

CHAPTER 2

LIVELY DAYS

A few days after our previous meeting, a party finally made it past Floor 30.

This was Masayuki’s team, and just as he had worked out with Mjöllmile, they were making their way down the Dungeon at a steady clip. It was fixed, I’ll freely admit that, but what the general public didn’t know wouldn’t hurt them. Besides, with his Chosen One skill, Masayuki can make some pretty big screwups and still look squeaky-clean to everyone around him. I couldn’t ask for a better advertising partner.

So we held a big announcement inside the labyrinth that the orc lord guarding Floor 30, as well as his five henchmen, had been slain. The results were electrifying. Cheers erupted from the inns and taverns people gathered at.

“Maaaa-sa-yuuu-ki! Maaaa-sa-yuuu-ki!!”

You could hear it all across town, and Masayuki reacted to the chants with a casual smile. His expression was stiff, to say the least, but to the crowds, it must’ve looked like a radiant smile. Once again, Masayuki’s fame and popularity had risen to the stars. Some shops even held “Masayuki the Hero Thirty-Floor Commemoration” sales. With all the excitement—and all the merchants whose eyes sparkled at the potential profits—things were, to say the least, lively.

Now we were holding another meeting in the conference room we had built in the labyrinth.

“Ah, the populace loves you more than ever, don’t they, Hero?”

“Rimuru, can you not pick on me, please? It’s hard!”

I thought my choice of greeting would be a fun way to break the ice, but he really did seem overwhelmed.

“Truly an excellent performance! Magnificent! Stirring!”

Mjöllmile couldn’t help but join in. He really meant it, too, making Masayuki snicker a little. Now I see. If this is how everyone reacted to him, I could understand how that would get tiring.

“I really didn’t do much of anything, though.”

“Oh, there you go again! You’re such a modest champion, Sir Masayuki.”

I doubted Masayuki was being modest at all. An ogre lord ranks a B-plus as a monster, and its henchmen would all be B level, too. One B-ranked monster could threaten the existence of a small village, and here we had a small group of such monsters, so beating Floor 30 requires serious talent…but Masayuki’s team emerged from that battle without any major issues.

The Mithril Armor I gave Jinrai did a lot to boost his defense, so the party’s strategy involved keeping the monsters’ attention squarely on him—an effective one, as it turned out. The rest of the party was pretty decent, too, focusing their attacks to unlock some pretty powerful magic. Bernie’s elemental magic, Jiwu’s spirit magic, and Masayuki’s Chosen One–based buff effect all worked together to raise their abilities to their peaks.

Masayuki said he didn’t do anything, but—really—he played a huge role just standing there.

“Still… Not that it’s for me to say, but we couldn’t ask for much better advertising. Having Rare equipment from a distinct series show up in the chests is quite attractive to a lot of people.”

“Right? I came up with that one.”

Equipment that unlocked special effects if you completed the whole set—that was an idea I discussed with Kurobe, and the memory of that discussion inspired him to make a test set, the so-called Ogre Series. The gold box inside Floor 30’s boss room awards you with one random item from that set, which was really a diabolical way of going about it.

There were five weapons—an ax, sword, bow, saber, and knife—and five pieces of armor—the helm, breastplate, gauntlets, gaiters, and boots. (No shield included.) What you got was completely down to luck—you were guaranteed an Ogre Series item, but you didn’t even know whether you’d get a weapon or a piece of armor.

Plus, keep in mind, there was no guarantee you’d see a series piece drop. The gold box the boss guarded was programmed to drop Rare items 2 percent of the time. Even if you beat the ogre lord once an hour, that box would still only contain twenty-four items a day—you’d be lucky to see a Rare drop every other day, at that rate.

It’s the perfect drop rate, in fact, to encourage the gambler side of people’s psyches. It’s human nature to want to collect ’em all; if you obtained a piece you already had, you could always trade or sell it. Now people had yet another reason to tackle the labyrinth.

“And we picked up the Ogre Greaves.”

“Yeah, and if you can find all five armor pieces, it’ll grant you Magic Interference, which is a powerful Anti-Magic skill. Real effective against the boss at Floor 40, hint, hint.”

It was the same effect boasted by the Scale Shield I gifted Kabal a while back. That shield gave you the effect by itself, but with the Ogre Series, you needed the whole armor set to unlock it. That’s the difference between a Unique piece of equipment and a Rare one. And to be honest, the Ogre Series was made from the magisteel we salvaged from the by-products of processing the shield-like scales of Charybdis. This meant it was already a powerful magic blocker, effective against the tempest serpent’s Poisonous Breath, and I hoped people were excited about collecting them.

“Oh, really?”

“Uh-huh. So the tactic I’m hoping people adopt going forward is to collect the whole set before taking on the next boss.”

With Masayuki’s team conquering Floor 30, we had now formally announced the Ogre Series. It wouldn’t be long before the information spread worldwide, and I’m sure it’d energize even more would-be challengers to try their own hand at the labyrinth.

Parties were allowed to be up to ten people in the Dungeon. No matter how strong a group of monsters you found in there, if you had a party of adventurers ranked B or higher, there was nothing they had zero chance defeating. It’d be a trial-and-error process ahead for them, I’m sure, but if they think of it as training for group battles against monsters, I think it’d be good experience for them. I definitely want them to build up their equipment for the floors beyond, besides.

Everything was going to plan. We didn’t miss a thing.

“That’s your idea, huh…? So you think we need to complete the series?”

“Well, that’s a good question. The Mithril Armor I gave Jinrai is a Rare piece as well. It’s got no special traits, but it provides better defense than the Ogre Breastplate. You could just keep pushing and beat the tempest serpent that way, maybe.”

The serpent was a tough foe, but there’d be only one of it. Tackle it with a party, and your strategy would probably involve keeping a decoy healed while the rest of the gang fought. That would be Jinrai with this group, and I figured he’d be up to the task.

“All right. In that case, we’ll keep going down.”

“Gotcha. Good luck, okay? Because you’re the best pitchman we got!”

“Jinrai and the others are a lot more enthusiastic about this than I am, but yeah. I think having monsters drop items is kinda adding to the fun, too. It’s always exciting to discover a chest, but…”

The simple idea of having monsters drop items turned out to be absolutely the correct thing to do. Some monsters—skeletons, for example—didn’t have any materials to harvest, and their magic crystals could often be low quality and worth pocket change. The stronger an explorer you were, the more of a pain in the ass monsters like that became to deal with, but now things had changed. The creatures that parties used to reluctantly mow down were now getting actively hunted again.

With monster materials circulating more than ever in the marketplace, I couldn’t ask for better results.

Giving labyrinth-generated monsters items was actually pretty simple. The dryads, led by Treyni, helped us out with that, taking newly born monsters and having them swallow the items. That sounded tricky, given that monsters may appear anywhere in the labyrinth and you can’t track them all. In fact, though, there was no need to.

The flow of magicules in each floor was supplied with special pipes. These pipes were set up to run through certain rooms from Floor 5 downward, rooms that subsequently would have lots of monsters born in them. Monster lairs, you could call them. To manage the labyrinth, Treyni and the dryads would place the items I specified in each of these rooms; the monsters would swallow them up, and then the dryads released them into the maze at large.

Tracking all the monsters generated in the labyrinth was a pain, but one greatly reduced by only having to watch over the monster lairs on each floor. Monsters who self-generated in the regular corridors wouldn’t carry any items, but that wasn’t a problem—we didn’t need every single monster to drop something anyway.

Thus, we had a reasonably efficient way to enable monsters to carry items around on each floor. I originally envisioned the monster lairs as a kind of trap, but now they were more like administrative pens. Of course, you might see a hapless party tiptoe into these rooms right when they were packed to the rafters with monsters…but hey, it adds to the tension! It’s all part of the charm for everyone—you never know what you may find around the corner.

“And the appraisers are working around the clock! We’re charging one silver per appraisal, but there’s pretty much a line at all times.”

From slain monsters, you may find flasks of fruit juice or milk, magically treated to keep for several days, plus a few Low Potions mixed in. Some of these drinks might go bad after a while, of course, so an appraisal was a must. We also threw in some of the failed efforts from Kurobe’s apprentices, junk that we then bought off them for cheap. This might sound like we were taking a loss on them, but they’re kind of like crane-game prizes—reinvesting our profits in order to attract more customers.

And speaking of prizes, we had to have some jackpots, of course. Occasionally, we’d mix in a masterpiece from Kurobe’s assistants. This, of course, generated a ton of buzz, with people going around town showing off the Special sword or whatever that they picked up inside the labyrinth. It really added that addictive touch we were hoping for; now, like ants to a hill of sugar, we were seeing people come back again and again.

So we had booty in the treasure chests, monetary rewards for beating every tenth floor, and plunder from the monsters themselves. A lot to attract repeat business with.

Thus, it was fair to say that the labyrinth was going well. It was perhaps inevitable that more people were showing up in the town.

“And Floor 95 is just packed!” effused Ramiris, the others nodding their agreement.

Yes, the new inn on Floor 95 was already a big success. Each floor had a conspicuous room before the stairway containing a rather unnatural-looking door reading INN on it. There was a bell next to each one; explorers rang it to call for a labyrinth manager who’d explain what lay beyond the door and how they could take advantage of it.

One silver coin was required to open it, not much less than admission to the labyrinth, but to regulars, that wasn’t going to be a big outlay. The majority of people who heard the manager’s spiel wound up paying, after all. And there was a good reason for that—the ever-changing labyrinth structure.

Thanks to all the corridors and such changing every two or three days, it was much trickier to conquer a floor than its size suggested. Few people could advance through a huge map without getting lost, and we had measures in place to prevent elementalists from relying on Elemental Communication too much. It was now a challenge to find the shortest route through a floor, and as a result, you really couldn’t reach the save point at every tenth floor in a single day. Thus, until now, parties were forced to camp out in the corridors.

“I’ve never slept in an open corridor before like that, actually.”

“Oh?” I turned to Masayuki. “How was it? Seems pretty fun.”

“Hah! Maybe for you, Rimuru, but if you’re sleeping on cold, hard stone, you’re gonna get terribly sore and maybe bruised up. The other two guys besides Bernie and me seemed pretty used to it, but…”

Not even Jiwu, a woman, objected to roughing it like that. But to Masayuki, sleeping in shifts to keep a lookout for monster attacks was nothing short of hell.

“Ah. Sounds rough.”

“Can you give me some actual pity, please? Because I never wanna do that again, that’s for sure.”

I suppose it would be an ordeal for most modern-day kids, whether you were an otherworlder or not. You could secure a treasure-chest chamber or some such and set up camp there, of course. But you’d still need someone keeping watch, since some monsters constantly wandered the hallways without rest. In those circumstances, providing a safe place to rest was unexpectedly popular.

There was also the question of what to do with the equipment you found inside. Discarding it would be a waste, since—as we planned it—there may just be a rare find among things that might seem like junk at first. But between your sleeping kit, a few days’ worth of food, and backup equipment, you had only so much room to spare.

When space is of the essence, food is often the first thing to go. If you ran out of stores, you’d have little choice but to retreat, although some monsters left behind edible goods when defeated. Water could be procured with magic, so a lot of people made do with the barest minimum of sustenance. If you were at the end of your rope, you could always die and get transported back with your Resurrection Bracelet—that cost you your items, but it beat struggling with starvation.

Along those lines, people were starting to reconsider the merits of the return whistles. Since they let you return to the surface with all your items, more and more people were starting to purchase them.

Thus, a consequence of the labyrinth’s new emphasis on dropped items was that people tended to carry less food around than before. So what if we had an inn available down there? If you’re well enough to reach a stairway, the inn was there for you, obviating the need for food or a sleep sack and making your pack a lot lighter.

Yes, if an inn were available, a lot of people would naturally want to take advantage. They provided safe rooms for three silver coins, the same as labyrinth admission; between that and the access fee, you had to pay double or triple the price of a regular inn to stay there, but at least you got a meal with it.

Those three coins gave you access to a building divided by gender, filled with capsule hotel-like rooms just large enough for a bed and little else. I’m not going to talk this place up too much—your money didn’t get you luxury. I was having some treants run it for us, and the work was carried out by new staff as an on-the-job education program. Cleaning, laundry, cooking, customer service—our hires would get to practice all of that here, and if they make the grade, they’ll be able to find work up on the surface.

Despite the rustic conditions, the inn still found its clientele. Your money bought you safety in the labyrinth, after all, and nobody was about to complain about that. We also provided a few extra services for additional fees. Clothes laundering: three silver. Access to a large open bath: three silver. Equipment cleaning and basic repairs: five silver. That sort of thing.

These services were all kind of popular, actually. Extended rounds of fighting in the labyrinth could make you a bloody, sweaty mess, after all. The bath was also a big hit, which I figure is because women might be more sensitive to people stinking up the place. Either way, it was all at exorbitant prices compared to the surface, so our profit margins were through the roof.

You were allowed to take a break in this space without getting a room, speaking of which. Simply having access to a bathroom you wouldn’t get ambushed in was a huge attraction. Masayuki suggested I look into that, and when I did, I found that was, well, a pressing concern for everyone. There were no flush toilets in the labyrinth, and since you were on the razor’s edge between life and death for much of your journey, you often had to resign yourself to some wet trousers, or worse.

The labyrinth itself never needed cleaning, though. The generated monsters cleaned everything up for us—in particular, the slimes in the labyrinth ate anything. Human waste, the remains of dead monsters, you name it. Monsters of that rank popped right back into existence after an adventurer killed them, so hygiene wasn’t a concern, at least. Plus, every time the labyrinth layout changed, Ramiris cleared out any useless garbage strewn around, ensuring the Dungeon remained in remarkably spotless condition.

Of course, this didn’t mean people were comfortable with dropping trou and doing their business in the middle of a monster-laden hallway. The labyrinth management didn’t want their maze to look like an open sewer, and our challengers weren’t great fans of that, either. If they got attacked by monsters in the midst of a bathroom break, it’d probably make them want to cry—yelling “Time out!” didn’t work against monsters. You’d need someone keeping watch for you, for number one as well as number two, and I know I’m speaking for at least some of you when I say that going to the bathroom in an open hallway while encircled by your friends is the perfect formula for performance anxiety.

Maybe a quick whiz would work—well, maybe not. If a monster caught you with your fly down and you had to fight like that… Or, even worse, you put it back in and had to piss your pants during the battle—ugh. I don’t even want to imagine it. You’d probably just want to march right back home, but then you’d have to go tromping around the city of Rimuru with a huge urine stain on your pants, like you lost a bet or something.

A man might be able to cope with this; I can hardly imagine how a woman would handle it. For some, death might be better than the humiliation. And considering that lots of adventuring parties were mixed gender, toilet-related practicalities were another incentive for people to use our inn.

By the way, some people tried to solve this problem with magic. Certain “household magic” spells like Clean Wash and Health Management can help you maintain normal bodily functions inside the labyrinth. Health Management, in particular, allows you to manage the times at which your body needs to eliminate. There were certain limits, of course, but you could use that spell to hold it in for around three days without issue. Unless you were the type of maniac who didn’t care if he sprayed his waste all over during battle, this was a must-have spell for adventuring.

Still, Health Management didn’t work forever. If you were gonna wander around the maze for extended periods of time, relying strictly on magic was risky. Thus, it came to pass that even sorcerers and the like saw fit to call upon the inn’s services.

So labyrinth management was all systems go for now. Mjöllmile couldn’t have looked more pleased with himself.

“It’s going along perfectly well,” he said. “We’re seeing a rising trend in our profits. Even subtracting the expenses incurred with the item drops we’re distributing, I’m beyond satisfied with our margins—I’m looking at around ten percent right now, from our original investment. My goal is twenty percent, and if we can attract more customers, I think we can make that happen.”

Hmm. So about what we figured, overall. And since I was having him report the items we provide at their sale prices instead of our own costs, we were actually making more profit. That and we weren’t paying a salary to the townspeople involved with the work, so all of that was going straight into our coffers.

“It seems like we could start investing more into it.”

“If we do, it’ll be a while longer before we see government-scale profits, but I think we could get in the black before an extended amount of time.”

If profit was all I cared about, we could just sell what we created at high prices. But as a nation, that wasn’t enough to survive. There were people in town involved in many kinds of work; we needed to make sure it was divided up appropriately, so they could do their best at their jobs. That’s why I thought it was important to set up an environment where everyone’s satisfied with their work. As the ruler of this nation, it was job one for me to provide work—or really, a purpose in life—for everyone who lived in it.

“Yeah, but I feel bad about them working for free…”

“Well,” Mjöllmile said with a grin, “if you factored the average salary in Blumund into our figures, we have more than enough of a budget to pay that to our employees. Whether they’ll accept it is another question…”

To a merchant like him, free labor must have been unthinkable. I could understand that. You didn’t exactly need to ponder the subject deeply to see the problem. We were providing food, clothing, and shelter, and everyone seemed happy enough with that…but it didn’t seem like a good work environment at all like this. I did want to compensate them all somehow, in time, but Raphael was doing a perfect job of managing them, so nobody had lodged any complaints about their treatment. Nonetheless, I decided I’d better bring this up with Rigurd and my other officials shortly.

But even as my subjects happily worked for nothing, one of my other acquaintances was much more faithful to her own greed.

“Um, by the way, is my payment gonna be all right?”

Ramiris nervously gulped as she asked the question. All this talk must’ve made her think I was gonna stiff her. She didn’t have to worry; I keep my promises. So I signaled to Mjöllmile, who then nodded with a smile of his own.

“You have every reason to expect it,” he proclaimed, trying to sound as important as possible. “I think we can pay you quite a figure, in fact!”

Ramiris gave that a satisfied grin. “This is it!” she exclaimed.

“Huh? What is?”

“My era—the era of Ramiris has finally arrived!”

Had it? Because I wasn’t so sure. But Treyni, bringing some tea in, warmly smiled at Ramiris as she guffawed at this. I always thought Treyni was overprotective of her—love can be smothering like that—but I wasn’t about to get involved in their affairs.

“Do I receive any of this payment?”

Oh, now Veldora’s interested in money? That’s the last thing I need…but we do owe him one. I gave another nod to Mjöllmile.

“Yes, of course, we have a payment prepared for you as well. Would you be satisfied with the same amount Lady Ramiris is set to receive?”

Mjöllmile and I had worked this out in advance. Veldora, after all, was acting as the “master” of this labyrinth—not that he had to do anything, really, but it was his magicules that kept the Dungeon environment running. His converting magic ore to magisteel for us, in and of itself, generated huge profits for Tempest. I didn’t think it right to try to cheat him.

“Ah! Wonderful! I knew I could count on you, Rimuru. I see that I’ll always be safe in your hands.”

“Don’t go wasting it, you two.”

“Of—of course not!”

“Y-yeah, of course not! I know how to save money!”

Knowing how, Ramiris, doesn’t mean much if you don’t do it. But they both looked pretty gratified, so I opted not to rain on their parade.

“Ha-ha-ha! Of course, they’re free to squander at least a little of it. Money, after all, is something you save because you know how much fun it is to use!”

“Ooh, yes, yes!” agreed Ramiris. “That’s such an astute insight, Mjöllmile!”

Mollie, if you coddle Ramiris like that, she’s gonna run with it. Treyni is a great example of how not to handle her.

“I suppose so, yes. And I have experience working at that takoyaki stand. Now I see what a noble thing work is, as well as how vital money can be. Rimuru, you worry about me far too much!”

You’re one to talk. I was the one who arranged that whole damn takoyaki stand for you, and Mjöllmile pulled more than a few strings to make it happen. All you did was grill up the damn things!

I had to mentally restrain myself from saying all that. There’s no better teacher than experience, I suppose. Let ’em do what they want. Even if it blows up in their faces, as long as they learn something from it, we’re good.

“So, Mjöllmile, how are things looking outside the labyrinth?” I asked.

I knew things were moving fast around town, but how were things really going? I was curious.

Mjöllmile smirked at me. “Brisk indeed! That’s the only word for it. The festival is long over, but really, we haven’t seen any major drop in our population. We now have a pretty steady clip of merchants going in and out, and I think that’s going to be quite stable for the time being.”

“Would you say the town is starting to function as a stopping point for trade?”

“Precisely. Merchants are starting to come see me so they can begin to do business here. They’re not going through intermediaries all the time, either, so Sir Rigurd has a rather full schedule these days. From Free Guild members to big-name merchants from the Western Nations, they’re all inquiring about opening up shop here.”

Sounds better than I thought, then. The Founder’s Festival was meant to prime the pump, and in terms of attracting people, it was a big success. Now the labyrinth I’d made for fun was building a good rep of its own, winning favor with all our visitors. After that, all we had to do was fine-tune things to keep the money flowing. I wanted people to challenge the labyrinth, earn money, then spend it on our nation’s goods—not just our inns and taverns, but weapons, armor, and other consumables.

I’m sure our merchants from other nations would play a big role in that. The Free Guild purchases monster materials, then deposits the money with us. Foreign merchants would bring us rare and exotic goods, no doubt—and at the end of it all, our town would be livelier than ever. Give it enough time, and people the world over would know just how fine this nation’s goods are. We’ve got a lot of exclusive things to offer—rare foods and liquor; all the cuisine Shuna was developing; the gear from Kurobe’s workshop. Even Kaijin’s apprentices were helping flesh out the selection. That wasn’t even all of it, and the selection was only going to grow.

Word about all this could easily spread by now. Even without advertising, we’d have no problem attracting customers—and at the end of it, people the world over would accept us and see us as necessary. I was sure of it.

What’s more, some of the gear made in Kurobe’s workshop was on sale as “special merchandise” at certain shops. The gear circulating in these shops was doubtlessly going to generate attention—and while different stores dealt in different levels of quality, if you had the money, you could buy it for yourself, although anything from them rated Rare or higher would be available for purchase only on Floor 95.

I’m sure some people might doubt this gear’s capabilities, but that wasn’t a big problem. We’ve got a place right by here, after all, that lets you test out what you bought. We rented it out to people in the labyrinth, even, although not too many people had taken advantage yet. It’d only be a matter of time, either way, before they used that gear and began talking up how good it was.

Little by little, we were building trust in our nation. Trust is more important than profit. I’m not about to go into the red for the sake of trust, but as long as we stayed in the black overall, I’d call that a success. We’re not in this to make money; we’re in it to get our nation accepted.

“Sounds like exactly what we aimed for. Even if Tempest’s a monster nation, if merchants can see profits, they’ll come for us. The labyrinth’s seeing more and more visitors, and I think we can build a relationship with the Western Nations, too.”

Mjöllmile nodded. “Smooth sailing, indeed. And yes, more and more visitors are coming. People know it’s a monster nation run by a demon lord, and they’re still coming. Just as you surmised, I think it’s safe to say that people are trusting us.”

He was in firm agreement. But he’s a funny guy, that Mjöllmile. He said “us” just now. From that, it seems to me that despite being human, he’s fully looking at matters from our perspective. I’m glad for that.

We can’t earn trust overnight. Trust is gained in drops and lost in buckets—that’s the truth. And maybe we’re stimulating people’s greed to bring them here, but there’s no easier thing to connect to trust. If you think that someone can address and satisfy your desires, that’s the same thing as earning their trust. Mjöllmile’s a good example of that; we’re connected by a desire-based trusting relationship.

Do good work and receive just profit from it—that’s really important, I think. And, of course, it’s no fun if that’s a one-way street. You need to look at the other side of the equation and figure out if you can trust them. Right now, we’ve got the perfect environment for training ourselves on that. We’ve got a teacher in Mjöllmile, and I’m gonna study as much as I can under him.

Then I paid Ramiris and Veldora their salaries. They both seemed satisfied with the amount. I told them not to squander it, but have they thought at all about how they’ll use it? The question weighed on my mind as we kept discussing matters.

“Hey, um, do you think we could set up a space for my personal use?”

“Sure,” Ramiris replied to me, “but what for? You wanna do some research, too?”

“No, it’s more about development in my case. I have a few ideas in mind that I want to try building.”

In terms of research, Kurobe was way ahead of me. His workshop was in the southwest part of town, along with the workshops of those apprentices he’d deemed worthy of going independent. That district was seeing weaponsmiths from all over now, hearing the rumors and building their own forges and repair shops to compete.

It was a full-fledged industrial zone by now, and as a result, it was getting hard to keep new discoveries made there a secret. The atmosphere was more convivial among those artisans, amicably sharing in one another’s neat new stuff, so classified project development wasn’t possible. Instead, my order for Kurobe was to develop new weapons and armor that nobody could imitate.

Besides, when conducting research, I didn’t actually need a physical space. I have the good professor Raphael with me. What I did need, though, was a development facility to implement the blueprints in my mind.

“Sure thing! I’ll get it set up today.”

Ramiris was eager to please.

So now the hundredth level on the bottom began with Veldora’s grand hall and continued on to rooms housing a plethora of research facilities. In terms of keeping the space defended (not to mention preventing leaks), I couldn’t ask for someplace safer. In fact, it was impregnable. Let’s use it for really important R&D from now on, then.

“But what are you tryin’ to make down there, Rimuru?” Ramiris asked me.

“It’s a secret.”

“Huh? But I really wanna know! You’re always cranking out all kinds of crazy things, so…”

“Indeed you are,” said Veldora. “There will be no secrets between you and me!”

Oh, great. Who decided that? And I knew full well Ramiris and Veldora were doing this and that behind my back, too. But they were always so persistent with things like this, and I didn’t have the energy to try to deceive them, so I gave them an answer.

“They’re bodies. I’ve been thinking about providing physical vessels for Treyni’s sisters.”

Plus the ones Diablo requested, of course. If I needed a thousand, painstakingly carving them by hand wasn’t gonna happen. I needed a setup that allowed mass production.

“And give me as much space as you can, by the way, okay? I want to try out a few different things.”

“Comin’ right up! Anything for my faithful underlings!”

Ramiris was emphasizing the “underling” part, but she agreed, nonetheless. Heh-heh… Good thing I let her in on part of my plans. Now I’ll have the space to try all sorts of things. Up to now, I didn’t have the time to make the things I came up with; now I could start implementing some of those ideas. The thought made me grin.

I spent the next few days setting up my development equipment and tapping Raphael’s full abilities for the first time in a while and copying all sorts of things within my Stomach. Any tech I wanted to pass on to future generations couldn’t rely on this, of course, but I didn’t intend to share it with anyone anyway, so all inhibitions were out the window.

Then I heard someone calling me from behind the door. Eesh. I was just getting into a groove, too—

Report. You have not communicated with the outside world for several days. There is a possibility that something has happened.

Come to think of it, I had been skipping out on meals, hadn’t I? Raphael’s observation reminded me that maybe I’d been a little too caught up in my own world. Even if nothing was going on at all, it’s natural that Shion or Shuna would get worried. Better make my rounds—now was a good stopping point anyway.

Replying to the voice I heard, I left my research center. As expected, Shuna and Shion were right there.

“Sir Rimuru, are you all right?!”

“I was worried. You didn’t even appear for the meals you enjoy each day, so I thought that something might have happened.”

Ah. So they were concerned for me.

“Sorry. I got a little lost in thought.”

“N-no, not at all! As long as you’re safe…”

“Shion is right. With all the hard work you’ve been doing, of course, nobody will complain if you want to take some more time off.”

Once they saw I was fine, they were all smiles again. Now I felt kind of bad. They really cared a lot for me.

“Well, I’ll make sure to check in at least once a day from now on.”

“That would make me very happy, Sir Rimuru.”

Yeah, better not get too wrapped up in my hobbies. Having someone worried for you is, in itself, a blessing.

As I let the remorse wash over me, Shion suddenly spoke up, as if just recalling something.

“By the way, Sir Mjöllmile has been searching for you since yesterday.”

Huh?

“Then he should’ve called for me.”

“He did, but there was no response… I apologize. We should have been louder.”

“No, uh, sorry I didn’t notice. I’ll set up a doorbell or something next time.”

Shion didn’t seem too perturbed about it; I guess she didn’t think it was too important. But after seeing how Mjöllmile was still hot to see me the next day, she grew a bit more concerned and talked to Shuna about it. Apparently, it was labyrinth business, but Shion didn’t know what kind. Did he figure Shion wouldn’t understand it if he explained it to her, or was it something he was reluctant about letting Shion in on? I wondered about that.

Guess Diablo was a lot more talented than I thought, though. At a time like this, he would’ve absolutely found a way to attract my attention. In fact, he probably would’ve joined me at my research desk. Maybe that made Diablo more selfish than Shion, if you think about it—but enough about that. Mjöllmile’s waiting for me.

Shuna had prepared a boxed sandwich for my lunch. Shion brewed up some tea. I was enjoying both as I waited for my finance minister.

“Ah, Sir Rimuru! I was looking for you. We’ve got big, big news from the labyrinth!”

I was in full relaxation mode, but Mjöllmile was frantic.

“What? What is it?” I asked, wondering if our user base was complaining about something again.

“Following Sir Masayuki, we’ve got another team that made it past Floor 30.”

“Oh? Cool. That’s faster than I thought.”

“I wouldn’t be so calm about that, Sir Rimuru! They’re practically sprinting their way down! In fact, they’re almost at Floor 40 already!”

Um… Oh. Yeah, maybe I shouldn’t be so casual about this. But I didn’t see what was worth getting in such a panic about.

What Mjöllmile said next convinced me otherwise.

“And their methods are, well… They’re making a science out of skirting the labyrinth’s rules. For example…”

He then began to explain. And he was right. I hadn’t predicted this at all.

………

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…

As he put it, this party had come upon fairly ingenious ways of using Ramiris’s labyrinth items.

First, they activated a Recording Crystal in front of the boss monster on Floor 20. One Crystal works for an entire party, so even if the boss wiped them out, they could revive themselves at the location they set for themselves. That was within expected bounds—so far, so good. But then, apparently, they would use a return whistle to warp out of the labyrinth. And then the party would split up, with each member going on to form their own party—always with ten people, the maximum.

“So then, um, all those people…”

“Precisely. It’s no longer a party so much as a small army.”

What was once a ten-person team was now ten parties, a total of a hundred people—each of them ranging between C-plus and B-plus as individuals. Apparently, they all wore a uniform of sorts, an overcoat with a shared design and a certain emblem sewn on it. They stood in line, no doubt unnerving the people around them as they marched in formation into the labyrinth…and that was the force they brought straight to the Floor 30 boss.

The rules stated that only one party could engage a boss at once, but here were ten of them challenging the same boss, standing in line to wait their turn. The orc lord and his five henchmen were powerful adversaries, but this army was no slouch either—and after a heated battle, they finally took the boss out with the third party of the group.

………

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…

“I feel like we talked about something similar just recently.”

“Indeed we did. This is Team Green Fury themselves.”

Ah, there you go. Judging by the matching overcoats, this must’ve been a set of people working for one noble or another. The sheer budget they must’ve had for Recording Crystals made me shiver. “Time is money” and all that, but those cost one gold coin a pop, and they were tossing them all over the place.

“Do we know which patron they belong to?”

“I had Lady Soka look into that. Apparently, they’re all part of the Sons of the Veldt, a pretty well-known mercenary outfit. She believes their benefactor hails from Englesia.”

The Sons of the Veldt? I’d never heard of them. But it was a surprise to hear that one of the core members of the Western Nations had their eyes on our labyrinth. I seem to remember one of their affiliate families participating in the Founder’s Festival…but no one from any of the main noble lines, I don’t think. Maybe they got a late start, or maybe they had some other intention…?

“Well, hmm. How to put it? It feels kind of like they’re paying their way in, which doesn’t leave a great impression, but it’s not a violation of the rules.”

Annoyingly, we had no reason to clamp down on them. I understood Mjöllmile’s alarm, but at this point, there wasn’t much we could do about it.

“Our profits are rising, yes. Lodging a complaint about it might be unreasonable at this point in time. But if this keeps up, the floors you spent so much time filling with traps are going to be conquered in the blink of an eye, it seems like…”

So Mjöllmile was going nuts looking for me because he thought someone would beat the whole labyrinth while I was holed up in here?

“Guess I made you worry, huh? Well, it’ll be all right. Things don’t really kick off until beyond Floor 40. And I think the tempest serpent is going to stop ’em in their tracks for a while anyway. Team Green Fury had some excellent teamwork going; I think they ranked an A-minus as a fighting party—but as individuals, they were each around a B, so I doubted they could hold out against powerful ranged attacks for long. A tempest serpent is among the stronger of the A-minus gang, so even ten B-plus fighters could have trouble emerging victorious against one.

“Indeed, but judging by what Lady Ramiris and Lord Veldora tell me, we have reason to believe the leader of Green Fury is misrepresenting their actual skills…”

Huh?

True, I can’t really run Analyze and Assess on someone in a video. Like—

Report. Accurate magicule counts cannot be calculated via Analyze & Assess on a motion picture of battle.

…Right, Raphael warned me as much. I just used that video footage to assign a rating based off how the Free Guild ranks its monsters, so I couldn’t really say with any accuracy exactly how powerful that party is. After all, I was only ranked a B-plus by the Guild, even though I’m definitely an S in actual skill. Ranks can differ from talent like that sometimes. And if someone was deliberately concealing their skill, we needed to consider addressing that.

“I think I better hear from Veldora and the gang about this.”

“Certainly. I’ve already reached out to them, so let’s pay them a visit!”

That’s Mjöllmile for you. By the time he rounded me up, he already had everyone else on call. I nodded and stood up from my seat.

We were back in the labyrinth’s conference room, the usual gang.

“You are late, Rimuru!” Veldora scolded me.

“Yeah! Look at what happened! You’re the leader—start acting like it!” Ramiris added.

I’m the leader? That’s news to me. But that didn’t matter right now.

“So how’s it looking?” I asked.

“It’s looking grim,” replied Ramiris. “They’ve penetrated all the way to Floor 38 now.”

She began to show me some video of their progress. She seemed pretty flustered, restless even, as she went over the footage, projected inside a little transparent box, with me. The effect was kind of like seeing 3-D miniatures move around by themselves. Too bad I couldn’t Analyze & Assess this directly…

…Suggestion. If I receive permission to interact with the subject Ramiris’s intrinsic skill Mazecraft, it will be possible to collect more accurate, detailed information.

Oooh! A rare proposal from Raphael. It seemed worth trying. Let’s ask.

“Ramiris, I have a favor to ask, if that’s okay with you.”

“Huh? Why all the formality?”

“Actually, I was hoping to intervene into your Mazecraft skill, but what do you think?”

“Intervene? What’re you gonna do, exactly?”

What was I gonna do? I wasn’t too sure myself.

“Well, you know, intervene. I wanted to collect more information about this labyrinth, sort of thing?”

I made most of that up, attempting to gloss over the truth with her.

Report. That is generally the truth.

Damn, I’m good. For once, I actually understood Professor Raphael’s explanation.

“I mean, that’s fine and all, but you sure you can manage that?”

“Um, why’re you worried about me?”

“It’s just, y’know, there’s a lot of information to go through. Not even I can fully grasp it, so I usually ditch it from my mind once I’m done creating it.”

Hmm? Hang on. She called it a lot of data, and she was probably right. With over a thousand challengers in the labyrinth at once, plus all the data from each floor, plus everything else—and we had permanent residents on Floor 95, too. Trying to grasp all of that at once—

Understood. It will not be a problem.

Oh, okay. Apparently, it won’t be a problem.

“Hmm, I think I’ll be fine…?”

“Why are you phrasing it like a question?”

“Now, now, Ramiris, you are in good hands leaving everything to Rimuru here. There is not a thing for either of us to worry about!”

I was all anxious, but Veldora was kind enough to browbeat Ramiris into trusting me.

“Well, all right! I’ll give you the right to intrude into my Mazecraft skill, then!”

Ramiris touched me, and with that, I instantly had access to the labyrinth.

Report. Connected to the subject Ramiris’s intrinsic skill Mazecraft. Now collecting information.

The seemingly impatient Raphael sprang into action. The moment it did, I… Hmm? Maybe I felt a whole bunch of data run across my brain? But it didn’t hurt at all. I was tensed up, prepared for anything, but this was kind of a letdown.

Report. Analyze and Assess on the Team Green Fury complete. Their leader is over the A rank, but my appraisal of the others does not differ greatly from before.

In a moment, Raphael found the info I needed. Talk about reliable. Then I noticed the Analyze and Assess was still running. Did something catch its attention?

Understood. Analyzing all battles that have taken place within the labyrinth…

…so quit bothering me, I thought I heard it say. Which made sense. There’s no way an average bum like me would understand the professor’s thoughts. I’m sure it was plotting something grandiose again, but I’ll leave it be for now.

So back to our meeting.

“I see…”

“Did you learn something, Rimuru?”

“That was fast. It didn’t work, did it?”

Ramiris, to say nothing of Veldora, gave me a doubtful look. I’m sure they had trouble believing me, as much as that annoyed me.

“You know,” I said, bragging a little, “this guy’s an A-plus or so.”

I brought up some other footage from Ramiris, blowing up the view to make it easier to see.

“Huh?!”

This surprised the whole room, Ramiris more than anyone else. “Um, Rimuru? Why are you using my skill so well?!”

“Ha-ha-ha! Well, you gave me the right to intervene, so I guess that’s why.”

“You’re kidding me! Even I can only show footage from a set position. I need to personally know someone before I can track them on here…”

Apparently, Ramiris could only access footage that had already passed through her labyrinth managers. I could see why; wrangling all this data in depth was a dizzying task.

“Well, let’s just say I’m more gifted at this for now,” I said to assuage her as my eyes turned to the image.

The over-A explorer we were following was the elementalist who led the Green Fury team. If that leader was hiding so much power, there were likely even more elementals they were able to tap into. If they had access to higher-level ones, you could count on them having access to power several times their own.

“Hohh. When you say ‘over-A,’ are we talking about monster standards?”

“Right. I think the Free Guild pretty much assigns ranks based off what rank of monster they think you can beat, but…”

That, however, was ignoring any safety factors. I think, to be exact, the standards were based on the scenario of several adventurers facing off against a monster of that rank.

“All right, so what about us?”

“You guys…?”

Masayuki, I wasn’t sure about. By the looks of him, he’d be on the low end of a D—but his unique skill was out of this world, so put it all together, and he’d be well into the A range. Saying that would probably give Masayuki the wrong idea, however, so I decided to keep quiet about it. Better to obfuscate the truth for now.

“I’d say Jinrai just barely clears the line for an A rank, but I’m not too sure if he could beat a tempest serpent solo or not. If he had the complete Ogre Series set, though, it’d be no sweat for him.”

His Mithril Armor couldn’t fully protect him against Poisonous Breath; as a foe, the tempest serpent was a bad matchup for him. Unlike monsters, humans come with a lot of weaknesses baked in, so to speak—and since this isn’t a video game, weakness against one attack or another spelled the difference between life and death. Even if his core strength made him competitive, the right poison at the right time could still easily kill him.

“Huh. Jinrai’s really something, huh?”

“Yeah. Although, I think your skill is boosting him in pretty much every way. And then…who else did you have? Jiwu and Bernie? I’d pin them both at A-minus.”

It was a great party. Well-balanced, to be sure. Maybe that’s why Masayuki’s faults never bubbled to the surface.

“Yeah, I definitely have some companions I can count on.”

“Ha-ha-ha! And given how much more powerful you are than them, Sir Masayuki, you’re an over-A for sure. After all, Sir Rimuru himself certified you as a Hero!” Mjöllmile had nothing but respect as he eyed Masayuki.

I really wish he’d be kind enough to stop. Masayuki was smiling, but he looked about ready to burst into tears at any moment.

“But the problem is that it’s not only the Green Fury leader,” I said. “Over on this team, this guy’s an A; this guy’s an A… The Sons of the Veldt, they’re all called? They sure assembled a rogues gallery here.”

“No way! That many high-ranked people?”

“Hmm… Nothing I would have an issue with…”

Yes, if the top members of the Veldt formed a party, even Floor 50 wouldn’t stop them for long.

“Bovix and Equix are A rank, too, but if it’s one of them against these two dudes in particular, it’ll be an uphill battle. And I’d put the Green Fury leader on the same line as Bovix.”

“That high up?”

“Yeah. I mean, this pair here, they’re about twice as strong as Jinrai—just comparing their bodily abilities, not their battle skills.”

The two Veldt standouts were each on the level of a high-end magic-born. Weaker than Gelmud (that name takes me back) but certainly stronger than one of the lower-ranked paladins. Meanwhile, the Green Fury leader was in a class of their own, too; I wasn’t sure, but I was willing to bet their skill level in battle was pretty high.

“Looks like they’re summoning magic beasts to run on ahead and alert them to the traps I set. They’re professionals, for sure.”

“Yeah, if this keeps up, it’s just a matter of time before they reach the floors I set up.”

Hmm?

I figured Ramiris would be happier about that. Why all the tension? I wasn’t too thrilled about this party dodging all my traps, but she and Veldora were all ramped up about taking on challengers. Between that and the generally disturbed way she was acting, was there something else going on?

“Say, are you hiding something?” I decided to just ask her point-blank.

Veldora and Ramiris looked at each other, figuring out how to handle this. Presumably, Ramiris drew the short straw, because she spoke first.

“Well, in the three days you were holed up in there…”

And the story she had made me want to rub my forehead, too.

As she explained, Hinata’s Crusaders had begun their training—beginning with Floor 51, as we agreed upon.

Ramiris had lined Floors 51 through 60 with her own set of traps, and of course she watched them excitedly as the paladins went about their business. Adalmann, the guy she tapped to be the Floor 60 boss monster, had summoned a massive force of undead, leading to innovations like corridors of infinitely spawning zombies, oxygen-free rooms (the dead didn’t have to breathe, after all), and things even more diabolical than that.

“I was really confident, you know? And those stupid paladins kept on purifying everything in their path. The no-oxygen chamber stopped them for a bit, but the people behind the front-line team just resurrected them, and off they went…”

“They had the perfect tools for that challenge, huh? Well, that’s the way it goes sometimes.”

I tried to comfort the depressed Ramiris as she continued.

Before much longer, the Crusader group reached the boss on Floor 60. Adalmann was waiting for them, but again, he was just the kind of opponent the paladins trained for.

Thinking about it, the results really made perfect sense. As a wight with none of his own power, Adalmann was only as good as whatever he could summon. The paladins were way beyond what he could personally fight off. At the same time, however, Adalmann was a sort of “elder statesman” in the eyes of the paladins. He couldn’t just run away from them, I suppose. Hopefully he didn’t find the experience too humiliating.

“He wasn’t all depressed, was he?”

“He was…”

Ah. Thought so. Better give him a pep talk later. “So what happened next?”

“After defeating Adalmann,” said Veldora, “they pressed on to the floors where my traps were set. I was watching from above, chuckling over all the pain and turmoil they’d undoubtedly be about to face, and—”

“And they actually dodged our master’s traps, too! The slippery floors, the illusory walls, the Corridor of True Darkness, the death rays—not even I could come up with some of that stuff, but they strode through all of it!”

Veldora and Ramiris gritted their teeth as they described it.

The floors between sixty-one and seventy were Veldora’s to decorate as he saw fit. His traps did take some victims, yes, but unless they died instantly, the paladins could readily heal them back to shape. Between that and their Resurrection Bracelets, as they put it, the team never really acted like they were in danger.

And here I thought those floors were too tough. With a team ranked A or above, as long as the whole party didn’t die at once, they could always bounce back. Something told me we’d need to recalibrate the difficulty level a little.

“But my Elemental Colossus put in a real good fight!” said Ramiris. “He wiped out all the challengers, even…”

Wow. If he can wipe out a team of paladins, that’s nothing to sniff at. But hell, his sheer weight alone was a threat. He was impervious to swords or magic, he moved like a jackrabbit, and his weight had to be measured in tons. He’d be anyone’s nightmare.

So why was Ramiris all despondent?

“Well, it appears that seeing the paladins struggle against that boss frustrated Lady Hinata quite a bit,” Mjöllmile said with a grin. “At one point, Sir Fritz, one of the paladin commanders in the party, said to his companions ‘Why, I’m not even sure Lady Hinata herself could conquer this foe.’”

Hmm. Yes, if Hinata was there—an angered Hinata—not even an Elemental Colossus could stop her. In fact…

“So, uh, how far did Hinata get…?”

“Y-yes, um…”

“That’s the problem!”

It really shocked me. In the space of a single day, Hinata made it all the way down to the ninety-fifth floor. Even if we spotted her at Floor 61, that’s an insane amount of speed.

She made quick work of the Elemental Colossus, stopping it in its tracks and using Disintegration to completely destroy it. Before much longer, she was at Floor 80, beating the boss there with pretty much a single blow.

“My apprentice Zegion’s in pupal form at the moment, so he was in no shape to get moving,” Veldora explained. “Apito woke up first, but she couldn’t keep up with that girl’s speed, so she got whipped.”

“Yeah, that was quite a fight! Being a queen wasp, Apito’s agility puts her at the top of the monster kingdom. And she was trying her hardest to land a blow on that Hinata lady, but she fended off every single one,” said Ramiris.

Mmm. Yeah, if it’s Hinata involved, I could kinda see that. She’s a strong one. How I even managed to beat her was still a mystery to me.

“And then she kept on going! Floors 81 through 89 are each ruled by one of Kumara’s followers, but she knocked them out, one by one.”

“Right, and Kumara’s still too young, so I let Beretta serve as the boss of Floor 90, but Hinata beat him!”

“Ah… It looked to me like Beretta had gotten stronger, but I guess he tangoed with the wrong lady,” I said.

“Mm-hmm. It’s incredible,” replied Ramiris. “I can’t believe people don’t call Hinata a Hero.”

And with that, Hinata called it a day and settled down in her elegant suite on the ninety-fifth floor.



She had spent yesterday conquering Floors 96 to 99, the “dragon floors” crafted by Milim that were supposed to be the toughest we had to offer.

“The Raging Earth floor, you know—the earthquakes are one thing, but the gravity traps are murder on you,” continued Ramiris. “It’s about five times normal gravity in there, so you’d think she’d have trouble moving around, but…”

But neither lightning from the heavens, nor bone-chilling cold, nor searing heat seemed to work against Hinata.

“So then it was finally time for my appearance.”

“Whoa, really, Veldora? You fought her?”

“I did. I take all comers! As the last boss, I will flee from no challenger!”

“…And what happened?”

This was Veldora—of course he wouldn’t run. But I needed to know the results. Veldora was stronger than me, so I couldn’t imagine that he lost—but the question was how Hinata decided to approach this.

“Oh, I won, of course. But she was rather strong, I will admit. Her sword skills reminded me a tad of the Hero who banished me, but her fighting style was quite the opposite.”

Hohh?

Whether Veldora’s victory was a foregone conclusion or not, I was kind of sad I missed the fight. I really wish someone thought to record it…

Understood. Unfortunately, all battle records appear to have been deleted.

Yeah… But damn. I can’t believe how stupid I am for missing an epic event like that.

“I tell you, Sir Rimuru, I could hardly believe my own eyes! Ah, Lady Hinata was poetry in motion!”

Oh, Mjöllmile saw it, too? I am so jealous.

“Yeah, I have to hand it to Hinata… People argue over who is better—am I or is she? But honestly, every time the question comes up, my stomach starts to hurt.”

“Ah-ha-ha-ha! Modest as always, eh, Sir Masayuki?”

Mollie, please. That’s not modesty at all. It’s the cold, hard truth.

“Hee-hee-hee! Oh, no need to joke about that, Mjöllmile.” The smile on Masayuki’s face looked taut and thin as he talked his way out of the question.

Mjöllmile didn’t get the message. “Ah yes, indeed. I am sure that when it comes to battle, there is never any joking around with you! Why, if you ever had the chance to wage battle against Sir Veldora, I’m sure the results would be beyond comprehension. I’d love to have a front-row seat for that!”

It’s funny. Mjöllmile was usually such a compassionate, empathetic man. But with Masayuki, he just didn’t know when to quit. Please, just stop. The kid looks like he’s about to have a heart attack!

“Oh, you think so? Would you like to have a bit of a sparring match, Masayuki?”

“A bit of a sparring match” would kill him.

“Now, now, now… Yes, Masayuki’s a champion, but he uses his brain to fight more, you know? If we ever fought, I think I’d have a slight edge—but with your outlandish strength, Veldora, I don’t think he’d ever live up to you.”

“I see, I see! Yes, I thought as much as myself. You always were a fine judge of character, Rimuru! Kwaaah-ha-ha-ha!!”

Whew. That oughtta do it. Praise him, and it immediately lifts his spirits.

“Anyway, back to the topic?”

For now, I needed to hear Veldora’s story to the end. I glanced at him, and he nodded back.

“Yes. You see, the Hero who sealed me away never made a single wasteful motion in her attacks. By comparison, that woman Hinata seemed to take a more varied approach, searching for something that could work against me. They were both coolheaded as fighters, never exposing themselves, but Hinata’s style seemed full of needless strikes and movements to me.”

As he described it, Hinata executed a wide range of attacks—every kind of magic, amulet, and artifact she could think of; she deployed them all. Simple physical attacks don’t work on Veldora, so I imagine she was experimenting to see what, if anything, would. But pretty much nothing she threw at him had any effect.

“That final attack of hers was a fine one, though. It even damaged me, albeit a very small, tiny amount. It reminded me of the Hero’s Absolute Severance skill, to some extent.”

He was talking about Meltslash, Hinata’s ace in the hole and a finishing move that took advantage of her sword Moonlight. But not even that fazed him?

“Do you think she could be a threat if she used the right tactics?”

Ramiris thought about this for a moment. “Hmmm, I think she’s stronger than Clayman or the other, lesser demon lords, that’s for sure. Even the Octagram’s current members might have a hard time with her if they let their guard down. But my master here’s in a world of his own—”

“Kwah-ha-ha-ha! Exactly! If she wants to fight even with me, she’ll need at least ten times the energy!”

Oh…

So not even Hinata was a good match for Veldora? I really wish I could’ve been there to study that battle. If I saved my memory of it, it could’ve been a great reference in the future. But there was nothing I could do now. Leaving the past where it belonged, I steered us back to the original topic.

“All right. So in essence, the second half of the labyrinth failed to function properly against the paladins and Hinata? But the bosses get resurrected, right?”

“Yeah, but Adalmann is weaker than Bovix, y’know? And he helps me with research and stuff—I think he’s a real talent, but I don’t think he’s the best person for the Floor 60 boss. Also…” Ramiris began to visibly shake. “My—my masterpiece, the Elemental Colossus… It’s broken…and it won’t go back to normal!!”

Then she broke down in tears. Huh? Wasn’t he a boss?

“Did he not have the bracelet on?”

“No, he did,” came the downhearted reply. “But he won’t resurrect. He didn’t back when you broke him apart, either.”

Apparently, golems that occur naturally can be resurrected in the Dungeon, but the types Ramiris built don’t. That gave me an idea.

“Maybe it’s because they don’t have a soul. Beretta resurrected just fine, so maybe your labyrinth treats the Elemental Colossus like any other item?”

“…What?”

“Hmm, that seems likely to me,” agreed Veldora. “Your authority fails to extend to him, Ramiris, because he’s not counted as a potential target.”

It sounded right to me. Which means that even if I rebuilt it, it might just get broken down again. That wasn’t going to happen too often, given its strength, but we should really address that.

And before that:

“That takes a lot of time to build, doesn’t it?”

“It does! So right now, Floor 70 doesn’t have any boss at all…”

I knew it.

“Yes, and down on Floor 80, Zegion will likely be sleeping for a while to come. Apito has grown stronger herself, but she has far too little real-battle experience. I think she needs some training before we can have her serve as a boss.”

It turned out Apito was already receiving some remedial battle training. I wasn’t quite sure this was what I put her in the labyrinth for, but she was gung ho about it, so I saw no harm in letting her. Hinata was her teacher, by the way; they asked her to help out in exchange for another chance at fighting Veldora. Hinata was already assisting with our kids, so giving Apito some battle instruction probably wasn’t much more of a stretch.

That left Kumara. The Kumara minions running things from Floors 81 to 89 were, in essence, magic-born manifestations of Kumara’s own nine tails, one per floor. Each had their own free will, evolving and learning by themselves, but detaching them from her own body like that greatly reduced Kumara’s own magicule stores. Thus, they decided Kumara would join with Alice, Chloe, and the rest and study under Hinata.

…All of this was decided yesterday.

“Okay, so we have no real bosses from Floors 60 to 90 right now?”

“That’s right!”

“Indeed. And that is why we have a problem!”

Ramiris and Veldora were sneering at me for some reason.

“Good heavens…”

“Boy, talk about bad timing, huh?”

Mjöllmile and Masayuki were just as surprised to hear about this. I thought things were pretty chill with the labyrinth by this point, but I guess I was wrong.

“…All right. I think I understand the situation.”

I heaved a resigned sigh.

So now I had a stack of problems to deal with at once, but at least we knew exactly what needed to be addressed from Floor 51 on down. Plus, the traps I laid out were still in fine shape.

“I suppose it’ll only be a matter of time before someone slays the tempest serpent…but there’s no need to panic!”

“Ah, that’s the confident Rimuru I know. You have a plan?”

“Hee-hee! I thought so. I knew there was nothing to worry about with you around!”

The anxiety seemed to vanish from Veldora’s and Ramiris’s faces. It was very self-serving of them, but I nodded back and explained my thoughts.

“Right. Like I said before, my traps begin to get serious from Floor 41 downward. Those are bound to trip them up.”

“Ah, how reassuring to hear!”

“Hmm? I suppose so, yes.”

“And what kind of traps are these, Rimuru?”

Oh, is that what you ask? Better sit down for this.

“Well, the coups de grâce are the slimes on Floor 49. Once you make it past a certain hallway, you’re cut off from the rest of the floor and confronted with a huge pile of slimes. Bad ones, let me add.”

This swarm of slimes would merge together to form truly gigantic slimes, almost ten feet in diameter. The escape routes in front of and behind it were cut off, effectively stranding the poor victims. Physical attacks—slices, blows, heavy impacts—didn’t work on it, and in a closed corridor, not much magic was safe to use. Anything that exploded was likely to blow up in your face, so that was off the table.

These slimes didn’t have much attack force, no, but they’ll maneuver to cover you from both sides, the classic pincer strategy. If you can picture edging closer and closer to the wall behind you as one of them advances, you can probably see how much of a threat they could be.

“Kwah-ha-ha-ha! Victory is ours!!”

“Yeah! It’s in the bag for us now!”

“Not so fast, you two. I didn’t stop there.”

I’m glad my initial salvo was enough to make them cheerlead for me, but there were a bunch of other traps. Prepare to quiver in fear as I break them down:

Slime Pool: What at first glance looks like a bouncy, rubbery corridor is actually a slime—one that opens into a soupy grave halfway down!

Slime Rain: A storm of fist-size slimes descends upon you, each one small enough to work their way into your clothing and armor. Watch for acid burns!

Slime Doll: Looks like a monster at first, but it tirelessly takes all your attacks, gradually exhausting you. Even worse, each attack you try on it exposes your weapon to corrosive acid. Try not to let your equipment get destroyed!

And so forth. I had other ideas, but for this set of floors, I wanted the focus to be on explorer harassment. Breaking their weapons, in particular, could make it impossible for them to fight any longer. It’s the perfect way to buy us time.

“Brilliant. Truly, a brilliant selection of traps. So even if we don’t defeat our enemies with these traps, we win as long as we can leave them damaged?”

“That’s right, Veldora.”

“Hmmm… And breaking their weapons is a good way to chase off the stronger contenders. I didn’t think about that.”

“Right. If you can beat them, it’s fine, but now they’re gonna have to think about what if they can’t. It oughtta buy us some time.”

For now, these traps wouldn’t do much more than slow the challengers down. That was a shame, but we needed that time to come up with more permanent solutions.

“So what do you intend to do with the time you buy?” Veldora asked.

Better give a serious response to that. “It’s important we don’t forget that our labyrinth isn’t your normal, run-of-the-mill labyrinth. This is the Advanced Dungeon, a newer, evolved type, and it’s meant to keep evolving and growing more advanced.”

“…!”

“Yes, of course.”

“So we just need to make adjustments so the Dungeon can handle things better next time. First off… Adalmann. I’ll figure something out with him. I wanted to change up the atmosphere in his boss room anyway, Ramiris, so I’ll need your help.”

“Sure thing!”

Adalmann had made it up to the rank of cardinal in his life; I think his job was officially high priest or something. In a party, he’d be your back-row support type. Leaving him to serve as a boss solo was a mistake; he needed to be paired up with some kind of front-row partner. I had some other thoughts, as well, so Ramiris and I decided to visit Adalmann later on.

Next came the Floor 70 boss.

“We’ll just have to make another Elemental Colossus,” I said. “And the perfect person for the job’s just come back.”

I could get the needed materials, so let’s take that approach. But it wouldn’t be any fun to just build the same thing again.

“The perfect person?” Ramiris asked.

I nodded at her. “Yeah, Kaijin is back. He knows a lot about spirit engineering, so I think he’ll happily take the job. Plus, I think this’ll help with the experiment I was conducting earlier. I’ll show him my research results, so I think you can expect an even stronger colossus than before.”

“…Really? Oh, great!”

We couldn’t produce immediate results for her, but with Kaijin on the team, we’d be stronger than ever. It wouldn’t be ready immediately, but it’d definitely be a threat for the next set of challengers who made it down there.

“So for Floors 80 and below…”

“I think that will work itself out over time. Once Zegion wakes up, your garden-variety challenger will have no chance, let me tell you. And the dragons Milim got should evolve for us once they spend some more time in the labyrinth.”

Kumara was a growing creature as well. No need to hurry things along. The question was just how much time we could buy for ourselves.

“Okay. So that’ll be our basic plan. Now we need more time, and I don’t think my traps are gonna be enough. So there’s something I wanted to test out, and Veldora… Ramiris… I need your help.”

“But of course.”

“Sure thing!”

They both affably nodded. I returned the nod, then looked at Masayuki.

“Masayuki, I’d like you to continue delving into the Dungeon. But instead of going past Floor 41, it might be best to focus on completing the Ogre Series first.”

“Very true. Sir Masayuki’s activities in the Dungeon are always good advertising for us, and I don’t see much need for him to hurry.”

“So I should let someone else get past Floor 40 first, then?”

“Yeah. Also, I think you should maybe stay away from us for a little while. I don’t want you getting caught up in our plans.”

“Are you scheming something again?”

Masayuki leered at me. Well, that’s mean. He’s acting like I’m always hatching some kind of nefarious new caper.

“Well, let me keep that under my hat for now. But we’ll handle things on our end, so Mjöllmile and Masayuki, I’d like you to keep things going as normal.”

“Very well, Sir Rimuru!”

“All right. I’ll give the news to my party.”

Good, then. Now to see how long my traps can hold out.

“Okay, if there’s nothing else, let’s—”

“Oh, one moment. I did want to discuss something…”

Just as I was about adjourn the meeting, Mjöllmile stopped me. I guess he had other business to address.

“What is it?”

“Well…”

What Mjöllmile had to say threw me a bit.

“Lady Hinata was asking me about her reward money for conquering the labyrinth floors…”

“Huh?” I reflexively replied. Those prizes, awarded for clearing every tenth floor, were meant to attract the nobility’s attention. What’d Hinata want with them? I mean, she did earn them, but…

“She did not officially make it down to the bottom during normal operation, no, but as she explained it to me, if she played by the rules, didn’t she deserve to be paid?”

Mjöllmile looked concerned.

Okay, Hinata. Yes, you’re technically right. But weren’t we kind of in this together? It was a test for us, too, and to them it was on-the-field battle training. I didn’t see how money had to be involved.

“No. Turn her down for me.”

“Are you sure, Sir Rimuru? If we do, she may decide to stage a more serious challenge in the Dungeon, wouldn’t she?”

“It’s fine. Just remind her that people will learn she lost against the labyrinth master, and the word’ll spread like wildfire.”

“Kwah-ha-ha-ha! It is impossible for me to lose!!”

Nice. I knew he’d pitch in at a time like this. Plus, if she really did stage another attempt, we could leverage that in our advertising.

“W-well, all right. But if possible, I’d like you to break the news to her, Sir Rimuru—”

“What? No way.”

Yeah. No. I didn’t want her hating me. It’d suck if she thought I was being a tightwad. Better to leave this role to someone like Mjöllmile, with the firm, resolved attitude I needed.

“B-but if I may, riling Lady Hinata’s anger honestly scares me a little…”

“Thanks a bunch, Mollie!!”

I think he was about to say something, but I cut him off. Sorry. I’m just not into doing that stuff. A pretty girl like her, you know, I’d like us to stay friends. Besides, Mjöllmile’s got a mafioso face and isn’t afraid of anyone; he thinks of everything in terms of profit and loss, so I’m sure he’d have no problem saying no.

I’m also sure that I just imagined it when I thought I heard him sadly mutter “Perhaps I’ll use my pocket money, then…” under his breath.

That wrapped up our agenda. Leaving the now-grieving Mjöllmile to himself, I went on with my business.

I told Veldora and Ramiris our meeting time tomorrow. There was some prep I’d need to wrap up before then, but before that, I had one errand to attend to. Shion was on standby outside my chamber, so I took her along with me to visit Shuna.

Shuna was overseeing dinner preparations when we saw her, giving out instructions to her staff. There were more people in the kitchen now, the air alive with conversation between an assortment of species. The skill Shuna demonstrated by organizing them all showed her strength as a leader. I hated to interrupt her for my personal business, but we were battling against time here, so she’d have to forgive me.

“Hey, Shuna. Got a moment?”

“Oh, Sir Rimuru! By all means, tell me what you need.”

Shuna ran up to me when I called out to her. In this noisy kitchen, everyone was always kind enough to let me sample their dishes when I stopped by now and then. I tried to offer a quick comment for everything I tasted, but I was in a rush, so our impromptu tasting had to wait.

“Sorry, guys, but I need Shuna’s help with something today. I’ll be able to take my time in here next time, okay?”

“Certainly!”

“Stop by whenever.”

“Wait’ll you see what we’ve been working on now!”

The enthusiasm was palpable. I guess me complimenting someone on their food was a kind of status symbol around here. Next time oughtta be real fun.

“Okay, Gobichi, can you run things for a while?”

“Yes, Lady Shuna! Ready and able!”

Gobichi was second only to Shuna in cookery by now. He was the head chef whenever Shuna was gone, so we were in good hands.

“Right, see you later,” I said, waving at the disappointed kitchen staff.

We were on our way to Floor 60, Adalmann’s lair.

“Oh, thanks for that sandwich, by the way. It was good.”

Shuna smiled as we walked along. “I’m so glad you liked it.”

“Allow me to make a box lunch for you next time, Sir Rimuru!” Shion was quick to volunteer.

I considered my options before replying. “Yeah, you’re certainly improving by leaps and bounds. Could you maybe work with Shuna on one sometime?”

I thought I was safe trusting Shion by this point, but a little insurance never hurt. Shuna’s presence should keep Shion from going crazy in the kitchen.

“Perhaps tomorrow then, Lady Shuna?!”

“Hee-hee! All right, Shion. Let’s begin with something simple first.”

It was a pleasant exchange. Their musical performance had been in perfect sync, too, actually. I’m glad they were getting along.

So we chatted along those lines as we reached the sixtieth floor.

“Adalmann, I’m coming in.”

“Ah, it’s you, Sir Rimuru! Truly, recent events have filled me with anguish. I am fully prepared to accept any punishment you deem fit for my inferior self—”

He immediately fell to his knees when I said his name. His penchant for exaggeration was as healthy as always, but I was used to it by now.

“Nah, as far as that goes, it’s our fault for misreading this. You’re not a good fit for combat against paladins. I don’t think you could’ve avoided that defeat.”

“…No, even now, I lament just how spiritless I was in battle. Losing to such inexperienced fighters… I approached the battle as if I were still a wight king, but I lost after my magic failed to trigger…”

Right now, Adalmann was nothing more than a powerless wight. A wight with some pretty advanced magic knowledge and battle experience, sure, but species-wise, he was just a low-level monster. There wasn’t much magic he could fully harness, and the only creatures he could summon were equally low-level undead. Monsters had the capacity to evolve via the magicules in the labyrinth, but that took time. Adalmann’s minions wouldn’t be evolving for a while to come—but what I was about to do would help him power up much more quickly.

“One of the most important things you can do is know the extent of your powers. Do you mind if I ask you a question?”

“Yes! Anything.”

“How much holy magic can you wield at the moment?”

Holy magic was, in essence, force stemming from faith. You didn’t need to gather up magicules from the atmosphere, and it wasn’t affected by the magic strength within you. If you had the right knowledge and enough spell-casting time, you could weave powerful magic without exerting a great deal of energy.

What it did require, though, was a pact forged with a god. A god, for the purposes of this kind of magic, was an existence who could wield the spiritual particles that were the building blocks for magicules. It wasn’t dependent on the caster believing in this or that god, or some other divine concept in this world—a god was just anyone who could directly interact with spiritual particles.

In Luminism, for example, Luminus was a god for this reason. Adalmann was a devout Luminist, and becoming a monster hadn’t shaken his faith at all; that’s why he could cast Disintegration as a wight king, I suppose. Now, however, he was worshipping me as a god instead of Luminus, and we couldn’t forge a pact of faith with each other. I figured holy magic was thus out of the question, maybe.

“These days, not very much, I am afraid. Even lower-ranked magic is inaccessible to me.”

I thought so. Holy magic, in essence, worked the same way as spirit magic. A pact was involved, and you were borrowing force from a higher power to cast your spells. Not even Hinata could cast holy magic without borrowing Luminus’s powers. If the human race didn’t align itself with a god like Luminus, they’d lose access to one of the most effective ways to handle monsters.

It’d be ironic if it weren’t so scary to think about. If Luminus’s whims had driven her to go in a different direction, the world might’ve wound up far more chaotic than it already was.

“All right. So let me ask you, Shuna: How much holy magic can you use? And what’s your faith pointed at?”

“In my case, it is not exactly holy magic. It is an imitation, powered by my unique skill Parser, and it works surprisingly well.”

Ah, I see. An imitation? I did leave her to analyze the barrier over our town, come to think of it. Maybe that let her copy a subset of holy magic as a side effect.

And in addition to that:

“My faith is in you, Sir Rimuru, and there’s no doubting the power that brings me. That’s why I think I might be able to do this.” Shuna gave me a somewhat bashful smile.

“…Huh? But when you fought me, didn’t you say that even monsters could use holy magic…?”

“I was bluffing,” Shuna replied, still smiling. “It was a bluff I was quite sure of, but you wound up proving it for me, Sir Rimuru.”

Adalmann gave us a quizzical look. It was surprising how much variety there was to his facial expressions, being a skeleton and all. But regardless.

The most important element to executing holy magic was faith. Faith was intertwined with connections in the soul, and it might be that Shuna inadvertently grasped this at the deepest level. If that was the case, I just needed to present my theory and have Adalmann learn it. He should know how it feels, so I didn’t think it’d be that hard.

“Now, I’d like both of you to accept for me what I’ll call the secret skills of faith and favor. I just learned them from Luminus not long ago, and it’s strictly classified information, so keep that in mind.”

As a former high priest, I figured Adalmann could rediscover holy magic once he could connect with me. Even now, when his magicule count was nothing like it used to be, holy magic ought to make him a lot more useful in a fight.

“The secret skills of faith and favor…?”

“Ah, ahhhh… Now I too shall bask in the powers of the truly divine…” He was even more stifling than usual today, but I put up with it.

“Um, Sir Rimuru, do you mind if I ask a question?”

I hadn’t thought about it until now, but for the first time in a while, I was being carried by Shion—in slime form, of course. I didn’t want that to stop—it was comfortable, after all. This holy-magic talk would fly straight over her head, I was sure, but I had to be confident she could keep it secret.

“Don’t tell anyone, all right?” I said to her.

“Of course!” came the energetic reply. I was happy enough with that, so I went over the basics of my plan with Shuna.

“I see… So I can learn holy magic as well if I can ‘believe’ in you?”

“Right. I think so. It’s something you can research in your free time anyway. Maybe talk about it with Adalmann and stuff.”

“All right. I look forward to seeing how much of it I can learn.”

Shuna was picking this up fast. With her Parser skill, maybe learning Disintegration wasn’t a pipe dream, even.

As for Adalmann:

“Oh, ohh, ohhhhhh!! I am swelling, overflowing with power!!”

He was pretty excited.

“Holy Cannon!!”

With a red light sparking up from deep within his eye sockets, Adalmann pointed a hand forward and screamed. A concentrated ball of energy flew out from his palm—a bolt of Holy Cannon, a full-fledged holy spell. A powerful one, too, and one he had generated all by himself.

“Ohh, Sir Rimuru, my god…”

He prostrated himself before me in worship. I wish he wouldn’t. It kind of made my spine prickle.

“Great, um, that worked, huh? Now keep practicing so you can start casting some higher-level magic. And if something comes up, you can always turn to Shuna for advice!”

I was clearly trying to hurry things along. Shuna, understanding my intentions, lightly nodded.

“…Ah. So you want me to be his adviser since you dislike dealing with him yourself?”

I heard that question loud and clear, but pretending I didn’t was probably the best move here. If she could just assume I’m an insensitive clod who doesn’t understand anything for myself, that’d be great.

“I promise I will live up to your lofty expectations, Sir Rimuru!!” Adalmann, meanwhile, was energized like never before.

I decided now was a good time to give him another important piece of advice. “Now, as a wight, if you cast a holy spell, doesn’t that damage you?”

There were two types of holy magic—one neutral type that worked with spiritual particles, and another of the “holy” type that canceled out magicules. Holy Cannon was the latter type, and as a monster, I figured that would cause him damage.

“Ha-ha-ha! A little pain is nothing that would faze me—”

Ah. Adalmann’s just soldiering through it. But that doesn’t really solve the problem. I could tap Beretta’s Reverser unique skill to flip the holy attribute around to demonic…but that’s another future research topic.

For the time being:

“Then how about this, Adalmann?” Still enveloped in Shion’s chest, I sent a beam of light into the air.

“Ohhh!!”

“I removed the holy attribute and powered it up a bit. It’s called Holy Ray, and it’s my own creation.”

Holy Ray is a neutral attack, neither holy nor demonic in nature. As long as you didn’t screw it up, it would never damage the caster. However, it was a trickier spell to cast—in other words, it required the user to have more “faith” in me…

It was meant for a single target, and in terms of spontaneous force, it was better than my Megiddo spell. It launched quickly and emitted a bright light, but it was actually a long string of concentrated, spinning spiritual particles. As a piercing attack, it wasn’t as powerful as Disintegration, but took much less time to cast.

“Wonderful. Truly a wonderful spell!!”

Adalmann was beside himself with joy. If he could master this spell, it might help him get used to manipulating spiritual particles in general. Then he’d be able to launch bigger beams with tons more lethality. This was one of the spells Raphael developed based on my requests, and for Adalmann at the moment, this was the most ideal weapon I could give him.

“I’ll be glad to discuss magic with you at any time, so don’t be afraid to contact me.”

Shuna had already kindly accepted my request. That was, to say the least, a relief.

“All right. Keep up your training, then, and try your best to learn holy magic that won’t damage you.”

I wanted that to be a focus. It would complicate fighting otherwise.

Raising a hand to quiet down the jubilant Adalmann, I then tackled our next problem.

“So right now, you don’t have too many ways to attack. We can help you gradually build up an arsenal, but before that, there’s something quick we can do.”

“How do you mean?”

“Well, you’re more of a back-row fighter by nature, right?”

“I would say my role more often was to provide rear support, yes. When I was a wight king, I’d often use summoning magic to bring forth an army of undead, overwhelming foes with my sheer numbers.”

I’m sure he did. There was no rule that said a floor guardian had to fight solo, so all we had to do was bring on someone to take up the front row for him.

“Right? So I think it was a mistake for me to pit you against parties of people.”

“Yes, I do have a variety of martial arts at my disposal, but with this body of bones, it’s all rather incompatible…”

No, that’s not the issue. He must’ve mistakenly thought I was scolding him. Punches and kicks weren’t going to solve anything.

“Nah, nah, don’t worry about that. If you’re fighting a single person, then fine, but if it’s more than one, call for some friends of your own. You had one, didn’t you? I think his name was…”

“Oh, you mean my friend Alberto?”

“Yeah, right, Alberto. I guess he’s a skeleton right now, but he used to be an imperial acolyte, didn’t he? Good enough with a sword to trouble Hakuro, even. That’s the kind of strength you need. And if he’s got the right equipment, he can still cut it in a fight today, right?”

“Yes, with his talents, I am sure he can live up to your expectations, Sir Rimuru.”

I could sense the pride in Adalmann’s voice. Now I was getting more confident about the idea I had.

“Okay, can you give him this equipment for me later?”

I produced a set of gear from my Stomach and laid it out on the floor. Previously, I had heard Alberto was capable of fighting without a shield, so I figured this was the best set for him:

Cursed Sword: A one-handed, medium-length sword that absorbs life force from its surroundings—including the wielder, making it a failure as a weapon.

Cursed Mail: Produces a constantly deployed barrier with high magical resistance and defense—but also continually saps the wearer’s life force.

These two items were collaborations between Kurobe and Garm, both trying to extract as many features from them as possible. They were planning to create a whole series, but they shelved it once they realized no living being could use them. Garm, in particular, actually collapsed while crafting them; things were touch and go for a little while. We could laugh about that now, but given that backstory, we were all a bit loath to just throw these things away.

Besides, they both worked really great. Unique-caliber gear, you could even call them. But since monsters count as living creatures, too, we figured they were completely unusable…and now, as I realized, that’s no issue at all with the undead.

“What do you think? You don’t feel sick or anything holding them, do you?”

“I feel nothing in particular. We are already dead, after all.”

Adalmann checked them himself to be sure. The moment he unsheathed the sword, Shuna and Shion began to wince—that life-absorb feature must’ve been working. Given how Adalmann wasn’t fazed at all, undead must’ve been impervious to it.

“Great. I think you’ll be okay, then.”

Back in its sheath, the sword no longer sapped our energy—but that alone could make it pretty decent for attacking.

“Oh, and there’s this, too.”

It was a surcoat, an outer garment, made of my Sticky Steel Thread—a superior piece, resistant to heat and cold and also resilient against bladed weapons. These were circulating around as part of the Tempest-made goods we had available, but we charged an arm and a leg for them.

“Very well. I will be sure Alberto receives these. He will be overjoyed, I promise you!”

Great. With Alberto fighting for him, Adalmann would have a lot more options in battle now.

Oops. Just remembered.

“And, Adalmann, I want you to have this.”

I took out a jet-black robe, like something a priest from some dark, sinister cult would wear. It looked kind of cool, actually, not to mention gaudily decorated. It was, in fact, one of the most impressive pieces of the whole Tempest clothing collection—something worth at least a hundred gold coins, or the equivalent of a luxury sports car. Even royalty or nobility couldn’t shell out for this without due consideration. Truly top of the line. And it performed well, too—amazingly, even if it got ripped, it’d use Self-Regeneration to fix itself up. That made it a magic item, one with features you almost never saw.

“Oh—ohhhhh…”

Adalmann respectfully took it from me.

“I’d like you to put that on and greet any challengers you see like you’re still a wight king. I think that’ll help create more of a ‘floor guardian’ atmosphere with you, y’know?”

This was more a matter of taste than anything—my taste—but still.

I had also asked Ramiris to help me renovate this floor. We envisioned something like a throne room, with Adalmann leading an army of undead like the king he was.

“I will gladly do that, Sir Rimuru. It happens to be one of my talents.”

Nice. It seemed like I could rely on him.

“Okay. I’ll leave you be here, then. Also, if you have any other talented knights you’d like to have serving you in here, knock yourself out.”

“Understood, my lord. If I could check with you on one thing…”

“Mmm? What is it?”

“Well, I would like to bring one of my pets here with me, but could I ask for your permission?”

A pet? Hmm… Didn’t seem like an issue.

“Well, sure, if that’s all it is. You can use whatever pets you want in battle, actually; just try not to have them outnumber the parties attacking you.”

“Yes, my lord. I have been granted this land by my god, and I promise you that I, Adalmann, will protect it with all the ability I can muster!!”

Overreacting again. I let it slide. It wasn’t worth commenting on.

“Okay. We’re gonna be renovating this space to look like a throne room tonight, so feel free to choose whoever you want to serve you. If you have any questions, ask Shuna or Ramiris.”

“Yes, my lord!!”

“May the words of Sir Rimuru propel you forward!”

Shion had to butt in there. I really wish she didn’t—but she seemed happy with herself, so I didn’t pursue it.

The next day, we all came together at the appointed hour.

“Hee-hee-hee… Adalmann’s floor is just perfect now!”

The moment she caught sight of me, Ramiris started bragging. As she had reported, she completed the throne room the previous evening.

“Thanks much. The rest, I think we can leave to Adalmann.”

“Are you sure?”

“Welllll, he’ll perform better than he did yesterday anyway. If he’s fighting an A ranker, he’s gonna have trouble, but he’ll at least be able to expose his opponents’ skills for us.”

The longer Adalmann held out, the more serious his foes would get. That’s where Raphael would step in, analyzing the battle and figuring out how we should best respond—valuable info we could leverage in the next floor.

Despite everything I said to Adalmann, it really wasn’t any big deal if he lost. Besides, depending on the decisions we made right now, both he and (for that matter) Bovix may be idle for a long time to come. We needed to address every facet of this.

So! Time to start implementing—

“What are you doing?! I heard all about it! My dragons got pummeled?!”

Now that’s the last person I wanted to see—Milim, storming into the conference room and looking absolutely livid.

In her hand was Gobta, looking like a dirty old rag; he was being dragged along, but it looked like he was still breathing. I could hear him muttering “Heh-heh-heh… I did it… I sure did… I finished it all!” over and over to himself, too, so I guess he was conscious. Milim’s training must’ve really done a number on him, but he didn’t look any stronger to me—just kind of (okay, a lot more) beat up. Was he all right?

Milim nodded at me, oblivious to my concern. “Ah yes! Yes, Gobta performed brilliantly! I didn’t think he’d ever beat Hell mode!”

She did look pretty satisfied. And judging by the praise from Milim, Gobta must’ve performed a truly monumental feat.

“In that case, it is time to teach him my Veldora-Style Death Stance—”

“No it’s not! Gobta is my disciple!”

Veldora and Milim promptly began arguing, a completely spent Gobta to the side of them. I really didn’t want to get involved with that, so I’ll leave that choice up to Gobta. Glad he’s home safe, at least. I was going to reward him later.

Once I had his attention, I ordered Gobta to get some rest. He promptly headed to a nearby nap room.

Did I mention Ranga?

“My—my master, I have returned…”

He was wobbly as he padded toward me, voice hoarse. Gobta looked bad, and Ranga was about the same. Pretty intense training, I guess. I reflexively gave him a pat on the head; he squinted appreciatively.

“Good job. You can rest in my shadow now.”

He jumped right in the moment I said it.

By the way, once he had recovered enough, I asked Gobta what they were up to. It turned out that his “training” was nothing but on-the-field battle—back-to-back fighting against monsters either at his level or slightly above it. Once he and Ranga were in perfect sync with each other, they moved on to a never-ending string of battles against people like Carillon and Middray.



As Milim apparently put it to him: “No matter how hard you try, you’re never gonna house more magicules within your body. But don’t worry! If you can Unify with Ranga, that immediately solves the problem—and once you learn how to master the increase in power, you’ll be fine! So leave the magicule surge to Ranga and just try to polish up your senses!”

“So it was nothing but battle-sense training since then,” he concluded with a smile. He had also learned the extra skill Sage, which let him speed up his thoughts. I was pretty impressed.

Having Milim back was a boon, actually. After leaving Adalmann, I had been making the necessary preparations all night, just barely wrapping everything up in time.

Promptly, I took out one of the items I had completed. Veldora, Ramiris, and Milim each gave it curious stares as I held it in my hand.

“Pay attention, everyone! I have a special item here, something I’ve been developing for a little while. Personally, I think it’s groundbreaking. It’ll help us solve the problems we’re facing in the labyrinth, and it’ll also add some more fun to all our lives.”

I gave all three one of their own. I didn’t expect Milim in today, but I was planning to invite her over once I had something practical to share, so hers was all set to go.

The idea for this came from the homunculus Archduke Erald used earlier. I figured that having access to temporary bodies would let you do some pretty neat stuff.

“What’s this?”

“Never seen this before. Do I eat it?”

“Hmm… To me, it looks like a vessel for the soul—or the like.”

Milim, Ramiris, and Veldora seemed equally curious. No, Ramiris, it wasn’t food. Did she think everything I brought over for her was food? Oh, well.

Veldora was fairly close to the right answer. These items were quasi-compartments for souls. When transferring your consciousness to a homunculus, a corridor is established between it and your soul using some magic. I had Analyzed and Assessed the core components of that magic, revising them for my own needs. This was what I gave to Treyni—a vessel for her chaos core. I called it a pseudo-soul.

“Veldora’s almost got it. This device imitates a soul vessel. I can’t provide a soul itself, so instead, I tried to create a substitute that mimics one.”

“Hohh. Why did you do that?”

Veldora, maybe pleased he got it right, tried to sound as intelligent as possible. There was no need for me to put on airs; I could go ahead and just state my aims, but before that, I wanted to surprise them a little. After all the effort I spent on this, I thought I deserved a bit of fun.

“Hey, not so fast, not so fast. I’ll explain everything to you, okay? But next up, I’ve also got this. Take it and try to imagine a monster in your mind. Any one is fine.”

I then took out a set of black balls, each about the size of a fist, and handed them to my audience.

Veldora gave it an odd look. “Hmm? Any type?”

“Yeah. Either an existing one or whatever crazy thing comes to mind for you.”

“So a goblin or an orc? Or a horned hare, or an ogre bear, or anything?”

“Hmm? Sure. But make sure it’s something you like. I don’t want you to complain about your choice afterward.”

“All right. A monster, then? Do these create monsters who you’ll repel labyrinth challengers with…?”

“Something like that.”

He was always supersharp with things like this.

Satisfied enough with my guidance, the three of them picked up their black orbs and sank into contemplation. These items were called master cores, and the magical core of Charybdis came in handy with developing them. I had that kept in isolation within my Stomach, but Raphael had finally finished analyzing it. It was the core of a large monster, as well as the root of its power; apparently, in the transformation into demon lord, I had consumed all the negative energy inside, so it was now an empty shell. That made it perfect for housing a soul vessel…and now, here we were.

After a few moments, the magicules in the air began to interact with the master cores, creating monsters—the exact ones each bearer imagined.

“Well? Pretty neat, huh? And like Veldora said, we can use these monsters to engage parties in the labyrinth. That’s what I gathered all of you here for.”

That wasn’t the only reason, but nobody was listening anyway. They were all marveling at the monsters they created.

Meanwhile, I was busy making my own monster—a ghost, a transparent, disembodied soul floating in the air. I’ll omit its stats, but one special skill it had was Cancel Physical Attack—as a ghost, no physical attack worked on it. It couldn’t attack physically, either, of course; magic was its only offense.

Next up was Veldora. There was now a skeleton standing next to him. It couldn’t cast magic, although it could learn how later on—with the right evolution, it could also master Battlewill.

Milim, meanwhile, had generated a bouncy, lustrous blob. It had no limbs, its color a garish red that demanded your attention. It was a slime.

Um…

“Why’d you make a slime? Are you picking on me?!”

“N-no, um, you asked me to go with something I liked. What’s the issue?”

Now she was firing back at me. Ah well. She was clearly happy, at least, her eyes all but shouting “Slime!” out loud. I was wondering about the Day-Glo red, however.

Finally, we had Ramiris. What was this? A knight? Or a suit of armor? Yes, it was a suit of living armor, to be exact—full plate, but looking worn out for some reason. It was still the largest out of the four monsters we made. Maybe Ramiris’s hang-ups about her size drove her to imagine something big. The fact that it was completely empty inside was pretty appropriate for her.

Everyone peered closely at the monsters they just willed to life. But the surprises were only beginning.

“All right, so listen. As Veldora pointed out, I’m thinking about using the monsters we created to dispatch the intruders inside our labyrinth.”

“Mm? Intruders…?”

“Yes. These monsters are the guardians of the labyrinth, so anyone stepping inside has to be intruders, right?”

“Ah, I see.”

“Huh? What?”

“Mmm, indeed. Remember, Ramiris, we are running this labyrinth. Calling them ‘challengers’ is rather strange, if you think about it.”

“Yes… Now that you mention it, you’re right!”

“Yeah, I was thinking the same thing.”

Veldora’s stepping in to explain matters was convincing enough for Ramiris. Milim, meanwhile, pretended she knew the entire time. I doubted she did at all, but I needed to move things along.

“Right. So we’ll be taking on the intruders with these…but do you think it’ll be possible at all?”

“Of course not. They are far too weak.”

“My armor looks pretty cool, but I’m not too optimistic, no.”

“Rimuru, I’m disappointed in you! You know I’m too smart a girl to expect anything from these.”

Heh-heh-heh. Just as I thought, they were spouting off whatever popped into their minds. Why were Ramiris and Milim acting so haughty with me? That set me off a bit, but I needed to act my age here.

“Well, the story doesn’t end when you create them. The real show begins now, so I’d like all of you to sit down and relax, okay? Now, what I’d like you to do is point your pseudo-souls at your monster and chant ‘Possess!’ out loud.”

There were some incredulous looks, but they all settled into their seats for me. We had some pretty comfy chairs in this conference room; the cushioning was excellent.

Then, all at once:

“““Possess!”””

The moment we all said it together, the pseudo-souls in our hands lit up as they were absorbed into the monsters, fusing with the master cores inside them. This resulted in a complete avatar core—and when it was done, my consciousness blacked out.

In another moment, my view had changed. My Magic Sense, something I had on at all times, immediately shrank down its range, drastically affecting my vision. I had my five simulated senses now, so it was still far better than my first few days in this world, but the other three had never experienced anything like that, so it must’ve been a bear to deal with.

I looked around as I thought about this. In my hazy vision, I could see a skeleton stretching out its legs, a slime zooming around at surprising speed, and a suit of living armor methodically toddling around like a classic wind-up robot. All three of them had successfully “possessed” their monster.

Even now, I could feel myself getting used to this. It felt far more natural than anticipated—like it was my own body. A body that was far less capable than my own, however, so it was hard to move around. But once you figured out how you moved, it got easier to predict how your body would react to your will. You didn’t need long at all to move it exactly as intended.

The same was true for the other three.

“““This is great!”””

After a few minutes of testing out their new bodies, they all shouted in unison.

“Isn’t it? What do you think of my research, huh?”

“Amazing. Truly amazing, Rimuru!” Veldora cried.

“That’s classic Rimuru, isn’t it? No wonder I thought you were such a great guy!” Ramiris agreed.

“I knew it all along,” said Milim. “I’ve always believed in you!!”

They were hopelessly wrapped around my finger. But hey, glad they’re happy. “Well, looks like we’ve got a resounding success. And now that you’ve all jumped into those monsters, I don’t think I need to explain what we have to do, do I?”



“Heh-heh-heh…,” Veldora chuckled. “Such a silly question. So instead of having the monsters do our bidding, we take matters into our own hands? What a creative idea, Rimuru.”

“Exactly!” I replied. “Although, I wish I could’ve tried conquering the labyrinth in this form…”

“So this is what a video game is like? I’ve heard about this!”

“What? Is that true, Veldora?!” said Milim.

“Master! So we’ll beat up the enemy like this, then? And then we can make these bodies learn new things, too…?” Ramiris jumped in.

Gotta hand it to Veldora. He immediately guessed what I wanted to do. Yes, this was basically a pseudo-MMORPG—although, there wasn’t anything too “massive” about our party of four. Maybe just an MORPG, then? It doesn’t matter. The key thing here, the concept, was that we could now enjoy the very labyrinth we expended the effort to build.

“Hee-hee-hee! Well put, Veldora. You can nearly read my mind, I see. But don’t get the wrong idea yet. Yes, I developed this with an eye toward playing the labyrinth like a game, but we have other business first, don’t we?”

“Kwah-ha-ha-ha, we do! We need to use these bodies to dispatch the challengers—I mean, the intruders causing us problems, then?”

He got it, all right. Yes, I thought about using these “avatars,” these monster bodies, to interfere with Green Fury’s rapid advance. And like Ramiris said, I had thought of several ways to enjoy these bodies—leveling them up to evolve them, learning how to fight with the restricted skills they had, and so on. Still, what I really wanted to do was go have fun beating up monsters and challengers—I had no idea I’d invent something so useful just to make that happen.

“Of course, once everything was ready, I was just thinking that we could enjoy conquering our own labyrinth as well,” I said.

“Ah, right. We’ll be able to test out our work, huh?”

“Mm-hmm. And with these avatars, we can’t exercise our full powers, right? So I thought it’d help us get another perspective on problems in the labyrinth.”

“Yes… True. And the master of the labyrinth taking on challengers himself—some people might see that as unseemly. But copying my soul into a weaker beast like this…”

“Right! This way, we can beat up intruders as regular old labyrinth denizens, not as True Dragons or demon lords.”

“Now I get it! This sounds fun!!” Milim was certainly convinced. Given the nearly infinite power she lobbed around all the time, a much more inconvenient form must’ve seemed novel to her. She looked really excited about it.

“Well, shall we spring into action?”

“Yes, why not clean up the garbage before enjoying our own game?” said Veldora.

“The time has come to fully stretch out my arms, I’d say!” said Ramiris. “I can’t wait to test all forty-eight of my finisher moves!”

“I’m not sure how any of this works, but this seems kinda fun to me!” Milim cheered.

We all triumphantly stood up. Time to go down there, get in Green Fury’s way, and ensure they couldn’t challenge the bottom floors for a little while. How would we do that? Well, I had a few other schemes in mind.

First, we needed to get used to our avatars. After that, the next important thing was equipment. We all put on Resurrection Bracelets with infinite charges, ensuring we could die as much as we wanted—but that wasn’t enough. Our avatars were freshly born and extremely low level. Pushovers like us wouldn’t deter Green Fury, no matter how well we surprised them. If we had some decent equipment, though…

“Right, we’ll definitely want to get some equipment together. Let’s go to Kurobe’s and have him craft some weapons and armor!”

“Ah yes, indeed! I’m a mere skeleton as it is, after all.”

“Hee-hee! You fools! I’m a slime built for speed and mobility now! I could work just fine in the labyrinth!”

“Um, I’m just a suit of armor… Can I put more armor on over this?”

“Oh, we can figure something out. Let’s just head over. And if you don’t need equipment, Milim, just stay here.”

“D-don’t give me that nonsense! I can hold my own as it is, but I still need some gear!”

Talk about selfish. She should’ve just said so. I wanted some equipment as well, so I prepared to undo the Possession and leave.

“To go back, just picture the word separate in your mind. That’ll bring you back.”

I gave them a quick demo, putting the avatar core in my pocket as I taught them. These avatar cores had the monster encoded in them, one per core, and they couldn’t be shared between different people. These cores were a second “self” for you, really, so I wanted to be sure people took good care of them.

“With these,” I added, “you’ll be able to call on your second form anytime you like.”

“Pretty neat item, definitely. We’ll need to think about what to do with them while we’re busy Possessing.”

Veldora and Ramiris, back in their original bodies, stood up from their chairs.

“Maybe fit it on our Bracelets so we don’t lose them?” suggested Veldora.

“That’s a good idea. I think I’ll do that!” said Ramiris.

They both played around with the avatar cores in their hands. I think I’ll do that with mine as well. But what about Milim?

“Hey, Mili—”

“I’m gonna go like this!”

Before I could call for her, Milim—in slime form—was digging her way into my pocket. “Okay, let’s go!” she shouted, bossing me around and demonstrating her utter lack of interest in listening to me. She must’ve really liked that body. Pretty childlike of her…which, yeah, she is a child. Calling a child childish wasn’t very constructive, so I gave up on scolding her and got going.

We were at Kurobe’s workshop.

“You there, Kurobe?”

“Oh, Sir Rimuru? What brings you here today?”

Kurobe came right up when I asked for him. Seeing Veldora and Ramiris with me surprised him.

“Well, we’re looking for some weapons,” I said as we walked inside. I hadn’t been around for a while, but the workshop definitely had more people now—monsters included. It was scorching hot as usual. Temperature didn’t affect me, so it was fine, but working in here must’ve been grueling for the others.

“Looks like you’ve hired some more apprentices.”

“Yeah, luckily! They still need practice, but some of ’em are pretty talented.”

Some of them looked up as they heard us talking in the workshop. Once they saw who I was, they leaped to their feet and bowed at me. Seeing all of them do that at once startled me, but Kurobe was used to it.

“It’s not break time yet! Get back to work!”

His ornery shouting drove his staff to return to their jobs. But I kind of understood their thought process. If you’re sitting at your cube, and the CEO comes in out of nowhere, you’d be nervous, too—especially if you were on the bottom rung. And maybe it didn’t feel that way to me, but I was the ruler of this nation. I hadn’t let it concern me before now, but maybe I should have given more advance warning as a rule.

Coming in casually like this might’ve just caused trouble for everyone. Whenever a district manager or whatever came to view our workplace in my old world, we’d always spend the previous day cleaning up the whole office to prepare. If it was the president, then no mistakes would be tolerated. The higher up you went, the more it unnerved people when you got all casual with them, I guess.

Still, I didn’t want every trip out to be filled with pomp and circumstance. I hated to call Kurobe out of his busy work schedule; better for me to just show up whenever he’s free.

“Sorry I barged in without any warning. I think I’m gonna make a regular habit of it for a little while, so no need to get all tense, okay?”

Thus, I decided to address the staff. Maybe them being too casual with me would be a problem, but there was no need to be on pins and needles around me. I loved acting like a boss, but I didn’t make a hobby out of inconveniencing people. If the other person’s too nervous to react to me, that bothered me, too. Gobta’s obliviousness was just right. Just keep in mind the acronym TPO—time, place, occasion—and it was easier to find the right approach.

My advice seemed to relieve the staff a bit. Once I was sure of that, I nodded and went into a room deeper inside the workshop.

I wasn’t aware of this, by the way, but the apprentices weren’t anxious just because I was a demon lord.

While I wasn’t paying attention, someone had held a Tempest popularity contest, and apparently, I had been voted into the top-three idols alongside Shuna and Shion. A surprising result, they told me. Ramiris and Milim were in the rankings as well, and while I won’t say exactly where, I can tell you that Milim and I were way ahead of Ramiris.

I wasn’t sure whether to whine about it or marvel at how my town’s grown. Either way, hearing about it later made me roll my eyes.

“So what kind of stuff d’you need?”

In his personal chamber, Kurobe got straight down to business.

“Well…”

We all went over the hopes we had.

“I’m intending to have Garm build the armor, so I think it’d be neat if you could collaborate again.”

“Yeahhh, true. All right. Let’s go bother Garm about it.”

So as we talked, we decided to take Kurobe over to Garm’s workshop. I wound up causing a similar commotion over there, but I’ll skip describing it.

“Equipment for monsters?! Wow. You always have the craziest projects for me, don’t you?”

As Garm groused about this, the four of us all Possessed our avatars to demonstrate for him.

“All right. We’ll make you exactly what you want—no, even better!”

“Yes, we’re on the case. I love a nice, creative project like this, and I’ll try to craft some stuff that’d never work on a human!”

Kurobe and Garm both readily agreed to the project. And really, I couldn’t wait to see what they came up with.

They said the work would be done in several days, so in the meantime, we trained ourselves to get more used to our avatars. Nothing too complex—fighting monsters in the labyrinth’s upper levels, attacking obvious newbie adventurers.

Over the past few days, we had grown adept at dividing up our roles. Reaching that point, though, was a slog. At first, we even lost to beginner parties up top.

We’d also get wiped out by traps, which would probably be funny to us later but definitely wasn’t at the time, and do other stupid things. We tried using magic items to keep traps from deploying and stuff, even. It was Ramiris who kept setting them off, with Veldora usually suffering as the hapless victim. I floated, meanwhile, and Milim could stick to the ceiling—pitfalls weren’t a concern for us two, so we forgot to warn the others about them.

That was a mistake, I’ll admit, but Ramiris… Seriously? Why are you setting off traps? We made sure to give her an earful about it, and I think she deserved it.

Through all the pain, we skipped out on sleeping to keep on training. In battle, teamwork was the most important thing. Normal parties would talk to one another or give signals with their eyes, but we had pretty much none of those skills at all. We had Veldora and Milim with us, after all, two people who were the strongest in the world all by themselves.

What we did have, however, was one cheat-level skill—Thought Communication, letting us stay in touch and give orders with pinpoint accuracy. I was the party’s command post, Veldora, Milim, and Ramiris serving as my hands and feet. Thanks to that, we began to rapidly build ourselves, eventually gaining some decent experience and abilities.

Once we had a good footing, we patiently waited for our equipment as we fine-tuned our teamwork. As we did, we heard the news that Team Green Fury had beaten Floor 40.

“Hoo boy,” said Ramiris. “Now they’ve beaten the tempest serpent, huh?”

“They took a pretty careful approach. The first team was all about gathering intelligence, the second whittled down its energy, and then the A team killed it,” said Veldora.

Bosses were resurrected regularly, of course. But if a boss successfully beat a party, that didn’t erase its current damage or state of exhaustion. If a group of people had the right teamwork, this gave them a clear advantage.

“That was a mistake. Bosses really need a way to heal…”

“Yeah, but those monsters work strictly on instinct, so…”

As Veldora saw it, they lacked the intelligence to use healing items anyway, making it a moot point. He was right, but we weren’t out of options.

“Why don’t we bring it up with Treyni?” I suggested. “The labyrinth managers can heal monsters, can’t they?”

“Oh, right. I’ll do that!”

So we decided to have Treyni’s sisters heal bosses if they were involved in a consecutive streak of battles all at once.

Little by little, we were addressing and solving the labyrinth’s issues. And then:

“They’re about ready to hit Floor 49. What’ll we do, Rimuru?” Milim was on the verge of panic. But she was right. Green Fury would reach their most climactic battle yet as soon as tomorrow.

“Well, we may not have our equipment at the moment, but I’d say our teamwork is golden,” said Veldora. “Shall we try taking them on now?”

“I’m game! Time to use my arms of steel to beat them to a pulp!” Ramiris crowed.

Those two were always out for blood. Honestly, though, I don’t think we stood much of a chance in a clean fight. For now, Floor 49, packed with the most devious traps I ever devised, was our only real chance at messing with them.

“Well, so be it. Maybe we can scrounge up some weapons…”

Even if Kurobe and Garm provided us the best gear possible, we probably wouldn’t take a frontal approach with them. It’d certainly up our chances a lot, but we could probably hold our own anyway. But just when I was about to commit, I heard a knock on the conference-room door.

“Sir Rimuru,” came Shion’s refreshing voice, “Kurobe said he’s ready.”

Our party looked at one another and grinned.

Our specialized avatar equipment was complete.

I was given a Death Scythe and Hell Garment, two magic items that even ghosts could wear. Veldora got the Death Blade and Hell Mail, along with a Hellgate Shield to complete the picture.

As a slime, Milim could only equip simple objects, swallowing up a Death Stiletto and covering her body with a Crimson Cape. The moment she did, her body grew a pair of bloodred wings—quite a transformation. “See?” she gleefully shouted. “It’s really true! You need to equip your items, or else they won’t work!”

Yeah, great. If she was happy, I was happy.

Finally, Ramiris. She had ordered Heavy Fullplate armor, which looked like a work of art, but we weren’t sure if she could even equip it. Nervous, she Possessed her living armor and tried to take it up—and at that very moment, she switched armor. With a clatter, her old tin suit crashed to the ground, turning to dust and vanishing in the wind. She had upgraded from living armor to heavy living armor—not an evolution, but more like a total replacement.

“Wh-whoa! This is so much easier to move in!”

She was right. Her old, creaky gait was now smooth and ninja-like. It’d help her teamwork a lot, I was sure. Funny to think a suit of armor’s feature set could affect the way you moved, though. Kind of an unexpected discovery.

Elated, Ramiris now had to select a weapon and shield.

“Ha-ha! I don’t need no stupid shield!”

…was her opinion, so she opted for a large two-handed weapon instead—the Death Axe. The power it packed made it the ultimate in weapons—wielding it was tricky, but oh well; not my problem. She got picked on all the time for being a wimp, so maybe this’ll assuage her ego a little. Funny how her personality kept coming out like that.

So we were all decked out in brand-new equipment. These weapons and armor were all on the level of a Unique item, but since they were heavily modified for use by monsters, they were more novelty items than anything. For beginners like us, however, they were crazily overpowered. What’s more, they had a type of curse applied that registered our names to them—thus, they could never get stolen.

It was the best equipment we could’ve possibly asked for right now, and it gave us a new perspective on everything. It was almost time to rumble, and we couldn’t have been more excited.

Time for a quick check of our avatars. My ghost dropped physical offense in favor of magical and spiritual attacks. It was classed as a sorcerer, and in time, I’d like to maybe teach it spiritual and illusory magic so it could make the upgrade to full-fledged wizard. Holy magic would be a nice addition, too—what would happen if I placed faith in myself to drive that? That’d be a fun experiment.

Veldora’s skeleton was an all-rounder, capable of various kinds of attacks. It was a fighter class, and I think he wanted to teach it magic so it could become a magic knight later.

Milim’s slime, meanwhile, was geared entirely for speed—and for landing telling blows in a single strike. Wish fulfillment for her, I suppose. Her class was assassin, and maybe I could have Soei give her some training, but I didn’t want to occupy his time with our dumb little make-believe fun here. Her basic strategy involved lunging down on foes from the ceiling—a powerful strike if it worked, but what did she intend to do if it didn’t? Run, I suppose; she certainly was fast enough for it. In a way, she was the ideal slime fighter.

Finally, as you’d expect, Ramiris’s heavy living armor was an attacker with more than ample defense, giving it a lot more stability than I originally gave her credit for. The class was berserker, and while she was no crazed warrior, defending herself was never really a priority in Ramiris’s approach. As a dangerous, attack-oriented creature, that was the name she was given. Once she got used to things, I could picture her as a tank, providing a twin wall of defense with Veldora.

We were all set to go. Given that we never got hungry, long, dragged-out battles were our lone major advantage. Let’s do the best job we can to get in Green Fury’s way.

Such was our thoughts as we set off, but…well…we sent them running so fast, the actual battle was a total letdown.

If you threw away all emotion and ran a completely impartial, third-party Analyze and Assess on our avatars, you’d realize that we were probably already pushing an A in rank. Our equipment was more than half the reason for that, but even without it, as long as we made good use of our powers, nothing could stop us.

The main oversight we made was that our own personal battle experience was reflected in our avatars. We couldn’t use all our skills, but things like Thought Communication and Hasten Thought were themselves enough to give us a decisive edge. Plus, we could cast magic so quickly that it was really unfair. Our restricted magicules blocked us from using much of it, but we had the knowledge for it, and thus we could handle magic better than even your average royal court sorcerer. This came with no casting time, so we could engineer tandem magic strikes with practically zero time lag—our foes had no chance to react.

Veldora, meanwhile, was such a genius with his sword, it was like he had eyes in the back of his head.

“Kwaah-ha-ha-ha! My Veldora-Style Death Stance gives me instant access to an infinite number of sword skills! …Oh, wait, this doesn’t work…”

He was trying to imitate the moves he saw in the manga he read. I thought he was just screwing around, but some of his moves were actually kind of plausible. His power was off the charts to start with, of course, so I should’ve expected anything and everything from him. Treating this whole thing seriously at all now seemed silly.

Milim was exactly as blazing fast as she set out to be. Even speeds that nobody else had a chance at controlling were no problem with her reflexes. I really had no idea slimes could move that fast if they tried—sliding frictionless across the ground, with enough elasticity to bounce off walls and lunge at foes. That worked just as well off the ceiling, too. Your average person would have trouble even following her with their eyes. As a slime myself, these new discoveries were a huge shock.

“Ah-ha-ha-ha-ha! Slow! Too slow! Face my wrath, you chump!”

She was getting exceedingly carried away as she dropped down on her foes’ backs, stabbing with her Death Stiletto. That was enough to end most battles. Her body was largely impervious to physical attack, and if you want to cast magic against her, you needed to capture her in your sights first. Think about it, and you’ll realize that Milim’s slime was a pretty scary enemy to face.

But what let Veldora and Milim truly shrine was Ramiris, the unsung hero of the pack.

“Hraahhh! Time to be crushed!!”

Ramiris’s battle strategy was pretty simple—find an enemy, run straight at it, and stage a full-frontal attack. This would be a bad idea for most, an imbecilic strategy, but in our case, it was the way to go. She never listened to any of my advice anyway, so I figured we might as well take advantage of her—she’d be our tank, our diversion, and the remainder of the party could get on the attack then.

Normally, that wouldn’t work too well, but Ramiris ran around like a daredevil, never bothering to defend herself, this big suit of armor sprinting for you and spinning a Death Axe in its hands. Anyone who saw it would be forced to deal with it—and since she didn’t care about defense, her attacks tended to find their target. (She also had Cancel Pain, which helped a lot.)

Plus, the armor itself was pretty sturdy. A Heavy Fullplate used what seemed like a cartload of magisteel; weight concerns were tossed out the window with it. It came with a Self-Repair function as well, so most damage wasn’t an issue. If a regular person put it on, they probably wouldn’t be able to move at all. Having such a hefty chunk of magisteel come your way—well, I wouldn’t want to be her enemy.

What’s more, I had Recovery Magic.

I had been experimenting with holy magic as part of my work, and it was surprisingly easy to deploy. It wasn’t a matter of “having faith in myself” so much as offering prayers in exchange for control over spiritual particles, a skill usually shut away from me. In my case, my magical power as a ghost was sent over to the “real” me along with the words of prayer. I was, in essence, borrowing force from my main body to cast magic.

These “words of prayer” were mainly about building up an image. When working with spiritual particles, you’d never get anywhere if you kept asking what your disciples wanted and going with that—it’d take too much calculation. All that processing work is instead applied to the people who placed their faith in you. The more disciples you had like that, the more magic force you got—to put it another way, you got higher up as a god. You were also connected to your believers, and you could use those believers’ minds to expand your calculation capacity—kind of a substitution cheat that saved you magic force and time.

Now I saw why Luminus sought to build more believers for herself. With a massive enough number of practitioners, she could whip up large-scale magic on a passing whim. The “secret skills of faith and favor,” indeed. That’s some scary stuff she taught me.

But enough about that. The point is, I had holy magic, and as a party, we boasted a pretty formidable force—and right now, like evil personified, we had just wiped out Team Green Fury on the forty-ninth floor.

You should never be afraid to try something new, I guess. Our frontal attack failed, so we polished our teamwork and took advantage of the traps.

I set the Slime Doll on them, damaging their weapons. I used the Slime Rain to break their focus and exhaust them—and then we attacked, throwing them into the Slime Pool. While Ramiris’s bellowing grabbed their attention, Milim sneaked up on them, breaking down their teamwork as Veldora split them apart and isolated their rear support. Our giant slime crushed their powerless magicians and thieves, while Veldora and Ramiris bear-hugged the remaining core members straight into the Slime Pool, sinking them down. Our aim was to destroy their weapons in the acidic goop, and once Green Fury’s main weapons had corroded into useless fragments, that’d be a huge damper on their dungeon-conquering speed.

“Ugghh! After all that swag we earned!!”

It turns out the leader of the Sons of the Veldt, the one currently whining about the equipment dissolving in her hands, was female. That surprised me—but not as much as what her companions said next.

“Well, maybe this timing’s for the best. It was about the right moment to pack up.”

“Yeah, our home country’s calling for us anyway.”

I definitely heard one of the survivors from the team say that to the leader. I thought the Sons of the Veldt was an independent mercenary corps, unaffiliated with any other nation. My reports stated they were being funded by someone in Englesia, but maybe it was more like a long-term gig? The term home country indicated that they might’ve had more loyalty to Englesia than a simple employer-employee relationship. I’d need to keep an eye on them.

As long as we were encouraging people to use the Dungeon, we’d naturally see visitors with murky origins. I was expecting that from the beginning, but we should probably give everyone another heads-up about that. The whole Green Fury thing reminded me of it all over again.

Besides:

“We did it.”

“Yes. Victory is ours!”

“Why wouldn’t it be? We are the strongest in the world!!”

If I didn’t keep these idiots in line, they’d immediately get distracted by the next victory ahead. The thought was in my mind, but—right now, at least—I didn’t let it get in the way of my joy. Mission accomplished.