

CHAPTER 4

THE FINAL ROUND AND THE LABYRINTH’S GRAND OPENING

The morning of Day Three.

I had already completed my little jaunt to the Dwarven Kingdom and exchanged my stellars for gold coins. That takes care of that. Now we’ll have to wait and see how the schemer behind this reacts.

So, all anxieties for the future quelled, let’s go back to enjoying this festival. Kicking off, we had today’s first main draw: the tournament final between Masayuki and Gobta.

The coliseum was already whipped up for this, people arguing and betting with each other over who would win. Mjöllmile was taking those bets, of course, and I looked forward to seeing how much we’d make off that. The most surefire way to win at gambling, after all, is to run the game. No matter who looked like the favorite, you were always going to profit that way.

I had made a bet on Gobta, in hopes of maybe earning some pocket money out of it. No, it wasn’t because he was a long shot. Definitely not. I certainly didn’t place a large sum on Gobta just because the odds were so crazily skewed against him. Uh-uh.

Um, but that didn’t matter anyway, all right? I had a hobgoblin to cheer on.

“Aaaaaall right, ladies and gentlemen! The final match of the tournament is here at last!! Which of our two competitors will seize the championship for himself today?! Will it be ‘Lightspeed’ Masayuki or Gobta, the fighter rising up and making a splash as he vies for a spot in the illustrious Big Four?!”

Soka’s commentating was as fresh as ever. She was talking up Gobta in such a breezily casual manner. It was, in a way, insurance to keep Gobta from ditching the tournament and hiding out somewhere—a cruel way of doing it but damn effective.

Diablo lifted up his hand. The arena fell silent. Was it me, or were some of the female audience members falling for him? I banished the thought from my mind.

If Gobta beat Masayuki today, all my problems were in the past. If, on the other hand, Masayuki really was a fighter on the level of Hinata, Gobta was toast—but we could still learn a lot from this battle. If Masayuki had, well, pretty much any trouble dispatching Gobta today, for example, we’d know that he was no threat at all to us.

Gobta had both Ranga and astonishing good luck on his side. It wasn’t a bad way to test Masayuki out, I thought.

Soka was now busy introducing the competitors in detail. Once that was done, the fight would begin. I patiently awaited the moment. How much of Masayuki’s real skill could Gobta pull out of him?

Masayuki was panicking.

When he saw Bovix and Equix’s battle yesterday, realizing he’d be fighting whoever won, he turned pale as a ghost.

I’m dead. If—if I fight either of those monster freaks, they’ll rip me in half!!

Somehow, he’d found the right words to turn Bovix against himself and forfeit the match. He really wanted to pat himself on the back for that one. But the match after that threw Masayuki right back into despair. How the hell can I beat them?! Did they only open this country’s tournament to insane monsters or what?! Both the competitors at yesterday’s closing match were more terrifying than even Bovix. It made him want to curse at the world.

He didn’t eat one bit last night, feeling all the world like a condemned prisoner waiting for the call to the gallows.

Looking back, things really have been going too well…

Leaning too much on the strength of his friends, letting people bandy him around as a Hero and champion, he’d let it go to his head, figuring “it’ll all work out somehow.” And it had, so far, enough so that Masayuki never really doubted it much…or maybe he deliberately strove not to think about it. He believed, without evidence, that his group was invincible and could defeat all comers. That was how Masayuki managed to maintain some sense of sanity about all this.

But how did I kid myself into trusting any of those stupid delusions? I gotta go. I gotta get out of here!

The urge had seized his mind again and again.

“Heh! Once you win your fight tomorrow, Masayuki, how ’bout you move right on and challenge the demon lord on the spot?”

The question from Jinrai was so innocent. Masayuki wanted to shout You’re crazy! at him.

This was all that demon lord Rimuru’s fault. He looked so kind, so vulnerable, that Masayuki wasn’t as wary as he should’ve been. Otherwise, he would’ve taken more careful steps to protect himself.

“Either way,” said Jiwu, “it’s only a matter of time, Sir Masayuki. Soon, you will slap the demon lord silly, and this nation will finally be free!”

“But shouldn’t we talk with Yuuki before he fights him? You’re calling this an easy fight, but what if he somehow loses tomorrow?”

Jinrai looked up. “Whoa, Bernie, are you kidding me?”

“Yes, I’d be more worried if Lion Mask made it to the finals, but Gobta, this hobgoblin? It has to be in the bag. The battle will be over before he can even summon that beast.”

No, it wasn’t in the bag. Masayuki had no idea how he’d defend himself. All he could picture was a future full of teeth, claws, and daggers. But his companions had so much faith in him, he couldn’t reveal his feelings to them.

So he just nonchalantly said, “Well, I’ll try my best!” and bluffed his way through the evening.

And now, time had beaten its merciless path all the way to this moment.

Masayuki visited the bathroom several times in the lead-up to the final, just to make sure he didn’t pee himself in the arena.

Gaaahhhh, what am I gonna do? How can I escape this coliseum alive?!

Facing him was a fighter who exuded coolness. His name was Gobta, according to the lady announcer next to them. Jiwu thought beating a hobgoblin was a cinch, but Masayuki just couldn’t see it. A hobgoblin? You liar! Goblins are the weakest monsters in the world! So what’d this guy do to evolve into such a heroic-looking dude?!

“Ladies and gentlemen! The final round of the First Tempest Battle Tournament is about to begin! On one side, we have Gobta, young captain of the Goblin Riders and a member of the demon lord Rimuru’s personal staff! On the other, Lightspeed Masayuki, Hero and champion of the Western Nations! What kind of battle will these two giants show us today?! You can see them staring each other down, here in the center of the arena. In just a few moments—”

When she stopped talking, the battle would begin.

Oh crap. I’m seriously running out of time.

He’d thought his bladder was empty. His nerves were telling him otherwise. They pounded against his mind, urging him to release himself. If he wasn’t so worked up, he might’ve been interested in things like the cute butt lurking underneath the base of the announcer’s tail, but now was no time for that.

Masayuki recalled his skill—Chosen One, his sole unique. He still didn’t know much about it. The name had been reported to him by this cold, businesslike voice in his mind. Only recently had he come to know that this skill provided him assorted effects. He knew it made people react in ways that always benefited him, making him worshipped as a modern-day champion. But he couldn’t find a way to turn it off—and now, it had brought him into this arena.

…Yeah. And that power did its stuff against Bovix yesterday, too. And if it can just get me safely through this one…

As far as Masayuki knew, Chosen One simply made everyone assume the wrong thing about him. He resolved to bet on it one more time. This inner decision helped calm him a little. He looked at his foe. Then—was it a coincidence? Their eyes met. And he saw that he was looking a bit agitated, too. Fidgety.

Huh? Wait, is this gonna work…?

Opponents reacted this way to him at the tournaments in Englesia, too, assuming Masayuki was all-powerful and throwing in the towel. It happened more often than he could count.

Now, maybe—just maybe—he could win this. And the moment he thought that, his legs stopped shaking.

Maybe, if all goes well, I can win without doing anything again.

His wits were returning to him as he thought it over. But in all too short of a time, he’d have to reconsider his wisdom…

“Ready? And…begin!!”

At Soka’s signal, the battle kicked off.

“Woooo! Let’s do it!”

Gobta acted first, plunging straight ahead. I feared this was some kamikaze move to get himself hurt (but not too hurt) so he could quit. I was wrong. I guess that fishing pole I’d dangled in front of him was pretty damn tempting.

Heading straight for his foe, Gobta slipped right past him in a baseball-style slide, taking position against the outer boundary like yesterday. His eyes were on his foe the whole time, but Masayuki didn’t even react, slowly turning back toward Gobta with a distant smile.

“Whoaaa! Is handsomeness the key to strength after all?! Gobta’s tricky maneuvers were totally ignored as the dashing Masayuki shows just how unfazed and comfortable he is!”

Soka’s commentary hit hard. It’d make anyone with hang-ups about their looks cry, not just Gobta. Yeah, Masayuki was handsome, but this was playing favorites a bit too much.

“Heh…heh-heh… All part of the playbook… You’re acting like nothing I can do will hit you, huh? I wanted to see just how far I could go with my own strength today…but I can’t even touch you, huh? Then it’s time to use this—my new, ultimate power!!”

Oh lord. He was up to no good again. This was so going to fail. No one was around to stop him, but I really wished he’d actually try practicing something before busting it out in public like this.

Report. Last night, the subject Gobta obtained the unique skill Summon Demon Wolf. It is believed that the subject Ranga’s forcing himself into yesterday’s summoning is the cause, but it combines with the extra skill Unify to “unify” the summoned Ranga with the summoner.

Huh?

So wait, Gobta could use Summon Demon Wolf to, like, merge with Ranga? How did he…? Hey, wasn’t Raphael about to say something last night but kept quiet instead? Was it about that?!

That accusation is—

That accusation is what, huh? If Raphael couldn’t even drive himself to finish the sentence, something must be going on. Gobta suddenly awakening to this crazy new power out of nowhere was way too unnatural to believe. I was beginning to think Raphael may’ve helped grease the wheels a little, helping Gobta pick up this skill.

Raphael stayed silent. He never lied to me, but he was in no hurry to answer with the truth, either. I could force the issue, but maybe I didn’t need to. Let’s just see what happens. Good timing, at least.

“Check this out! Transform!!”

The air warped around him. Ranga appeared behind his back—and then they “unified,” Ranga’s body seeming to merge with Gobta’s. To make a long story short, the results looked like a bipedal version of Ranga—and I’ll admit it. It looked way cool. Dammit! Why does Gobta get to transform into something so awesome like that?!

“Whoaaa! Sweet! What is that? So cool!!”

Milim, next to me, was dancing in her seat. I could understand her excitement. Gobta drove me insane sometimes. Turning into some dashing fantasy creature like this…

“L-look at that! Gobta has transformed into something far from himself…!”

“Yes,” a composed Diablo said to the excited Soka, whose voice had ratcheted up an octave or so. “The ability to infuse your own body with the power of a summoned creature. A very rare skill.”

“So Gobta is using the power of the creature he summoned yesterday for himself? Amazing! We’re witnessing something amazing here, folks!!”

“Wait,” I whispered. “So it’s kind of like Gobta extracting all of Ranga’s force for his own use?”

“Impressive, isn’t it? Ranga seems to be giving himself up to Gobta, but this combo might work a lot better than I thought.”

“But we’re talking Gobta here.”

“Oh-ho-ho! And Gobta is my apprentice, remember. He may not be the greatest physical specimen, but he has experience fighting magic-born more powerful than he is. If he can ably harness Sir Ranga’s power, he may grow in ways I cannot predict…”

My officials seemed impressed, at least. And the rest of the crowd was watching on silently, holding their breath.

“Heh-heh! Now it’s my turn!”

It’s been your turn, dude. Masayuki hasn’t done anything.

My jealousy was driving me to pick on him internally.

Then Gobta disappeared before my eyes…figuratively. My eyes could follow him, but I’m sure most of the audience thought he vanished.

“G-Gobta is gone?” Soka shouted, very deliberately drumming up the tension. “Where did he go?!” I knew she could see him as well—nice performance on her part.

And then, right before her eyes…

Booooom!!

There was a small explosion, accompanied by a thundering sound. It was located by the wall under the stands—right by the VIP boxes I was in, as it happened.



Thus, I had a close-up view…

…of Gobta, right after declaring it to be his turn, running straight for Masayuki—and then continuing to run right past him, until he smashed into the wall.

I knew he should’ve rehearsed that first. Even before he tried it, I knew there was a pretty big chance he’d screw it up.

“Whoa! Gobta isn’t getting back up! Is he all right?”

He wasn’t. In fact, bashing himself against the wall had knocked him unconscious—and the out-of-bounds line was far behind him. He was out.

That idiot had no control over that transformation at all. Everything worked great up to taking in Ranga’s powers, but I could see those powers treated him like a chew toy. To put it simply, he wanted to start running, then stop running—but his brain was still judging these maneuvers based on his original body dimensions. A second of time in Gobta’s world was far different from that same second in Ranga’s. Before he could even think to stop, his head was against the wall.

Even worse, as Soka pointed out, he showed no sign of getting back up. It was the shock of the collision, rather than actual physical damage, that had knocked him out.

What can I say? First he reveals this supercool new monster, then he reveals himself for the dolt he is. Very true to character.

“……”

I was stunned into silence.

“That fool,” Benimaru muttered, eyes turned upward.

“That’s Gobta for you.” Shion snickered.

“…”

Veins throbbed on Hakuro’s forehead…

“Wow, so that’s your fighting apprentice, Dad?”

…and Momiji added more fuel to the fire.

It was, shall we say, a hard-to-describe sort of tension. And Gobta deserved it, frankly. The crowd around us was also having trouble parsing these events. I could hear one of them try to explain them, based on the sparse evidence at hand.

“Wait… Did he throw him aside in midair?”

The arena was so quiet, the words echoed oddly well.

“Amazing. Amazing, Masayuki!”

“Whoaaaa… That was awesome!”

“I barely even saw it happen. This is just too crazy!!”

The praise for Masayuki spread like a virus across the coliseum. Then, as if this explanation was the unvarnished truth, cheers began to erupt, heralding Masayuki’s victory before Soka and Diablo could even take action.

My neighbor, however, was quivering with anger.

“Is… Is this some kind of twisted joke? After looking all cool like that… I mean, what was that?”

After that radical transformation, this was the result. Gobta had shot expectations sky-high with Milim, then sent them crashing down to earth. It only amplified her anger.

“Now, now, I, um, I think he did his very best! In his own way…”

“Rimuru, you know spoiling him isn’t good for him!”

“That’s right, Sir Rimuru. I think I have been too lenient with Gobta as well. We should all be more stringent with him going forward.”

Hakuro agreed with Milim. This was the first I heard of him going easy on Gobta.

“Right! I’ll whip him into shape. Rimuru, let me borrow Gobta for a while. I’ll make him into the most wonderful fighter you’ve ever seen!”

Milim’s eyes were sparkling now. This was a rare monster, and she just had to have him, I was sure. If I nodded my approval here, that’d be so mean to Gobta…but then I thought of something else.

“Actually, I have a favor to ask of you. I’ll accept your offer if you accept mine; how about that?”

“All right. Let’s hear it.”

“So there’s this set of ruins in Clayman’s domain, right near his manor. I don’t want people poking around them without permission, and I think they’re packed with artifacts that’ll teach us about the ancient past, so I’ve been keeping them untouched for now.”

“Mm-hmm.”

“And I’d like to explore these ruins, but I wanted to get your permission first.”

“Why’re you asking me?”

Because it’s your domain now, doofus.

“Milim, who’s the ruler of that domain right now?” Frey asked Milim quietly before I could even say it.

“Oh…” Milim shot straight up in her seat. “Oh, right! That’s me, isn’t it? Right! I knew that!”

Great. Glad she remembered.

“So…”

“Of course it’s fine!”

That was easy. Maybe Milim just wanted to put the subject behind her, but as long as I got her permission, anything was fine. Sorry, Gobta, but at least I was achieving something out of this. I mean, Gobta essentially self-destructed, and I still didn’t know anything about Masayuki’s skills. He wouldn’t mind if I at least got some use out of this travesty, right? It’d help build him up, besides. All’s well that ends well.

“But when you do this exploring, Rimuru, you’ll take me along, right?”

“Ummm, that’ll depend. I’ve actually reached out to an expert from the Free Guild on this topic, but if they give the okay, you can come, sure.”

“Ooooh! Sounds like fun!”

“Yeah? Don’t get your hopes up. It might turn out pretty boring.”

I continued to chat with Milim as we awaited the certified results, which took a few minutes. Finally, Soka and Diablo wrapped up their discussions.

“The judgment is in! And while I’m concerned for the still-unconscious Gobta, the winner is…”

Don’t remind me, I thought as I listened to Soka’s announcement.

“Check this out! Transform!!” came the shout—and only then did Masayuki realize he was being far too optimistic.

Whoa, wait a second! What’s that thing?! I heard nothing about this!!

There was no way he’d finish Gobta before any summoning took place. He was transforming his own body now—something Masayuki totally didn’t expect.

The sheer power in the air was electrifying. To the amateur-level Masayuki, this looked like a towering monolith of strength. He knew there was healing potion on hand, but no way it could help him. It couldn’t raise the dead.

Dude! If one of those claws tears through me, this armor’s about as good as cardboard! If I knew this was gonna happen, I never would’ve turned down full-plate for being too heavy…

For that matter, he realized in the midst of his reverie, not even a full suit of magisteel armor could help much.

“Heh-heh!” Gobta shouted. “Now it’s my turn!” Then, not waiting for a reply, he burst into action.

Masayuki was this close to saying, Wait a minute! I give! His life, he concluded, meant far more to him than his pride. Faced with this transformed monster, victory no longer mattered to him at all. But regardless of what he thought, events moved on without him.

Before he could say, I forfeit, a rumbling boom echoed across the arena as Gobta self-destructed. Masayuki, unable to react, just stood there dumbfounded. A small piece of the stone wall scratched against his cheek. The stinging pain told him this was all too real.

No… No way… I could never have dodged that. I know people misconstrue my words to my benefit, but if I wasn’t able to get away with murder like this, it’d be hopeless for me…

It was clear what would happen. Gobta would be disqualified, and he’d be crowned champion. But Masayuki began to wonder if that was really good for him. Would winning this provide him with anything he wanted?

The right to battle a demon lord? You gotta be kidding. That’s totally suicide!

Masayuki wasn’t a fool. If he was named champion, it’d be him against the demon lord Rimuru. He understood what that meant for him. That black wolf who just whipped by him, as well as Lion Mask from yesterday, were both opponents he had no chance of beating—and they both worked under Rimuru. Pick a fight against that guy, and he’d just get pummeled.

Pummeled? More like killed!

It wasn’t about whether his skill would work or not. The demon lord was in a whole other universe; it was hopeless. Thus, Masayuki decided he needed to get out of here, pronto. Seriously, the crowd thought he threw that freak into the wall? That was just depressing.

He had to do something fast, or else Gobta would lose. Masayuki’s mind raced faster than it ever had before in his life. How could he arrange things so he could lose and remain in one piece?

“The judgment is in! And while I’m concerned for the still-unconscious Gobta, the winner is…”

Oh crap.

“…Wait.”

Masayuki went on the move, panicking internally but playing it cool on the outside as he brought his hand up toward Soka.

“Um…?” Soka figured Masayuki had something to say, so she handed him a spare mic.

“I think I lost, actually,” he said, trying his hardest to keep his voice from shaking.

“Ummm… But, Masayuki, sir,” Soka replied, bewildered, “it looks very much like Gobta took himself out of the match…”

“Perhaps. But you know, I couldn’t keep up with that attack at all. I don’t think I have the experience needed to challenge a demon lord quite yet; I just thought…”

He spoke slowly, trying not to get tongue-tied as the sweat poured down his entire body. It was a real stretch of an excuse, but he tried to make it sound as reasonable as he could. Then, without saying anything else, he walked out of the arena and never looked back. If someone asked him a question right now, he’d have no answer for it, so he decided to just leave without another word.

With my skill active, I’m sure the crowd will imagine some way to make that sound convincing for me. Right now, getting out of here’s my best option…

Masayuki had never focused so much on moving his legs before now. But it worked. He was out of his potentially lethal pinch.

Gobta was just lying there, sprawled on the ground, but then Masayuki declared out of nowhere that he lost.

“What is he thinking?”

“Hmm… I don’t know.”

“He couldn’t have been scared of Gobta. What’s motivating him to do that?”

Benimaru and Shion had no clue what had happened, either, as they watched Masayuki walk off.

So was he just a big fake after all? Or was there something else going on in his mind? Ah well. If Masayuki was giving up on fighting me, then I’d call it a good way to settle matters.

The crowd, too, was confused at first.

“…Is it because he can’t drum up the will to face the demon lord?”

“No, no! You saw that throw. It was masterful.”

“He said he couldn’t keep up with his attack. Is he hurt?”

“There is a small cut on his cheek…”

“What?! He managed to land a blow on Sir Masayuki?!”

The murmuring continued anon.

“Wait! I’ve got it!” one man screamed. “Sir Masayuki just gave the demon lord a reprieve!”

“What do you mean?”

“The demon lord declared he wants to be friendly with humans. You all know that, right?”

“Of course.”

“Yeah!”

“So that’s why,” the man smugly said, “what Masayuki did just now was give a warning to Rimuru.”

It did sound oddly convincing, as much as it irritated me. That’s likely why the people around the man started nodding at him.

“I see… And that reminds me: Sir Masayuki didn’t unsheathe his sword this time, either, did he?”

“Well spotted. You’re right. That’s his way of telling us he could win this tournament anytime he wanted to!”

“Right! And if the demon lord pulls any false moves, he’s not gonna take that sitting down. That’s what he’s saying?”

“Probably. Of course, if they ever did fight, I bet he’d stop before landing a killing blow.”

“So he’s willing to lose some face just to bring the message across… What a wonderful young man he is!”

“That’s the Sir Masayuki I know!”

“He’s so cool!!”

They were starting to interpret this in very surprising ways. But soon, all of them were in agreement, singing Masayuki’s praises like a church choir.

“Ma! Sa! Yu! Ki! Masayukiiiii!!”

What the hell? Was this a religion or what? I felt like I was getting a glimpse into something terrifying.

Masayuki answered the chanting with a raised hand as he exited. His motion was a bit awkward-looking, which struck me as curious. What a strange kid. Why does he get all this praise heaped upon him?

Understood. It is believed that this is the effect of a unique skill possessed by the subject Masayuki Honjo.

Just when I thought some things in the world couldn’t be explained, Raphael stepped up and explained them for me. I guess the professor was doing a little analytical work on him.

Apparently, Masayuki’s skill, when it takes effect, could manipulate the thoughts and feelings of people under its spell. He’d just forfeited the championship because he saw how powerful Gobta had become, I suppose—and given how he’d won over Bovix yesterday, I imagined Masayuki hadn’t thought he could beat him, either. I thought back to his performance so far, based on this new assumption. As far as I could recall, it was like he couldn’t even react to what his foes were doing, could he? No wonder he never took out his sword.

I suppose the conclusion to make was that Masayuki himself couldn’t fight very well. Hinata said she couldn’t read his strength at all, and I could see why. There was no strength to read.

Still, it wasn’t safe to look down on him. If he could influence the people around him that much, making him your enemy could be seriously dangerous. Definitely not someone to trifle with—if anything, I think I need to stay on his good side. Maybe I could threaten him, like “Heh-heh-heh, I know your secret”— Nah. Just joking. I bet he was racking his brain figuring out how to deal with Bovix later; no way his friends would let him weasel out of that rematch.

Maybe I’d offer him some sympathy. I could help prop him up as a Hero, even; it’d certainly be helpful advertising the labyrinth challenge to people.

“Soei! Make contact with Masayuki and tell him I want to meet with him.”

“At once!”

“Keep it courteous, okay? If you could invite him to lunch after this, then perfect.”

As a fellow native of Japan, I’d like to talk to him anyway. I’ll ask Hakuro to whip up some sushi. Hopefully this hunch of mine turns out to be true.

While I was thinking about Masayuki, Gobta was finally coming to. As he did, Soka and Diablo, after some deliberation, apparently decided to accept Masayuki’s request.

“Today’s been a cavalcade of unexpected events, but with Masayuki’s withdrawal, Gobta is our champion!!”

I could hear jeering from pockets of the crowd. Yeah, I’d be disappointed, too—here we were, the big final, and we’d gotten a champion who gave up and a half-wolf who almost killed himself. If I paid good money to see this, I’d find it totally valid to demand a refund. Luckily for me, they were in the minority. Masayuki made that decision himself, and nobody was blaming me for it. I imagine Gobta proved his strength well enough that nobody was too dissatisfied with this result. Of course, Gobta was still the heel in everyone’s mind, and with his antics today, that rep would be set in stone.

“So, Gobta! How are you feeling right now?”

“Uh… Huh? Really? I won?”

“You sure did! And you really put in an excellent performance today!”

Yeah right. All Gobta did was trip over himself and get knocked out, and Soka was trying her hardest to rev him up.

Regardless, though, the fight was over.

Afterward, I stepped back into the arena and gave out awards to each of the competitors, offering all eight of them my thanks and praising their performances. I also gave Masayuki’s friend Jinrai the set of equipment I’d promised him. Gaiye said, “Give that to me, too!” when he saw it for some reason, but we had no such agreement, so I ignored him. Masayuki also agreed to my offer of a meeting—he looked more resolute to me now, but he didn’t have the wrong idea about this, did he? If there was any misunderstanding, I’d take the time to unravel it for him.

That left Gobta.

“You did well, Gobta. I hereby name you a member of the Big Four as of today!”

He had taken a pretty rocky road on his way to it, but a championship was a championship. As promised, I appointed him to the Big Four, a title Gobta would no doubt find quite alluring. From now on, if he ever lost to anyone, I could just say, “Heh-heh-heh! He’s the weakest of the Big Four! A disgrace to his team!” and people would accept it. It was the perfect role for him, one that’d no doubt make Gobta seem pretty cute and charming. In fact, it was almost too perfect for him. Scarily so.

“Thank you! I’ll keep doin’ my best!”

And with that, the First Tempest Battle Tournament came to a close.

If only it really was over for Gobta. But his personal hell was just beginning.

“Okay, are we ready now? ’Cause I’m gonna start training him hard!”

Milim was beaming at me when we returned to the VIP boxes.

“Oh, uh, sure. Don’t overdo it, okay?”

“Nothing to worry about! He’ll undergo my special training inside the labyrinth, so he can die all he wants to!!”

Ah yes, she could use it like that, huh? I wasn’t sure Gobta would see that as much of a consolation. All I can say is, it’s gonna be tough for him. Not even death would offer sweet release for him. Just thinking about it made me shiver.

“Gobta, can we talk over there for a moment?”

Milim marched right over to Gobta…and picked him up with one hand.

“Pyahhh?!”

There was so much strength focused on her arm, I was surprised I didn’t hear any bones crunch. Milim was smiling, but her eyes sure weren’t.

“Congrats on the win. But that last match was pitiful. I’m not going to let that one slide! It’s time to start training you!”

Milim really enjoyed Gobta’s transformation—which was why his subsequent lamebrained acts angered her so much. Her reaction made it clear that her expectations and excitement had been deeply soured.

“You’ll be facing off against me personally. You’re gonna be stronger in no time!”

“Wh-whoa! Lady Milim?! I—I didn’t ask for that!”

Gobta was panicking. I doubted anyone was listening to his input.

“This is a good opportunity for you, Gobta,” Hakuro said with a forceful smile. “I want you to put everything you have into training with her.”

“M-Master, are you selling me off—?”

“Silence!” Milim said, shutting him down before he could finish. How cruel.

“Oh-ho-ho… Don’t make a disgrace of yourself like that, Gobta. This is all for your sake!”

I wasn’t sure Gobta was listening to Hakuro any longer. This was him getting back at Gobta for acting like such a clown in front of Momiji, I bet. It definitely wasn’t for his sake.

Thus, Gobta was now Milim’s property. I turned my attention to the other party involved in this stunt.

“My master, my teamwork with Sir Gobta brought us the championship!”

Ranga ran up to me, abandoning Gobta without a second thought. Smart of him. He didn’t want to get caught in the cross fire at all. Unfortunately, there was no fleeing from Milim.

“Hold it! Ranga was your name, right? Gobta can’t complete his training without you!”

“?!”

Ranga looked at me, his eyes pleading. Sorry, man. Once Milim gets an idea in her head, she tunes out everybody else. Besides, he was the one who went into battle without my permission, so he had this coming. I didn’t see any need to help him.

“Wah-ha-ha-ha-ha! Don’t worry! I won’t do ya no harm!”

And with that, Milim strode off, dragging Gobta and Ranga behind her.

Really, I thought Gobta relied too much on his own good luck. That, and Ranga had a tendency to fight on instinct. If they could polish their skills a bit and work with each other more, that transformation could really be something formidable, you know? Milim must’ve thought to train them because she spotted that. Here’s hoping they worked on that, bit by bit, and gained something concrete from it. I’d be expecting big things from Gobta, and Milim’s the girl who’d bring him there.

Farewell, Gobta. Farewell, Ranga. I’ll never forget your courage! I vowed to say a prayer for them as I saw them leave with Milim.

It was time for lunch—a lunch I’d now be spending with Masayuki.

This was nothing that fancy, really. I told him I wanted to speak with him alone; the rest of his group could stand by in a separate room. We had a little trouble earlier, but I was sure Masayuki could smooth things over with them later.

“Um, well, good to make your acquaintance, I guess? My name’s Masayuki Honjo, and people call me ‘Lightspeed’ and ‘the Hero’ and stuff…”

He was blushing a bit. Yeah, calling yourself “the Hero” in our old world would be about the most embarrassing thing ever. People would think you’re a thoughtless moron if you tried it. I’m sure it made him feel creepy. That, and it looked like he was worried how I’d react to him. He remembered how he promised to defeat me, although that was mostly just his friends egging him on. This must’ve been awkward for him. I’m a demon lord, after all. He had to be scared out of his wits, fearing he’d picked a fight with a foe way out of his league.

He was no doubt conflicted, but he didn’t need to worry about me. I was ready to leave the past where it belonged—in the past. A nice meal together should help us work out our issues.

“Yeah, I know we spoke before, but it’s nice to meet you, too. I am Rimuru, a demon lord, but my real name’s Satoru Mikami. I used to work for a building contractor.”

Masayuki wasn’t too keen on touching his food, so I decided to just blurt it out. I hadn’t used that name in a long while, but it still felt like it fit me, a lot more than I anticipated. It wasn’t like I was hiding it—I just never had the chance to use it much.

“…Huh? Are… Are you Japanese?”

Masayuki didn’t quite seem to believe me. And yeah, I did look kind of like a cute little girl at the moment. I couldn’t blame him.

“Yeah, more or less. But let’s talk about that over lunch, all right?”

That finally inspired him to pick up his chopsticks.

“Um, this is okay for me to eat?”

“Of course. I had them whip up something Japanese for you.”

Sushi and tempura were on the menu today. They had wowed Hinata earlier, and I thought Masayuki would be just as grateful—he hadn’t been part of our pre-festival banquet, so I was sure it’d be the first time he’d seen sushi in years.

“This isn’t, like, my last meal before my execution, is it?”

“No. You seem sensible; we’re from the same place. I just wanna be friends with you.”

Seeing this spread must’ve given him the completely wrong idea. Maybe he thought this was the last meal he’d eat in his whole life. I told him I was from Japan, but he still doubted me.

“Well, um, all right…”

He finally took a bite—and the moment he did, he fell silent. His eyes looked different now, and his chopsticks, and his mouth, sprang into motion. He was so focused on his meal that it didn’t seem like the right time to start talking, so I waited until he was done.

And the moment he was:

“…All right. Satoru—um, I mean, Rimuru, I’ll gladly become your servant!”

I had no idea where this came from. I mean, I could tell he was starving for good Japanese food, but I hadn’t even said anything yet. Besides, he must’ve had his own thoughts about me.

“Servant? Uh…”

“No, it’s fine. I don’t have anything keeping me from abandoning this Hero crap. It’s just embarrassing when they do that ‘Ma! Sa! Yu! Ki!’ chant, and… Really, I’ve been constantly trying to figure out how to escape from all this.”

This sounded like the real Masayuki here. And as I enjoyed some post-meal tea, I let him tell me his story.

Masayuki was a pretty smart kid in his old world, going to a high school that put most of its grads into college. He liked reading manga and light novels, something he kept a secret, and he complained to me about how it must’ve led to this for him.

“My skill’s called Chosen One, you know? It’s just so…stupid.”

He’d wanted to be a hero, and as he saw it, that’s why he wound up here. And his skill, Chosen One, was about what I figured it was. It let him naturally guide the thoughts of those around him, almost like brainwashing—and that’s what brought him to Hero-dom. This ability was beyond his control; he couldn’t turn it off even if he wanted to. That’s not too user-friendly—or maybe it’s a little too much so.

“Maybe it is, but that doesn’t mean it’s not incredible. You would’ve won the championship if you didn’t bow out.”

The tournament was ample proof that this skill worked. Victory was his if he wanted it.

“Yeah, but it’s only caused me trouble. I do nothing, and people just make all these assumptions about me… That was the whole way I won over in Englesia, too.”

As he put it, he let that get to his head. Even with his efforts crushing the Orthrus crime ring, he didn’t actually do anything—people just treated him like a king. He could completely give up and things still worked out his way, so life was generally pretty easy for him. The experience at this tournament, though, made him realize that if this ever failed, even once, it’d end his life.

That was why he’d decided it was time for a reality check, and I thought he was right. But would Chosen One affect me?

Understood. Against ultimate skills, nearly all lower-level skills are canceled.

So it doesn’t affect me. Good. Because I intended to go easy on him anyway, but I didn’t realize he was a complete amateur in battle. I bet even a quick jab from me would be disastrous.

“Well, you made the right choice—and probably at the last moment possible. I think you should be proud of that.”

“You think? But Gobta transformed into that terrifying…thing and… You know, I didn’t need brains to realize I could never beat him.”

I wasn’t so sure about that, actually, A pretty decent chunk of people were taking Gobta on regularly… But yeah, Masayuki did the right thing.

So we chatted some more, giving each other our stories and backgrounds. For the most part, though, I just gave a quick rundown of my life, spending more time listening to Masayuki talk. His friends worshipped him like a god, so he couldn’t really speak frankly with them. He had nobody to vent to except Yuuki, and his busy schedule made it difficult to meet up. It made the stress and irritation accumulate.

Basically, he revealed everything about himself to me, without me having to ask any questions.

“Well, I’d like to hear more from you, but my lunch break is just about over. So let me ask you this: What are you going to do now?”

“How do you mean?”

“I mean, you promised Bovix a rematch, right? Are you gonna tackle the Dungeon?”

“Ahhh!”

I guess Masayuki had forgotten all about it. He must’ve been planning to promptly skip town.

“Well…what should I do?”

“Ahhh, don’t worry. Bovix is only guarding the area around Floor 50, and the Dungeon’s super huge, so it’s gonna take a few days just to make it that far.”

“Oh. So if I pretend to tackle it, I’ll make it through today, at least?”

“Exactly. And all the dignitaries here right now are gonna leave town tomorrow.”

The festival ran for three days. The highways were going to be packed with people tomorrow, so we’d mainly be working to keep traffic smooth. The real cleanup work wouldn’t start for two days, once all the visitors were gone. The big Dungeon opening today was mainly a demonstration for the royalty and nobility in town—a pre-unveiling, really, or a temporary opening until it began normal operation.

Thus, I didn’t think anyone would go more than a few floors down in the several hours it was open today. Besides, I also had an idea about that battle between Masayuki and Bovix. Not to disappoint him, but I didn’t want Masayuki to get defeated. Since I had him here and all, I wanted him to function like a living, breathing billboard for me, leading the Dungeon-conquering adventurers down and getting them enthused about tackling the challenge.

“So I’d like you to grab people’s attention for me, but do you think you can do that?”

“…Wow. That’s pretty reassuring to hear. That’s why you gave Jinrai all that great equipment, huh? And personally, if screwing up in there won’t kill me, I can tackle the labyrinth worry-free. It sounds perfect!”

He gladly pledged his support. I’d meant nothing of the sort with Jinrai’s gift, but that certainly worked out well, too. Going into the Dungeon de facto topless was just asking to be killed.

“And I’ll be glad to leak some hints about conquering the Dungeon, too. If you can use them to get down pretty far for me, that’d be great. Also, if you see anything you think we could improve, don’t be shy about telling me.”

I wouldn’t offer any help going beyond Floor 50—we wanted to keep things on the up-and-up here, so I advised him to keep that in mind. But even there, he’d never die as long as he held on to his Resurrection Bracelet, so it was all good.

“Sounds great! I feel like I’m beta testing a game or something.”

“Ah… Now that you mention it, it is kinda like that. But no need to knock yourself out today. Try to reach, like, Floor 5 or thereabouts.”

A game, huh? That’s an interesting observation to make.

“All right,” Masayuki said with a refreshing smile. “I’m glad we got to talk to each other, Rimuru. It’s really put my mind at ease. Now I’m starting to think this world isn’t so bad after all.”

His skill had made things pretty easy for him before now, but he was still anxious a lot of the time. Having someone pledge their support for him must’ve eased his worries. That, and our nation was at the cutting edge of technology in this world. Our baths and toilets made our accommodations far better than anywhere else, and the variety and quality of the food here must’ve surprised him, too.

“We have that orchestra, and we’re teaching painting to people. Pretty soon, I plan to get some theater productions going. I want to have fun here, and I’m not gonna skimp on investing in that stuff.”

“I really respect you, Rimuru! Um, what about manga?”

“Hee-hee-hee! Of course we’ll have manga, Masayuki. That’s a longer way away, but nobody else is gonna do it, so…”

“Whoa! I-I’ll follow you wherever you go, Rimuru!”

And so Masayuki decided to remain in town for the time being. I planned to stay in close touch with him, passing on information and such. Hopefully we could have these talks regularly—I wanted to kick back and ask him about our old world, too. It’d be a nice nostalgia trip. That, and I wanted to prod his memory for manga. He was keenly curious about my collection, and I definitely hoped to stay on good terms with him.

Now I had a new friend.

Our Dungeon was finally slated to open this afternoon, and I decided to perform one last check beforehand, just in case. Heading down to the open area at the bottommost floor, I was greeted by Ramiris, who came flying right up to me.

“We’re just about to open things up, but how’s it all going?”

“Ha! Who do you think I am, huh?”

She certainly sounded confident—and Veldora, lumbering out from his room, seemed pretty proud of himself, too.

“Kwahhh-ha-ha-ha! Fear not, Rimuru. We have overlooked nothing!”

Uh-oh. I was suddenly very worried.

“Whoa, are you sure about that? I don’t want you guys doing anything stupid during the unveiling today, okay?”

“Ha-ha-ha! No worries! Just leave it all to us! I activated every safety feature.”

“Heh-heh-heh… But starting tomorrow, the labyrinth will bare its fangs!”

Ramiris and Veldora looked at each other and sneered. Were they really gonna be okay? Because they weren’t assuaging my fears at all.

“Um, I’m gonna say this just in case you forgot, but we’re closing the labyrinth right after this, okay?”

“Wh-what?!”

Why was Veldora saying “Wh-what?!” to me? I’d told him as much several times before, but I suppose he wasn’t listening.

After seeing how today turned out, I wanted to fine-tune the labyrinth’s difficulty levels. Thus, my plan was to close things up for two or three days, then reopen after that. We also hadn’t worked out admission prices yet, and we needed trained personnel in place to sell the Labyrinth Cards (i.e. the tickets) and other items. We didn’t have the free time or people for that so far, but I wanted to talk it over with Mjöllmile after we finished the post-festival cleanup.

Looking back, maybe it was a mistake to leave the final details to this pair. I mean, Ramiris and Veldora looked like they were having fun, and I was busy anyway, but…man, they were paying no attention at our meetings. But I didn’t want to yell at them, either. Everyone was a little flustered right now.

“Calm down, okay? I’ll do my best to get us officially open as soon as possible, so just sit tight until then.”

“Okay!”

“I will trust in you, Rimuru!”

Great. That ought to get us through today… Oh, but I almost forgot. I had something extremely important to ask.

“By the way, is Milim in here?”

“She is.”

“Yep! She took two unlimited-use Resurrection Bracelets from us and ran off.”

“Ahhh. And I gave her control over Floors 96 to 99, right? The dragon chambers with the elemental-effect floors and everything?”

“That’s right. She has been putting a great deal of work into them.”

“She sure has! And she even gave me the rights to the dragons she caught for those floors! She said that if we raise them right and they evolve into Dragon Lords, they’ll be intelligent enough to understand my commands!”



Ramiris was all smiles. I guess, in her mind, even Milim had some good facets to her.

The sight of Milim flying through the air, carrying captured dragons in her arms, must’ve given anyone who saw her quite a shock. Apparently, we’d received complaints about it the first two times, but people got used to it from the third time onward. I guess our town’s residents just accepted it as normal.

Milim had found for us four dragons in all—a Fire Dragon, Frost Dragon, Wind Dragon, and Earth Dragon. These were elemental Arch Dragons, just as Milim had promised us, and even now they were about as intelligent as your typical farm animal. Give them care like you would any pet, and it’d be possible to connect with them.

“Huh. Did you put collars on them or anything?”

“For now, yes. These are my beloved servants, so I want to be darn sure we set up a clear master-and-servant relationship!”

I see. Ramiris was certainly thinking deeply about this, and what I heard sounded good enough to me. But back to the main topic.

“So is Milim in the dragon chambers right now?”

“Yep. She said she found some playmates to help my servants stay in shape!”

“Indeed. I believe I went fishing with one of them once. But how is someone like him going to play with a dragon?”

You’re better off not knowing, I think. But all I needed was Milim’s current location. If she was toiling away near the bottom of the labyrinth, I doubt she’d meddle with our opening at all.

“Right. She probably won’t get in the way, then, so I’m fine with that. We’re about to open the labyrinth right now, so can you come up top for me?”

“Yep! I’d be happy to,” chirped Ramiris.

“I will pass. It is the role of the labyrinth master to await his challengers!”

…Look, I told you, nobody’s gonna make it to the bottom in one day! In fact, you’d probably have to wait many days before anyone shows up. I refrained from telling him this, however. That’s so kind of me.

“Great. Well, good luck, then!”

Leaving Veldora with some encouragement, I took Ramiris along as we teleported to the chamber up top.

With lunch over, a large number of people had arrived at their seats. Ramiris and I were there to greet them.

“Welcome back, Sir Rimuru,” Diablo said, smiling. He was done with his refereeing work, and I heard he was looking for me. I gave him a quick nod and hello of my own, then switched gears and took a look at our program. I had a lot of expectations for the Dungeon we were opening. It was one of the centerpieces of our nation’s future development, so I wanted as many of our visitors to explore it as possible. Fortunately, it seemed like few to none of our invitees decided to take an early leave after lunch. The hall was nearly full, so I thought this would function as pretty decent advertising.

Turning toward the event space, I could see Soka and Mjöllmile, the latter of whom would take Diablo’s place as guide and announcer during this event. It was time to go, so I gave them both my signal.

“All right! The time has come! The final event of Day Three of the Founder’s Festival is about to begin!”

“Ladies and gentlemen, thank you for your patience. We are about to show you a small portion of our impregnable Dungeon, one of Tempest’s greatest achievements. It is the ultimate challenge for adventurers, presented by our leader, the demon lord Rimuru. Will anybody out there be able to conquer it?!”

Mjöllmile was giving this spiel from center stage, mic in hand. He wasn’t quite as much of a natural at this as Soka, but he looked well enough in his element.

What he had to say was this: Running a demonstration of the labyrinth was well and good, but taking all the visitors here inside the Dungeon was too dangerous. There were several hundred members of the ruling class in here; add our more nearby residents, and the number became several thousand. A crowd that size crammed into the labyrinth would be far too unruly to guide around.

Instead, we’d come up with the idea of sending several parties down there and showing their progress on a large screen. That presented a few technological challenges, but we had already succeeded at providing a clear picture on a huge screen at the battle tournament, and we could use the same tech for this.

The projector that Gabil and Vester built was proving useful for a variety of purposes. It’s what we’d used to display the battles on-screen earlier, via a video-recording crystal ball stored inside the machine. This crystal was inscribed with magical communication spells that let it receive images recorded far away and project them here, allowing the audience to watch the challengers from a safe distance and enjoy the entertainment.

Getting a king or prince injured would be a huge problem; as a result, only a few selected parties would actually be experiencing the labyrinth today.

“And so,” a smiling Soka shouted, “we’d now like to open the labyrinth up to adventurers! Are there any members of the audience courageous enough to delve into the Dungeon we’re proud to offer you?”

That was our cue. Ramiris, perched on my shoulder, summoned a temporary doorway to the labyrinth in the center of the stage. We could’ve just brought any challengers down to the basement here, but it was important to put on a show for things like this.

“““Oooohhh!”””

See? The crowd was amazed, just as I hoped they’d be. A quiet sort of excitement was taking root among them, the adventurers in the audience sizing up one another. We were strictly accepting volunteers today, and if possible, I wanted to see a lot of participants—and even if nobody raised their hand, we still had Masayuki’s group. That was part of why I wanted to negotiate with him earlier; he had already explained matters to his friends, and they were on standby right now. I had given them a map of the first five floors to ensure against any mistakes. Hopefully they’d serve as the advertising pitchmen I wanted.

So would we see any volunteers? As it turned out, my concerns were for nothing.

“Heh-heh… I dunno what a demon lord’s labyrinth is all about, but I’m ready to rip the facade from it! You might think you’ve cowed us all, what with that phony battle tournament and everything, but you won’t get us this time!”

“Yeah! Basson’s right!”

“If the highway wasn’t so jammed, Basson would’ve won the whole tournament!”

“Heh-heh-heh… You’re not forgetting about me, are you?”

“Ah, don’t be that way, Gomez. They know all about how strong you are. As long as you and I are together, our ‘Great Lightning’ team’s got nothing to fear!”

Oh? Looks like we’ve got all kinds of challengers. This Basson guy must’ve shown up too late to join the tournament. If he was around to see it, he should’ve known full well how powerful the competitors were…but with a couple of matches forfeited, the quality of the fighting was admittedly hit-or-miss. I was sure there were a ton of people like Basson who assumed they were invincible and so on. But that was fine. I figured we’d see a few skeptics who refused to believe in any of this. Those would be our future customers, after all.

“And Masayuki the Hero wasn’t anyone special in the end, either, was he? He’s strong, I’ll grant you that, but in a fight, you gotta see it through to the end! Letting the demon lord of this country off the hook like that… How half-hearted of him! It sickens me!”

Um… He admitted that Masayuki was “strong”? Okay, whatever.

“Yeah, this so-called labyrinth is a big con job—and Basson and I are gonna expose it for what it is right now!”

Basson’s group certainly had gusto.

“I refuse to allow them to berate you like this, Sir Rimuru.”

“Let me go over and shut them up a bit—”

“Halt!”

I couldn’t let my guard down. Shion was irritated, and Diablo came this close to going out of control. I hurriedly stopped them—but at least they didn’t threaten to kill them this time.

“They’re just a little overconfident, okay? Besides, I think it’ll be more fun if we get people like them.”

They might be a little dumb, I thought, but they were the right people for this job. Shion and Diablo nodded their agreement—I was used to handling them by now.

Basson was a fighter with a shaved head; Gomez, a sorcerer in a black robe. They had four others in their party, none of them worth writing home about. This sextet would be our first challengers.

Then someone unexpected spoke up.

“We’ll take the challenge!”

Three people jumped out of the audience. I thought I’d seen them before… Wait, is that Elen?!

I was having Elen’s trio help with the founding of Yohm’s new nation. They were going around the Free Guild locations in the former Farmus, and I had asked them to aid Yohm however they could. A B-ranked adventurer was a fearsome presence in itself, and Elen’s party was now rated B-plus. They were allowed to cross national borders unhindered, so I figured this was the perfect job for them. They hadn’t joined Yohm on the way here, so I assumed they had gone back home or something, but no. I had no idea they were planning this, in fact—they must’ve been hiding it so Archduke Erald didn’t stop them.

“We’re really going to do it?”

“Oh, of course we are! I haven’t had any adventures lately, so I’ve been waiting for this!”

“Let me ask—as leader, I have the right to say no, right? Right?”

“Um, no? Not at all. It’s already set in stone!”

Crazy. I felt so bad for Kabal. And I thought I’d just heard Erald screaming over in the other room, only to fall silent after the sound of something smashing. I could picture what had happened but chose not to. Hopefully, at least, Elen would be done before her father woke up.

Our third party here was led by Masayuki, hero of the day. They all calmly strode onstage, greeting the audience with smiles.

“Ma! Sa! Yu! Ki! Masayukiiiii!”

Yes, yes, all right. They hear you. The applause in the room was deafening. What a stud he is.

Counting Masayuki, there were four people in the party, including the formerly topless Jinrai clad in the armor I’d given him—a suit of Mithril Armor, crafted by Garm and rated as a Rare on the scale. It was heavier than Yohm’s Exo-Armor and not quite as effective but just as durable. It even gave the wearer anti-poison effects.

I had also given Masayuki a rapier as a present. I’d asked him over lunch why he never drew his sword, and he flatly replied, “Well, like, it’s heavy, so…” Honestly, I was shocked by how much of a bluffer he was. He had some kendo experience but none with actual swords—and besides, in this world, slicing Japanese katanas weren’t as popular as heavy, skull-crushing blades, so they were all gonna have a little heft to them.

As he told me, even striking a pose with a sword for a long time was difficult for him. So I gave him this rapier, advising him to try working out a little more as well. This blade was a discarded version of the one I gave to Hinata—it had the same light weight and strength, but not her sword’s unique trait of always killing your opponent on the seventh landed attack. Just swinging this thing around was enough work for Masayuki; he didn’t need that sort of advanced feature anyway. Plus, the rapier also remedied exhaustion for its user to some extent. If all Masayuki would do was strike a pose and keep it steady, this sword was more than enough.

So the party of four was soaking in the cheers from the audience, none of whom questioned their change in equipment.

We planned to set a time limit of three hours, calculated back from my intended goal of keeping anyone from going past Floor 5. Masayuki’s party had a map, giving them an advantage over the others, and I was counting on them to advertise the labyrinth for me.

So three parties, then? That didn’t seem like too many, but of course, a lot of people would think twice about challenging a shady, demon lord–run labyrinth. We needed to address, and quell, that hesitation with this demo today.

But just as I was about to move the show along:

“Wait. I’ll join in, too.”

A man clad entirely in black appeared onstage—Gaiye the Flowing Swordsman.

“You’ve done a fine job trapping me in your bluffs and trickery, haven’t you? Heh-heh-heh… The demon lord’s Big Four, or whatever they’re called, certainly play dirty, do they not? I can understand if they’re afraid of my talents, but they picked a fight with the wrong foe. You can scheme all you want, but I’m about to crush your ambitions for good!”

Quite an introduction. I was wondering what he was doing here, and now I knew, I guess. Basically, he couldn’t understand how Ranga had beaten him and decided it was all a trap. He assumed I was up to something no good with this labyrinth, and now he was standing up to stop me in my tracks, I guess. And yes, I was up to something—but probably not the things Gaiye was picturing.

“Right. This time, I’m going to chop his little—”

“Yeah! Get ’im, Diablo!”

“No. Don’t get ’im. And stop imitating my voice, Shion.”

These people… I swear, why were they always like this? Whenever someone said something about me, they just give them no mercy. And Shion was getting so sensitive to every affront, too, imagined or not. Maybe it was time I thought of some more serious measures for her.

But whatever.

Gaiye looked like he wanted to go solo on this, but was he gonna be okay? I was honestly concerned. On the other hand, it’d be nice to get a sample of how a lone adventurer would fare in the labyrinth. We might as well make him the fourth “party” today.

Now that we had our challengers, the long-awaited moment was here. It was time to open the Dungeon.

There wasn’t much time to work with, so all four parties would be going in at once. Soka would stay here to commentate on the on-screen action. Inside guidance would be best handled by the dryads, who’d also serve as “cameramen” as they accompanied each party. We didn’t have many of them, but there were a few—Treyni, Traya, and Doreth included. The others were young and inexperienced in battle but boasted tremendous magical force. Under Ramiris’s management, they’d make for perfect labyrinth managers.

“These four people,” Soka said, “are the curators of our labyrinth. Normally they will not accompany parties entering the Dungeon, but for today’s run, we’ll have one shadowing each team.”

The quartet gave their hellos to the crowd. These were named Alpha, Beta, Gamma, and Delta—not having names would be inconvenient, so I’d just pulled those out of my head. It didn’t cost me any magicules; since dryads are high-level monsters, I could have them consume their own magic force for the job. Ramiris was their boss, so all I did was help come up with their names. As sisters, they all had the same looks, so telling them apart via visuals alone was a challenge. Monsters often rely on things like magical waveforms to identify individuals, but I thought that was asking a lot of humans, so names were more helpful.

“If you guys run into any trouble, feel free to ask them for advice! And now, let me run down the rules for you all! First, I’m going to give these to everyone!”

Soka pulled out a couple of items, Alpha and the other dryads giving the same ones to each party.

“These items here, you see, we’re planning to offer for sale when people enter the labyrinth. Does everybody have them now?”

As she spoke, each item was shown in a close-up on the screen. This pseudo-television technology was really helpful for stuff like this. Currently, it was showing a set of ten High Potions, one Full Potion, and a bunch of Resurrection Bracelets and return whistles. These had been provided for free during today’s beta test—if they were kind enough to volunteer, I didn’t mind giving them some compensation. The dryad chaperones would have some backup items, too, just in case, so they could get whisked to safety if things went south.

Given the size of this thing, it was entirely possible that a party wouldn’t get out of Floor 1 in the time allotted. Even if they took the shortest path to the stairway down, we’re talking a literal mile or so of walking—and given that this was a maze, they were gonna be covering much more distance than that. For the next three hours, it’d be best if the parties tried just hard enough to keep the audience entertained—and once time expired, they’d use their items to get back up top.

I had other rewards for them, too, of course. For advertising purposes, I had some treasure chests set up containing souvenirs in the form of decent armor and so on. During actual operation, these chests wouldn’t show up until Floor 2 onward, but we were being generous today.

Finally, Soka explained the most important item in the lot.

“Now, take a look at this item. This is known as a Resurrection Bracelet, and we highly recommend you purchase this when you enter our labyrinth. What does it do? Believe it or not, it resurrects you from the dead!!”

The crowd immediately began chattering about this. ““Impossible!”” I could hear a few of them shout.

“Ladies and gentlemen, quiet, please! This is important, so I want to be sure everybody’s paying attention, all right? The key thing here is that this item only works if you are inside Tempest’s Dungeon! It doesn’t do anything at all outside the labyrinth, and given the stakes involved, we want to be absolutely sure everyone’s aware of that. Always remember that at all times—this doesn’t work outside!”

That was important. If someone assumed otherwise, it’d make for some sad scenes if they tried using it and failed. I didn’t want people to claim I was liable. It’s up to you to keep yourself safe, okay, guys? But I knew that some people just loved to cause a scene and complain about anything and everything, so we needed to be 100 percent sure we drilled this point into everyone’s minds. Nobody could be allowed to think this worked outside the labyrinth; we couldn’t have some idiot think, Hey, maybe it’ll work somehow. If you mess that up, hey, it’s not our fault. The promoter—i.e., me—bore no responsibility.

You know, in my old world, I always felt like people foisted way too much responsibility on retailers and companies. If some fool breaks the rules, goes crazy, and gets themselves killed, all I can say is that they had it coming—but if we’re negligent about providing guidance and cautions, then it does become our fault. That’s why we needed to be thorough about our warnings here.

“…So once again, never, ever attempt to use this bracelet outside!”

Soka was being exactly as clear and thorough as I hoped. Good. The only unresolved item on my wish list was to have someone actually die in there—something people would admittedly be reluctant about. But Ramiris had upgraded the Resurrection Bracelets to the point that they even canceled out pain upon determining you were dead. They also gave you a delay of around ten seconds between when you died and when you got teleported back up, so if you or a fellow party member could take suitable measures in time, you could still get fixed up on the spot. Resurrection, being a divine skill and everything, was too high-level for most people to cast, but still.

By the way, Full Potions normally cannot regenerate the soul, but since your soul was stuck firmly inside your own body inside the labyrinth, you actually could “resurrect” people with a Full Potion to restore the body. I feared encouraging this, however, since (again) it may give people the idea they could pull that trick outside as well. That’s why, unless you resurrected a downed adventurer the standard way, their body and soul would get teleported topside after ten seconds. Just like Masayuki, one should just think of it like a dungeon-exploration video game.

Anyway, that wrapped up the initial briefing. Now I just needed someone to try out the Resurrection Bracelet for me.

“So who would like to experience this for themselves?”

I doubted anyone would, actually, but Soka brightly belted out the question anyway. Talk about thick-skinned.

Basson, the giant skinhead of a man, grunted at this. “Hmph! You’ll never die in the labyrinth? That’s a funny joke. If you think I’m gonna believe that and get myself killed in there, you got another thing coming!”

The people around him nodded their assent. This was just common sense. Not even Elen’s team was taking the bait.

“Heh… Well, who do you think should do it? You go first.”

Gaiye the Flowing Swordsman pointed a finger at Mjöllmile. He wanted someone else to go first, not him, and I guess that was to be expected. I wished he were more polite about it, though.

“Me? An understandable suggestion, I suppose. I’d be happy to.”

Mjöllmile, perhaps expecting this, wasn’t agitated at all. In fact, he’d already experienced it once. The members of Team Reborn under Shion had experimented with it many times, so he fully believed it was safe—and going through it one time removed any fear from the process. So, with as much stately majesty as he could muster, he put on the bracelet and set foot inside the labyrinth. The challengers followed behind him.

“Now, if you actually attack Mjöllmile in here—”

Soka took up the sword on her hip, preparing to slash at Mjöllmile. But before she could continue, Gaiye cut him off.

“You can’t trick me. Krahhh!”

There was an arcing flash in the air, and then he sliced Mjöllmile’s arm clean off.

“…Hey!!”

Soka tried to stop him, but nowhere near in time.

“Gaaahhh!”

Mjöllmile started shouting as well, bringing a hand to the gaping wound. The reduced-pain effect kept him from dying of shock, but I’m sure getting forcibly amputated wasn’t a very pleasant feeling.

“Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha! And now it’s almost time for the final blow!!”

Was he just playing with him? What a bastard. I almost lost my temper, but then I saw a smile on Mjöllmile’s face. That restored my cool—and just as it did, Gaiye’s sword hewed Mjöllmile’s head clean off. At once, his body turned into a collection of light particles, flowing up and gathering by the door at center stage. Mjöllmile, along with what he was wearing, formed anew from these particles, fully restored.

The crystal balls carried by Alpha and the other dryads recorded all of this, transmitting it to the large screen in the hall.

“And there you have it! I’m back in perfect shape!”

Mjöllmile stood there, as if he hadn’t just been brutally murdered. His severed arm was attached to him as well. It couldn’t have been a better performance.

“Whoooaaa!!”

The audience cheered for him. Some of them screamed that it was a miracle. I’d say the demonstration was a success. I didn’t want people to think this was an elaborate trick, but thanks to Gaiye’s penchant for sudden violence, I think everyone was more convinced than they would have been otherwise. If anyone still didn’t believe it, we’d just have to let them experience it for themselves. Of course, it wasn’t risk-free, so the best thing to do in the labyrinth was to simply not die. Take care of yourself down there, and you’ll never have to go through it.

I figured we could let adventurers who challenged the labyrinth spread the stories for us, and things would work themselves out. I thought some curious daredevils would want to get killed just to see what the experience was like, and that was no problem to me, either. The important thing was that adventurers had nothing to fear if they took on the Dungeon—and I thought Mjöllmile had just ensured that for me. I gotta say, he’s got courage. He put up with Gaiye’s morbid antics because this is exactly how he wanted this to turn out. Definitely need to thank him later for taking that role, I thought as I looked at the screen.

“The Dungeon is now open for exploration! A brand-new world is waiting for you inside. What could be awaiting those intrepid enough to battle their way through to the bottom?”

Soka was onstage, kicking off her commentary, as the screen showed the viewpoints of all four parties. The live connections worked without a hitch, bringing the audience inside the labyrinth. She was taking a documentary-style approach to her announcing, and I really appreciated her attention to detail as I watched the parties set off.

The first one that caught my eye was Basson’s, as they plunged past the orderly, well-built stone-type walls that defined Floor 1.

I figured at least one party member would be drawing a map on the way, but nobody was. They weren’t even leaving marks on the walls to keep their bearings, instead just pleasantly chatting as they strode down the corridors. Were they gonna be okay? I knew people like them explored caves and went on hunting missions in lush forests and so on—how did this party find its way to their destination otherwise? They didn’t hire a guide every time, did they?

“Tch! It’s the same damn kind of corridor over and over! And all these crossroads!”

“Weren’t we at this intersection before, boss?”

Just as I feared, they were lost. I’d told them earlier how big this place was, but had they tuned that out?

“Whoa, this is bad news, Basson! This maze is bigger than I thought…”

Ah. Yeah, the first floor alone was over eight hundred feet long per side. They had been told this was a pretty big place, but I suppose they were picturing something cozier. I guess that, if you heard it described as a man-made structure beneath the coliseum, you’d likely think it wasn’t that big, either. But oh well. It wasn’t my problem—and again, it made for good advertising.

However, I really didn’t want these parties to face instant death at the start of Floor 1. If we went that insanely hard on them from the get-go, nobody would want to take the challenge. They needed to get at least a little far in. They could always die to be transported back, and there was an SOS feature in their bracelets as well, which treated the wearer as dead and let them escape at any time. The dryads could also come to their rescue, and there was one accompanying each party, ready to promptly bring them back to the surface.

So I really wanted them to be serious about plumbing this labyrinth…but Basson was too busy getting irritated at his panicky party members.

“What are you people? Idiots? I’ve never heard of such an enormous maze before. That demon lord’s just feeding us a tall tale. He’s using magic or something to disorient us.”

“Oh… Oh, he is!”

“You’ve convinced me, Basson!”

“Yeah, the magicule concentration around here is pretty high. You’re probably right. This must be illusory magic or the like.”

“You said it, Gomez. We’ve been following the right-hand rule religiously so far. Worst-case scenario, we’ll just wind up back where we came.”

Oh dear. Labyrinth difficulty was the least of their concerns. They might’ve thought they were thinking things through, but they sure weren’t. I wouldn’t be so harsh on them if they were taking notes on paper, but no way could they memorize a path through all these similar-looking corridors, packed with forks, four-way intersections, and dead ends. Between the uniform decor and the twistiness of the paths, simply going right at every opportunity wasn’t going to get you anyplace.

These challengers were just way too idiotic. Couldn’t count on them for too much, I guess…

…But then Basson’s party disappeared. Or, to be more exact, they fell down to the next level.

“Wh-whoaaa! Was that a trapdoor?”

I was as quizzical as Soka. Did we set up any trapdoors on the first level?

“Ramiris…”

“Um… Yes? How can I help you?”

“…When I set up this floor, I really don’t think I installed anything like that. You haven’t been messing around with my design, have you?”

I tried to keep a smile on my face, so as not to scare Ramiris. That being said, I still found it prudent to grab her to keep her from flying away.

“Well, actually,” she replied with a forced smile, “we wanted to make the labyrinth a more complete creation, so…”

Upon further interrogation, Ramiris admitted to placing a fairly decent number of trapdoors around. I had to chew her out for this. A floor this large doesn’t need trapdoors, all right? The idea was to tire adventurers out and sap their endurance, but these kinds of traps had the opposite effect, essentially serving as time-saving shortcuts. Traps are only traps, after all, if their effect matches your intended purpose.

“But, um, but, I mean, you had a lot more fiendish trapdoors in the lower levels, didn’t you? So I thought, you know, perhaps you forgot to install some higher up. I just did it out of kindness, you see?”

I didn’t need that type of kindness.

Sure, if they wanted to make this into a punishing gauntlet, I could get that. If I left everything in the hands of Ramiris, Veldora, and Milim, they’d litter the whole labyrinth with insane traps like that. But I didn’t want that at the very start. That was the whole reason I worked on the topmost floors myself!

Quickly, I turned my attention to the other parties.

Elen’s group was theoretically led by Kabal, but Elen herself had fully taken over the leader role. On the whole, they had no sense of direction at all, so I thought beating the first floor could prove difficult for them…and I was half-right.

The group didn’t run into any traps, at least, as they carefully advanced. Amazingly, they were even writing down notes as they went, following the textbook method of dungeon conquering.

“Oh? Elen’s party is sure taking this seriously. They didn’t hit any trapdoors, and they’re dodging the traps I set up as well. And they already looted three treasure chests? They’re having a pretty smooth time so far.”

“…Eh-heh-heh!”

Um? What’s so funny? Why are they having such a smooth time of it? And something about Ramiris hiding her reaction with a laugh rubbed me the wrong way.

“…Uh, Ramiris?”

“Y-yes? What is it?”

“I trust in you, okay? I know you wouldn’t hide anything from me.”

“Of—of course not, Rimuru!”

“So let me ask: Did you do something to Elen’s group?”

Nothing looked amiss on-screen, but they were performing a little too well. As one would expect in a dungeon, many of the treasure chests throughout contained nothing of value—but Elen’s party picked three chests in a row with killer loot. It stank of cheating.

“Well, actually…”

Not that again.

“What did you do?”

“Oh, um, well, Elen and her group gave me a nice little gift, so we really hit it off, you could say! So then—”

………

The more I heard, the worse my headache got.

In the midst of labyrinth construction, Elen had given Ramiris a large number of cakes. These were baked by Mr. Yoshida, so I’m sure they were all delicious. Elen had made similar overtures to the dryads as well, and bit by bit, she had gleaned information from them about the first floor. Ramiris realized this after a while, but as she put it, the magic of those pastries was simply irresistible.

“I mean, what could I do?! I didn’t see it as a problem! And Master Veldora and Milim didn’t, either!”

Now she was firing back at me, trying to portray her actions as totally justifiable. But it was straight-up bribery. I was exasperated at how quickly corruption had become an issue down there.

Still, no need to catastrophize about it. I had adjusted the labyrinth today to skew easier difficulty-wise. Plus, only the first floor had been exposed to her. The treasure chests with the real top-shelf prizes weren’t on that level.

“Kabal’s party is doing a good job landing treasure, isn’t it?”

“That it is,” Mjöllmile told Soka, joining her in the announcer’s role. “Sir Rimuru mentioned that chests can sometimes be found in small side rooms and the like, but they need to watch for traps as well.”

“Good point! Do you think there are neat items in them?”

“There’s some really good stuff in the lower levels, I would imagine… And speaking of which, I understand there are three types of treasure chests in all—gold, silver, and bronze. It seems only the bronze chests run the chance of being booby-trapped.”

These three chest types contained different sets of items. Floor 1 contained nothing but bronze chests. Silver chests could contain items up to the Special level of rarity, but most of them were seeded with potions, silver coins, and other useful stuff. This included some of the lesser-quality swords forged by Kurobe, only ranking a Normal in quality. Overall, nothing that would really cost us much if someone was gunning for them.

“But it’s the gold chests you really want, I suppose,” Soka said.

“Quite so,” agreed Mjöllmile, reading from some notes I’d given him earlier. “And apparently, those only show up on floor numbers that are a multiple of ten—the boss chambers, in other words.”

“What do you mean by that?”

“Well, as all of you know, Sir Bovix has been appointed the guardian of Floor 50. In much the same way, we have other guardians, or ‘boss monsters,’ positioned in chambers in front of the exit stairway in Floors 40, 30, 20, and 10. The gold chests are only for those adventurers who can defeat such formidable foes, and they could even contain Rare-level weapons and armor!”

This was meant to be an advertising event, so I didn’t want opportunities like this one to go to waste. The script here was admittedly kind of trite, like a late-night infomercial, appealing to people’s greed with such refreshing alacrity that I was almost ashamed to be one of the writers. But it worked like a charm. The mention of Rare weapons sent a clamor across the audience.

“I imagine most people here got to see Bovix’s strength for themselves. He is the kind of powerhouse challengers have waiting for them in here, so if anyone thinks they’ve got the muscle for it, I’d love to see them challenge this labyrinth!”

“That’s right! And one more thing: As you can see on this screen, each floor is very large in size. I imagine you’d need to clear out several days if you wanted to fully conquer the Dungeon, huh?”

That was our basic setup—Soka asking leading questions, Mjöllmile answering them. The classic “play-by-play” and “color commentary” setup, and they were doing pretty well as partners.

Like I said before, Floor 1 had only bronze chests.

“…You didn’t mess around with the contents of the chests, did you?” I asked Ramiris.

“All good there!”

Ah, all right. I didn’t appreciate Elen gaming the system like this, but her party was advancing the “right” way, and it made for perfect advertising. I suppose she earned whatever she picked up down there today. Giving her a map and list of trap locations was a blatant rule violation, but I’d overlook it this time.

So I knew Elen’s party was safe. What about Masayuki, whom I’d given my own set of hints?

“And look at this! They’ve already made their way to Floor 4! What speed! We’re definitely seeing ‘Lightspeed’ at their quickest today, folks!”

Pfffthhh!!

Why, man?! It hasn’t even been thirty minutes since we began! Why was he already down to the fourth level?!

Masayuki’s party had hit virtually every trapdoor so far, as if aiming for them, which gave them a head start to the lower levels. And the crowd…

“Ma! Sa! Yu! Ki! Masayukiiiiii!!”

…I didn’t even need to look at them, really. Even audience members who laughed at Basson blundering into a trapdoor sang Masayuki’s praises whenever he found one. It was incredibly unfair, but that was just Masayuki’s power doing its thing. He was probably resenting me right now, given that the info I’d leaked to him was less than fully reliable. Sorry, man. It wasn’t my fault, not that that was an excuse.

By Floor 4, they’d start to see monsters patrolling the corridors. I was sure my map wasn’t looking too reliable at this point, what with those fearsome trapdoors at random locations, but I still prayed they’d do their best with the situation.

That just left Gaiye, and he was using his physical gifts to rush through the labyrinth, Delta flying at full speed to keep up.

Being a demi-spiritual being, Delta could “teleport” herself using whatever nearby plant life there was—but doing that would cut off the video she was telecasting, so she was frantically chasing after Gaiye instead, I suppose. It was an impressive effort, and I was glad to see her so devoted to her post.

Gaiye, of course, paid her no mind, proceeding along at his own pace. Judging by how he wasn’t getting lost at all on his way to the stairways, I was guessing he had some kind of magical positioning system activated.

Understood. This is the elemental magic spell Automap.

Aha. You wouldn’t need a map at all, then, huh?

This magic flashed pinpoint positional data into your brain, sort of like what the Great Sage used to provide me. If Gaiye was keeping it constantly activated, he must’ve been well versed in magic, too, not just swords. Pretty gifted in both as well, I’d say.

Upon reaching out to Fuze, I learned that Gaiye was indeed an A-ranked adventurer, a very rare breed. Based on his performance, I’d call that more than fair. He was on Floor 2 right now but would be reaching the next stairway down shortly. If he kept up this pace, he should make it to Floor 5 in the two hours or so remaining. This was much faster than I envisioned; I didn’t see this speed coming at all.

But something caught my attention. There was something sparkling within Gaiye’s eyes—something unusual. His lips were twisted downward, his eyes bloodshot—and even when he hit Floor 3, he kept up his blazing speed. Unlike the first two floors, however, he started ducking into side rooms, checking them for treasure chests…or, really, just raiding the chests without hesitation, like he knew where they were all along. Strictly silver chests, too.

“Uh… How’s he doing that?” I grumbled. Raphael had no response, so not even he knew.

“I feel like that adventurer Gaiye’s got this intense greed pushing him forward, y’know? Like his nose can smell out where the gold is.”

Ramiris’s appraisal was a tad vague, but I think I might understand what she was getting at. It was clear there was nothing normal about Gaiye, between this and the gruesome treatment he gave Mjöllmile. Hopefully, I reasoned as I watched him sprint forward, I won’t have to get involved with him much.

We were now two hours in, and Basson’s party had just found another hidden room.

“Basson! There’s another chamber in here!”

A fellow party member happened upon the latch for the door.

“Not another trap, is it?” a doubtful Basson asked.

The adventurers had been stymied by a paralysis-poison trap I’d laid for them, as well as a treasure chest loaded with sleeping gas. They even got accosted by one of the weaker mimics in the labyrinth, so now they were eyeing every chest with caution.

“Hey, Ramiris, which chest was in that chamber? I’d really like them to find something good soon. It makes for bad advertising otherwise, and I’m kinda starting to feel sorry for them…”

Seeing them bumble around reminded me of my days of buying ten loot crates in a mobile game and getting nothing but crap from them. After all this failure, they just seemed pitiful to me. They’d never come back if they completely lost their drive to continue, so I wanted them to land something pretty soon.

“Um, n-no worries there. It’s just, y’know, that challenger’s party is really awful. Not that I’m one to talk, but I didn’t expect anyone to be this reckless. But that chamber’s got one monster and one silver chest. I don’t remember what’s inside, but it’ll definitely be worth the trouble this time!”

Great. Today, at least, I wanted something good to come their way—

“Whoa, boss, it’s a trap! There’s a monster!”

“Geh. Wanna fall back?”

“We can’t, Basson. He’s already locked on to us!”

“A giant bear?! Yeah, no running from that…”

Both sides began to size each other up, gauging their first move. I…was concerned. Why would the simple presence of a monster spook them so much? No, you didn’t see creatures like this on Floor 1, and Floor 2 had nothing too powerful on it. But this hidden chamber had a silver chest with a fairly decent item inside, so we’d just placed a monster in there to protect it. Ramiris was right—this hidden room housed the best prize of the entire floor, and the giant bear guarding it was a C-ranked monster. Basson’s team was rated B; this would be easy pickings for them…and yet, the sight of that beast scared the pants off Basson and Gomez.

“Basson, I see a treasure chest on the other side!”

“And it’s silver…”

“It might be a trap, but we gotta do it. Brace yourselves, people!”

“Let’s go!”

Now the party of six was finally ready to fight, gripping their weapons tightly as they stared the bear down.

“I’ll distract it. You guys catch it off guard!”

Basson, as leader, intended to play the advance-guard role. The moment he jumped into the room, he let out a roar, drawing the bear’s attention. The two of them faced off.

“Whoa, Basson’s party has started fighting a monster! Is that a giant bear they’re up against? Those enormous claws could easily take your life with one swipe, it’s said!”

Soka’s commentary made me realize how wrong I was. Ah yes—this wasn’t a game. Basson’s party wasn’t proving it too well today, but they were professional adventurers, and they didn’t like getting hurt. The stakes dictated that one wrong move could end your life, so naturally, they wanted to avoid any combat that didn’t suitably reward them. I told everyone that dying in here was perfectly safe, but it looked like that’d take a while to sink in.

Maybe I needed to reconsider the pitch I was making with this labyrinth…

And then battle began. Basson was up in front, fending off the giant bear’s attack. His face was taut. He had gone with a set of hard leather armor today, which left his arms and sides undefended—no wonder even a lower-level foe was making him sweat. The swipes from his ax were heavy and punishing, no doubt, but they didn’t offer good defense against a clawed foe. Instead, he was deftly using his circular shield to push the giant bear’s arms away.

Meanwhile, his companions were offering him support, focused on staying safe as they aimed for the enemy’s eyes and footing with their barrage of attacks. It was Gomez the sorcerer who struck the final blow, however, with a Windcutter attack that hit home.

“And the curtain has closed on their battle with the giant bear! That was quite a battle, wasn’t it?”

“That it was. Truly a textbook approach—not going in too far at any time. These are true veterans of the craft at work.”

I listened to Soka and Mjöllmile’s banter as I thought over the fight. The party had worked well together. They’d wrapped up that battle successfully in around five minutes, with nobody hurt on their side. To me, though, this was a serious problem. My head started to hurt again.

“Guys, this was a fight they would’ve dominated from the start. Why were they being so damn careful with it…?”

“…Yes, I’m a tad surprised as well. But that’s the normal approach, isn’t it?”

“I guess so. I was worried when I saw they weren’t drawing a map, but I guess their approach to this is just too far removed from what we pictured.”

“Right, right. It might take some people three days or so just to wrap up Floor 1…”

“Hmm… In which case, maybe we better start thinking about supplying food or something…”

Man. I sure wasn’t expecting our plans to go awry like this. Basson’s party had adventurers of assorted ranks, but as a team, they were equivalent to a B. With the right equipment, I figured Basson and Gomez could both merit a B by themselves. The sight of a party of six experiencing so much trouble on Floor 2 was beyond unexpected. They were the clear victors of that battle, but five minutes? That was too long. Yeah, their emphasis on safety was probably the mark of professionals…but maybe they should focus more on healing injuries with potions and learning how to fight a little more efficiently.

As I fretted about this, the party approached the treasure chest.

“Looks like there’s a treasure chest in the room. And that color’s silver, isn’t it? What could we find inside…?”

Soka’s buildup filled the audience chamber with tension. Other parties had opened many chests by now, but it seemed like the crowd couldn’t get enough of that moment when the chest swung open.

One of Basson’s party members popped open the top. Eesh, at least try to be on the lookout for traps, guys! There weren’t any on silver chests, but they wouldn’t know that… They already had a dose of paralysis-poison earlier, along with sleeping gas before that. Now the party was taking turns picking someone to open chests, like it was a kind of punishment. It was so low-level, it scared me to look at them. For someone like me, used to the unwritten rules of video games, it was complete amateur hour. People here might not be used to uncovering chests in the middle of huge mazes…but was that why they were being so thoughtless about opening them?

Along those lines, Elen’s party was looking far more sensible. They had Gido with them, so up to now, they had managed to raid the chests without getting caught in any traps. Not having a thief-type specialist in his party might be a problem for Basson. Hunter-type adventurers who made most of their coin from bodyguard work might not be used to situations like this. It’d be best for them to bring on a dedicated explorer or just expand the size of their party.

But… Hang on. Maybe the labyrinth really was more difficult than we pictured. I thought Basson’s crew was just kind of low-level, but with nobody here well versed in this kind of dungeon hacking, perhaps things were just going to go slow at first. We’d need to reconsider that later.

“Oh! Ohhhhh! Basson, it’s a sword!!”

Nice! They’d finally drawn a winner—a big winner.

Top prizes for these chests included high-grade potions, ancient gold coins, quality armor, and so on. Starting on Floor 2, you also had a tiny chance at uncovering a Rare-level item, and that was exactly the kind of sword Basson’s team had just found.

“Oh, actually, Master Veldora said that he adjusted the chests from Floor 2 down to give out more jackpots like that.”

“Did he? Ah. But this party didn’t find anything good until now…”

Veldora saw the problem and addressed it, but with a party this unlucky, it still didn’t help. If he hadn’t fudged the stats a little, Basson would’ve been finding nothing all day. Drawing a Rare item was certainly quite a comeback. It meant good PR for us, and I bet it’d drive Basson’s party to try their luck some more. Thinking about it that way, I had to admit—Veldora did a good job.

“That was a smart decision on Veldora’s part, though. People need to have some positive experiences in here, or else it’ll affect our future strategy.”

I’d have to thank him later.

Basson’s party, meanwhile, was passing the sword around to one another, staring at it and whistling their astonishment. Seemed they liked it.

“Okay, guys,” Basson said as he put his ax away and switched to the sword, “let’s keep this up!”

The next chamber had three lesser bats flitting around, but Basson managed to swipe them all down with one hit. The blade must have helped, because they were starting to move faster. One of Kurobe’s apprentices had crafted that sword, which just barely qualified for Rare status, but to Basson, it must’ve been a legendary piece. The same was true for Gaiye; I heard that even A-ranked pros had difficulty acquiring a full set of Rare equipment. If so, no wonder Basson was so excited.

The party was now proceeding more quickly, making up for lost time and accumulating a large number of magic crystals from the monsters they slew.

“This is nice. We’re definitely comin’ out ahead. I think we’ll earn a lot more than I thought before the day’s through!”

“Yeah, I definitely want to pay another visit here once it’s fully open!”

Now the party was all smiles as they ventured farther into the Dungeon.

I turned my attention to Elen’s group.

Since they were on Floor 1, they’d have trouble finding any Rare items. They were being very cautious as they proceeded—too much so, really—but the approach paid off with all the chests they got to raid.

Now, though, they were suddenly switching tactics.

“Are we about ready?”

“You’re really going to do this?”

“Um… Do I get a voice in this…?”

“Here we go! Time to hook some big fish!”

Completely ignoring Kabal, Elen began to head for the lower levels. They had just under an hour to go, and I guess they chose this moment to go for broke. It looked like they’d focused on Floor 1 so much up to now because they were trying to gather as many potions as they could. Now it was time to make use of Ramiris’s info and attempt to get all the way down to Floor 10.

“It looks like Kabal’s party is on the move. They’ve been thorough in their work so far, proceeding bit by bit, but now they’re making a beeline for deeper floors.”

“Hmm… Are they looking for treasure chests with larger payoffs? But it’ll be hard to discover chests out of sheer luck…”

“But it looks like you can find Rare items from silver chests, like Basson’s party did earlier, right?”

“Right, but it’s not something you can aim for, really. Sir Gaiye has opened something like twenty silver chests so far, but he still hasn’t scored any Rares.”

“So they’ll need to look for gold chests to be guaranteed Rare items?”

“That’s correct. But they’ll only find gold chests in the designated boss-monster chambers, mostly.”

“Mostly? Are they anywhere else?”

“Well… Actually, there are other powerful creatures in the labyrinth that you may run into at random. These are called ‘area bosses,’ and the rooms they guard could contain golden chests.”

Soka’s and Mjöllmile’s guidance convinced me of what Elen was after.

“Hey, Ramiris?”

“Yeah?”

“Did you leak out the locations of the area bosses as well?”

“Well, um…”

“Well?”

“…?! I—I think such a thing might have been included, yes!”

Oh lord.

But—hey, let’s stay optimistic. These area bosses, something I included mainly for fun, could also be good PR for us—and I knew I laid one out in Floor 4. Its position changes whenever it’s defeated, but those guys should still be where I left them…

Essentially, this floor housed a small monster lair inhabited by several giant bats, each ranked C-plus. If you weren’t aware of them, you’d have to face a torrent of monsters all at once, but if Elen’s party saw them coming, I suppose they could prepare for it well enough. I just didn’t want it to look like they knew in advance there was something in that lair—that’d seem a little too contrived.

But I had nothing to worry about. Elen’s party deliberately used trapdoors to go down to Floor 5, pretended to be injured so they could advertise the effects of potions for me, and claimed loudly to be searching for somewhere to rest all the way to the monster lair. The perfect act from start to finish. They had futures in the theater, I tell you.

“Guys, there’s a small chamber around the corner. Let’s rest in there.”

“All righty! Are you okay, Kabal?”

“Y-yeah. Boy! That potion worked like a charm. I feel absolutely fine, but let’s rest a little bit before we start farming some more.”

Kabal’s delivery was a touch wooden, but nobody noticed. The eyes of everyone in the audience were on the big screen as Gido opened the door.

“Whoa-ho-ho! Giant bats!!”

“Stay calm! Kabal, you’re on!”

“…I don’t want them sucking my blood, but…”

Despite Kabal’s reluctance, he hefted up his Scale Shield, hiding behind it as he faced the full brunt of the bats’ attack. It looked like a tricky situation at first glance, but Kabal was cool as a cucumber. The giant bats had no way of cutting through a shield that durable, so he shrugged off their strikes without breaking a sweat.

As he distracted them, Elen completed her magic spell.

“Here we go! Icicle Shot!!”

A flurry of small, sharpened shards of ice flew at the bats. In a room this small, they had nowhere to flee. With her magic amplified by her Dryad’s Staff, Elen’s blast of ice tore the entire flock of bats to shreds.

“Hmm… Too easy, by the looks of things.”

“You may be right. If this were Basson’s party, I bet it’d be a life-and-death struggle…”

“I feel like giving out a gold chest for this is costing us.”

“Maybe, but let’s not use Elen’s party as our yardstick for this, hmm?”

Ramiris had a good point. Plus, if you think about it, this went easy for Elen only because she cheated; she wouldn’t get this advantage normally. If she had run herself ragged all around the labyrinth before finally discovering a gold box, I’d be happy to toast her good fortune then.

“That was a fine battle, wasn’t it?” Soka asked Mjöllmile on mic.

“Yes, this is definitely a well-seasoned team of adventurers. They certainly made it look easy. Ah, and here’s Sir Gido opening a treasure chest…”

“Ooooh! A gold chest! Are we really going to see a Rare item come out?!”

I focused in on Gido’s hands. He was guaranteed a Rare, but exactly what, I couldn’t guess.

“Looks like a sword…”

“Awww, I wanted some sorcerer’s armor!”

“A sword?! Sweet! Someone up high must be watching how hard I’m working!”

Three people, three reactions. Gido couldn’t care less, Elen was pouting, and Kabal showed his first real enthusiasm of the day. The sheer across-the-board variety made me laugh.

“…And it looks like a weapon, Mjöllmile!”

“Ahhh, I’m sure it is. The demon lord Rimuru has given me word that every gold chest is guaranteed to house an excellent item inside.”

I didn’t remember saying that, but I was glad Mjöllmile was kind enough to hype it up for me.

This chest contained a Tempest Sword—everyone thought it was a Rare, but it was actually a Unique. Like the Tempest Dagger I’d given Gido, it was a masterpiece of a weapon, forged by Kurobe from Charybdis scales. Veldora had made “jackpot” finds like this more common for today, and maybe that’s why Elen’s party scored a killer item that usually showed up just 1 percent of the time.

Then, their mission done for the day, the party promptly prepared to head back. Talk about a cold, calculated approach, huh? I dunno.

“We kind of lavished too much on them,” I said as I laughed at their indomitable drive for riches, “but ah well.”

How were Masayuki’s team and Gaiye doing?

Both were drilling deeper and deeper down, as if in a footrace, but it was clear who had the advantage. Masayuki’s party was overwhelmingly ahead, already at the ninth floor by the time two hours passed by.

“They’re just way too fast…”

“I’m sorry! I didn’t think challengers would use trapdoors that way.”

“Ahhh, I doubt Masayuki is deliberately aiming for them, but…”

Even as Ramiris and I spoke, the party tore their way across Floor 9. With over fifty minutes left to go, they reached Floor 10—and thanks to yet another conveniently placed trapdoor, they managed to get deep inside, right nearby the boss chamber. Masayuki’s good luck again, no doubt.

“I never would’ve guessed they’d go this far in under three hours…”

Their speed just totally floored me.

By this point in the labyrinth, you’d start to encounter monsters in the middle of corridors as well, not just in rooms. Sometimes they’d appear in small groups, too—but Masayuki’s friends did an impressive job against them. Nearly all their foes fell with one hit; at no time were they ever endangered. And since my map was accurate except for the trapdoors, they were still checking it to figure out the way ahead.

Finally, the party reached the last chamber in the floor. The stairs to Floor 11 would appear only once they defeated the boss lurking inside—a black spider, ranked a B in difficulty.

The party cowered against this fearsome sight…

“Yahhh!”

…and Jinrai then slashed it to death in one swipe.

Damn. That was frustrating. Against Team Masayuki, a black spider didn’t even begin to pose a challenge. If it weren’t for all those damn trapdoors, at least they would’ve had to spend more time getting here…

Thus the party picked up their gold treasure chest, grabbing a Rare-level dagger from it. That, and they even added their names to the floor’s save point. I decided, right then and there, to just do away with all the trapdoors.

Once the boss was slain, Masayuki’s group used their return whistle to head back to the surface, making them the second group to emerge after Elen’s.

Just when the party exited the boss chamber, the door leading to it opened again.

“Masayuki’s party is back with us, but now Sir Gaiye is going to challenge the boss!”

“Gaiye has traversed this far into the labyrinth all by himself. No traps or pitfalls have caught him yet, and he’s been going at a breathtaking clip the whole time.”

“Yes, at the speed he’s going, he’s racing past trapdoors before they can even open. That’s an unexpected approach to take! I don’t think most people could copy it.”

The adventurer types in the audience nodded in agreement with Mjöllmile. Going solo was one thing, but a multimember team could never pull a trick like that. Gaiye didn’t have the greatest of personalities, but he was every bit worthy of the A rank he was rewarded. He had run into no problems in these early floors, taking every measure available to score as many silver chests as possible. He was about the worst beta tester I could’ve picked, but I couldn’t do much about that now.

“Pffft. That piece-of-garbage swordsman beat me here, eh? Oh well. Bring back that boss for me!”

Gaiye wasted no time copping an attitude. It was grating, but I was mature enough to put up with it.

“So what happens at a time like this, Mjöllmile?”

“Well, I’m told that the boss is resurrected in approximately thirty minutes.”

“And the gold treasure chest with it?”

“That’s what I understand, yes. Otherwise, Sir Rimuru was concerned people would start fighting each other for the right to tackle a boss.”

“I see, I see. In that case, I’m afraid Gaiye may not have enough time…”

“No, there’s not much time left. I imagine that’ll be the end of this run for him.”

Fifteen minutes remained out of the three hours allotted. Gaiye, once the situation was explained to him, did not take it well.

“Are you kidding me?! You think you can boss me around in here? I know how talentless all you people are, but I don’t see why I need to stoop down to your level! Get this boss back here now!”

The greed was visible in his eyes as the self-centered vitriol continued. Delta took it all in stride, but the next thing Gaiye said changed matters for her.

“Hmph! The master of a talentless fool is a talentless fool. There’s no need at all for me to abide by the rules of you buffoons!”

Oops. Shouldn’t have said that. That’s all but declaring to the master of the labyrinth that you aren’t gonna play by her laws. Gaiye’s shouting wasn’t going to change anything, but was the master going to ignore that insult?

Doubtful.

“Your statement clearly violates the regulations set by us,” Delta calmly stated. “I will let this go if you apologize, but I will not allow any more abusive language.”

Gaiye snorted at her. “What? Why’s a guide like you think you’re so far above me? Don’t make me laugh!”

“Clear rule violation confirmed. Executing punishment.”

“Huh? Punishment? What could you ever do to—?”

At the next moment, Gaiye’s body was bound and lifted into the air by vines that sprang up from the floor around him.

“…Wha—?!”

“I have removed the pain suppressor feature on your Resurrection Bracelet. Do you feel like apologizing yet?”

Small thorns shot out from the vines, piercing into the slits between his armor’s plating. The results were painful for him. This was the spirit magic Thornbind, and Delta was able to launch it with zero spell-casting delay.

“D-damn you! You think that’s all it takes to beat me?”

“This is your final warning. Do you have any interest in apologizing?”

“The hell I do! This level of magic could never—”

His shouting was cut off mid-sentence, as Delta used her slender hands to slice Gaiye’s head off.

He had chosen the wrong person to pick a fight with today. Yes, he was an A-ranked adventurer, but Delta was a dryad. Even without battle experience, her species had instincts that made her a threat beyond Hazard level. Once she was a bit more well versed, she’d be at the Calamity tier with Treyni and the others. Someone like Gaiye had no chance.

The sight of Gaiye, who had wowed in the battle tournament, getting destroyed by the gentle-looking Delta made the crowd audibly gasp. The Flowing Swordsman may’ve thought he was strong, but he was killed in an instant, unable to defend himself. Seeing that projected on such a large screen would scare the crap out of anyone.

“Ah yes,” Mjöllmile said in hushed tones. “In the labyrinth, the words of the maze master essentially serve as the law. Ignore her rules, and the managers will deliver a swift punishment like the one you saw just now.”

As he put it, if you followed the rules, you were perfectly safe.

“That, um, that’s pretty scary. So what happens to Gaiye, then?”

“Nothing at all, actually. He will be stripped of the items he’d acquired in this trip into the labyrinth, but otherwise, he is alive and well… Although without the pain suppression feature on his Resurrection Bracelet, I imagine it’s a rather grueling experience for him at the moment.”

There was no real punishment, you could say. All it meant was a reset back to what you were before venturing inside, and nothing else. Serious rule infractions might require us to ban you from the Dungeon entirely…but we planned to discuss that once we saw how things went.

“Ah! Gaiye’s now out from the labyrinth—but unlike you, Mjöllmile, it appears he’s unconscious.”

Immediately after the decapitation, Gaiye dissolved into particles of light and was resurrected at the surface—still knocked out. That’s because Delta exercised her right to restrict the functionality of his Resurrection Bracelet, a sort of nuanced way to mete out extra punishment. He was safe and unhurt, but his body would need some time to recover from the shock of “dying.”

Between his mistreatment of Mjöllmile and outright contempt for Delta, Gaiye was proving to be one of the most distasteful people I’d ever met. Seeing him like this was, to say the least, gratifying. Hopefully, he learned his lesson a little.

“Yes,” Mjöllmile continued, “as long as participants follow the rules, the Resurrection Bracelet always works perfectly. But as all of you saw, Sir Gaiye was deliberately flaunting regulations, so… The labyrinth has a number of rules for visitors to follow—for example, no conflicts among adventurers, and always follow the advice of the maze’s managers. We plan to distribute a book of rules once normal operation begins, and our guides will also provide rule rundowns to those adventurers who can’t read. We’ll want all of you to follow the rules and behave well inside, lest you meet the same fate Sir Gaiye just did.”

“Oh, I could imagine Gaiye might be a little disappointed about this result, but during normal operation, all you have to do is wait a short period of time, and the boss will reappear! It’s against the rules to fight other adventurers, so it’s important to wait your turn and conquer this Dungeon the right way!”

Soka used a melodious tone of voice to run all of this down. What’s “the right way” mean here? She didn’t specify. I thought the crowd felt kind of awkward about this, but Soka’s follow-up largely steamrolled over all of that.

As she went on, Gaiye woke up again…then reeled back in shock, remembering what had happened to him. Seeing him recovered (if intensely frustrated) helped calm the crowd down a great deal.

Well, good.

It seemed like the crowd had accepted Mjöllmile’s explanations for everything. He may have been a total prick, but the things we learned observing Gaiye were quite useful. If we could work out how to deal with high-level adventurers sprinting down just to raid treasure chests, hopefully we could avoid losing a mint on this. That, and everybody certainly knew how the rules worked now.

All in all, I’d say Gaiye’s journey proved pretty satisfactory for all of us.

Thus, each team wrapped up their runs, leaving only Basson’s party inside. They had about ten minutes left, so I’d want them to wrap up shortly.

As I thought about that, one of Basson’s companions screamed loudly and fell to the ground in the corridor. Someone in the adjacent room must’ve gotten him; he was alive, but there was an arrow straight through his right eye.

See? I told you going in all careless like that was dangerous.

There was a single skeleton inside this chamber, wielding a bow and taking potshots at anyone through the door. The second party member through the archway was rewarded with a bolt between the eyes; he fell as well, but unlike Gaiye, he disappeared into light particles after ten seconds. Nice. We’d have at least one challenger experience death before time expired, then.

The remaining four party members made quick work of the skeleton.

“Ahhh, look at this!” Soka said, talking quickly. “We haven’t had anyone drop out yet, but that skeleton has just claimed two victims! But don’t worry, because the deceased will be revived shortly back at the surface!”

The audience was riveted by the you-are-there viewpoint they had of the battle. Having it shown on such a huge screen like that really did make it feel like you were exploring the labyrinth with them. I heard screams here and there whenever a monster appeared, which I thought was a pretty cool reaction. Maybe it was like watching a horror film; people started shouting their heads off when that party member died, too.

Maybe staging viewing events of the action inside the labyrinth would be a fun idea. We’d work this out with the participating adventurers in advance, of course; we couldn’t get away with showcasing their exploits without permission. Really, today was helping me come up with all kinds of little ideas.

For now, though, time was almost up. This offered a nice taste of the show to everyone, I thought.

Basson’s party helped keep things tense throughout; in the end, they were pretty good challengers, actually. They may’ve dissed Masayuki and crowed about “ripping the facade” off the labyrinth and accused me of running a con job, but once they were in, they forgot about all of that and focused on their task. Now they were shedding tears and wailing the names of their fallen comrades. Not only did they have the wrong impression, they clearly weren’t the kind of people who listened to anything they were told. As beta testers, they were tremendously helpful.

“All right, everyone, it’s just about time to return to the surface.”

Alpha, the guide for Basson’s party, interrupted their mourning in her matter-of-fact voice. Basson looked livid at her for a moment, but Alpha ignored him and forced their return whistles to activate.

“Goddamn you!” Basson protested—but he swallowed his words back on the surface.

“Oh, hey, Basson. I guess I actually got resurrected.”

Being greeted by his alive (and very confused) companion made Basson’s anger vanish.

“Whoa! Awesome!! You really came back to life?!”

“Yeah, I thought I was done for, but it didn’t hurt near as much as I thought, and now I’m back to normal.”

“Man, are you serious? ’Cause if so, this is just amazing. There’s so few people out there who can cast resurrection magic, and this bracelet does it all for us?!”

The group chattered on some more as they celebrated their revived companion.

“Ugh, dammit, my eye…”

“How about we use this?”

The man with his eye shot out had it all fixed up with a dose of potion.

“This is crazy. For people like us, you know, our bodies are our main asset. So having this sort of setup is like a dream.”

“Wow, so it’s true?! Man, we can really go all-out next time!”

You were going all-out, man. I don’t think I saw you check for traps once all day. Once they get nastier on later floors, you’re goners.

I could criticize their style all day, but I stayed mum for now. The key thing was how the crowd reacted, and after seeing how Basson’s party fared start to finish, I think they understood how safe the Dungeon was.

As an advertising stunt, I’d call today a success.

The challengers were all lined up onstage now. I headed up as well, standing in front of them, to offer some closing remarks.

“So what did you all think?” I asked, mic in hand. “Did you have fun today? Our Dungeon will be officially opening to the public in just a few more days. I guarantee to all of you that it’s perfectly safe, so if you’re interested, go ahead and give it a try for yourself. And if any of you can conquer the hundredth floor on the bottom, I will grant you the right to challenge me to battle!!”

With that, the event was over—and my instincts told me we kicked ass. The tournament final was exciting enough, but viewing these test runs into the labyrinth really did make it seem like you were there. It was a great way to round out the show.

Of course, it would’ve been perfect if the show actually ended then. But:

(Rimuru, what is the matter? I have yet to see any challengers. How long do I have to wait?)

Veldora, lord of the labyrinth, sent me a Thought Communication that clearly indicated he hadn’t listened to a word I said. Way to ruin the moment, man.

(Shut up! How many times do I have to tell you?! Listen to me: You’re not gonna see anyone good enough to make it to the bottom for a while!)

(Wh-what?! That was not how I understood it!)

(Then you understood it wrong, dumbass! Why don’t you try actually listening to me?!)

We argued about this for a little while afterward. You know how you sometimes see kids get yelled at during a fair or festival, because they get too worked up and all that? It’s so regrettably common—so this time, I lectured Veldora until I was damn sure he was sorry.