being like a Dragon Lord to cooperate with us would be pretty fruitless, now that she mentioned it. Maybe we could get one to agree to the job if we asked them nicely, but it wasn’t that worth it to try, I thought.

“Guess not, huh? So what’d you mean when you said you could catch one?”

“Well, there are some Arch Dragons with elemental attributes to ’em, even if they aren’t quite Dragon Lords. If we catch some and let them run free in this dungeon, they’ll eat up the magicules and change the landscape around them, I think.”

I see. Dragons were in the habit of creating nests for themselves, so wherever they decided to set up shop, they’d transform the local environment for us. We had tons of magicules for them to chow down on, so no issues there. Let’s go with Milim’s offer.

“All right. Can you do that for me?”

“You got it! I’ll grab you one from each type, right on the cusp of becoming a Dragon Lord.”

As she explained, dragons derived from that original Spirit Dragon came in just four types. At the top of the pyramid, you had your earth, water, fire, and wind Dragon Lords, with the element-infused dragons below them. They also came in four types, known as Earth Dragons, Frost Dragons, Fire Dragons, and Wind Dragons, respectively. The Sky Dragon I tangled with was a rarer case, a would-be evolution into a Wind Dragon that missed the mark for some reason. There was no sky type to these guys, unlike with elemental spirits, although there were other variations and special types—little things that occasionally made the resulting dragon unique, kind of like with humans.

This sounded like the perfect engine for giving our labyrinth some nature-based spice. Let’s put those dragons in the deeper floors once Milim picks them up. These element-infused dragons, by the way, were stronger than offshoots like the Sky Dragon, maybe a Special A in terms of ranking—not a match for Charybdis, but still packing a big punch. I hadn’t really thought about it, but I supposed one of those rarer offshoots would be a good, even match for six paladins. Upgrade that to an element-infused one, and you’d need a whole Crusader platoon to stand a chance, apparently… But hey, this is my dungeon, and I get to decide what goes in there.

With spirits, the five elemental attributes work like this: Earth is strong against sky, sky against wind, wind against water, water against fire, and fire against earth. This, however, didn’t apply to dragons. Battle experience was more important than elemental attributes—in essence, older dragons were stronger than younger ones.

As a result, I decided to order the elemental floors like so:

Floor 99: Fiery Hellscape

The final challenge, encased in raging flames. Fire-resistant equipment is a must. What could be waiting beyond…?!

Floor 98: Icy Grave

Keep moving or die instantly. Will your cold-resistant equipment be able to save you from this?

Floor 97: Electric Skies

Lightning rains down from above. Only luck can decide whether you’ll survive or get singed!

Floor 96: Raging Earth

A punishing quake sorely tests anyone who makes it this far down. Behold the blind rage of the dragon!

These four element-themed floors would serve as the last challenge before the final boss, Veldora himself. It was perfect. I saw absolutely no way anyone could beat it.

“Not bad, Rimuru!”

“Heh-heh-heh… Placing those half-breeds ahead of me, eh? I imagine you’re trying to put adventurers off their guard with those also-rans before encountering my full might!”

“Aw, why does Veldora get the coolest part? You oughtta put me in as that final boss thing from time to time!”

All three seemed to like the concept. Good to see—but we still needed to get those dragons worked out for it. Flattering Milim ought to ensure she’ll get the job done.

“You’ve already got a vital role in this, Milim. If it wasn’t for you, this final set of traps never would’ve existed.”

“!”

“He’s right, Milim!” exclaimed Ramiris, probably picking up on my intention. “I really hope you can get some strong, mean-looking dragons for us!”

“No problem, guys!”

She looked motivated enough. That was good. If I had the dragons, I had the traps I wanted—and the way Milim described it, the dragons would do all the interior decoration work for me.

Not long after, Milim set off to capture the dragons, the latest members of Ramiris’s rapidly expanding band of underlings.

A few days after Milim’s sudden visit, I had the traps set up across all the floors. The only thing left to do was wait for Milim to come back with those dragons.

“Man. Beretta and Treyni, you guys did a hell of a job.”

“Oh, no,” Beretta said, taking a step back and being modest as usual. “This is all for you and Lady Ramiris.”

“Exactly,” said a beaming Treyni. “It is a joy to work for the sake of my master.”

Ramiris herself was sitting on Treyni’s shoulder, and Treyni looked ready to carry out nearly any order she gave her.

That wrapped up the bulk of the work—

“By the way, Sir Rimuru, I still have these with me…”

—but then Beretta took out a Unique-class weapon and armor set.

“Those?”

“I received them from a golem in the service of Clayman. I was unable to give them to you earlier, but I thought, perhaps, they would make good loot for a treasure chest or two…”

Oh, right. Clayman’s greatest masterpiece, or whatever it was? Viola, I think was the name. Beretta stripped all the weapons from it, and he meant to present them to me, but I turned them down. He wanted to pay me off with that stuff so they could move here, after all, and I wasn’t up for that.

“Weren’t you going to offer that stuff to Ramiris?”

“Ha-ha!” Ramiris said, butting in. “There’s no way I could use it right, and I don’t really care about it anyway. I think it’s a pretty fancy piece of weaponry, but that’s about it—not much else you can do with it. So I talked to Beretta to see if we could make better use of it!”

“Are you sure about this? Because it’d be worth a lot if you sold it.”

“It’s fine, it’s fine! All part of my job! And I’m gonna make a ton of money before long, so why quibble over the little stuff? Besides, we finally have somewhere to live!”

So the weapon and armor were mine—and thus, I decided to put them to work for me.

It was time to put the treasure chests in place and see how the labyrinth was shaping up.

From Floor 1 on down, we checked our work. That topmost floor was kind of a demo of things to come. I made it so even beginners could proceed without too much hassle; the chamber and its hallways were broad, wide, and hard to get lost in.

Still, eight hundred feet to a side was big. I worried that people would spend all afternoon mapping out every nook and cranny, only to be rewarded with nothing. That might cause people to start dissing the maze, but with all the weak monsters prowling around, I figured there’d be enough excitement for everyone—the magic crystals and other useful stuff they dropped would make it worth novice adventurers’ time.

I intended to buy this loot from those adventurers. There wasn’t a Free Guild post in Tempest, so the nearest one would be Blumund’s. Going all the way there could be a tall order for some people, so I thought we could function as a pseudo-Guild, accepting their loot for discount prices and pocketing the difference to cover expenses. Or could I talk with Yuuki about building an official Guild post here? Maybe, but until that came up, we’d kind of function as them with this labyrinth.

This was the basic scheme of things up to Floor 5; the mazes gradually got trickier, but otherwise, no difference. Floor 6, though, is where things got tough. The traps would make their debut here, although nothing truly vicious up to Floor 9, so nobody would die from them (probably). A seasoned adventurer would cruise past them. If I made things too hard too fast, it’d discourage repeat traffic, and that was out of the question. I wanted to be kind with the first nine floors’ design.

That all changed with Floor 10. Here, I placed a single monster who was, shall we say, kind of strong. In other words, this was a boss room. Defeat it, and a door would open to the floors below.

“What kind of monster did you go with, Rimuru?” asked Ramiris.

“I’ll decide on that once I see how these guys are spawning, but… We haven’t seen any so far, have we?”

No, we had yet to encounter a single monster, all the way down to Floor 10. Veldora released his aura a week and a half ago, but it still hadn’t resulted in any baddies.

Understood. Even with his aura hidden, monsters can still detect the presence of the subject Veldora. Few would want to approach him.

Oh. I see.

“I guess monsters born from the magicules you released can pick up on his presence. They’re too scared to go near him.”

“What?! So that’s why!” said Veldora, convinced. “No wonder I never saw many in my presence inside the cave I was sealed in.”

I think it’s more like the weaker monsters literally couldn’t take the heat from him. But regardless:

“Well, I’ll figure something out. One way or another, I want just a kinda strong monster in here, ranked B or thereabouts.”

“Hmm… All right,” said Ramiris. “I don’t want any unintelligent beings among my lackeys, but if you find the right monster, bring it in here and put this collar on it!”

I accepted the collar, which apparently let the wearer be resurrected even if they hadn’t forged a formal pact with Ramiris. That helped a lot. It meant I didn’t have to find a replacement every time someone killed the guy.

“Wow, convenient. That’ll save us a lot of trouble.”

“Right? Remember, in this labyrinth, what I say goes!”

It probably did, too. Her skill let her change the effects of pretty much any item in here. I realized once again how much of a pity it was that I couldn’t learn it for myself.

That took care of the boss issue. The boss room formed the entirety of Floor 10, making it perfectly safe after the battle was over. Beyond the room lay a save point and a simple stairway down. And let’s not forget about the treasure chest! The one in the boss room had no trap installed, but I did carefully adjust the rates at which you’d find certain weapons or armor inside. In subsequent floors, however, there’d be both hidden chambers and chest traps.

Mimics would debut in Floor 20 and below—pretty diabolical, but that’s the thrill of a labyrinth like this. Being able to experience something like this in real life was something I thought I deserved praise for.

But it wasn’t all threatening stuff. With abundant magicules all over the labyrinth, the swords and lances found inside could start to get a bit magical themselves. Getting your hands on stuff like that was worth risking your neck a little, I thought. With a Resurrection Bracelet, nobody was going to die, so I figured revving up the difficulty would make it more fun and exciting. I couldn’t wait to see how the adventurers would react to all this.

Finally, we wrapped up our inspection of the first ten floors. “Well, now what? Should we set up someplace on this floor where you can sell the stuff you found or put it in storage for safekeeping?”

“Oh? Do we really need that? Because then we wouldn’t be able to sell any return whistles.”

Ah. Right. Ramiris actually had a great point. She was always sharp with issues related to money, I guess.

“True. Not much point putting ones up in floors with save points. How about safe zones starting in the middle dungeons, say one every five levels?”

“Oooh, that could work!”

We could offer storage for items found, sell healing potions at marked-up prices, and offer some simple fare to eat. The labyrinth could have doors at regular levels that connected to a single zone, so we wouldn’t need to construct separate zones all across the maze. It wouldn’t be that much work to implement. Would more people opt to go outside when they needed a break, though? It’d depend, I suppose. Return whistles were meant as insurance, after all, so maybe we could price them on the higher side. I decided to reconsider that once this labyrinth made its debut.

As we chatted about this or that labyrinth-related issue, we continued to inspect each floor—and as we checked out all the little details, the labyrinth slowly approached completion.

Finally, we were done with the hundredth floor, generally satisfied with ourselves. To be frank, the complete labyrinth ventured far beyond mere viciousness.

…Based on the skills of the average adventurer, low-level monsters and a labyrinth would provide enough of a difficulty level. Adding crafty traps and a legion of upper-level monsters, the term vicious seems rather tepid a description.

Sorry? I didn’t hear that. Raphael sounded a bit exasperated with me, but I’m sure, of course, that I was just imagining it.

I’d learn not much later that I definitely wasn’t imagining it. Between working out monster placement and boss setups, I suddenly realized that the labyrinth was now full of monsters. Tons of them.

“Wh-what in the…?!”

Well, too late now. This difficulty-balancing work wound up biting me in the ass, which I suppose I deserved. But no worries. It’s important to leave little mistakes like this behind you.

There was still plenty left to do, but I decided to leave the rest to Veldora and Ramiris, who were now even further motivated. Milim was kind enough to fetch those dragons she offered to bring in, and we released them on the appropriate floors, adjusting the atmospheric magicule count as needed. The dragons helped cull the excessive numbers of monsters being generated, too. We still only had our bosses worked out down to Floor 30, but that would do for now.

The coliseum up top was still under construction, but the framework was getting completed at speeds I couldn’t believe. It should be done in time for the Founder’s Festival, once the snow thawed. The labyrinth below, meanwhile, was turning into a more splendid attraction than I had guessed. You needed to buy a Resurrection Bracelet to enter, but once you got one, I was sure you’d be addicted. Hopefully it would remain one of our city’s main draws as long as I hoped.

There were still a lot of ideas left to implement, but for now, this was fine. I flashed an evil grin at the others, sharing a nod with them. We had our labyrinth all prepped and ready.

Before long, our town started to see some new faces. The snow was melting away, and once it did, we began to see visitors from all over traveling to the Forest of Jura.

The Founder’s Festival was near.