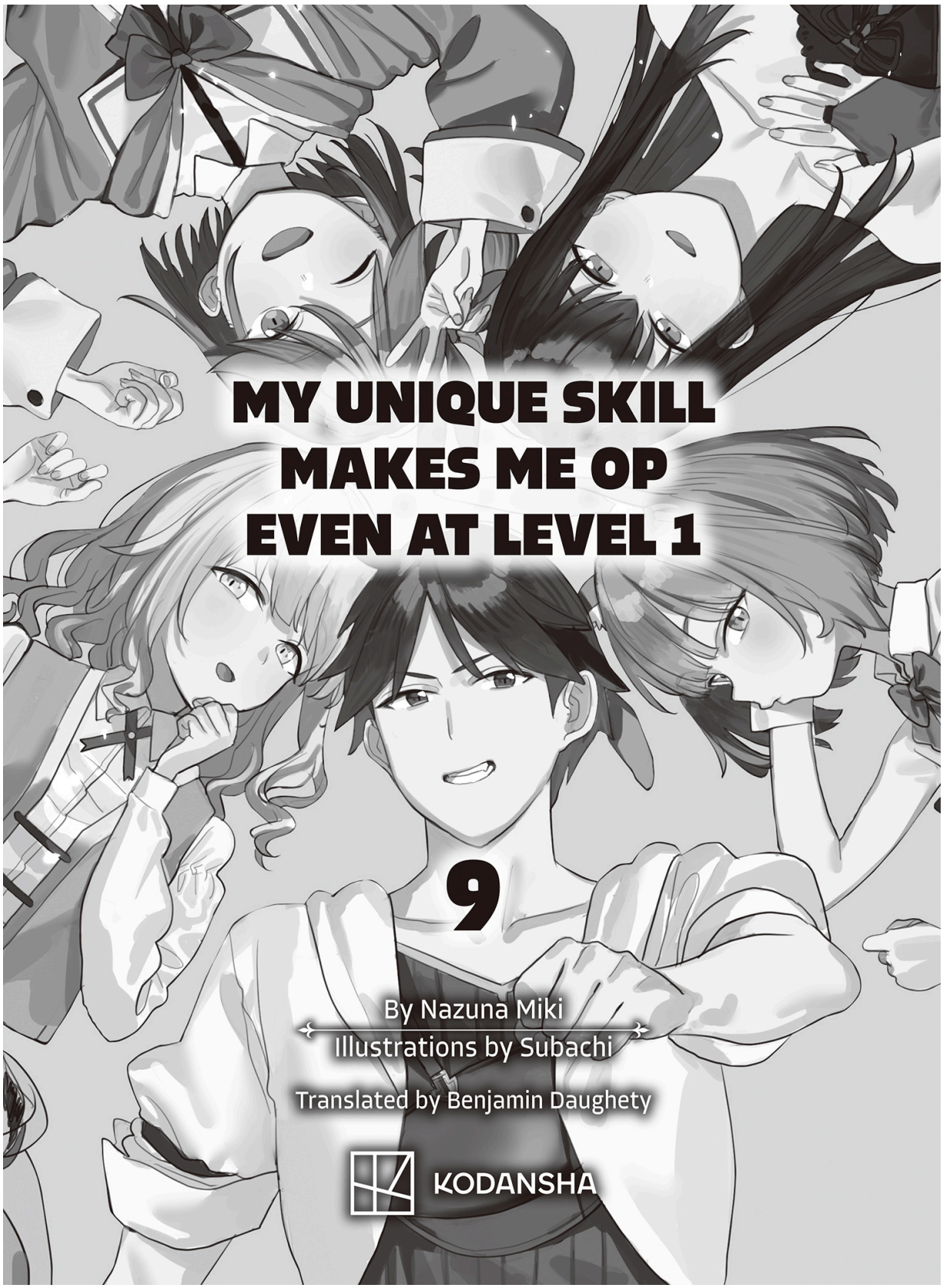

9
Nazuna Miki
Art by Subachi
MY UNIQUE SKILL MAKES ME OP EVEN AT LEVEL 1


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MY UNIQUE SKILL MAKES ME OP EVEN AT LEVEL 1


WHEN I GOT HOME, ERZA WAS WAITING AT THE DOOR.
"WELCOME BACK, RYOTA."
"THANKS. WHY THE LONG FACE?"
"WELL, MY BOSS WAS HERE JUST NOW."
"YOUR BOSS? OH, THE OWNER OF THE SWALLOW'S RETURNED FAVOR?"
SHE NODDED BACK.
Erza
A member of the Family and receptionist from the Swallow's Returned Favor. Admires Ryota.


"BUNNIES WILL DO ANYTHING FOR CARROTS."
"I'M BACK! PLUMBUM'S A FUNNY GIRL!"
"ALICE? DID YOU JUST SAY PLUMBUM?"
Alice
A member of the Family, born and raised in a dungeon. She can communicate with monsters.
Eve
A bunny member of the Family, known as the Killer Rabbit. Obsessed with Ryota's carrots.
Ryota
Leader of the Ryota Family. After dying of overwork, he was transported to this world and stuck at level 1, but he wields the strongest skill.


"WOW, THAT'S AMAZING!"
"RYOTA MUST BE MASS-PRODUCING THEM IN THE CHAMBER."
"I SEE... AN ENDLESS LOOP OF SLIMES AND NORMAL BULLETS."
Emily
A member of the Family, and the first person who Ryota met after he was transported here. Creates warm homes with her innate motherly powers.
"OH, I SEE. HE DOESN'T GET ANY BULLETS OUT OF IT, BUT HE CAN EARN ENDLESS EXPERIENCE POINTS!"
"YEAH! ONLY HE WOULD COME UP WITH THAT IDEA SO QUICKLY."



MY UNIQUE SKILL MAKES ME OP EVEN AT LEVEL 1

9

By Nazuna Miki
Illustrations by Subachi
Translated by Benjamin Daughety

KODANSHA

My Unique Skill Makes Me OP Even at Level 1, 9

A VERTICAL Book

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260. (Tax) Money Makes the World Go Round

While I relaxed in the mansion salon one night, Emily came calling, "Yoda, you have a visitor."

"A visitor? Who is it this time?" I asked.

"It's their first time here. What should we do?"

"Let's see what they want."

"Okay. I'll bring them to you!" she said before running out of the salon.

A first-time visitor, this late at night? Who could it be, and what do they want?

While I waited for Emily, Aurum ran in this time and said, "Ryota, let's go to the pub!" Miike, a mini-sage and her permanent companion now, was cradled in her arms.

"The tavern?"

"Yeah! That place with all the people, where I get to hear all kinds of stories!"

"Huh. I guess you would like that."

"Yep! So let's go. Come on, I'll even treat you!"

She held out her hand and created gold bars—not just one, but a whole pyramid-like pile of them. That could easily go for 4,000,000 piros.

That's the incarnation of gold, the spirit of the dungeon Aurum, for you, I mused to myself.

"Whoa, no, no, that's too much. We don't need all that for one trip to the tavern."

"Then let's buy a round for everyone!" she insisted. "It's a really fun place, so it's worth it!"

"I'm amazed that you love it so much."

"I do! So come *on*!"

"We can go, but..."

"Thanks for waiting, Yoda." Just then, Emily returned with our guest in tow. He was a slightly haggard-looking man in his fifties, like someone from a dying shopping district.

"Thing is, we have a guest," I replied to Aurum.

"Oh... Okay, that sucks." She held out her hand again, and the gold disappeared. I appreciated how she was willing to let it go without a fuss, but it did feel bad to see her so dejected.

"We can go tomorrow, though."

"You mean it?!"

"And we'll talk to lots of people. Nobody can refuse a free meal, right?"

"Ooh...! Thank you, Ryota!" She lunged at me, hugged my neck, and kissed me on the cheek. Then, she happily embraced Miike and skipped out of the salon with him.

"...Ahem." I cleared my throat nervously and faced our guest again. "Sorry you had to see that. I'm Ryota Sato. Nice to meet you."

I tried to be extra polite since I hadn't met him before. Simple manners, but a remnant from my days as a corporate slave—or rather, as a salaryman in general.

"My name is Dale," he introduced himself. "Ah, excuse me for asking, but that was Lady Aurum, no?"

"Yes. Why?"

When I replied, something in his eyes changed. "So you really do live among spirits. And when she made that gold disappear into thin air, that was her spiritual power, too?"

His sudden interest left me taken aback. "Y-Yeah?"

After introductions, Emily poured tea for him and left the salon. Meanwhile, I sat across from him.

"So... What brings you here?" I asked.

"I am the chief of Tetramine's Dungeon Association."

"Ooh."

Tetramine, huh? Sounds poisonous.

"Allow me to be frank! Would you be willing to move your base of operations to Tetramine?!"

"Hmm? Base of operations..." I thought for a moment before asking, "Wait, you want us to move houses?"

Dale nodded timidly. "Yes, sir! We've taken the liberty of preparing a mansion for you. It will come with a well-trained maid,

and we'll build a drop-buying shop close by. Of course, your companions will be treated equally well. Also..."

"Also?"

A mansion and maids? What more could one want?

"We will naturally issue licenses for every floor of our dungeon Plumbum."

"Plumbum... Lead, huh?"

"Huh?"

"Oh, nothing. Hmm..."

This is kinda weird. He comes here and tells us to move to his city, where he'll just give us a mansion? There's something behind this, but what?

"...I can't answer straight away. Let me think on it for a few days."

Dale leaned forward dramatically. "Thank you, sir! Please, give it some thought!"

I didn't know what he was really after, but he was obviously desperate.

☆

The following night, I took Aurum to Villa di H as promised, where we ran into Neptune and ended up drinking with him.

When I brought up what had happened last night during small talk, he chuckled and revealed the answer, “Ahaha! He’s after taxes.”

“Taxes?”

“Consider your influence a little more, my man. Remind me, how many people are in the Ryota Family these days?”

“Me, Emily, Eve, Celeste, Alice, and Miike... Oh, do the Cliff and Margaret Families count?”

“Latter aside, you have six people right there. And your taxes?”

“Hmm?”

“How much do you all pay in taxes each year?”

“Taxes, huh... I wonder.” I’d never paid it much mind. Adventurers’ taxes were hard to measure in this world, anyway, since they were deducted from your earnings every single time you sold loot.

At the next table was Eve, tipsy from beer and carrots. She took this opportunity to chime in, “A billion or so.”

“Eve?!” I gasped.

“The low level’s Family pays a billion piros in taxes.”

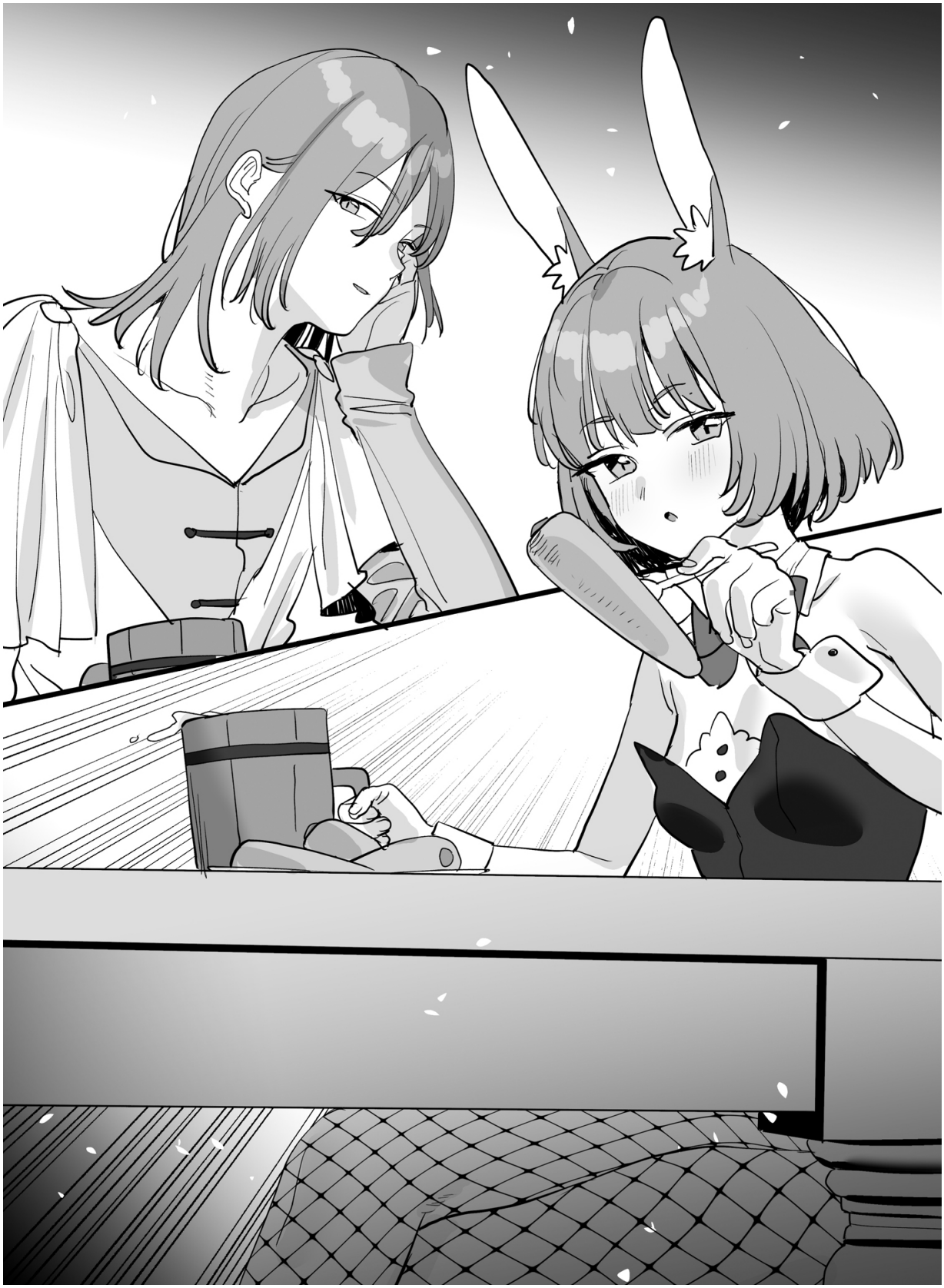
“That much?”

“He’s a major taxpayer, for a low level.”

“Wow.”

“There you have it,” Neptune said. “Bringing your Family in means enjoying your tax revenue. Tetramine has been suffering a bit

of depopulation lately, so a billion means a whole lot more to them than it does to Cyclo.”



“That makes a lot of sense...”

That solves the whole mystery.

I just had no idea that was what he’d wanted.

“By the way, someone as important as you moving would be a big problem. It could lead to conflict—hell, even war—between cities.”

“You’re exaggerating... Or maybe not?”

A billion piros was a lot of money. Neptune had even mentioned that Tetramine was losing population. My first impression of Dale had turned out to be correct. Based on that fact, a billion could genuinely be the difference between survival and destitution.

One thing tugged at my mind, though.

“What caused Tetramine, and Plumbum, to end up in such dire straits?”

Everyone was leaving the city, and by extension, the dungeon.

Hmm...

“Hah!” Neptune laughed, interrupting my train of thought.

“What?”

“Just laughing at how that bad habit of yours is coming out again.”

“What bad habit?”

“Oh, do you want my prediction? You won’t move, but tomorrow, you *will* go to Tetramine in hopes of fixing their problem for them.”

I grinned wryly. He was right; that was exactly what I planned to do.

The depopulation of Tetramine, the dungeon Plumbum... Dale had come to ask for my help, and I wanted to do just that.

261. How Insider Trading Begins

When I got home, Erza was waiting at the door.

"Welcome back, Ryota," she greeted me.

"Thanks. Why the long face?"

"Well, my boss was here just now."

"Your boss? Oh, the owner of the Swallow's Returned Favor?" I asked, and she nodded back. "You said 'was.' Does that mean he left?"

"Yes. The situation was changing so rapidly that he couldn't sit idly by."

I went inside to the salon to settle down for a bit. Erza came with me, so I asked her, "What situation?"

"First, my boss came to ask if you were really going to Tetramine. If the answer was yes, he was going to try to convince you otherwise."

"Why convince... Oh, because I'm a major customer?"

"Yes. If your whole Family left, we would be running at a deficit."

"What?! We make that much of a difference?"

"He said our profits would be outright gone."

"Wow... Okay, no wonder he came."

We went into the salon and sat down.

This was all so big that it didn't feel like it was about *me.*

"But he went home?" I confirmed. "Without trying to convince me?"

"Yes. Apparently, other drop buyers are already making plans to open shops in Tetramine. He worried that he'd be outmaneuvered."

"Outmaneuvered... I mean, even if I moved, I'm not about to stop doing business with the Swallow's Returned Favor." Not as long as I had Erza, anyway.

She was on a temporary assignment here from her employer, the Swallow's Returned Favor. But when you live with someone and share meals with them, you tend to start caring about them. She nominally worked for someone else, but to me, we were like coworkers.

"Thank you very much," Erza replied, looking down and blushing a little. Based on how she acted, I thought she felt the same way. As long as she was here, I was going to limit my business to her employer. "But that's not the problem," she added.

"Oh?"

"My boss said, 'Damn them! Sato's sure to revitalize Tetramine, so we need to stake our place right now!'"

"You mean..."

"Yes. They believe that you will succeed if you try. I happen to think they're right."

"Huh? Why's that?"

“People consider you a master of breathing new life into things. Indole, Methylene, Fylline... You have quite the success streak.”

“Do people really talk about me like that? How many nicknames do I have by now?” It seemed like they were really piling up lately.

“That’s why my boss rushed to Tetramine.”

“That makes sense.”

“I don’t think that’ll work, either,” a different voice suddenly piped up.

“Whoa!” I jumped from surprise. When I turned to them, Ina was there—Emily had brought her in.

She was Erza’s best friend and coworker. Once upon a time, she had made a request for me to procure specialty watermelons for her family’s greengrocer.

Ina smiled happily at my reaction.

“What does that mean, Ina?” Erza asked her.

“He already left, but we just got new intel. A certain someone has already started buying up all of the land in Tetramine; that means *all* of the drop buyers are too late.”

“Wh-Who could do something like that?”

“I bet Ryota has an idea,” Ina said, turning to me.

“Me?” I racked my brain.

To carry out a land grab like that, you’d need to be well-connected, quick to work, and have a certain level of conviction—

“Oh!” I gasped. “You mean Neptune?”

"The very same."

He moves way too fast. Good grief.

"I'm impressed. Ryota just *says* that he'll go somewhere, and it spurs so many people into action," Erza complimented me.

"Yep. Who knows how many hundreds of millions of piros have been spent on that alone?" Ina agreed.

I get it, but I don't really like it.

262. A Ghost Town and Outsiders

I took a carriage to Tetramine.

On the way, I asked Eve and Celeste, “Is it okay for you two to take the time and come with me?”

Eve gazed at me with rare sincerity. “We cannot let you go alone, low level.”

I hesitated. “Why not? I don’t get it.”

“Because of Aurum.”

“Aurum? What does she have to do with this?”

“She has the little one.”

“You mean Miike?”

Eve nodded. “You don’t have to take her anymore, so it’s okay for you to stay long now, low level.”

“That is true.”

Until now, when I went away to work, I’d worked under the impression that I had to be home soon. Because back then, I was the only person who could take her to her dungeon and back. If I needed to carry out requests, I’d always come back as soon as possible. I couldn’t, say, sightsee or enjoy a short vacation after solving a problem; I’d come straight back.

But that wasn’t a problem now. I didn’t know what kind of city Tetramine was, but I could hang out for a while after if I wanted this

time.

Eve chopped my forehead. It stung.

"Ow!"

Her chops were multi-hit attacks. They were so fast that it looked like she only chopped once, but in fact, each attack was multiple. Like the blades of a fan, the faster she went, the slower it looked. That showed how serious she was about any given attack.

That one was slow, and it hurt.

"Without you, I lose my carrots," she said flatly.

"Of course," I chuckled. Eve and Aurum had similar reasons to keep me at home. This bunny loved the carrots that came from my S-rank drops, and if I stayed out for too long, she wouldn't be able to get her fix. "And that's why you came?"

"Mhm."

"But there aren't any carrot drops there."

"If I need carrots, I'll just hit you."

"I get it. I'll fix this as soon as possible so we can go home."

"Mhm." Eve nodded in satisfaction.

I turned to our other companion. "And you, Celeste?"

"I looked into it, and apparently, Tetramine doesn't get many magic storms."

"Is that so?"

"Yup. I figured I could help you out."

"Well, thank you."

“My pleasure.” She smiled and blushed a little.

It was reassuring to have Celeste around. Frankly, “thanks” didn’t seem worthy of how much she would help.

“I’ll find a way to thank you. Is there anything you want?”

“We’re friends.”

“All the more reason that I’ll feel bad if I only take and don’t give.”

“Okay, then I’ll think about it. If I find something I want, I’ll let you know.”

“Yes, please.”

Her face broke out into a big smile.

Thus, we headed to Tetramine, rocked by the carriage all the way.

☆

“Neeeigh!” the horses whinnied as the carriage stopped.

I opened the roof and asked the driver, “Are we there already?”

“Not quite.” He shook his head and looked forward.

I followed suit.

Many people and carriages had gathered, like a merchant caravan. At the far end, about thirty minutes away by carriage, I

could see a city in the distance. Most people were facing that way, but they weren't moving.

Celeste looked out and asked me, "What's the matter?"

"Dunno. Let's go ask."

"Okay."

"Eve?"

"No work without carrots," she refused, drawing a surprisingly reasonable line.

But fine, we're just going to ask a question anyway.

Celeste and I headed toward the group of people without her.

"What's going on here?"

"Man, we're in big trouble... Oh! Ryota, is that you?"

"Yeah," I confirmed.

The man I'd addressed seemed to know me. I didn't know his name, but I recognized his uniform; it was the uniform of Swallow's Returned Favor. I'd asked him specifically because I recognized it.

"Is something holding things up?" I asked him.

"Oh, how unexpected this is. We can't even enter the city!"

Seeing the look on his face—an odd mixture of hopelessness and a wry grin—I cocked my head in confusion.

☆

Celeste and I traveled to the entrance of the city Tetramine alongside people from the Swallow's Returned Favor and other drop-buying shops.

When we got there, I quickly figured out what was wrong.

This was no place where people could live. Monsters roamed the streets, like a cross-section of hell.

"How did this happen?"

"I think the city ran out of operating funds." Celeste had prefaced that with *I think,* but she sounded almost certain. "They stopped disposing of trash."

"Now that you mention it, that's a lot of Frankensteins," I noted. Frankensteins were outsiders that spawned from this world's garbage. "Yeah... You did work as a garbage disposal person before we met, huh?"

"Yup. Even we don't work for free; if the money stops flowing, this is what happens."

"I get it."

On the way here, I'd expected this place would be like a dilapidated shopping district with every shop shuttered. This was entirely different from what I'd imagined.

So this is what happens when cities in this world are deserted.

I glanced behind me. There weren't any fighters among the people who'd come to do business. That was why they couldn't go in.

Celeste noticed my gaze and spoke up, “They must not have known that it was such a tragedy.”

“No doubt about that. But I guess you can buy up all the land here without even coming here first, huh?” After all, all you need to do is slide some documents over a desk. “Well, first things first. I’ll clean this mess up.”

“I’ll help.”

“Back me up, then. Cover anything I miss.”

“Got it. You’re not going to use your guns?”

“That’s right.” I nodded and stepped forth, unarmed and casual, before charging into the swarm of outsiders. “Repetition.”

I used Repetition, my ultimate farming spell that insta-killed anything I’d killed before. If I used this magic, I could essentially skip to the results screen of any monster fight that I’d gone through before.

I pressed on, never stopping to check on things, just firing off one Repetition after another.

Monsters disappeared one by one. I culled the numbers of the ones I’d defeated before, particularly the Frankensteins. As for the ones I hadn’t fought before...

“Eruption!” Celeste used her greater magic to clean them up.

There might be some strong ones amongst the ones I ignored, but she was much stronger than when we’d first met. I could leave them in her hands.

Like detergent on a grease stain, we cleaned up the outsiders who’d taken over Tetramine while people cheered us on.

263. The Splitting Dungeon

Eve and Celeste returned and reported to me.

"Low level, it's empty."

"Nobody in this house, either."

I furrowed my brow.

We'd looked around the town after cleaning up all the outsiders, but we hadn't found a single resident. We even searched inside the buildings. Not one person to be found.

"It'd be worse if there were," Eve said quietly. I had to agree.

The sheer number of outsiders wandering around had made the town into a sort of biohazard. It would be more worrying if someone *had* managed to survive in hiding throughout all this.

"But it's strange," Celeste mused. "If it was like this, I would think they would have asked you for help differently."

"I had that same thought."

Tetramine looked like a town in ruin after our fight with the outsiders.

Dale had asked me to move my base of operations here. Neptune had explained it away as him wanting my taxes. I'd found that convincing at the time.

"Typically, they'd be honest and ask me to save their town from the monsters, yeah?" I agreed.

"And they didn't need you in particular, low level." Eve was right, too. Her evident unhappiness was probably because my being called here meant fewer carrots for her.

"Yeah. A simple request to exterminate a flood of monsters could be handled by any old adventurer. Throw a hundred in this town, and they would've finished within a day."

"What is going on here?"

☆

It didn't take long for me to get my answer. With the monsters gone, the caravan from Cyclo entered the town and settled in. Meanwhile, Dale and the other townsfolk approached me.

"Thank you! Thank you so much!"

After hearing that we were the ones who'd saved them, they all came running and thanked us over and over.

"Forget that; I need an explanation," I said to Dale. "Why did you make that specific request given the circumstances? I wouldn't have refused if you'd told me monsters had taken over."

"That's not it!" He panicked and tried to explain—though he was *so* flustered that it almost sounded like excuses to me. "The dungeon wasn't paying out; we had no choice. But we'd managed to maintain appearances, if nothing else, when I left for Cyclo."

“And things changed after you left.”

“Yes... My subordinate, the vice president, ran off with all the town’s remaining funds. All while I was gone...”

“...”

“The town had nothing. We were on a tightrope...”

“And then it all came falling down,” I said.

Dale nodded silently. The townspeople behind him did the same.

It didn’t seem like he was lying.

One or two people might lie, but you can’t get hundreds of people to stick to the same fabricated story. As more people get involved, the chance of a lie being exposed rises exponentially. If just one person spills the beans, that’s it.

But he was being honest now.

The most convincing thing of all, of course, was the exhaustion evident in those who’d fled from town and taken refuge from the monsters.

☆

Though they were naturally just here for profits, the presence of people from Cyclo helped get the town running for the time being. That allowed me to put it aside for now and go to the dungeon with Eve and Celeste.

On B1 of Plumbum, Celeste and I were stunned by what we saw.

“Oh,” I gasped. “This is...”

“It’s underwater! Why?!”

The dungeon looked as if it was submerged underwater. Plants swayed as if they were in water, and we moved sluggishly.

“Huh? But I can breathe.”

“We can...”

“That’s how it works,” Eve cut in.

“Eve? Have you been here before?”

She nodded slightly. “With the party before my last party.”

“You’ve been in lots of parties, huh?”

“Yes. But differences in dungeon priorities always led to us breaking up.”

“So it’s like it’s underwater, but we can breathe just fine.”

“Looks like it. Hup!” Celeste took out her magical Bicorn horns and swung them. As usual, they allowed her to use fireball magic as much as she wanted. “It still works. Fire isn’t weakened by being underwater here, then?”

“I see. Then this should work, too.” I loaded a limitless lightning round and fired it at a wall. It struck and scattered electricity, but we didn’t get shocked by being underwater like you’d expect.

Seemingly underwater, but not quite. What a strange dungeon Plumbum was.

“Now, as for monsters... There we go.” I quickly spotted a monster. A fish-like monster swam in the air...water? Whatever.

It was as big as a dolphin you’d see in an aquarium, but it had a fierce-looking face and demonic fangs.

“Killer fish,” Eve said. “This bunny hates them.”

“They’re called killer fish?” I switched to my growth round and shot the killer fish as it menacingly approached. The bullet landed and penetrated straight through.

BZZZT.

With a grating noise, the killer fish split in two.

“Wha?!”

“It split?!”

“That’s how it works,” Eve repeated. “Try burning one with magic.”

“Okay! Go, Bicorn horns!” Celeste cast fireball on one. It hit its mark and set the monster on fire. “More again!”

The burned killer fish had once again split in two. In two attacks, one killer fish had become three.

“If you don’t kill it, more appear every time you attack.” Eve approached a killer fish and chopped it.

BZZZZZZZT!

With the loudest noise I’d heard all day, that one killer fish became more than twenty.

“Like this,” she said matter-of-factly.

“Why would you use a multi-hit attack *now*?!”

Her chops looked like singular hits, but they were the kind of attack that struck a ridiculous number of times. She’d done that and caused the killer fish to multiply all at once.

“That’s how they work. That’s why I hate them.”

“N-Now isn’t the time for that! This is far too many—” Celeste panicked.

I loaded bullets, took a deep breath, and fired rapidly. Upping the firepower a bit, I used piercing rounds to shoot every single one of the twenty-plus killer fish.

“Oh... And it’s fine now,” she laughed. “Incredible work, Ryota.”

“Uppity, for a low level.”

They complimented me, but my mind was elsewhere.

“I see...” I muttered.

“See what?”

“Take a look.” I pointed at white stuff floating in mid-air. Based on its scent, it seemed to be milk.

“Yes. The drop on this floor is milk,” Eve said. “You can collect the stuff that floats at your own pace.”

“This dungeon’s feature is surprisingly convenient,” Celeste said.

She was right. The milk wasn’t in a container, but it was like liquid floating in midair; it didn’t mix with anything or splash onto the ground.

That was kind of convenient, except for one problem.

“Fatal, too, though,” I added.

“Huh? How so?” she asked me.

“You didn’t notice? How many did I just kill?”

“Umm... About twenty?”

“Nope.”

“Huh?”

“One,” I said, pointing at the milk again. “One.”

“...Huh? Wait, what?” She was confused.

Another killer fish happened to swim by, so I used weak attacks to make it multiply. Since I was doing it myself this time, I counted how many I made.

When there were exactly a hundred, I killed them all again.

Celeste cheered and called it incredible again, but she was quickly stunned—for once the hundred killer fish had died, only a single drop’s worth of milk was there.

The more you multiplied them, the more futile it felt.

This had to be why Plumbum was abandoned.

264. He Whom the Spirit Feared

"Let's look through all the floors," I suggested. "I want to have a good grasp of this place."

"Sounds good to me."

"Mm."

Celeste and Eve seemed willing to follow.

We went through Plumbum, one floor at a time. The entire dungeon was the same as B1—underwater, but breathable. It slowed me down and made it harder to fight, but it didn't affect mages like Celeste as much.

Incidentally, my bullets were about half as slow as usual. Furthermore, if I tried to go for a burst of full speed right away, the resistance was greater. It took a major toll on my stamina.

It was best to move through this dungeon at a slow, consistent pace, like walking through a swimming pool.

All of the monsters were fish-like. Fanged dolphins, horned goldfish, whales with wings—despite being underwater—and so on, all of them resembled things you'd find swimming in the ocean.

They all split if not killed in one blow, just like the B1 monster. Even if I tried my best to kill them in one hit, my reduced speed led to me failing quite often. A tricky dungeon, to be sure.

Celeste accurately pointed out the problem along the way. “The real problem here is how the monsters split.”

“Agreed.”

“It would be fine if we could change that, but is that possible?”

“We could try selectively breeding like before. That changes the monsters themselves.”

“I’ll call two people from the mansion,” Eve offered.

“That won’t be necessary,” I replied. She tilted her head in confusion. “Needing two spirit-blessed for selective breeding is only a rule in Cyclo. Tetramine probably hasn’t adopted that yet, or even had it brought up for a vote.”

“So one low level is enough...”

“What, am I alone in this?” I rebutted with a wry laugh.

“You can do it, low level. This bunny believes in you.”

“I can manage, sure, but I’ll need your help when the time comes. I’ll owe you all the carrots you want.”

“My motivation is breaking its limit.”

I don’t know whether I should call her cheap or not. Either way, glad to have her help.

The three of us continued to chat, kill monsters, and descend through the dungeon.

☆

The lowest floor of Plumbum was still "underwater," but it came with dungeon snow.

"So this is the end," Celeste said.

"That matches what I heard," I agreed.

"The monsters are doggy-paddling fish." Eve's commentary was spot-on.

"It's weird to see, isn't it?"

This floor's monsters were fish with arms and legs. Their hands had fur, and their legs bore fishnet stockings, and they were dog-paddling. The sight was, in a word, uncanny.

"But...they are fish. So it fits, I guess?" I shrugged.

"Yep. I think so, too."

"Well, I'd better kill one to get them bookmarked." I readied a gun. Not that I expected to ever use it, but I wanted to kill one so I could use Repetition on them in the future.

I loaded a homing round. After much testing, I had learned that of my bullets—which naturally slowed down due to the watery nature of this dungeon—the homing round dealt the most damage. I'd be able to use other ones with practice, yes, but this was just a preliminary bookmarking run.

I raised my gun and put a finger on the trigger...

"Huh?"

"I-It's gone!"

Me and Celeste were surprised. The monster had disappeared as soon as I'd set my sights on it.

"Look closer, low level."

"...They're all gone?"

Eve had made me realize that *all* of the monsters had disappeared. They'd doggy-paddled here and there with the population density of a normal dungeon, but now, they were nowhere to be seen.

"The dungeon master has appeared," Celeste added.

"Gotcha. We don't want it making a mess of the place, so let's find and kill it," I said.

"Right!"

"If we must."

It didn't seem to be on this floor, so we went up one level.

"Huh?" I was startled by the situation before me. The floor above had fish-like monsters swimming around just like before. "There are monsters. So it's not the dungeon master?"

"I guess not..." Celeste replied. "When dungeon masters appear, monsters are supposed to leave every floor."

The laws of this world were surprisingly inflexible. There were almost no exceptions to things that my S-rank drop skill couldn't interfere with. If a dungeon master emerged, the monsters would disappear from every other floor. That was certain.

"Let's go back down."

“Okay,” Celeste agreed. Eve remained silent.

The three of us went back to the last floor.

No monsters. Dungeon snow continued to rain down, making it feel even lonelier.

“What’s going on here?”

“I’ll go ask the townspeople,” Eve said, turning and going back upstairs.

After a while of waiting, she returned.

“How’d it go?” I asked.

“Nobody knows. They say it hasn’t happened before.”

“What an odd phenomenon,” Celeste said. “It happened when you pointed your gun at them, right?”

“Yeah, that’s right.”

“It’s like they didn’t want to be defeated by you.”

“...They didn’t want to be defeated by me? Just here?”

“Yes... Oh!” Celeste’s eyes went wide. She’d realized it, too.

There was another possible reason that the other floors were fine while this one wasn’t—the spirit.

To reach the staircase leading to a spirit’s chamber, one had to defeat monsters on the bottom floor of a dungeon. With my S-rank drops, I could open the path far more easily than others.

But still, the laws of this world were inflexible. Even with S-rank drop rates, I couldn’t do that without first killing a monster. If there were no monsters, then I could not go to meet the spirit.

And tell me, who controlled how many monsters there were?

"Does the spirit Plumbum not want to meet me?" I wondered aloud.

"That would make sense," Celeste agreed. "Spirits can control the monsters and drops in their dungeons, just like Aurum did. It'd be easy to get rid of the monsters on this floor."

"Getting rid of just drops wouldn't stop this low level from tripping into her chamber," Eve commented.

"So you just get rid of the monsters altogether, huh?" I mused.

We discussed the situation, as if comparing answers. The more we discussed it, the more certain we became that we were correct.

"But what do we do?" Celeste asked. "I'm glad that it recognizes your abilities to the point of wariness, but we can't do anything without monsters."

"Nah. There's no problem," I disagreed.

"Huh?"

"Eve."

"You're bossy, low level." She turned and went back up the stairs.

"What are you doing, Ryota?"

"Remember the potatoes."

"The potatoes... Oh! If she brings this floor's drop..."

"Yep. We just need to bring a drop from this floor back and let it turn into a monster. Outsiders will turn back into their base monster

if they're on their home floor."

"I see. But will it work that well? You need more than one kill to make the staircase, don't you? If we wanted to do that, wouldn't we need a lot of them?"

"...No, I think we're fine."

I felt something akin to certainty. This dungeon's spirit was avoiding me. It took drastic measures to do so, going as far as getting rid of every monster.

And that had to mean one thing.

Before long, Eve came back with a bottle of white liquid. "Sorry for the wait."

"Is that the drop from this floor?"

"Yes. Goat's milk. They only had two left."

"Two?" Celeste repeated. "Oh, I guess Tetramine is struggling because of depopulation, so production must be low... Will this be enough, Ryota?"

"Yeah. I'll use it well—though I think one will be enough." I accepted the goat's milk, put it on the ground, and backed off with the two of them. Soon after, a dog-paddling fish with arms and legs appeared.

I aimed, fired a homing round, and killed it. When I did, a path opened.

I'd done this many times by now. Instead of dropping goat's milk, it had dropped a staircase leading down.

“I think it got rid of the monsters so fast because it knew the path would open that easily,” I declared.

“Wow! That’s amazing, Ryota.”

“Now, let’s do this.”

The opened staircase, the spirit trying to escape me... Normally, I’d have ignored or put this off. But with how much they had put me through, I had to meet this spirit.

265. Doubling Turtles

"I'll be right back, girls."

"Is there anything we can do?" Celeste asked, facing the staircase.

Only I could go down, because I'd defeated the monster and made the staircase. They couldn't go with me, but she gazed intently with a fervent desire to help despite that.

"Hmm... I know. If one of you could run back to the mansion, that might help just in case."

"The mansion?"

"Opening the gate," Eve said, with her usual flat tone of voice. She'd been a veteran since even before she joined our Family, so she caught on quick at times like this.

"Yeah. Go back to the mansion and use the warp room to open a gate between it and Plumbum. Then I can rush back to the mansion, too. That will help if I can't immediately solve this spirit's problem."

"Ooh, I see. Like with Emily!"

"Yeah. We can try to do what she did when she helped Arsenic and got her lunar eclipse drop rates doubled."

"Got it. Leave that to us; one of us will go."

"Thanks." I nodded goodbye to the two of them and went down the stairs.

But I wouldn't get to visit the spirit straight away. Typically, an extremely strong enemy stood in the way.

As expected, I arrived in that same blank-white space. This chamber was small, though, less than half the size of a tennis court.

There was a curled-up turtle in the very middle. It looked...surprisingly like a normal turtle, with its limbs withdrawn into its shell.

I took out my gun and tried firing my growth round as a test.

Bang! Tink!

With a metallic sound, it was easily deflected by the shell.

Okay, so it's as hard as it looks.

But just as I thought that, the turtle split into two.

It seemed it would split just like the normal monsters here.

No testing, then. I need to kill it with a big move.

I drew both guns, loaded azure flame rounds into one, and fired both guns. Flame and azure flame rounds fused to make an eternal flame round.

Invisible fire scorched one of the turtles.

"What?!" I shouted.

A heat haze flickered; the eternal flame round had definitely worked, but the turtle was unmoved. A bullet that had burned *everything* was doing nothing this time.

And they split again. Both turtles split, becoming four.

"Even that didn't work... I'll need to be prudent here."

But what do I do? I wondered.

Meanwhile, the four turtles split into eight!

"Huh?!" I was wide-eyed and at a loss for words. I'd done nothing, yet they had split.

Wait, more importantly than that. Every time until now, only the ones I'd attacked had split. This time, even the ones I hadn't touched were splitting.

While I was confused, they split yet again from eight to sixteen this time.

"What is this, double-or-nothing?" I watched with bated breath.

A few seconds later, I had thirty-two turtles on my hands.

After that, sixty-four.

At this point, I didn't even have room to stand. The only silver lining here was that they didn't attack—*wait, no!*

I realized now that I was in bigger trouble than ever before. They wouldn't attack, that much seemed certain. These turtles seemed similar to Arsenic's rocks to me in that they didn't intend to fight.

They would just keep doubling in number every few seconds.

But this room was surprisingly small, and there was no exit. The staircase had disappeared as soon as I'd entered.

At this rate, the room would be full of turtles in less than thirty seconds, and I would be crushed to death.

"Tch!" I put away my guns and started punching the ones at my feet.

Maybe with my SS-rank strength, I thought, but I was wrong.

No matter how hard I punched, their shells didn't even crack.

And they split even more. The layer of turtles on the floor doubled, making it feel as though the ground had risen.

I panicked and punched even harder. But it didn't work, and they doubled again.

I only had two more doubles left. Less than ten seconds.

"Acceleration round!" I promptly fired a round into myself to buy time.

As my world accelerated, the turtles' multiplication slowed.

I had to beat them, no matter what it took.

I gritted my teeth. Based on the feeling of my strikes, it wasn't nullifying my attacks; it was just extremely hard—so hard that physical and magical attacks failed.

But that only meant that I needed to hit it even harder, so I grabbed one and hit it as hard as I could.

Pow! Pow! Pow! Pow! Pow!

With SS-rank power, my maximum-force punches struck the turtle shell over and over.

They doubled again, filling half of the remaining space.

There was only time for one more. Only a few seconds of real time.

I punched faster and harder. The skin on my knuckles tore, and my bones creaked.

"Raaaaaagh!"

Crack!

Finally, the turtle shell cracked. It glowed and then shattered.

"There's no time. Repetition!" I cast the spell over and over, wasting no time.

It worked, since I'd defeated one of the turtles the hard way.

I fired it off desperately, killing them at high speed. Along the way, they doubled again!

But since I'd culled their numbers with Repetition, it wasn't enough to fill the entire room. There was barely enough space for me to fit.

As long as I wasn't dead, I could make it out of this. I fired limitless recovery rounds into myself to supplement my accelerated Repetitions.

Their constant multiplication was brutal, but my acceleration round and Repetition just barely outpaced it.

They doubled twice more along the way, but I'd managed to cull them all.

And so, the door leading to the spirit's chamber opened.

266. Believe in Me!

In the chamber downstairs, there was a single girl. She looked young at a glance, but she was about fourteen or fifteen like Alice.

Her hair was long enough to touch the ground, and her attire was very Japanese—like a traditional noblewoman's kimono. She reminded me of a *hina* doll, or an old Japanese princess.

"Are you Plumbum?" I asked her.

"Another human... Here to deceive me, I presume."

The girl—surely the spirit Plumbum, given where we were—glared at me with evident hostility. But that told me one thing. She hadn't gotten rid of the monsters just to evade me in particular; she'd done it to refuse all human entry.

"Deceive you? Did something happen between you and humans in the past?"

"Trying to deny it, are you?"

She raised a hand. Suddenly, I felt a ton of wind pressure. I crossed my arms to guard and stood my ground, but...

"Gah!" I screamed as pain ran through every inch of my body. I looked and realized that all of the fish-like monsters from this dungeon were attacking me from all angles. "Wait! Hear me out—"

"Leave me! I refuse to speak with humans!"

Enraged, she waved her hand again. During this second attack, I temporarily shifted my focus to my surroundings.

Multiple monsters appeared in different directions, surrounding me. I jumped back to evade, took out my two guns, and fired growth and normal rounds. In doing so, I'd intercepted and shot down the monsters attacking me.

"Now you've done it..." she growled.

"Kh!"

This was getting nowhere fast.

I loaded recovery rounds into both guns and fired them both; they combined to make a restraining round.

Ropes of light bound Plumbum. When she tried to raise her hand and couldn't, the rage in her eyes only grew. That was a look of raw rejection.

Normally, that would make me hesitate. But I looked into her eyes and asked, "What happened to you? Tell me. I might be able to help you out."

"Meaningless prattle. You humans use such kind words, only to betray in the end."

"...Were you betrayed?"

"I was!" Her eyes went wide with rage. I almost expected fire to spew from them.

"Tell me what happened to you."

"...Very well. If you so demand, then you may learn of humanity's sins." Still enraged, Plumbum answered and told me what had happened. "Once upon a time, a human male came to my abode. He was strong and brave."

A seasoned adventurer, then.

She continued, "That was my first time meeting one of your kind. He told me all about humanity, of a world beyond my reckoning. In return, I granted him power that only I could wield." That meant that she'd made him a spirit-blessed. "He said that he'd be going home for a moment."

Hmm? Wait...is it just me, or is this not going where I was expecting it to?

"He claimed he'd return. He promised me. I trusted him and let him leave...and yet!" Fierce winds struck me as she screamed. "He never did. He used the power I gave him so flippantly, but never did he come back to me. He died, and I never saw him again."

"...Did he die recently?"

"Yes. I know because the power I gave him has returned to me. Now do you understand? Humans are beasts that readily break promises."

"You're wrong about that."

"Explain how!"

"He couldn't come back even if he wanted to. It's extremely hard for humans to get here."

“Nonsense! He claimed that he’d ‘just wandered in here while working normally.’”

“He just didn’t realize how lucky he was—”

“How dare you?!” Plumbum’s anger only intensified.

I wasn’t lying, but that only incited her rage further.

“He might’ve broken his promise, but I wouldn’t. I always keep my—”

“I won’t allow you to fool me again!” She raised her hand again.

I braced myself, but no monster attacked. Instead, a turtle appeared in front of her.

“Repetition!” I used my ultimate farming magic—but it failed to kill the turtle.

Now that I got a closer look, this one’s shell was a different color. Was it a different monster, then? Despite that, it was like the other. It multiplied faster than the last, doubling once per second.

I fired my guns, but these turtles were just as hard.

I couldn’t stop them, I realized. Just then, a staircase appeared in front of me among the multiplying turtles.

“Get out of my sight, human!”

Repetition didn’t work, the turtles were no weaker, and they multiplied at five times the speed.

There was only one way this could go.

I gritted my teeth and ran up the staircase she’d provided. When I reached the top, I was outside of the dungeon.

Phew... I'd better retreat and devise a strategy.

Knowing that, I turned and left the dungeon. However, I stopped myself.

Turning just my head, I looked back at the dungeon.

No... That won't do.

Plumbum thought that the human had abandoned her. If I left her now, she'd think that she was right all along.

I couldn't do that. I had to go and see her. To make her see reason.

I went back into the dungeon and sprinted down to the last floor. We'd used one of the only two bottles of goat's milk left in town, so I put the true final bottle on the ground.

When the outsider spawned, I killed it with Repetition.

The staircase appeared, and I went down. The multiplying turtle was back, but I likewise took it down with Repetition.

Now I was back in Plumbum's chamber.

"Wha?! What do you mean to do?"

"Hear me out, please."

"No! I've heard enough!" She summoned the turtle again. It multiplied again, far too fast for me to defeat it. The staircase appeared once more. "Begone!"

"I'm not leaving," I said quietly yet firmly.

She hesitated. I could see her wavering.

The turtles continued to multiply, filling up the room. With my Absolute Rock pebble and SS-rank HP and stamina, I decided to weather it.

"Creeeaaak…"

I heard a disquieting noise inside me. Even my SS-rank stats and invincibility mode were buckling under this force.

"Gah!" I coughed up blood. The taste of iron filled my mouth.

"Wh-Why would you go so far to..." She was speechless.

"I can't overlook someone like you," I replied.

"L-Like me...?"

"Stuck alone in a place like this, unable to see the people you care about, forced to live in a place where little missed connections can cause so much pain." I gazed into her eyes. "I can't overlook that."

"Ah...!"

"So I want to help you. This pain is nothing compared to that—" My words trailed off. My vision fogged up, and my mind seemed to fade.

Even still, the pressure of the turtles continued to intensify. Plumbum wasn't affected, naturally, but it felt like this would crush me to a pulp before long. As my limit approached, I let go of consciousness—

Clench!

I gritted my teeth, wrung out the last of my energy, and managed to keep hold of it.

"Trust meee!" As soon as I finished that sentence, I lost feeling in my feet.

I'm past my limit. Is this the end?

But just then, I heard Plumbum's faint voice.

"...Do you mean it?"

"Huh?"

"Can I truly trust you?"

"...Yeah."

"You'll come and see me again?"

"I will. There may be days when I can't come, but I'll have a friend do it if I have to."

"A...friend?"

"Yeah. Hell, I'll take you outside if you want."

"I...suppose that's fine, but..." she murmured. Plumbum reminded me of Aurum in some ways, though they were different. She didn't have much interest in the outside world; what she really wanted was guests. Finally, she said, "Okay."

"Huh?"

"I...will trust you."

I did my best to stand on shaky feet and replied firmly, "Yeah... Just trust me."

She finally smiled warmly, like melting snow.



267. The Spirit Who Loved Me

"Now..." I sighed.

I'd successfully melted the ice in her heart.

Long hair, traditional kimono. Plumbum's appearance hadn't changed—she was still the spitting image of an old Japanese princess—but she looked so much prettier now. I had a feeling that gentle smile was closer to her true self.

The phrase *true self* reminded me of something, however.

"Hey, can I ask you something?"

"Yes? Presuming it's something I *can* answer."

"Yeah. I think you'd know better than anyone else in the world, actually. Have the monsters in this dungeon always split like they do now?"

"Urk..." She clammed up. There was an uncomfortable look on her face.

It was just as I'd suspected.

I hadn't been in Tetramine for long, and though it was deserted now, its layout made me think that it had been quite prosperous not long ago. There was a time when it flourished—and I doubted the dungeon was as crappy back then as it was now.

So when I asked the question, her face told me everything I needed to know.

Her face was down, but her eyes turned up at me like a child being scolded.

"I thought he'd betrayed me," she said. "Something dark started swirling around in my mind, and I decided to show those dastardly humans, and, well..."

"I understand. Can you change it back?"

"Umm..." She clammed up again.

"Not as easy as it sounds?" I guessed.

"To be honest...even I don't really know how I did it."

"Oh. Well, that's fine. I'll just have to use the dungeon master."

"That may not work..."

"Huh?"

"You mean to use the dungeon master to change the monster types, yes?" Plumbum asked me.

"Yeah."

"Making them split was an action of mine. No matter how you change them, you will only get monsters that split."

"Well, that's a problem."

She'd said that there was no point in trying to use the dungeon master, but I understood what she was trying to say.

Up until this point, I'd used dungeon masters to change drops specifically. And though I'd changed the drops, they still stayed in strict categories. Lanthanum drops were always alcoholic drinks, and Silicon always dropped vegetables.

A dungeon's inherent properties can't be changed. Not by me, at least. Only a spirit, an even higher being than a dungeon master, seemed to be able to do that.

And since Plumbum didn't know how she'd done it, it was impossible to stop it or revert it back to before.

"Hmm..." I thought to myself.

"H-How about this?"

"Oh?"

"Weapons made by parts of my body can stop them from splitting," she said, summoning a turtle. Using her fair white fingers, she karate-chopped the turtle. It did not split. "For example."

"I see. In this case, we'd use...your hair, I guess?"

In stories where people made weapons out of body parts, they typically used hair. And Plumbum was a girl, after all. Even in my world, there were stories of women's hair having mysterious powers.

From a more practical point of view, hair could be continuously cut off and grown back, so it was easy to mass-produce. With all that in mind, it'd be best to forge her hair into steel and use that steel to make weapons.

"Okay, then." Without a moment's hesitation, she grabbed her hair—that beautiful cascade that flowed all the way to the floor—at the root and prepared to chop it off with her hand.

"Wait, wait, wait!" I screamed and caught her wrist.

"What now?"

“Uhh...”

How could I not be hesitant? She was about to cut off all that hair without a second thought. Back in Japan, we used to say *hair is a woman’s life,* but that wouldn’t exactly be appropriate right now.

“Do you not need my hair?”

“I mean, we do, but it’s so beautiful. It feels like too much of a waste to just lop it off.”

“Beautiful...” She froze up, wide-eyed.

I furrowed my brow and thought for a moment. “Just one strand will do,” I suggested.

Yeah. Just one strand. That’ll be two birds with one stone.

“W-Will that be enough?”

“It won’t, but let me take one per day. Then we won’t have to leave your beautiful hair in such a sad state.”

“One per day...”

“I’m coming every day, so that’ll be enough.”

Plumbum faced down and turned her eyes up at me again. The same act as before—but why this time? After a while, she finally spoke up with a gentle air, “Thank you.”

“Huh?”

“I am no fool. You said one per day... because you wanted to reassure me that you would come every day, no?”

“It’s a little embarrassing when you put it that way.” Really embarrassing, honestly. I felt like my face was burning.

I'd had the idea to get one strand of hair every day. That would let her keep a full head of hair, yes, but it would also let her live with the knowledge that I'd be back every day. This came to mind because I was already going to the monster village Ryota to pick up an acceleration round daily.

Like I said, two birds with one stone. But it felt awkward now that she'd put it into words.

"Thank you..."

Still, she looked happy, so my embarrassment was a small price to pay.

☆

After Ryota left the spirit's chamber, Plumbum combed her fingers through her hair.

"He said my hair was beautiful..." she murmured as she blushed from joy and embarrassment.

Suddenly, she looked up to the ceiling. And she thought of Ryota—the man who promised that he would come see her every day.

"I wonder...if spirits can mate with people..."

After not even a day of knowing him, she had fallen for the man.

268. Rose-Colored Glasses

The next day, while I was waiting on B1 of Plumbum, a gate opened nearby. Eve stepped out and stood in front of me.

"Sorry for the wait," she said.

"Thank you."

"Show your gratitude with carrots."

"I'll make a whole mountain of 'em for you soon."

"Mm." She nodded in satisfaction, took my hand, and guided me through the gate. I was enveloped in dazzling light, and then, I was in the mansion's warp room.

The gate she'd opened would now allow me to go anywhere I wanted in Plumbum.

"Goodbye." Eve turned and tried to leave.

"Oh, hey, do you wanna come? I might as well introduce the two of you."

"I'm not interested in that dungeon."

"Really?"

"I was excited at first, but it didn't have rabbit's milk." After saying what she had to say, she promptly walked away.

"Hmm?"

Rabbit's milk? As in, milk from a rabbit?

There's no way it would have… Wait.

"Right… Rabbits are mammals, huh?" I recalled when I'd looked after bunnies back in the animal-rearing committee in elementary school.

They do produce milk, and they do breastfeed their young…

"Sure would be weird if that dropped, though." I felt a little bad for Eve since she'd apparently wanted it, but as for me, I was glad.

I refocused myself and went into the warp gate.

I designated Plumbum's chamber as my destination. After confirming that the usual swirl of light had appeared, I went inside. In an instant, I'd gone a distance that would normally take more than a day to travel.

"Morning," I greeted the spirit.

"You really came…"

"I promised, didn't I?"

"…You did." She smiled happily. A smile really did suit her best. "S-Say…"

"Yes?"

"Could you…tell me more about yourself?"

"About me?"

"Yes… F-For example, say, how you withstood my assault when I tried to crush you."

"Oh, that." I took out the Absolute Rock pebble, which I always carried around for helping me clear dungeons. "I used this. It came

from a monster called an Absolute Rock, and when I use it, I go into invincible mode… Uh, my defenses go up a lot."

"And that's how you didn't get crushed by the turtles?"

"Yep."

"Incredible… They should have exerted incredible pressure upon you…"

"They were doubling over and over, yeah," I agreed.

"You fired something, did you not?"

That "did you not?" at the end of her sentence was like music to my ears. It was kind of captivating. I could listen to her talking like some kind of old-fashioned aristocrat forever.

She asked more questions, and I answered each one. Plumbum was awfully interested in me. The barrage went on for a good while.

Each time I answered, she would look straight at me and nod interestedly. "Hrmm. That I did not know."

Occasionally, she was overtly surprised. She reacted so much that it was fun to talk to her.

"Well, I'd better hit the road soon," I said, tired from the Q&A session.

"A-Already?"

"I'll be back tomorrow. Don't worry."

"I-I am not worried…" Plumbum blushed and averted her eyes, but before long, she gazed at me again. "I-I know that you are not the sort of man to break a promise."

“Thanks. See you tomorrow, then.”

“Indeed. Tomorrow.”

After we’d said our goodbyes, I took a strand of her hair and left the dungeon.

☆

The next day, I took that strand of hair to Orton, the custom magic cart manufacturer. There, I asked him to put it into a weapon.

He was a skilled hand at processing monsters and their parts into tools.

First, I asked him to make a prototype weapon. When I’d told him the details, Orton tried combining the hair into one of my normal bullets as a test.

After that, I went back to the mansion and warped to B1 of Plumbum in order to go out to Tetramine.

The Plumbum weapons, our solution to the monster splitting, would need to be distributed or sold to adventurers. My plan was to look for a merchant willing to take on that task.

But as soon as I exited the dungeon, someone shouted in a panic, “Aaah! Mr. Ryota!”

“Hmm?”

When I turned to look, I saw Dale, Tetramine's Dungeon Association chief. He ran over to me, sweaty and desperate.

"What's the matter?" I asked him.

"It's here! The dungeon master!"

"What?!"

"It's rampaging in the dungeon. Everyone is too scared to touch it because it might split."

"Got it. I'll deal with it." I turned around and went right back into Plumbum.

I hadn't noticed before, but I could now feel the aura that came with a dungeon master's presence. There weren't any other monsters around, either.

This couldn't go on. I ran as fast as I could through the dungeon—down floor after floor, until I encountered it on the fifteenth.

"…Huh?" I gasped dumbly. If there was a mirror in front of me, I'd see an incredibly stupid-looking man's face.

For the dungeon master before me was humanoid resembling an adult man wearing protectors and a jacket, wielding two guns.

He's just like me.

"Except I'm not sparkly or covered in roses…" I muttered, exasperated.

It was like the Ryochin version of me that Alice summoned, except in an entirely different way.

Ryochin was a chibified, marketable plushie version of me. That made him cutesy, rather than uncanny.

Can't say the same for this dungeon master, though.

In a word, it was like…a shoujo manga protagonist. The kind of all-powerful, super-hot guy that the main character might fall for.

He was sparkly. There were roses in the background. In this world's art style, for lack of a better word, he was totally out of place.

But I didn't have much time to wonder why; he raised his gun and fired a bullet. It flew straight at me—a simple, true-to-form bullet.

When I deflected it, he charged in for close-quarters combat.

I was a little relieved. If he was as strong as me, like Ryochin, he'd be big trouble when combined with the whole splitting thing. But his speed and power were no big deal; I'd put his stats at A across the board.

This was doable.

I restrained him without using enough force to count as an attack and fired the one Plumbum-enhanced bullet I'd had made right into his skull.

"Eww."

It wasn't very fun to watch a more handsome, shoujo-styled version of me get shot in the head and die, but, well, he was dead.

The dungeon master dropped a rusty key, which I picked up and put into my pocket for now.

With the death of the dungeon master, normal monsters returned to the dungeon. I left and reported my success to Dale, who was waiting at the entrance.

"Good now?"

"Ooh! Incredibly done, Mr. Ryota. Thank you for defeating the dungeon master with such speed!"

"Don't mention it. There's something more important I want to discuss." I told him about the weapons, and how we could defeat monsters without them splitting.

"Goodness! Do such weapons exist?!"

"I'll bring the first prototype tomorrow." I'd used my Plumbum bullet already, but the true prototype to see whether other adventurers could benefit would be ready tomorrow. "By the way, I'll need someone who can manage distribution of the weapons. Can you do that?"

For some reason, Dale seemed oddly moved by this. "Leave it to me, sir! I will take full responsibility!"

"You mean it?"

"Yes! You've given me your trust, and I swear, I will not let you down."

"Got it. Thanks."

That's dealt with. Guess I'll go see Plumbum now.

I went into B1, used the warp gate to go back to the mansion, and then warped to her chamber.

"Good morning. I'm back," I called out. There was no response.

On closer inspection, she was hard at work drawing something.

Wonder what she's drawing.

I tried looking over her shoulder.

"Woargh!" I made a very odd noise.

She was drawing *me.* Or more precisely, a shoujo-manga hottie version of me. Indeed, it was the dungeon master from before.

After she'd finished drawing him, she said, "No… The real one is much more attractive."

"Not really!" I couldn't help but shout, startling her.

"Hyah?!"

But let me be clear: no, I am not.

It seemed that her extremely beautified image of me had become the new dungeon master.



269. The Hyperbolic Something-or-Other

After dinner that evening, I snuck into the mansion's basement. At the far end of the room, I took the key out of my pocket and put it down.

This was the drop of Plumbum's dungeon master. Yes, the 10000% hotter version of me.

I'd tried a few things, but it didn't seem to do anything as an item, so I decided to ignore its original effect and tried turning it into an outsider to see its boosted effects.

That was why I'd come down here alone, avoiding my friends.

"Oh! There he is!"

"What are you doing here? Emily baked cookies! Let's get to the salon and have tea."

The ever-cheerful Alice and Aurum had appeared.

Ever since Aurum had gotten access to Miike and gained freedom of movement, the two of them had started going around together.

They were both cheerful, impulsive, and accompanied by monsters. The duo was as close as sisters, or best friends of many years.

And said duo had come looking for me at the worst possible time, because the rusty key had just turned into an outsider.

“Whoa! I know that feeling…”

“It’s a dungeon master. We came just in time to cause trouble, didn’t we?”

The two of them read the room and looked apologetic—but that didn’t last long. When they saw the dungeon master, the 10000% hotter version of me, they burst out laughing.

“Pssh, what is that? Hahahaha!”

“Pfft… Ryota? That’s Ryota, isn’t it?”

“He’s all sparkly, and there are roses behind him! Gahahahaha!”

“Hey, don’t laugh… Pfffft!”

“Oh, that’s hilarious… Ryochin!”

For some reason, Alice used her Omnipotence spell to summon Ryochin.

In that moment, I was with my two impostors in the basement. This was, in a word, striking.

“What? Why’d you summon him?” I asked.

“I mean, look. This one here’s face screams ‘Ryochin,’ right?”

“Yeah. It’s totally a ‘Ryochin’ face.”

Alice and Aurum were in full agreement. It seemed they had similar naming senses.

What the hell is a Ryochin face, exactly? I wondered, but I couldn’t figure it out.

“So I wonder what that one’s called,” Alice explained.

“Well… Huh, you know what?” Aurum said.

“I think I do!”

The two of them nodded meaningfully to each other. And then, they said in unison, “Prince Ryo!”

Oof.

This was exactly why I’d tried to do this in secret. Now that they knew, it had devolved into bullying.

“Repetition…”

Depressed, I killed Prince Ryo with my ultimate spell.

The outsider died and dropped a golden key. It was the same shape as the rusty one, but it was golden and shiny now.

“Aww, he killed him.”

“I wanted to see more! Hey, can Ryota use summoning magic?”

“Huh? I dunno, why?”

“If he can, wouldn’t it be cool if he summoned a pretty white horse and had Prince Ryo ride on it?”

“I bet he could! Ooh… Wait, the Bicorn!”

“A white, two-horned horse! Prince Ryo and the Bicorn… Yeah, they’d go great together.”

“Stop. Please.” I was getting even more depressed. Their excitement was hurting me.

“Horse or not, though, he’s so picturesque,” Alice said.

“Hey, let’s call a famous painter. Ooh, maybe a sculptor, too?” Aurum added.

"A sculp—ack!" I sprinted out of the basement and into the hallway. Cell was outside the window.

The moment we locked eyes, he scurried away.

"Seriously?" I despaired and resigned myself.

Cell Stem was among the most important members of a family that controlled this world's money-printing rights. He was a really big deal, but for some reason, he was a fan of mine. Every time he witnessed my "achievements," he'd turn them into statues and figures.

No doubt he'd seen it.

I could just imagine the announcement. *Prince Ryo figure in production!*

My shoulders slumped as I trudged back to the basement.

"Welcome back," Alice greeted me. "What's wrong?"

"I saw Cell…"

"Ooh, so he's making a figure!"

"Why do you sound so happy about it?"

I was going through the stages of grief so fast that I came full circle and just started laughing.

There's nothing you can do about him. Just forgive and forget. Same with Alice and Aurum, in fact. They're your friends. Just forgive…and forget. More importantly, the drop.

I took out the golden key that I'd gotten from Prince Ryo.

"That's the item that dropped before, right?"

"Yep," I answered.

"What does it do?"

"I don't know. It turned from a rusty key into a golden one, so I think it powered up… But I don't have a frame of reference for it." I casually held the key and turned it, as if unlocking a door. When I did, a door appeared in the big, empty basement.

"What's that?! It's like a secret room!" Alice was excited. The monsters on her shoulders looked eager, as well.

Meanwhile, I looked the door up and down. It stood in the very middle of the room, like some kind of display in a shop. A number was displayed above it. It said 01, in a calculator-like font.

"01… Wonder what that means," I muttered.

"Does that mean only one person can go in?"

"That, or you can only go in one time. I think one of those conclusions is the most reasonable."

"Wanna try going in?" Aurum suggested.

"Wait," I stopped her. "Aurum, stay back."

"Why?"

"The door might have dungeon properties. It could be dangerous, even with Miike around."

"…Tch." The spirit poked out her lips, but she obediently backed off.

Dungeon properties was a phrase I'd just made up, but as a spirit, she knew that going in and out of dungeons could kill her.

“So it’s me or Ryota, then,” Alice said.

“Yeah.”

“Okay! Then I’ll go.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yeah! I mean… It smells like fun!”

“I see.”

So it does have dungeon properties.

Since she was born in a dungeon, Alice could “sniff out” various things about dungeons. If she said so, then it was very likely that this door contained a dungeon or a space with the features of one.

“Leave it to me.”

“Got it. Be careful in there,” I warned her.

“Yep! I’ll be right back, Aurum.”

“Okay! If it’s safe, then I wanna go next!”

“Gotcha! Open sesaaameee!”

As excited as can be, Alice threw the door open and stepped inside. When she did, it automatically closed, and 01 turned to 00.

“It went down,” Aurum noted.

“This alone doesn’t tell us if it’s counting how many people go in or how many times it’s opened. If it counts from 01 to 00, then that must mean you can increase it. But how?”

“Maybe by flirting with Prince Ryo more?”

“That might be our only option—but don’t call it that, please,” I rebutted, but it was definitely a possibility.

Defeating the dungeon master, getting more keys to raise the occupancy limit. Or maybe the passage of time? It could regain one usage every day, or every other day, or something. That would need more detailed experimentation—

"I'm baaack!" About a minute after she'd gone inside, Alice returned, still as cheerful as before.

"That was fast. How was it in there?"

"Well, basically, uhh, how long has it been since I went in?"

"How long…"

Me and Aurum looked at each other and nodded.

"Uh… A minute or so?"

"Heheheh…" Alice's mood only improved when she heard that. She put one hand on her hip and thrust the other forward, making a peace sign. "Get this! I was in there for a day!"

Wait, a whole day?

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"There was an explanation inside. Apparently, a day in there is equivalent to a minute out here."

"Hmm… I don't really get it," Aurum shrugged.

"Wait…"

I absolutely know what this is. It's like a dream to any boy my age. We've all had them.

I looked at the 00 displayed above the door. I had to know more about this door—about this chamber.

270. Ryota's Portraits

The next day, I used the warp room to go to Plumbum's chamber.

"Morning."

When I greeted her, she looked up. "Ah…" She was hunched over a drawing again, but she smiled when she saw me. "I've been waiting for you."

"What are you drawing… Oh." When I approached and looked down to her hands, I had to chuckle.

She was drawing me again—rather, not quite me. It was Prince Ryo—the dungeon master, named by Alice and Aurum.

"This is how I've been killing time in your absence," she said.

"That so? About that, uh, I'd like to ask you a favor."

"What is it? I'm happy to do everything in my power to satisfy a request from you of all people." She smiled. It pained me, but I appreciated the thought.

I hadn't confirmed a direct causal relationship, but I had a feeling I was on the right track here.

As the dungeon spirit, when she drew me, the dungeon master's appearance had changed to Prince Ryo. That meant that I just needed to change how she drew me. I'd be much more comfortable with dungeon master Ryota Sato than Prince Ryo, if I had to choose.

Hell, even Ryochin would be fine.

I picked my words carefully. “Can you draw me a little more, uh, normal?”

“Normal? I’m simply drawing what I see.”

“Bwah?!” That answer surprised me so much, I ended up making a weird noise.

Drawing what you see? What you…see?

I looked at the Prince Ryo she’d drawn again. Silky hair, sparkly eyes.

There aren’t just roses behind him. He even has one in his mouth! Is this what she sees?!

“O-Oh, okay…”

In that instant, I came to a realization.

I understand. This is the kind of thing I can’t do anything about. Forget it. Let her do what she wants.

She was looking back and forth between me and her drawing so happily. She even giggled to herself, “Heheh…” I much preferred that to her tense desperation I saw back when we’d first met.

How could I stop her?

“Is that all you need from me, then?” Plumbum asked.

“Yeah. That’s all.”

“Then perhaps you’d be willing to fulfill a request of mine?”

“What is it?”

“Let me…hold your hand.”

"My hand?" I stared at my hand for a moment and then held it out to her.

Does she want a handshake? Or to interlock our fingers like we're in love?

I expected a couple different things, but neither came to pass.

She held and played with my hand and fingers, as if examining them. Like she was inspecting a doll.

"What are you doing?"

"You see, I struggle to draw hands well. So I hoped that seeing and feeling yours in person would help."

"I see. Hands are pretty tough."

I'm the kind of guy who can't draw.

From childhood to my teenage years, I'd made little sketches in the corners of textbooks and margins of notebooks. When I drew people, though, they always had their hands in their pockets or behind their backs.

Basically, I was incapable of drawing hands, so I could empathize with her struggle.

After looking at my hand for a while, she began drawing again. I peeked over; this time, she was only drawing a hand.

This is fine. Let her draw.

Or so I thought…

"All done," she announced.

"Why is it sexy?!"

My(?) hand, as illustrated by Plumbum, was extremely sexy.

Lithe fingers, a perfect balance of joints and flesh—it was just a hand, but it had such an erotic air to it. Frankly, it was attractive.

"Perfect. I've drawn it exactly like the real thing!"

Her satisfaction left me grinning wryly to myself.

☆

That afternoon, I brought Dungeon Association chief Dale and representatives from each drop-buying shop and merchant firm to B1 of Plumbum, where we were about to watch an adventurer.

The young woman was wearing highly revealing bikini-like armor, like a stereotypical female warrior archetype.

She swung a brand-new longsword at one fish-like monster that swam through the air. The fish was not instantly defeated, but more notably, it did *not* split.

"Woooo!" Everyone cheered. Their cheers were for the fact that it hadn't split.

The closest person to me, Dale, took my hand. "Thank you! Thank you so much, Mr. Ryota!"

"It's still just a prototype, but if all goes well, we'll have to mass-produce weapons like that one."

“Yes, sir! Thank you so much!” Moved, he tightened his grip on my hand.

The female warrior was using one of Orton’s Plumbum-infused prototype weapons. It incorporated a strand of her hair, which allowed the weapon to nullify this dungeon’s monsters’ splitting effects.

It was the ultimate panacea for improving the ruined efficiency of this dungeon. With these weapons, people could farm it just as well as any normal dungeon.

“Now Tetramine can finally be like before…” Dale said.

“No, I think it’ll be even better.”

“Huh? Wh-Why is that?” He was confused. I pointed behind him, but he replied, “Um, there’s nothing there.”

“Exactly. There were merchants there before.”

“Ah… Everyone left.”

“They know this is a serious investment opportunity, so they all went running. I bet they were all prepared before, but they stood by until now. Now that they’ve seen this, they’re getting back to work.” Nobody’s as quick to jump on an opportunity as a merchant, and in this case, that was a good thing.

“I see!” Dale was visibly relieved. “Thank you, really.”

“Don’t worry about it. I just did what I wanted to do.”

Honestly, I probably should be the one thanking him. If not for him coming to me, Plumbum would probably still be there stewing in

resentment. He'd given me the opportunity to fix that, and I appreciated that.

Suddenly, the warrior trying her new prototype longsword gasped, "Ah!"

"What's up?" I asked.

She knelt down and picked something up with a frown. Curious, I got closer to her.

"This is…" She showed me a picture the size of a photograph.

"A-A portrait of me?!" It was a portrait of me—no, of Prince Ryo. "What is the deal with this?"

"It dropped when I killed the monster."

"This thing did?"

"It's called 'Ryota's Majesty.' Oh… It's a consumable item." Surprise appeared on her face. Had she sensed something upon picking it up?

Immediately after, she used the portrait. It disappeared, and in its place appeared Prince Ryo.

"Wha—?!" I gasped.

The dungeon master himself had appeared.

I thrust out my palm and tried to cast Repetition, but then, I realized something. Monsters were still in here, and I didn't feel the aura of a dungeon master.

What was going on? While I was confused, Prince Ryo took action.

He attacked the fish swimming the closest to us. As he was based on me, Prince Ryo used much stronger attacks than her, felling the monster in a single blow. It disappeared and created a drop. With his job done, Prince Ryo disappeared.

"Ooh… I get it!"

"M-Mr. Ryota, what just happened?"

"It's a one-time consumable item," I explained to Dale, who still couldn't comprehend the situation, and tried to reproduce it.

I used Repetition on every fish remaining on the floor, killing them all. After about thirty had gone down, another portrait dropped. When I picked it up, the name of the consumable item Ryota's Majesty appeared in my mind.

I used it.

Prince Ryo, now with very sexy hands, appeared and defeated a nearby monster. Then, he and his portrait disappeared.

"There you have it," I said.

Dale and the warrior looked upon me with respect.

"Incredible! The form it takes is proof of how the spirit has acknowledged you."

"That's the leader of the Ryota Family for you!"

I mean, you're not wrong about that, but…

Ever since I'd come to this world, I had gotten a lot of praise like that. But this was the most embarrassing way yet.

Honestly, the fact that they were so serious about it only made it hurt more.

271. Ever Beyond Expectations

One day, after speaking with Plumbum herself, I went out into Tetramine. With the advent of Plumbum weapons, all kinds of merchants had flocked here, supporting the expansion and renovation of the town. But I found the increase of adventurers incongruent with that.

Curious why, I cocked my head in the now-bustling downtown.

"Mr. Ryota!" Dale called out to me while I walked. He was practically drenched in sweat, and his slightly messy hair stuck to his forehead. To me, he looked overwhelmed by work.

"Dale… You look busy."

"That I am! Thanks to you, adventurers are moving in every day. Today, I have a meeting regarding expansion of the town's residential districts."

"Wow. More hopefuls, huh?"

"All thanks to you, of course."

"Because of the Plumbum weapons?"

"No, that's not the only reason."

"Oh?" I cocked my head again.

Dale's eyes were respectful, like those of a fan waiting for their favorite idol's appearance. "It's because of Ryota's Majesty. We've found that using that to defeat a monster guarantees a drop."

"Oh, really?"

I see. That matches Plumbum's image of me.

"They're guaranteed to drop every thirty monster kills, which puts Plumbum among the most efficient dungeons to farm. That's led to many move-in requests from adventurers."

"Aha. That does sound like a good deal." I tried imagining the feeling. If I could have a guaranteed win once every thirty tries on average, then that would make me more efficient, yes, but it would also motivate me more. "If I were them, I'd save up a bunch and use them all at once."

"Some adventurers do exactly that."

"I bet." Now I understood their feelings even better.

I see. No wonder they're getting popular.

"Again, it really is all thanks to you, Mr. Ryota. Thank you very much!" Dale bowed so deeply that his body was at a right angle.

Suddenly, a man came running over. When he saw Dale, he beelined toward him.

"Th-There's big trouble!"

"What's the matter, Pierre?"

"Th-The dungeon master. It's appeared!"

"What?!"

"I'll go take care of it," I said, and ran straight for the dungeon Plumbum.

The faster you can kill a dungeon master, the better. One Repetition would take care of it since I'd killed it before, so I knew it'd be best if I went.

I entered Plumbum and went down through the empty floors. But I happened upon Prince Ryo just in time…to see him being beaten. An adventurer—or rather, their Ryota's Majesty items—had done it.

It was a bizarre sight. Over a dozen Prince Ryos were beating the tar out of the dungeon master, who was also a Prince Ryo.

The dungeon master version was stronger, but he was far too outnumbered, so he was defeated in no time by the Ryo mob.

☆

That night in my mansion's salon, Neptune said with a big smile, "I heard about that little showdown. The prototype versus a mass-produced army, eh?" The way he said it made it sound like a mecha anime. "You're the dungeon master. You vanquished the dungeon master. Yet the *real* you is nowhere to be found. Isn't that funny?"

"I guess it is."

"I have to thank you, too. This whole turn of affairs has boosted Plumbum's reputation."

“Ah, right, you had investments in Tetramine. But why did its reputation improve?”

“Dungeons where the dungeon master doesn’t pose a threat are few and far between. Plumbum now has a system where they don’t have to rush to hire someone to kill the dungeon master when it appears. A safe and stable dungeon to farm, indeed.”

“…Guess that would make it more popular.”

“But you really are amazing, friend.”

“Hmm?”

“Every single time, you go above and beyond expectations.” Neptune’s smile broadened even more.

272. A New Use for the Portraits

Today, when I left Plumbum's chamber to go to the dungeon, I spotted a familiar face. She had fluffy golden hair, a pretty red ribbon, and a pure-white dress that suited her elegant figure.

The big ribbon attached to her waist bounced as she swung her broadsword, dealing the killing blow to a monster.

"Oh? Margaret, is that you?"

Margaret. The leader of the Margaret Family—a subsidiary of the Ryota Family now—and the person most like me in all the world.

"Ryota!" The instant she noticed me, she whipped around and ran over with a big, sunny smile on her face.

As usual, her four knights were behind her. As I recalled, their names were Lat, Socia, Prey, and Bildar. Not that I knew which was which, of course—probably because they each stayed hidden, "protecting their princess from the shadows" and all that jazz.

"It's been so long!" she said.

"Sure has. I didn't know you were here at Plumbum."

"Oh, yes. I heard the rumors and knew I needed to come."

"Rumors? What rumors would bring you here?" I'd been closely involved with Plumbum and Tetramine lately, but I couldn't think of anything.



Princess Margaret was an idol-like adventurer who sold canned air and her time to excited buyers. I didn't see why she'd have an interest in Plumbum, a livestock goods dungeon.

"That would be—"

She was interrupted by one of her knights—whatever his name was.

"Princess, the next monster has appeared."

"Oops! I forgot it was almost time."

"Allow me to set the stage." The knight, who always acted like their leader, bowed in respect.

"Please wait a moment," Margaret said to me.

"Sure, I guess."

While I wondered what was going on, her group headed over to the monster.

It was their same perfect strategy as always. The four knights attacked ahead of her, weakening the monster. They had perfect judgment; in the midst of their fierce assault, they suddenly paused.

As for the monster itself, it was haggard. Anyone could tell at a glance that it was inches from death.

Margaret took a step forward and swung her sword around her. Her first-page combat stats were all F, making her the weakest adventurer out there. But her second-page drop stats were all A, giving her the best drop rates normally possible.

She shone as an adventurer who dealt killing blows and nothing else.

The broadsword cut though the monster, yielding an item drop. But it didn't drop milk; it dropped the Prince Ryo portrait.

"Yay! Here it is!"

Margaret was overjoyed to have the portrait.

Meanwhile, her knights all took a knee and bowed. "Congratulations!" They really were like a princess and her protectors.

"What, is that all you came here for?" I asked.

"That's right!" She lovingly stored the portrait.

"You're not going to use it?"

"Why, I'd never! That would be such a waste!"

"Really?" I had to wonder when she planned to use it, then.

"Of course! Now. Lat, Socia, Prey, Bildar! Let's get going."

"Yes, milady!" they replied in unison.

"Now. Ryota, I must apologize, but…"

"Oh, it's okay; my bad for interrupting you. See you again."

"Of course."

I watched as she left. "Really gotta wonder why she won't use it."

"A lot of people aren't using them lately," someone said next to me, startling me. Dale had appeared out of nowhere.

It surprised me, but I quickly calmed down and asked, “They aren’t? Why?”

“Through using it, adventurers have noticed a particular characteristic of the item. When it summons you, Ryota—”

Prince Ryo, you mean, I mentally commented. It was just embarrassing for someone to say that shoujo manga guy was *me* outright. The name Prince Ryo at least let me pretend it was someone else.

“—You strike the nearest monster and immediately leave. However, if there are no monsters nearby, you will neither attack nor disappear. You’ll just stand there.”

“Huh. Is that how it works?”

“Some people take advantage of that to use you for personal security purposes.”

“Oooh.” I understood now.

Prince Ryo wasn’t an item. The portrait was, yes, but Prince Ryo himself was not.

The portraits would spawn floating fish monster outsiders if left alone, but Prince Ryo wouldn’t. He had powerful attacks, and he’d stand there until a monster appeared *and* immediately strike if one ever did, so he could be used as an automatic security robot.

“The portraits themselves also sell for quite a sum as a result, so more people are keeping them to sell instead.”

“I see. I wonder if Margaret is doing the same.”

Now I could see why she'd put it away without using it.

☆

I went through the warp gate back to the mansion.

Now, I'll go through Aurum and get my daily acceleration round from the monster village, I thought to myself.

My friends chatted in the distance.

"Thank you, Celeste!"

"You don't need to thank me. I got my reward."

"Well, thank you anyway."

Those voices were very familiar to me; they were Erza and Celeste. Curious what they were talking about, I left the warp room and headed over to them.

Erza was in the Swallow's Returned Favor branch office in the back of the mansion. Celeste had already left, so she was alone.

Plop!

An item drop teleported in just in time. It was a whole pile of flowers.

They'd been teleported here via magic cart. I had to assume they were Emily's. Erza quickly tallied them up and wrote numbers into a ledger.

In this branch office, the Ryota Family's drops were brought in via custom magic carts, and our exclusive dispatch Erza would calculate our gains.

Come to think of it, I'd never really watched her work. I went to dungeons with the others often, so I had an idea of what they did on a daily basis. But Erza wasn't an adventurer, so I didn't know much about her job.

What did she do all day? Curious, I decided to wait and watch for a while without saying anything.

However, someone suddenly spoke from behind me.

"Ryota?"

"Ack! Oh, Celeste. You're still here?"

"Yep. But forget that; I need a favor."

"A favor? Okay, what is it?"

"Come with me."

I couldn't say no to a request from her, so I turned around and followed her out.

"Call it mercy… No, an after-sale service."

"What was that?" I asked. "You turned away and muttered, so I can't really hear you."

"Oh, it's nothing. Let's go."

"Okay."

We then continued on to an undisclosed destination.

☆

In the Swallow's Returned Favor branch office, after Ryota and Celeste had left, the unaware Erza used a break between drop transports to look at what Celeste had brought her. This product was all the rage recently: a Prince Ryo portrait from Plumbum.

"Ryota…"

Though bashful and blushing, she used the portrait. A Ryota with a shoujo manga touch—Prince Ryo—was summoned. When he was summoned, he would stand perfectly still if no monsters were about. Naturally, there were no monsters in this branch office, so he just stood there sparklingly.

"Eheehee…" Erza giggled to herself as she gazed upon him.

She gently sat him down before sitting next to him. And, alone in her workplace, she laid his head in her lap in a moment of pure bliss.

Indeed, there were a sparse few people who would begin to use Prince Ryo as such…

273. Rendezvous with Plumbum

People brought all kinds of goods—mostly milk—to Tetramine's branch of the Swallow's Returned Favor. Products and adventurers alike filled the shop.

"Here you go. Your total sale is 20,000 piros."

One employee handed money to an adventurer and accepted a weapon in return.

"What's going on there?" I asked Dungeon Association chief Dale, who watched the scene alongside me.

"We've decided to only rent out your weapons for now. They're still few in number; if they were sold outright, such valuable resources could go unused for days at a time if the owners decided not to work that day."

"I see. So you lend them out and have them returned when people sell loot, huh?"

Dale nodded.

"At first, it was only a temporary measure to make up for the lack of numbers. But this also functions as a licensing system, so we're considering maintaining this posture."

"That's a good idea." I nodded back. It was nice to know that things were working in a positive direction.

A group of adventurers slipped by us and left the shop.

“Phew. We made a big haul today!”

“Let’s go drink.”

“Hell yeah! Let’s go to a nicer place today.”

“Agreed!”

Their conversation was awfully lively.

“Goodness… I never could’ve imagined this just weeks ago.” Dale was getting emotional.

“I’m glad things are getting better,” I replied.

“Me, too! By the way, I heard incredible news yesterday.”

“What news?”

“The bank is planning to open a branch in this town.”

“Wow, that’s great.” I was genuinely impressed.

Merchants are already keen to the smell of money, but they don’t hold a candle to bankers. If bankers were looking at this town, then that must mean they expected further development of it. At the least, it was certain that the flow of money would increase.

That was enough for me to be satisfied.

“Mr. Ryota.”

“Yeah?”

“I must repeat! Thank you so much!” Dale took my hand, grasped it tightly, and bowed his head over and over.

It wasn’t what he’d asked me to do, but I was sure that Tetramine would be just fine now.

☆

I went through the warp room to Plumbum's chamber.

As usual, she was drawing something intently, but she stopped and welcomed me with a smile. "Ooh! Good timing."

"I'm surprised you knew I was here."

"Heheh, but of course."

Of course what?

Before, I would greet her, and she'd look up to greet me then. That was our usual process. But after a few days, she'd see me before I said a word.

Could she hear my footsteps, or something?

"I'd never overlook your presence, not even if heaven and earth turned upside down."

"That sounds a bit hyperbolic."

"Not at all!" Plumbum insisted. "When I feel your presence, it sort of…warms my heart, you see. Never would I miss such a sweet sensation."

"Okay, then. Anyway… What are you drawing today?"

"Well, you said you were an adventurer, yes?"

"Yes," I affirmed.

“I hear you’ve gone to many different dungeons and solved just as many difficult problems.”

“I’ve fixed my fair share of issues, I guess.”

“Well, I’m drawing those. I don’t know about other dungeons, though, so I fill in the gaps with my imagination.”

“Let’s see here… Oh, wow. You’re drawing a manga, huh?”

“Oh ho. Do humans call this manga?”

“And you’re good, too! I’ve never seen someone self-taught who can draw this well.”

Plumbum’s manuscript was of a quality that rivaled professional manga artists. And it was big, too—far from just one or two pages. The pile of manuscripts, satisfactory in both quality and quantity, could definitely be published as a manga if printed and bound.

“Oh,” I sighed. “I see you’re drawing me as handsomely as ever.” The version of me on the pages was still that shoujo-style man.

“As I’ve said many times now, I’m only drawing what I see.”

“I-I see… Oh? Is that…you?”

She blushed and quietly confirmed, “Y-Yes.” The heroine of this manga was Plumbum herself. Unlike me, it looked just like her, unadulterated.

But she was already very pretty, so she had much more presence than Prince Ryo without being prettified.

“Let’s see… Oh, is this the one about Emily?”

“I-Indeed. I wanted to draw one of the stories you told me.”

“Very interesting.”

It was kind of funny. The manga was the story of how Emily and I had met. It began from the part where I was transported into this world in the form of being dropped by a slime, borrowing the bamboo spear from Emily, desperately trying to make money, and renting our first apartment.

It was funny because I’d never seen my own life being put to paper like this.

“Hmm?”

The manga went up to the point where Emily had suggested we live together. The story ended here. After all, that was where I’d ended the story when I told Plumbum.

Yet there was another page after this.

“What’s this—?”

“Waaaaaagh!” she screamed and snatched the manuscript out of my hand.

“Wh-What’s wrong?”

“Nothing!”

“Okay? Then let me read the rest—”

“Absolutely not.”

“Huh?”

“Absolutely. Not.” She glared at me terrifyingly. That was the face I’d seen when we first met—the hateful *death to all who would*

intrude upon me glare.

"O-Oh. Okay." I backed off.

If she was that against it, I wasn't about to force her. Not getting to see what happens next in a manga always leaves me feeling antsy, but oh well.

She started muttering something to herself. "I cannot let him see such things. If he knew my fantasies, my vulgarity, he would hate me…"

"What's up? You okay?"

"I-I am fine! Anyway, I'd like to hear more stories."

"Hmm? Oh, okay." I sat across from her. Making a conscious effort not to look at her manga, I gazed only at her.

"What story do you have for me today?"

"Hmm… If we're going chronologically, I guess the next one is where I meet Aurum."

"Aurum… Another spirit like myself?"

"Yep."

"What did you do? Tell me, tell me!" she pressed me. Sparkly eyes, an excited look on her face—I'd never have expected her to look this lively on the day we met.

"I'm glad things turned out this way," I said to myself.

It was thanks to Dale that I'd come here, but I was happy that I had.

Satisfied with this chain of events, I spent time with one very happy Plumbum.

274. Image Rights and Usage Fees

In the afternoon, after I'd spent time with Plumbum, I decided to take a day off and relax in the salon. However, I was interrupted by a panicked Erza.

"Ryota! Ryota, this is bad!" she screamed.

"What is it?"

"Have you lent your magic cart to anyone?"

"My cart? No, I don't think so. Why?"

"I see… Um, please come with me!"

I didn't know what was going on, but she clearly didn't like it, so I went with her.

She guided me to the room that served as her Swallow's Returned Favor branch office.

When we went inside, she jogged over to a terminal. It was an item transporter that used the master and slave rocks.

This one was connected to my magic cart.

"Look at this!"

I quickly realized why she was panicking. Money was spewing out of it—because it was being teleported here.

"Five-hundred-piro tokens… Why?"

"I don't know. This one comes from your magic cart, so I was hoping you would know something."

“Hmm.” I put a hand to my chin in thought, but nothing came to mind.

I stayed there a moment and watched on. Tokens worth 500 piros came out at irregular intervals.

“It’s like a magic hammer.”

“There you are, low level.”

“Eve? Wait, what are you doing with him?”

She came in with Prince Ryo in tow. One bunny-suited bunny, and one shoujo manga prince… In a word, this duo was surreal.

“This fake low level is defective,” she complained. “Useless.”

“Defective?”

“His carrots taste bad.”

“Oh… You used the portrait in a dungeon to try and farm carrots?”

Eve nodded. She’d tried to produce Ryota-brand carrots on her own, but Prince Ryo didn’t have S-rank drops, so his carrots weren’t as tasty as the original’s.

“I’m surprised you used it.”

“Bunnies will do anything for carrots.”

“Sure seems like it,” I replied.

Eve unhappily chopped Prince Ryo. She wasn’t a monster, so he just accepted it.

That killed him in one hit.

“Ryota! The money!”

“Huh?” I turned back to Erza and saw a 500-piro token fly out of the warp device. “That timing is suspicious. Could it be?”

“What do you think, Ryota?”

“Do you have a portrait?”

“Yes. I have some that I bought from Celeste today…”

“Give me one. Take the cost from my account.”

“Okay!” She went back to her desk, wrote something down, and brought a portrait over.

I accepted it and summoned Prince Ryo. Then, I killed him where he stood. As I did…

“Ryota! There’s another!”

“They appear the moment he disappears, don’t they?” I bought another portrait. This time, after summoning him, I created a slime outsider from a bean sprout and had him attack it. After Prince Ryo had defeated it, he disappeared, and another 500-piro token appeared. “Looks like we’re right.”

“Yes, but why…”

“Hmm.”

The two of us cocked our heads in thought together, but we just couldn’t figure it out.

Meanwhile, one more friend—Alice—came into the office.

“I’m back!” she greeted us. “Plumbum’s a funny girl!” She was as cheerful as ever, with her buddy monsters riding on her shoulders.

“Alice? Did you just say Plumbum?”

“Yep! I was just hanging out with her. Burny and Plumbum really hit it off!”

Burny was one of her buddies, a chibified will-o’-wisp monster. Its original form was Phosphorus, the spirit of the dungeon Phosphorus.

“They hit it off? Well, I guess they are both spirits.”

“Yep! And they combined their power to do…this!” Alice said, taking out a portrait of me.

She summoned Prince Ryo, something she’d obviously done many times before. Her chibi buddies swarmed Prince Ryo and beat him to a pulp, and 500 piros was transported in again.

“Your clone, uh, Prince Ryo. Every time someone uses him, you’ll be paid a fee,” she explained. “Umm… A likeness fee, or something? I think. Anyway, Burny said people shouldn’t be using you for free.”

“So that’s why?”

Phosphorus was the spirit of a dungeon that dropped money. He and Plumbum had worked together to evolve the portraits.

“Whoa, whoa, that’s awesome! Look how many people are using you—I mean, Prince Ryo!” Alice clapped gleefully as she watched 500-piro tokens flood in one after another.

Every time Prince Ryo was used, I’d be paid a fee. But forget that—I’d noticed something more meaningful.

“Is this the first time in history that two spirits have worked together?”

“Is it true, Burny? Ooh, it is!”

I knew it.

I look away for one minute, and the Prince Ryo portraits have evolved already.

275. Passive Income

Visiting Plumbum had become a part of my daily routine. While we chatted casually about trivial things, she suddenly asked me a question.

"Is it okay for you to stay so long today?"

She was worried about me staying longer than usual.

"It's fine. I'm taking today off work."

"Off…work?"

"Yeah."

As I'd declared, I was in total R&R mode. Before I came to this world, I'd worked at a place that 100% of people would recognize as a corrupt company. I'd collapsed from exhaustion more than once.

And that hadn't done me a lick of good. As such, in this world, I rested whenever I felt like it.

"So I'm going to stay here a little longer for today."

"Oh… Well, I do appreciate that." Plumbum wasn't shy. She said what she wanted to, when she wanted to. Honest to a fault.

"So, I hear you met Phosphorus recently."

"I did. Though he was in an odd form."

"Do you want to meet other spirits?"

"No, I'm fine," she refused and gazed directly at me. "As long as you come, I'm happy."

"Really? Okay, what about coming to our house? Phosphorus and Aurum are there."

"No." Once again, she'd refused my offer immediately. "I want you to come to see me."

"Got it."

If that was what she wanted, then that was that. I'd thought meeting Phosphorus might make her rethink her stance on not leaving the dungeon, but it had not.

When I came to see her, she smiled with such genuine joy.

Fine by me.

I'd already decided to visit every day, so I relaxed down to my core and spent a peaceful day off with her.

☆

"…Huh?"

Before I knew it, I was asleep. My mind was fuzzy. When I vacantly looked up, I saw a featureless white ceiling.

"Are you awake?"

"Plumbum… Huh?!"

She looked down from above. I felt a very soft sensation on the back of my head.

My hazy mind cleared up all at once, and I jumped up. Then, I got away as fast as I could.

Looking down at me. Softness on the back of my head. Her sitting seiza-style. The words *lap pillow* popped into my mind.

"Was I…asleep?"

"Yes. You looked as peaceful as a baby."

"Urgh. Well, that's embarrassing."

"I enjoyed it, personally." Plumbum's smile showed heartfelt joy. She looked gentle and affectionate, like a loving mother. Again, she wasn't shy about it; she was happy. "Rest a little longer, why don't you?"

"Uh… No, I'm fine." It'd be even more embarrassing to do it on purpose. Realizing how vulnerable I'd been made me so ashamed that I couldn't bear to say yes to that.

Just then, I yawned. The surprise had awoken me, but sleepiness came back in no time. I felt like I was in the warm, clear air of spring.

I rolled over and lay there.

"Mind if I stay here a while longer?" I asked her.

"You could be in my lap."

"What if we lie down together instead?"

"Together?"

"Yeah."

"…Okay. With you, I suppose I could," Plumbum replied, scooted over to my side, and lay down likewise.

"It feels kinda like we're in a field."

"Does it?"

"…No, I guess it just feels like how I imagine it. I've never done anything like that myself."

Life in my old world was just work, work, and work. Picnics? Never heard of those.

But this felt good. It was like those sunbathing naps I'd only ever heard of.

Before long, I'd begun to fall asleep again.

☆

At night, I left Plumbum's chamber and went back to the mansion. The sun had already set.

I'd done nothing productive today. Not only had I *not worked,* but I'd also neglected to do anything *related* to work like picking up my acceleration round.

It was truly a day of rest.

"Oh, welcome back, Yoda," Emily greeted me.

"Thanks, Emily."

"Erza was looking for you."

"She was?"

"Yes. She said she wanted to do today's tabulation."

"Tabulation? But I didn't work."

With a wry grin, I went with Emily to see Erza. She was waiting in her little branch office.

"I'm home, Erza," I greeted her.

"Welcome back."

"I'm told we're doing tabulation?"

"Yes. I'd like to report on your revenue for today."

"Mmm…" I shrugged nonchalantly. I'd done no work. I got usage fees from Prince Ryo, but that was about it.

"Let's see… Your total revenue was 1,210,000 piros."

"…Huh?"

Over a million?

"What the heck? Why that much? I just lazed around all day."

"Umm…" She looked down at her notes and replied, "Taxes from Aurum, your cut from Arsenic, contributions from the Ryota village, usage fees from the portrait… All of that adds up to 1,210,000."

"That much…?"

"That's incredible, Yoda," Emily said. I had to agree; it was wild.

To be fair, these were all things I'd earned, yes.

But earning over a million passively in one day? That was *wild.*

276. New Limits

In my room in the mansion, I prepared to head out to my next job. It was then that Celeste rushed over in a flurry.

"Ryota!" she called out.

"What's going on?"

"The dungeon master has appeared at Plumbum. Can you kill it?"

"I sure can." I assented, left my room, and started on my way to the warp room, but I stopped as I remembered something. "Hmm."

"Yes?"

"Plumbum's dungeon master… Didn't people kill it easily last time?"

"Yeah, they used one portrait each to defeat it. But lately, as research on the portraits has advanced, their price has gone up a lot…"

"And nobody wants to use them willy-nilly, huh?"

Celeste nodded silently.

That's understandable, I guess. When I played games back at home, I was the kind of guy who hoarded elixirs "just in case."

It made sense to be reluctant to use valuable items.

“Got it. I’m the best guy for the job, then.” I promptly walked away and to the warp room. “Which floor?”

“When I came back, it was on B3.”

“Cool.” I’d explored every floor of the dungeon, so I could warp anywhere.

I designated B3 as my destination, opened the gate, and immediately jumped in. Instantly, the air around me changed to that of the dungeon master.

I looked around—and there he was. No other monsters were here, and all of the adventurers had evacuated, so the dungeon master Prince Ryo was alone.

Am I just imagining it, or is he taller now?

He was about nine heads tall now. Truly, he was the spitting image of a shoujo manga protagonist.

“I hate how it makes him look cooler.”

Despite his girly manga vibe, he still looked like a cool, handsome guy to me. His appearance was identical to the pictures drawn by Plumbum, so this must mean that her drawing skills had improved again.

Prince Ryo noticed me and readied his gun. Incidentally, he held it sideways. Very cool, as usual.

“Whoops, right. Repetition.” I was curious how he’d move now that he was cooler, but adventurers would suffer for every minute that he lived, so I quickly killed him with Repetition.

Immediately after, I was exhausted. The MP cost of Repetition varied based on the strength of the target, so dungeon masters emptied even SS-rank MP in just one go.

I injected myself with limitless recovery rounds to fix that.

"Ooh, a key."

When he disappeared, he dropped a rusty key. I picked it up and went back via the gate.

Celeste greeted me in the mansion, "Welcome back."

"Thanks. I killed him."

"Thank you. You really are the only person I can rely on."

"What are you going to do now? Going back?"

"Yep."

"Okay. Well, I doubt you need me to tell you, but be careful out there."

All of the monsters in Plumbum, including Prince Ryo himself, seemed to grow—or perhaps evolve—unlike in other dungeons. It also seemed to me like the dungeon master appeared a lot more frequently than others.

All of that probably depended on Plumbum's mood.

It was very possible that, someday, the fish monsters would all evolve into monsters that looked like me.

No… I must be overthinking it. Surely.

Either way, I figured the monsters might get stronger, so I warned her to take care.

"Thanks. I'll be careful." Celeste blushed, and she gave a mature smile before using the warp gate to go to Plumbum.

I wanted to test something, so I changed my plans.

Off to the basement I go.

First things first, I needed to turn this rusty key into a golden one.

I walked down the hallway and to the basement. When I passed by Celeste's room, I noticed that the door was half-open.

"Someone's careless…" I muttered to myself and reached over to close it.

But as I did, I happened to see inside her room. It was a surprisingly girly room, just the same as when she'd moved in.

Plushies all over the place…but there was something else this time. Amidst the line of plushies, I saw Prince Ryo standing there. He stood perfectly still like a mannequin, since there were no monsters for him to kill.

Why in the world…?

"I'll just pretend I didn't see this." Unpleasant thoughts ran through my head, so I quickly bleached my brain. I didn't know why she had Prince Ryo, but I could rationalize it away on my own. "So that's why she's been at Plumbum so much. And that explains why she came to tell me about the dungeon master. Okay, makes sense."

I tried rather insincerely to blind myself from an inconvenient truth, closed the door, and went to the basement, where I put the

rusty key on the floor and backed away.

The instant Prince Ryo spawned from it, I promptly killed him with Repetition. The rusty key then became a golden one.

This was the second time.

I took the first one out and turned it while still holding the second one. When I did, the door leading to the chamber from before appeared.

The number 02 was displayed above it.

Aha. So it does go up by one for each key. The only question now is what the number means.

I left the basement and yelled out to the rest of the mansion, "Heeey! Anyone else here?"

"I am!" Emily peeked out of the salon.

"Oh, you were here, Emily?"

"Yes. I'm cleaning the house today."

"Huh. Well, would you mind helping me test something?"

"Of course I don't mind. What do I need to do?"

"This," I replied, turning a key. Another door appeared between us.

"Oh!" she gasped. "That startled me."

"Can you go in there?"

"Okay." Without any hesitation, she opened the door and went inside. She did it so quickly that I didn't even have time to say some things I wanted to say.

Not that it mattered; what mattered was the number. As she went inside, the number above the door changed from 02 to 01.

“Ryota, you called?” Next was Erza. Not a surprise, since she was in the mansion for work.

“Sorry, would you mind helping me test something?”

“Of course. Do I just do something with this door?”

“Thanks for catching on quickly. Just go inside; Alice has already confirmed it’s safe.”

“Understood.”

“See if Emily is in there when you go.”

“Okay.” She quickly accepted, but she didn’t rush in as fast as Emily had, so I was able to actually give her directions.

Like Emily, she opened the door and went in. The number changed from 01 to 00.

It seemed the number, and therefore the number of keys, equaled the number of people who could go in at once.

277. Mass-Produced Power

The next day, I used the golden key again in the salon. The door leading to that chamber appeared, and the number had changed back from 00 to 02.

Emily and Erza were there with me. Since they'd helped me with the test, they got excited about this development.

"Ooh, it's back to normal."

"That must mean that it reverts daily, right?"

"Looks like it," I replied. "The number of keys is how many people can go in daily. And when you go in…"

"A day passes in there."

"There was a clock inside. We couldn't leave until a full day had passed."

I nodded along with their explanation. I hadn't gone in yet, myself, but combining their testimony with Alice's, it seemed that you could go in there for a whole day *but* could not leave until that day had passed. Furthermore…

"And a day inside is about a minute outside, huh?" I mused. "This seems useful."

"It could help when a deadline or other time limit is approaching," Erza suggested. I had to agree.

It was then that I remembered something. She was an employee of Swallow's Returned Favor, dispatched to work for us, and the manager of the branch office connected to our magic carts.

"What about magic cart teleportation? Can things go in and out of there using that?" I asked.

"Let's try it," Emily suggested.

"Good idea. Let's."

"Okay. I'll go in."

"You sure?"

"There's something I want to do, too."

"I see." I didn't know what she wanted to do, but if that was what she wanted, then so it would be. I handed Emily a key.

"I'll go get my magic cart." After taking it, she ran out of the salon, her slippers slapping the floor with each step.

I waited for a while, and yet…

"She's not coming back, is she?" Erza said.

"Doesn't seem like it…" I agreed. "Oh, I think she's already gone in."

"Huh? Oh, she has! The number went down to one."

We looked at the door together. The 02 from before had become 01.

"I see… I guess you can go in from anywhere as long as you have the key. Are they connected on the inside?" I asked.

"They were. I found her as soon as I went in yesterday."

“Hmm… Okay. One key per person, then.”

After gathering so much information on how it worked, I came to a conclusion.

It’d be best to collect keys until we had one for everyone—so that everybody could use the chamber, so that they could enter from anywhere they wanted, and so that we could assemble at a moment’s notice if needed.

While I thought about that, I heard a distant crash.

“That came from…” Erza began.

“Your office. Well, if she’s not coming back, then there’s no reason to wait for her. Let’s go see what happened.”

“Okay!”

The two of us rushed over to her branch office.

There, we found Emily’s hammer. It had come out of her magic cart’s warp point and fallen to the floor.

Right after we went in there—no, at the same time—she arrived. “I’m back.”

“That was fast… Has it been a minute already?”

“Yes. I was there for a day. It feels weird…”

She went into the office and easily lifted up her hammer. Her power was as impressive as ever, especially given her 4’3” height.

“Yeah. It’s only been a minute since we last saw you, but to you, it’s been a day.”

“Yep.”

“Were you not able to leave via the cart?”

“No. Only objects could go through.”

“I see…” I’d hoped that she would be able to go in and out freely, but alas.

Wait.

An idea came to mind.

“I’m gonna do some testing,” I announced. “You two stay here and watch.”

“Okay.”

“Understood.”

I left the office, grabbed my own magic cart, and used the other key to summon a door labeled 01. Then, I opened the door and pushed my cart inside.

“Whoa!”

There, I was so surprised that I almost fell over. Behind the door was an empty space, but it had the vibe of a temple.



Bright, warm. A truly relaxing space.

I know this sensation!

"Emily… She cleaned it, didn't she?"

Our first shabby apartment, our two-bedroom, our mansion today. Whenever Emily took charge of a home, it became a soothing place. This place was no exception.

Huh. So what she wanted to do was clean it.

"Still… You're something else, Emily." I was a little moved by what I saw.

Whoops. Now isn't the time to be moved. It's testing time.

I stopped pushing my cart and dropped a bunch of normal bullets nearby. Then, I stepped away and waited.

Before long, a slime spawned.

Normal bullets made from bean sprouts would turn back into slimes. It attacked, so I shot it down with my growth round.

The slime dropped a normal round again—along with a crystal. This was thanks to the ring on my right hand, which came from Nihonium's dungeon master. When equipped, it would turn leftover experience points after level cap into crystals worth the same amount.

I could use this to bank EXP to give to other people.

I threw the bullet into the distant pile, put the crystal into my magic cart, and warped it out. More slimes spawned, and I killed them to turn them into normal bullets and crystals. Each time, I

returned the bullets to the pile, put the crystals into the cart, and warped them off.

"…This is gonna be a long haul." I chuckled to myself, refocused, and aimed again.

☆

Emily and Erza were left in the branch office after Ryota's departure.

They watched as crystals shot out of the warp device attached to his magic cart. One, two, three—they flew out at an astounding pace.

"Wow, that's amazing!" Emily exclaimed.

"Ryota must be mass-producing them in the chamber," Erza added.

"I see… An endless loop of slimes and normal bullets."

"Oh, I see. He doesn't get any bullets out of it, but he can earn endless experience points!"

"Yeah! Only he would come up with that idea so quickly."

For the next minute, they waited and marveled at his judgment and speedy creativity.

278. In a Doubly Accelerated World

When I woke up, I was still in the chamber.

Time passed differently from the outside world. You couldn't leave this room for twenty-four hours when you went in. At first, I'd spent my time mass-producing EXP crystals, but fatigue had built up and made me sleepy.

The chamber was empty, so I'd slept using my arm as a pillow, but it was surprisingly refreshing.

"All thanks to Emily, really."

It was warm and bright thanks to her care, and it had the aura of a holy temple. Even sleeping directly on the floor and using my arm as a pillow, it didn't hurt at all; I woke up with all of my fatigue dispelled.

"Now…" I stood and looked up. The clock that my friends had mentioned was up there.

It started at midnight, and it was close to making a second full circle now. That meant nearly twenty-four hours had passed.

As a morning stretch, I did some more light EXP crystal generation.

I wonder how much I've made in a day, including breaks.

In the outside world's real time, this was only a minute. How much had I made in a minute? The thought suddenly made me

excited to leave.

The clock moved again. One minute remained.

"Oh!"

A door appeared before me. The door that had disappeared upon my entry, which I couldn't bring back no matter how I used the key, had finally returned at the literal last minute.

I put my hand on the knob and turned it. The outside world was behind this door.

Sunlight filtered through the trees and to the floor. The shadows of trees in our garden swayed in extreme slow motion.

Twenty-four hours here was one minute there. Simple calculation showed that time passed 1,440 times faster here.

The shadows moved…so slowly.

I waited until thirty seconds remained.

"It's early, but I guess I'll exit. I do want to confirm that I can get out before twenty-four full hours," I murmured to myself and prepared to go out the door—but then, a white-hot flash of inspiration jolted my mind, like those Newtype guys in old mecha anime.

Thirty seconds. A different flow of time. Acceleration rounds.

I pulled an acceleration round out of my bag. When fired at someone, that person would move in an accelerated state for thirty seconds.

You could say that everything in this room was accelerated by 1,440 times. What would happen if I fired an acceleration round here?

Let's try it.

I loaded the bullet and fired it into myself.

My world sped up. The clock in the room slowed down.

In an already accelerated room, I was accelerated even further. That meant basically that everything else was going slower.

The shadows almost stopped moving. They only twitched every once in a while, like I was watching a super slow-motion camera.

It was kind of funny…

"…!"

My eyes widened at a sudden occurrence.

In front of me, on the other side of the door, something had appeared for a mere instant and then disappeared again.

It seemed impossible. I was basically watching a world slowed down by several thousands of times. How could something flash in and out of existence near-instantly from my perspective?

It seemed impossible…and yet.

I squinted, focused, and watched that spot.

Sure enough, there it was. Whatever it was, it floated there, flickering in and out of existence.

I had a feeling. Was it always there, just impossible for me to see? Was I only just noticing it now because I was accelerated

twofold?

Thinking that made me want to know what it was.

I watched intently. Observed.

The interval was perfectly regular. I focused further, twice-accelerated, and reached out in time for the next one.

“There!” I felt it, and spinal reflex spurred me to grab it. The instant I did, the flickering object took real form.

It was a sword—an old-fashioned decorative one like the kinds used in rituals.

Was it pure intuition, or had something led me to this conclusion? Either way, the mirror and the magatama appeared in my mind.

“Kusanagi…”

Had I truly been searching for it, or had it been by me all this time? Whatever the case, the final key to Nihonium was in my hands.

279. Nihonium B9

I went to B7 of Nihonium, which was teeming with electricity-clad mummies.

Flame rounds were effective here, but I had an even better means of attack now: eternal flame rounds, the fusion of flame and blue flame rounds. After being fired, these bullets made invisible, super-high-temperature flames.

I fired one, led the mummies to it, and killed one after another in energy-saving mode, gaining willpower seeds as I went.

Kill, drop, raise stat by one.

Kill, drop, raise stat by one.

I repeated this process until it began to *feel* like my stat had gone up. Then, I used a portable status board to check.



My willpower, which had been capped at S, was now SS just like the others.

When I'd obtained the mirror, my HP, strength, and speed had been uncapped to SS. Likewise, the magatama had raised the caps on my vitality, MP, and intelligence. And the sword I'd now obtained had unlocked my willpower stat.

Next up: luck.

I went down to B8, which had three-headed dog zombies.

To narrow it down to two heads, I fired a homing round first. Then, I closed in on the zombie and fired a growth round into one of the heads the homing round hadn't chosen. Its head flew off, the dog zombie disappeared, and I got my luck seed.

I picked it up and raised my luck by 1.

I repeated that against the next dog zombie, firing a homing round and manually knocking a different head off. This was less effective; the zombie remained alive and well.

These zombies couldn't be killed unless you guessed the correct head. Homing rounds always targeted the worst head, so I farmed by firing one and guessing which of the other two heads was the good one.

I continued on, killing at a 50% success rate.

Repetition could skip all of this. It could kill even dog zombies. However, I killed them the right way.

I started to rush a little as I approached my goal, but it was times like this when I needed to remember my purpose. If I decided to force my way with my raw, overpowered abilities, I'd get sloppy and mess up. This world was like a game, and I'd experienced such failures many times in games I played.

Be prudent. Remember why you're here.

I continued my 50% success rate strategy until it felt like I was done.

Then, I used a portable status board again.



My luck had reached SS, as well. Now I had eight out of nine stats at SS.

Only one remained: dexterity.

It's finally time.

I went down to B9.

In the midst of the dungeon snow, I saw a giant monster—a dragon. It was a four-legged dragon, as big as a two-story home. Its body rotted in various places, and it emitted a sort of miasma.

This was B9 of Nihonium, a dungeon full of undead monsters. Fittingly, the monster here was a zombie dragon. I could tell at a glance that it was strong, but that wasn't all.

"Three… What does it mean?"

The number 3 was above its head.

"Well, let's get testing!" I readied a gun and fired a growth round, which had become my main weapon by now.

There had to be a trick here—or so I thought, but the bullet pierced through and blew a part of its body off.

No special trick?

But then, the number changed from 3 to 2.

I thought for a moment. I'd spent so long concentrating today that I figured it out quickly: that was the number of times I could attack it.

The problem was what would happen if it reached zero.

Would I be unable to attack? Or would it disappear and waste my time without dropping anything?

Worse, would I be warped out of the dungeon?

Knowledge and experience led me to various conclusions.

"What attack can expose the truth *and* deal with whatever might happen after?"

My heightened concentration gave me an answer.

I pulled out both guns and loaded the same round in either one. Pulling the triggers simultaneously, I made a fusion round from two blue flame bullets. After I fired, the number on it changed from 2 to 0.

I knew it. It was the number of attacks.

And though I had bullets loaded after them, pulling the trigger yielded no more shots.

"Wind Cutter!" I tried magic as well. It did not fire.

I also tried punching, but it was basically just a tap—no force behind it. It seemed certain that the number was the number of attacks.

Fortunately, the eternal flame round I'd chosen took care of that problem.

I couldn't attack, but I could evade. I dodged the zombie dragon's attacks, guiding it into the fire and slowly burning it to death.

It died and dropped a seed. Suppressing my excitement, I gingerly took the seed in hand.

Ryota's dexterity went up by 1!

But I couldn't hold it in. My joy manifested as a fist pump.

"Woohoo!"

I now saw the path to perfect SS stats.

280. A Way Forward

I spent another day clearing B9 of Nihonium.

Miasma-spewing zombie dragons stood silently in the middle of the dungeon. Unlike previous monsters, they didn't do much before you attacked them, but their enormous size and miasma combined to create an awe-inspiring presence in the middle of this quiet dungeon.

I braced myself and attacked one.

"Mgh!"

Before I could, though, I realized something and stopped.

"Groooaaar!"

The immobile zombie dragon seized this opportunity to attack. It opened its massive mouth, glistening with fluids, and chomped down at me.

"Kh!" I jumped away, but its neck continued to stretch, and it managed to latch onto me. Fangs sunk into flesh and squeezed with all their might, causing my body to creak. "Rgh… Gaaaaah!" I took a deep breath and put all of my strength into my arms and legs, resisting its bite strength.

After a sharp crack, I managed to stretch out my arms and legs, shaking off the dragon zombie's bite. I then landed and jumped again to properly put distance between us.

I looked again.

There was no mistaking it; I hadn't attacked yet, but the number above the zombie dragon's head was 2 now.

"You can't possibly mean…"

To confirm my suspicions, I ran away from the monster.

After shaking it off, I came face-to-face with another. This one had a 4.

I didn't attack; instead, I looked for another one.

I ran all around, looking for the numbers on their heads.

They were all different. The number wasn't set at 3, but instead varied in a range from 2 to 5.

After realizing the meaning and implications of this, I grumbled in complaint, "This'll be hard to farm…"

The most important thing about farming was to make a plan of action. A good farming plan was simple, routine, and consistent, but that would be difficult under these conditions.

"Well, no. I can just make a plan that always kills in two actions."

With that, I thought to myself, *Oh, I know.* I'd thought that it might be difficult, but variance meant nothing if I always thought in terms of the minimum number, even when offered a lenient number of five.

Two moves… Well, the first thing I did—fusing blue flame rounds—would work. Okay, let's try it.

I whipped out two guns and loaded a blue flame round in either. Ready to fight a dragon, I stepped forth—but there was a problem.

"There are ones, too?!"

The very first thing I ran into happened to have a 1 over its head.

My plans had been thwarted in no time. I couldn't use the eternal flame rounds like this.

I tried fusing them just in case. After making the flame, I lured the dragon into it, but it dealt no damage whatsoever. Indeed, they were invincible when they hit 0.

Come to think of it…

"Repetition!"

I fired my ultimate farming magic at the dragon, but even that failed.

Despite being my ultimate spell, it was still something that had originally existed in this world. That meant it had to follow the rules of this world. Zombie dragons were invincible when their counter hit 0, so Repetition would not work.

That made sense; I couldn't use it during magic storms, after all.

My hypothesis had been proven correct, though not in a way I'd like. It brought me down a little.

I had no way to defeat a zombie dragon whose counter was at 0, so I ran away from that one. I could try to resume farming, but it

would be haphazard and inefficient.

In that case, let's cut our losses and start investigating again.

I circled B9 without attacking anything, just counting the numbers on zombie dragon heads for an hour.

The counters ranged from 1 to 5 in all cases. Three was the most common, while the others were about equal in rarity among themselves.

There were no others.

In other words, if I wanted to farm mindlessly, I'd need a way to kill them in one attack. Zombie dragons were pretty strong. If I wanted to kill them in one attack, then…

"It's gotta be Repetition," I muttered with a sigh.

I tried casting Repetition on zombie dragons of every flavor. All of them went down in one Repetition. Naturally; it worked on every number that wasn't 0. That meant that I could use it to farm stably without a care in the world.

But man, I don't like it…

Repetition farming was the easiest and fastest way to defeat any enemy, but that was exactly why I didn't want to use it. I wanted to avoid being *that* lazy and mindless so that I could properly use my powers when the going got tough.

"Now what…"

I tried firing various bullets at them without worrying about whether they went down. Normal bullets, freeze rounds, flame

rounds, lightning rounds, restraining rounds, homing rounds, trash rounds, slicing rounds, threefold rounds. And since they were undead, I tried recovery rounds just in case.

I used every single one, but none of them did the trick.

The same went for acceleration rounds; even if I attacked while accelerated, their counters went down instantly, so there was no point.

I didn't bother trying fusion rounds; those were two attacks, so if the counter started at 1, they were useless.

Was there no other way? I looked through all of my items apart from the special bullets, mentally checking each one's effects.

"…Oh?"

Among my items, I found something nostalgic. Something that I'd only ever used once.

I held it in my hands and thought, *Yeah. This might work.*

With it in hand, I stood before a zombie dragon. Its counter was at 2.

Perfect.

"Testing time. Just to save time, I'll bring it down to 1," I muttered and fired an acceleration round at the zombie dragon. Indeed, though the acceleration round sped up the one it was fired at, I'd used it at the enemy instead of myself.

The instant its counter went from 2 to 1—

"Urgh!"

It had disappeared. A heavy impact struck me. The dragon had accelerated and attacked me at speeds I couldn't even see.

I was battered in no time, but since I was guarding, my SS-rank HP and vitality withstood it.

I continued to endure the storm of attacks. Eventually, its attacks suddenly came to an end. The dragon disappeared, and a dexterity seed fell before me.

"Woohoo!" I pumped a fist again. Just as planned.

I looked at the item I'd brought here: the High-Guts Slime's drop. When equipped, it reflected damage taken to the attacker.

It had been gathering dust due to how slowly it killed enemies, but it had helped this time.

The zombie dragon's counter only reduced when I attacked; it didn't count counters. I'd used an acceleration round just because I wanted to see the results quickly, but this was all I really needed to kill zombie dragons with a counter of 1.

It would take time, yes, but I was satisfied to know that I could defeat zombie dragons at 1 without relying on Repetition.

But I wasn't done yet.

"Keep thinking. Keep improving."

For once in a long time, this endeavor had proven quite satisfying.

281. Rare Monster Mass Production

I went to the mansion's basement alone for my next test: the special bullet.

Specifically, I wanted to know what bullet the outsider made by dexterity seeds would drop.

I was certain that it would drop a bullet. Given the rules I'd learned so far, I was 99.99% sure, in fact. The only question was what the bullet would do.

I placed a pouch of dexterity seeds I'd gathered in the corner, backed off, and waited for outsiders to spawn.

By the way, I hadn't been working much with Leia lately, despite her ability to use Revive. This was one of her ideas; for some reason, she had been going to Selenium's chamber every day.

Leia Selenium was spirit-blessed, so she had good reason to visit her spirit. Rather, I knew she wouldn't suggest that *without* a good reason, so I let her do what she wanted.

As such, I was waiting for outsiders to spawn like the old days.

After the usual amount of time, a zombie dragon outsider had spawned.

"Repetition."

When farming in dungeons, I thoroughly tested options without slacking off like this, but I always used Repetition to kill things in the

mansion’s basement.

My friends lived here. I couldn’t do anything stupid, so I always used the fastest and safest means available.

The zombie dragon outsider died and dropped a new bullet. I approached, picked it up, and inspected it closely.

Its appearance was clearly different from that of my other bullets, but I knew that appearances wouldn’t tell me what it did.

I wouldn’t know until I fired. That was true of all monster drop bullets.

I loaded it into my gun.

To create test targets, I scattered some bean sprouts I’d grabbed in advance. After backing off, I waited again for an outsider. The instant a slime spawned, I aimed and fired my new bullet straight through its center.

The slime was blown away and burst open. Out popped normal bullets.

“Hm? Twice as many?”

There were two bullets on the ground—twice what I normally got.

Just in case, I spawned another slime and shot it with a growth round. It dropped only one bullet.

There was an obvious difference. I’d never gotten two bullets from one slime before today.

Did the zombie dragon's bullet double drops? At least it was obvious that, unlike acceleration and recovery rounds, this bullet was intended to be shot at the enemy.

For the sake of further testing, I turned my remaining dexterity seeds into outsiders and made them into special bullets.

This time, I used the warp room to go to a dungeon.

B1 of Tellurium was basically my backyard by now. There, alongside a veritable crowd of adventurers, I shot an attacking slime with my new bullet. It dropped bean sprouts—again, twice as many as usual.

Those who had witnessed it spoke up in amazement.

"Whoa. What was that?"

"Can slimes drop that much?"

"Nah. That's just Ryota being amazing, as usual."

S-rank drops already dropped lots of bean sprouts, and I'd doubled that. Compared to the average C-rank drops, I had gotten ten times the bean sprouts from one kill. No wonder they were amazed.

I'd tested what I needed to test here.

After that, I returned to the mansion via warp gate and went to several other dungeons I'd been to before. In each one, I defeated a monster with my new bullet.

Veggies, meat, minerals… All kinds of drops had been doubled. Incidentally, in Arsenic—which was always under the drop-doubling

lunar eclipse thanks to Emily—my drops were four times the base.

There was no doubt now that this bullet doubled drops. It was weak, by the way. About as strong as a normal bullet. I'd have to weaken enemies with other things and then finish them off with it to double drops.

Hmm… Strong, but kinda meh at the same time, I thought to myself.

But suddenly, the air inside the milk-dropping Plumbum changed. The dungeon master had come.

"Whoa!" I abruptly jumped to the side. A bullet whizzed right by me. Murderous malice instantly drew closer.

While evading, I caught sight of the assailant. It was none other than Prince Ryo, the dungeon master.

He appeared so much more often than other dungeon masters. It happened every few days—more than ten times as frequent.

I evaded the hotter Ryota's ferocious attacks and reflexively aimed my gun and fired.

"Crap!" I quickly realized my mistake: the new bullet was still loaded into my gun. Given how weak it was, it was far from enough to kill Prince Ryo.

As expected, despite scoring a direct hit, it didn't deal much damage.

Prince Ryo was alive and well. Worse, he was getting ready for his next attack.

Ugh, what a waste…

Or so I thought.

"Huh? It dropped?!" I was so surprised that I screamed. The moment the bullet struck him, the rusty key had dropped—despite him still being alive. "Wait…"

My brain worked at max speed and uncovered a new hypothesis. Then, I loaded all of my remaining new bullets and fired them at him.

Four of them struck him directly. And then, four more keys dropped. He was still not that badly hurt, so he attacked again. I fended him off and picked up the keys.

"It doesn't double drops? It just forces a drop… It's like using Steal?" If that was true, then they were extremely useful. I'd be able to mass-produce drops from rares despite their rarity.

282. He Who Overcame His Limits

I sat cross-legged in the mansion's basement and gazed at my new bullet. Given the effect, I decided to call it the force-drop round. Or drop round, for brevity's sake. When fired, any monster it hit would drop an S-rank drop's worth of stuff.

Whether it killed or not, one bullet would yield one S-rank drop. It worked the same on every enemy, but I believed that its true value lay in being used on rare monsters.

I took the rusty keys out of my pocket. In total, I had gotten seven from Prince Ryo today—six from the drop rounds and one from finishing him off.

He appeared often, though, so I wasn't that excited about having seven.

Say for example, though, the Bicorn appeared at Selenium. If I took a hundred drop rounds—by no means a difficult number to obtain—I could get a hundred Bicorn horns in no time. In this way, I considered them stronger when used against monsters that appeared more rarely.

Now that I knew its properties, I had also figured out how I'd use them in the future.

A part of me wondered if there was more to them, but for now, I left that aside, turned the seven rusty keys into outsiders to make

them golden keys, and left the basement.

It was evening now. My friends would be coming home soon. I'd decided to give them each a key to the chamber.

Suddenly, I heard cheerful humming from afar. Upon investigation, I found Emily had gone into the kitchen.

"Oh…" I let a sound slip.

"Ah, welcome home!" Emily turned to me. She might be as small as a child, but she looked so very warm and divine when she was in the kitchen with her apron, backed by the setting sun. We'd lived together for over a year now, but I was still taken by the sight of her.

"Yoda, is something wrong?"

"Huh? Oh, no, uh…" I thought for a moment and blurted out the first thing that came to mind. "You're really good with a knife, huh?"

"Thank you." She smiled happily and looked forward again. Her knife danced on the cutting board again, cutting cabbage into thin strips.

I watched again. Another compliment naturally came out, "A downright master."

Her chopping was as smooth as could be. It didn't look fast at a glance, but cabbage strips came off one after another and piled up in the bowl next to the board. It reminded me of a sword as still and calm as water, like in fighting manga.

With masterful movements, she continued to slice it.

“Thanks for always making food for everyone.”

“I just love cooking.”

“Heh. Thanks anyway,” I repeated.

Emily giggled to herself and started preparing potatoes.

“Potatoes, huh?” I asked her.

“Yes. They’re freshly picked.”

“Does that mean you got them yourself?” I recalled breakfast.



I wouldn’t call it reporting exactly, but before we all left for work in the mornings, we typically announced where we were going each day. Nobody had mentioned going to a potato-producing floor.

“That’s right. I got potatoes for everyone from the slime families.” After saying that, she smiled nervously. “I need to get a little stronger. If more people join the Family, the slime families will get a little too strong for me to get enough potatoes.”

“Ah, right, that’s how they are.”

Slime families lived on B6 of Tellurium. They’re called families, but each family is a single monster. The more of the “children” you defeat, the more drops you get from the “adult.” But in return, the adult becomes much stronger defensively.

The main thing to know about farming on that floor is how many kids you can kill before you go for the adult.

“…Hm?”

“Yoda, what’s up?”

“…”

“Yoda?” Emily cocked her head and looked at me.

I didn’t have time to reply; a flash of inspiration had lit up my mind. As soon as the image came together, I whipped around and ran off.

“Yoda?!”

I ran through the halls to the warp room, leaving her in my dust. I then activated the warp gate and designated B6 of Tellurium.

I pushed my magic cart, which I kept in this room, since I could go to any dungeon from here, through the swirl of light. In no time, I was on that floor.

Many adventurers and slime families were here. Among them, I picked out a slime family and went into battle.

First, I fired off growth rounds to kill all the children and maximize the adult's drops. Next, I used a restraining round at the parent—its defensive stats were akin to S-rank now, though its other stats remained the same. I then pushed my magic cart over next to it, pressed my guns against the slime, and fired repeatedly at point-blank range.

I was alternating drop rounds and recovery rounds.

Every drop round generated the maximum number of potatoes without killing it. S-rank drops plus a maximum-power slime family made for a massive number of potatoes, which went into the magic cart and to the mansion's branch office. I then fired the recovery round, which healed off the minor damage it had sustained from the drop round.

With another drop round, I'd made another mountain of potatoes in no time.

Again, they were warped to the mansion. Again, a recovery round. I continued alternating, sending ungodly quantities of potatoes to the mansion. I'd estimate that I was making tens of pounds of potatoes in just a few seconds.

I always tried to think of new and novel methods instead of mentally slacking off, so this had come to me in no time. My excitement grew, and so too did my pace.

"Yoda! Wait a second!"

Emily suddenly appeared and stopped me. She was still wearing her apron; she must've followed me from the kitchen.

"Emily? What's wrong?"

"You're going so fast that Erza's burning out!"

"Oh…" I imagined what was going on in her office and laughed.

It seemed I was going *so* fast that I'd exceeded the processing speed of our poor dedicated drop manager. This was the first time that had happened, so I was happy with my idea.

283. Another Dispatched Employee

One afternoon, in the Swallow's Returned Favor branch office in our mansion, Ina came wearing the same uniform as Erza. After breakfast, when I was going out for my dungeon work, she suddenly came to visit me.

She bowed her head and said politely, "I'm happy to be working with you." But when she stood straight again, she was back to her usual self. "Crazy stuff, Ryota. You've got *two* dedicated employees now. Are you happy?" She came closer and started nudging me with her elbow. "C'mon, are you?"

"Happy or not, I still don't really understand what's going on."

As soon as she'd come, she started yapping about working with me and me being happy. I was utterly confused.

"Come on. You did something awesome yesterday, didn't you?"

"Yesterday…? Oh." I chuckled to myself, raised a hand in front of my face, and bowed in apology to Erza. "Sorry. Did I cause trouble for you?"

"N-No."

"Yeah, not one bit! It was great, in fact. Man, I wish I could've seen Erza drowning in a sea of potatoes!"

"I really did, then. Especially in a physical sense."

I bowed in apology once more.

"We tried sending them all to HQ to give Erza room, and even they started drowning in them! They were all so amazed that they couldn't pick their jaws up off the floor. Only you could elicit so much amazement, so many sighs, and so much dying and going to heaven from our employees."

What was that last part?! Bah, she's probably just joking anyway.

"So, is that why they decided to do that? Because Erza was struggling on her own?" I asked.

"We have been talking about getting more staff here for a while, anyway. Riiight?" Ina punctuated that with a wink. She'd been so… friendly ever since we first met. That wink suited her well.

"Is that so?"

"Erza's enough for everyday things, but y'know, you're not an 'everyday' kind of guy, are you?"

"Heh… I guess not." I was aware of this, too, so I couldn't contain my wry chuckle.

Right. I'm not an "everyday" kind of guy. I always stuck my neck into things I found unfair, people like Cell always came to me with big requests, and people at wit's end always looked to me for help.

Ina was right; I did a lot of things that the average guy didn't do.

"That's why. We wanted one more staff member here for times like that. Especially given yesterday."

That made me chuckle again. The max-power slime family, battered by drop rounds, had produced dozens of pounds of potatoes in mere seconds. From what I heard later, it had looked like she'd won a jackpot at some kind of wacky slot machine.

Just imagining it excited me a little, too.

Ina concluded her explanation, "So basically, here I am now."

"I see. But why you?"

"Huh?" She was oddly shaken.

"I'd imagine that you've been dispatched elsewhere. I mean, I run into you all over the place."

"Hmm, well… Truuue." For some reason, she hesitated and looked away.

While I found it odd, I continued, "So I figured you were a major asset to the Swallow's Returned Favor. Pinning you down in one place seems like a waste, doesn't it?"

"W-Well… Y'know, I mean…"

"Hm?" I understood her even less now. Was it that hard to tell me?

"O-Oh! You've been helping my family, y'know?" Suddenly, she had a reason.

That does make some sense.

Her family, a greengrocer, regularly purchased my watermelons.

“Besides!” she giggled to herself. The awkwardness from before was all but gone. “Since we know each other, it’s easier for us to do business! We run into each other all over the place, don’t we?”

“That is true.”

The only person I knew better at that shop was Erza. If they wanted to choose someone based on affinity with us, then indeed, Ina would be the best choice.

“Geez, you’re such a liar,” Erza grumbled something, but I didn’t hear it well.

“Hm? Erza, you say something?” I asked.

“Nope.”

“Really?”

If not, then that’s that, I guess. In that case…

I poked my head out of the office and called out, “Emily! You here?”

When I did, I heard a “Yeees!” in the distance, followed by the sound of footsteps. I waited for her to come, still leaning out the door.

“What the heck do you mean, ‘liar’?”

“You’re a liar. Liar. I know.”

“I-I have no idea what you’re—”

“I don’t like how you’re covering it up. It’s not like I’m blaming you.”

“I mean… I dunno, okay? It’s like a ‘maybe,’ or something.”

"…Okay, then."

Erza and Ina were arguing about something behind me, but they seemed to come to a tacit agreement. They were coworkers and friends, so I figured it was just small talk and paid it no mind.

Emily arrived shortly after, so I asked her to make a room for Ina. Whether she was going to live here or not, she could at least benefit from a private break room. Personal space is important, after all.

"Oh. Ina, mind waiting a sec?" I asked.

"Hmm? Sure, but why?"

"Just wait." I left her and ran out of the office. Then, I duplicated a golden key using a drop round.

Enhanced items made from outsiders would drop the same thing when made into an outsider again. They wouldn't be enhanced further, but they wouldn't deteriorate either. Though I personally figured they just distinguished based on whether they were dropped inside of or outside of dungeons.

In this case, it went like this. If inside, rusty key. If outside, golden key. I turned the golden key into an outsider Prince Ryo, fired a drop round, and used Repetition. All of that served to duplicate the key.

I brought that back to Ina, who looked confused.

"Here you go."

"What is it?"

“I’ll explain how to use it. It’s basically a duplicate key.”

“A-A duplicate key…”

She looked confused. Her face turned red.

For some reason, Erza rolled her eyes in exasperation.

“You call that a maybe? Come on.”

284. The Final Barrier

In the morning, I woke up, exited my room, and promptly bumped into Ina. She blushed awkwardly when we locked eyes.

"G-Good morning," she said.

"Morning. Did you stay overnight?"

"Yep. At first, I planned to commute, buuut…" Ina looked around down the hallway—no—at the mansion as a whole. "It's so bright, warm, and comfy here that I couldn't help myself. It's like there's a spell making it so I can't leave."

"RIGHT?!"

My loud agreement startled her.

"Whoa!"

"It's all thanks to Emily. That comfort, that warmth that gets you addicted to living here, it's all her!"

"Huh." We walked down the hall and chatted. Along the way, she asked, "By the way, do you think the rumors are true?"

"What rumors?"

"They say she cleaned Tellurium up and napped with slimes."

"It's true. Saw it with my own eyes." I saw that a long time ago, when I'd picked her up from the dungeon.

After she'd cleaned up the dungeon to be as warm, bright, and holy as this very mansion, she'd gotten tired and took a nap there. I

saw with my own two eyes how slimes had gathered around and joined her.

I remember thinking that she was the *real* dungeon master that day. She ruled the place.

Ina sighed. “That’s just amazing.”

“Isn’t it? People like to say that about me, but really, she’s the most amazing person in this Family.”

“I get it. Your amazing performance is all thanks to you having this home to come back to, right?”

“You get it!” I was excited.

Ina agreed, stopped, and then fully turned to face me.

“So it looks like I live here now. Thank you for having me,” she said and bowed once more.

Thus, Ina came to live in our mansion.

☆

On B9 of Nihonium, I used every measure I could think of to optimize my zombie dragon strategy.

“It’s just not working…”

I could guarantee a kill in two attacks using the method I’d devised early on, with the eternal flame round. Incidentally, said flame would serve as a sustained damage source as long as I

wanted, but just guiding a zombie dragon toward it would reduce the counter by two.

It didn't seem to just be counting the number of times you attacked the monster, but rather, the *number of attacks* involved altogether, so eternal flame rounds just wouldn't work against ones with a count of 1.

This is one hell of a problem, I thought to myself.

A new zombie dragon appeared before me. The number over its head was a new one: 99.

"Wait…ninety-nine?"

All of the ones so far had been 1 to 5. I'd been doing this for a few days, and I'd killed hundreds by now, and this was the first time I'd seen an exception. It was clearly less than a 1% chance. And that meant…

"It's a rare." I could practically feel the glint in my eye.

I readied my guns and fired a few normal bullets to fend it off. The counter went down for each shot. Then, I lured it into attacking. It bit down, swung its tail, clawed at me with its forelegs, and spat miasma to make things harder for me.

I knew all of these attacks. It was the same style as any other zombie dragon.

"Is it just the same as others? Repetition." I cast Repetition to confirm, and the zombie dragon died. The fact that I could kill it with Repetition meant that it had to be a normal zombie dragon.

The counter was different, yes, but it was otherwise the same—

And here I was proven wrong—a staircase appeared. Instantly after the zombie dragon vanished, instead of dropping a dexterity seed, it had dropped a staircase leading down.

"It's finally time…"

I'd expected it to take longer, but the time came sooner than I thought.

I took a deep breath and went down.

A white chamber, as usual. This was the last room before the spirit.

There was a giant block there. Or more precisely, a *structure.* It was like a giant, fifteen-square-foot, six-sided die. But it was made out of something…gross: *pulsating flesh.*

The block was like those dungeons in video games that were modeled after the inside of a living thing, with internal organs and the like.

But it was rotting, like the rotting flesh and muscles of a zombie. The message was clear: it was just like the rest of Nihonium. I had to destroy it.

I fired a preemptive attack, fusing flame and freeze rounds into an annihilation round.

It struck, but nothing happened. The giant hunk of flesh was unwounded. I tried all kinds of attacks, even getting in close to punch, kick, and push it.

Yet nothing worked.

I didn't think I could destroy it no matter what I did. It remained fully unwounded, pulsating irregularly.

Something felt wrong. It was unlike other monsters before. I knew instinctively that fighting conventionally would get me nowhere, so I circled around to the other side, and there I saw a status board.

"…"

Warily, I approached and operated it.



The usual screen showing my current stats appeared.

After that, the board glowed.

HP - SS

The top value lit up first. In response, the flesh cracked.

MP - SS

The second value lit up, and the block began to glow.

Stats lit up one after another, gradually destroying the thing.

However…

Dexterity - E

When it got to dexterity, that evidently tripped things up. The light there was weaker than any other, and it didn't crack the flesh heap; in fact, the flesh and status board both disappeared.

I was in an empty chamber once more.

"I see."

Other dungeons had plenty of different tricks and gimmicks in these chambers, but this seemed to be one of the simpler ones among them.

Mirror, magatama, sword. The three of them unlocked SS-rank stats, and the one that I had not raised to SS was clearly the issue.

All I needed to do was raise my dexterity to SS. That much was clear.

"Let's do this."

I turned around and went back up the stairs to B9.

285. Slow and Steady

I checked my stats with my portable status board.



After many zombie dragon kills, I'd bumped my dexterity up to D. Work had been inefficient due to a few 1-counter dragons, and before I knew it, it was evening. Time to go home.

Well, I know how to meet the spirit. Maybe I should keep pushing…

"No. Let's not." I quickly let that idea go.

Don't push yourself. That's the whole reason you collapsed back at the company. Don't repeat those mistakes. Besides…

☆

The next morning, after breakfast, I went to meet Plumbum.

As usual, she was drawing pictures of me. She looked up and smiled happily. “Ooh! I’ve been waiting for you.”

The reason I hadn’t pushed myself yesterday was because I’d promised to come see her every day. If I went hard and stayed up all night just to raise my stats, I’d get too focused on it and forget to come see her. No doubt about that.

So instead, I’d finished up at the usual time yesterday for the sake of coming to see her on time.

I’d made a similar promise with Aurum, but despite her curiosity, she didn’t get resentful if I couldn’t fulfill it. Plumbum was different. She’d believed that she had been betrayed long ago, so I wanted to keep my promise to never let that happen again.

Happy that she was so happy to see me, I sat down next to her. She kept staring at me.

“What’re you staring for?” I asked.

“Did something…happen to you?”

“Huh?”

“Your face looks different.”

“Different?” I touched my face to try and figure it out. It felt normal to me. Same me, same face.

“Is something worrying you?”

“Why do you think that?”

“Do not underestimate me; I’ve kept a close eye on you. It’s not hard for me to figure out something so simple.”

The directness with which she said it made me a little embarrassed. “I see. Hmm, well, there is one thing I’m worried about—or rather, a thing that’s troubling me.”

“What is it? Tell me about it.”

“But…”

“I’ll have you know…”

“Hmm?”

“Just talking about trivial things with you is enough to make me feel better.”

“Oh… I see.” I was happy that I’d come today. I’d never said anything like that, so this must have come from Plumbum’s experience alone. She seemed to be happier when I came, so I was glad that I hadn’t skipped today. “Basically…”

I told her about my problem—about the zombie dragons with a counter of 1. Not as a means of asking for help, but just because she’d said that she wanted to know.

She listened in silence until the end, slowly stood up, and casually waved her hand. A turtle appeared in midair. It was big

enough for a person to sit on, and its shell had an odd pattern reminiscent of outer space.

"What's this?" I asked.

"One of the rare monsters of my dungeon. The Chrono Turtle."

"Chrono Turtle…"

"Try defeating it. Its shell is hard enough to deflect any attack, but the bright spot is always the weakest."

After the spirit herself had told me its weak spot, I took out a gun and fired a growth round into the spot as directed. It was super-effective; the bullet went straight through the Chrono Turtle, and like the other monsters of Plumbum, it turned into floating liquid.

"What's the drop?" I asked her.

"Humans have called it the Bead of Time."

"Bead of Time?"

She waved her arm again, summoning another Chrono Turtle. Then, she splashed the Bead of Time onto it, causing it to change color and stop moving.

"It froze? Wait, based on the name, did time stop for it?"

"Indeed." She nodded slightly yet firmly. "This item stops time for whatever you splash it on. Why not try using it on those dragons of yours?"

I was awestruck.

☆

I went to B9 of Nihonium again, walked around the dungeon, and searched for a zombie dragon with a count of 1.

One showed up in no time, so I snuck over and splashed the Bead of Time onto it. Like with the Chrono Turtle from before, it lost color and stopped in place.

Its counter remained at 1.

Then, I fired normal bullets at it. Even when I unloaded the cylinders of both revolvers, its counter didn't change.

"Nice!" I pumped a fist.

I tested yet further, using an eternal flame round on the time-stopped zombie dragon. Despite not working on dragons with counts of 1 before, the invisible flame burned it just fine now.

Its body was half charred, yet it couldn't move from its previous position.

Eventually, time started moving again, and out popped a dexterity seed. The Bead of Time had worked perfectly against the dragon.

But one test wasn't certain enough for me, so I decided to go again. I walked all around the dungeon, ignoring zombies with counts from 2 to 5.

"Mm?" I found a 1—two of them at once, in fact.

Having more than one around would interfere with the test, so I considered leaving one be—but then, I held up my gun.

"…"

I stopped moving. My eyes landed on the gun in my hand. Something ran through my mind—a flash of inspiration.

I knew that I could do it, but it hadn't fully taken form yet. I desperately tried to catch the idea, like water slipping between my fingers.

I focused for a while, and eventually, it took clear form.

This time, I splashed the Bead of Time onto my gun. My favorite gun lost color, as if frozen; time had stopped for it. Then, I removed the bullets that had time-stopped, loaded new normal bullets in, and fired them repeatedly at the 1-count zombie dragon.

The counter stayed the same.

Firing with a gun that I'd used the Bead of Time on wouldn't reduce the counter!

286. Beyond Legendary

After waking up in the morning, I left my room. I yawned as I walked through the salon, feeling the morning sunlight through the window.

Celeste was slumped against the arm of the couch.

"What's the matter, Celeste?" I asked.

"Oh… Ryota. No big deal, it's just a magic storm."

"Oh, man."

Magic storms were a type of weather in this world. During such storms, people couldn't use magic at all. Depending on the person, you might even feel sick. Celeste was one such person.

"Are you okay?"

"Yeah, it's just the usual," she replied. "I'm not actually sick, so it's fine. This one just happens to be a bit long, so that sucks a little."

"Long, you say?"

"Yeah. They say it'll last five days."

"That is long!" I was surprised.

Five whole days? This must be the longest one yet.

"It's just the season for it. There's nothing we can do about it."

"Kinda like rainy season, huh?"

I compared it to my old world.

"What about you, Ryota? Are you okay?"

"Huh?"

"You look so serious lately. Are you working on something big?"

I touched my face all over again. It was true that I'd been extra-motivated by the prospect of meeting Nihonium lately. Had she seen through me?

"I dunno, maybe."

"Do you need my help?" She sat up with a determined look on her face.

I appreciated the offer. It made me happy, but I answered, "It's okay. I'll manage."

"Yeah… Knowing you, I'm sure you will." She slumped down again.

She trusted me; and to live up to that trust, I planned to go for another hard day's work in Nihonium.

☆

After breakfast, I went to chat with Plumbum. She showed me an even more powered-up Prince Ryo. His face was prettier than ever, and his clothes were more sophisticated.

If the two of us competed in a beauty pageant, he'd trounce me, I thought as I left her and went to Nihonium.

There, I farmed zombie dragons, typically with eternal flame rounds. When I ran into a specimen with a counter of 1, I used the Bead of Time and shot a bunch of bullets.

Along the way, I stopped using eternal flame rounds on counters of 3 and above; instead, I'd use a growth round and annihilation round combo.

I continued to refine my methods.

Slow and steady wins the race. Even if it took longer to kill them because of these new methods, I might still get a flash of inspiration. I considered using the two-action eternal flame rounds against a 3-counter dragon lazy, so I stopped doing it.

And so, I killed monster after monster, gradually raising my dexterity.

Eventually, though, I got a sharp headache.

The magic storm was affecting me, too. MP, intelligence, willpower—I'd raised all of my magic-related stats to SS, so magic storms affected my health. Not as much as they did Celeste's, though.

Most of all…

"Repetition." I tried casting a spell, but it didn't work.

Even the strongest farming magic in the world was still just magic; it was useless during magic storms.

A zombie dragon with a counter of 1 appeared. I used my Bead of Time on my gun and fired repeatedly to kill it.

When I got the dexterity seed, I was relieved. It was a good thing I hadn't settled for incorporating Repetition into my farming scheme. If I had, I'd be forced to give up for this whole five-day magic storm.

"I'd still like another option or two, I think."

A pattern for 3-counters.

A pattern for 4-counters.

A pattern for 5-counters.

And though they were rare, an all-out pattern for 99-counters.

I wanted to try everything I could.

Suddenly, I heard applause nearby. I whipped around in surprise. Nobody ever came beyond B2 of Nihonium.

There I saw Neptune. As usual, his two orbiters Lil and Ran were there.

"Impressive," Neptune said in greeting. "You've found a stable way to do work here. And in a magic storm, at that."

"What brings you here? That's rare."

"Ahaha, well, I just heard there was someone who'd cleared a dungeon that I'd given up on long ago."

"Given up…?"

"Remember? When Nihonium was born, we came here to investigate it."

"…Oh!" In the very depths of my memories, I found it. I clapped my hands together when I remembered.

It had happened over a year ago, back when Emily and I had still struggled on B1 and B2 of Tellurium. Back when my stats were all F.

When Nihonium was "born," there were rumors that the Neptune Family had been sent to investigate it.

"You're right. I totally forgot."

"To be honest…" his voice trailed off.

"Hmm?"

"I gave up on this dungeon. Threw in the towel."

"You really did?"

"I investigated all the higher floors, yes, but I couldn't do the 1-count and 2-count monsters here. I just couldn't kill them in one blow."

"Really?"

"Yep. Lil, Ran," Neptune said to his girls. The women behind him came up and clung to him.

"Yeah, yeah. You just want a demonstration?"

"Leave it to us!"

A zombie dragon passed by; its counter was at 3.

Lil and Ran began casting spells in songlike tones.

"Godly Blessing!"

"Devilish Curse!"

White and black magic covered Neptune. Two opposing colors of light created wings of white and black.

Instantly, the counter went down to 1.

Neptune swung his fist without much ceremony. It was a powerful blow, easily blowing away the zombie dragon despite him not putting his full force behind it.

“That’s my trump card, as you can see. Three and higher are easy, but one and two are impossible.”

“Oh, I see.”

I’d seen his ultimate move there before. It had power to spare, but it was fully incompatible with this floor.

“But you’ve been an adventurer for a long time, too, so you understand. What does it matter if I can’t beat the one-count monsters here?”

“Yeah. No doubt,” I replied. Neptune nodded back.

This world’s rules were strict. Apart from phenomena relating to S-rank drops, there were no exceptions.

There was nothing wrong with Neptune investigating the whole dungeon down to this floor and giving up on the 1-count and 2-count monsters. If he reported that honestly to the Dungeon Association chief—Clint at the time—then that would’ve been convincing enough.

“That’s why I came. To see the face of the person who so easily overcame what I couldn’t.”

“That so?”

“You’re as impressive as ever. Say, why don’t you join me?”

"Still trying? How many times have you tried to poach me now?"

"But of course. I like you, remember?"

"You keep saying that, too… Sorry."

"That's a shame. Well…"

"Hm?"

"How about *I* join *you* instead?" he offered. "Like how Cliff and Margaret have already."

"…Huh?"

"Let the Neptune Family come under the Ryota Family umbrella. How about it?" Neptune looked as serious as could be.

But…

"For real?" I confirmed.

"For real for real."

Despite his light-heartedness, he seemed serious about this. Lil and Ran's sulky looks were proof of that. As if they wanted to know why the hell Neptune would be subservient to someone else.

But he was serious.

For real, though?

287. More than I Bargained For

I remained silent at Neptune's offer.

"What's it gonna be? You won't suffer for it, I promise."

"Hmm… I think not," I finally answered.

The sexier one behind Neptune, Lil, knitted her brow in anger. She looked about ready to attack me at any given moment, but Neptune raised his hand to stop her.

With his usual affable smile, he asked me, "Why ever not? I'd love to hear your reason."

"You won't back down unless I tell you, huh?"

"Yep. I'm genuinely serious right now."

I sighed.

"Because you're not troubled."

"Do I have to be?"

"It's not exactly that you *have* to be…"

I struggled with his earnest question.

He was right; that was my intent. But when he asked me outright, I struggled to answer.

Ever since I'd arrived in this world, I'd mostly acted based on helping people.

People who tried their hardest but never got anything out of it. People being exploited by others. I helped the kind of person who

reminded me of my past self, basically.

Following that logic, I doubted he needed my help. He wasn't unrewarded, and he wasn't exploited; quite the opposite, in fact.

That was why I'd refused.

"No worries there, then," he said.

"Huh?"

"I'm super troubled, actually." Neptune flashed his usual calm smile and said, "Tennessine."

"The 117th one, huh?" I muttered to myself.

"Hmm?"

"Nothing. Is that a newly born dungeon?"

Lil and Ran's eyes went wide, as if they couldn't believe what they were seeing.

Neptune wasn't as surprised; rather, his smile grew bigger. "Hahaha, you really are incredible. You already know about a new dungeon when we haven't announced it anywhere. Only a select few have heard the news."

"…"

That might've been stupid of me.

Element 117, Tennessine. I knew about it because it had been named around the same time as Nihonium. I didn't know how it had arisen in this world; I'd only reacted because of the name. That was what made my response careless.

“I’ve been asked to investigate it, just like Nihonium,” he explained.

“Impressive.”

“But I’m in a real tight spot. Frankly, I can’t do it myself; I’m a little bit cursed. So I need your help.”

“A tight spot?”

“Yep. To be honest, you’re the only guy I can ask. Because you’re the only person in this world who’s stronger than me.”

I gazed at Neptune, trying to figure out his hidden intent. But there wasn’t much point in doing that. Finally, I said, “You’re no fair.”

“Oh, really?”

He played dumb. I wouldn’t have been able to tell if he were alone, but Lil and Ran’s facial expressions spoke louder than words.

Lil looked furious, as if she’d kill me if I refused. Ran was sad, as if to say she’d die of sadness if anything happened to Neptune. Both of them were even more worried about him than he was.

That was what was unfair—bringing the two of them here.

I sighed. “Okay, fine.”

“You mean it?”

“Yeah.”

“Thank you! Lil, Ran?” Neptune looked to the girls.

“Okay!”

“Hmph… We just have to do what you said, right?”

The two of them turned around and ran back the way they'd came.

"What are they doing?" I asked him.

"Call it preparation. First, we need to make a big fuss so everyone knows that Neptune has joined the Ryota Family."

"Is that really necessary?"

"…Yeah."

"Hey, what was with that pause?"

Were those two just acting?

"Whaaat? Haha, come ooon. It's not like I'm taking advantage of a legitimate problem I'm having to get into the fold, or anything."

"Now you're just being brazen!" I roared. I was starting to regret agreeing.

Still, it was rare for him to be this serious.

"Thank you, honestly. This is a big help."

"…You really are unfair."

At least he can stay strong, I guess.

After that, he left Nihonium, announcing that he'd return once he was ready. I refocused myself, raised my dexterity to B, and went back to the mansion.

When I got back via the portal, Ina ran up and screamed, "Aaah! Ryota, there's an emergency!"

"Ina? What's got you so panicked?"

"L-Look outside!"

“Outside?” As directed, I looked out the window. “Whoa! That’s one heck of a crowd… Must be over a hundred people.”

“They’re all adventurers under the Neptune Family.”

“Neptune?”

My eyebrow twitched. I had a bad feeling about this.

“They heard that Neptune joined the Ryota Family, and they want a piece of the pie. A few of them have already said they’ll follow you as their new boss for the rest of their lives.”

I massaged my brow. A headache started to come on. They were eager to join me, but I couldn’t start accepting any random person who came to my door.

For now, I chased them all off.

And for many days after, I was constantly haunted by third-party groups who claimed to be under the Neptune Family who would now technically be under us as well.



288. Meeting Nihonium

For the sake of working with Neptune and dealing with my own problems, I decided I needed to finish clearing Nihonium. After fulfilling my promise to Plumbum, I holed up in Nihonium and went home in the evening.

Three days later…



"Ooh…" I looked at the stats on my portable status board and shuddered with emotion.

I remembered how I'd started off.

I'd measured my stats after watching Emily do it and despaired when I saw mine were all Fs. But today, I'd raised them all to SS.

It was even more emotional because I'd built them up one seed at a time.

Now I could do it—I could finally meet Nihonium. Looking back, she was the one who'd led me to the magic fruit that taught me Repetition.

I returned to the mansion and used the warp room to return to the room before the spirit's chamber.

There, I faced the fifteen-foot-squared cube of rotting flesh. It was every bit as eerie as before. I circled around and used the odd status board on it.

Stats appeared one after another, and every SS-rank stat glowed.

HP - SS

MP - SS

Strength - SS

Vitality - SS

Intelligence - SS

Willpower - SS

Speed - SS

Dexterity - SS

Luck - SS

Once all of them had been displayed, the flesh heap melted away and was absorbed into the ground.

I backed off and waited for it to finish.

"Another zombie dragon?!"

Once it was gone, a zombie dragon appeared in its place. It looked just like the other ones on B9; its size, presence, and miasma were the same as well. Nothing differed save for the number 9 above its head, which was a counter I hadn't seen before.

I'd expected this to open the path leading to Nihonium's chamber, so this was a little bit of a letdown.

"Either way, guess I'll just kill it. A counter of nine means I have nine moves—"

Suddenly, alarm bells went off in my head.

It was nothing but instinct.

Instinct and intuition, the general instant decision-making that comes from a wealth of experience, had made me stop myself from attacking.

Lately, I'd been increasing my number of attacks to match the zombie dragons' counters to cultivate better judgment, so I'd considered killing this one in exactly nine moves.

Nine. That counter wouldn't come up without reason. Not now. The number nine couldn't possibly be meaningless here, in a chamber that symbolized the whole of Nihonium.

Killing in nine moves was a bad idea. Probably a *very* bad idea.

"…Repetition!" I defeated the zombie dragon with my ultimate farming magic, the perfect representation of a one-action kill.

The counter went down by one. In its place appeared a three-headed dog zombie. This one's counter was an 8.

"I knew it!"

I evaded its biting attacks and summarized the situation in my head. Nine floors, nine kinds of monsters, a count of nine. With each kill, the counter would go down by one, and the next would appear.

Defeat them all. Show the fruits of your growth.

That was the intent that I sensed from this.

"In that case—whoa!" I'd prepared to defeat the three-headed dog zombie through my usual homing round method, but I quickly realized that it would count as two attacks. I used the Bead of Time on the dog zombie, fired a homing round, and rushed in. The head I'd chosen was the correct one. Its counter went down by 1, and it disappeared.

Counter: 7. Electric mummy.

Counter: 6. Poison zombie.

Counter: 5. Red skeleton.

These I insta-killed without issue.

Counter: 4. Mummy.

"That's right. I needed two moves for these, too!"

Like with the dog zombie, I splashed the Bead of Time on it and killed it with my now-quite-strong growth round before burning the

bandages left on the ground to finish it off.

Finally, I defeated a mummy, zombie, and skeleton with ease. I'd killed all nine monsters within the nine counts.

After a short wait, a gate appeared. This was what I'd been waiting for: the entrance to Nihonium's residence.

The air changed. I instinctively knew that I was right.

I took a deep breath and went through the gate. Beyond it stood a regular-sized woman in a kimono—the same one I'd met in figure size before.

"I have been waiting for you."

She was the spirit Nihonium herself.

289. Passing on the Favor

"I've been thinking…" Nihonium said.

"Hm?"

"About the first thing I would say to you when we'd met. In the end, it's this." She smiled sweetly and said, "I'm as impressed as ever."

"By what?"

"Do you remember when I gave you Repetition?"

"Yeah. It was when you first showed yourself to me, right? You chose the fruit that would randomly give me Repetition."

It felt like so long ago now. I was at my favored item shop, carefully picking a 3,000,000-piro magic fruit—no small number for me at the time—when Nihonium had appeared and showed me the best one. That was when I'd learned Repetition.

"Yes. I knew that I had to deliver that magic to you. Normally, it is impossible to reach this place without it."

"…True. I normally wouldn't have been able to beat all nine within the countdown without Repetition. I could've been lucky with the three-headed zombie, but under normal conditions, the mummy always takes two moves."

"And that is why I gave it to you. No matter how strong your stats, no matter your level of training, you shouldn't have been able

to get here without Repetition. And yet…" This time, Nihonium's smile was more…seductive. She was a beautiful Japanese woman in a lovely kimono, and her smile only added to it all. "You've become so strong that you could have made it even without Repetition. You've far exceeded my expectations… Truly amazing. Amazing…"

She repeated that last part quietly to herself. I heard that word often, but it came with a different flavor—more joy—when I heard it from her.

"More importantly, why did you call me here?" I asked her. "You must have a reason."

She smiled sadly. This one had a tinge of loneliness to it, unlike the last.

"Don't laugh, please."

"Okay." I nodded firmly and gazed at her, waiting for what she'd say next.

"I wanted to be needed."

"…"

"I don't think I have to tell you this, but nobody in this world has ever needed me."

"But Margaret is here… I guess she doesn't really *need* you, though."

"Yes, she would do just fine anywhere else. Nobody but you comes here."

There was nothing anyone could do about that. In a world where every product dropped from dungeons, dungeons were simultaneously farms, mines, factories, and more. Among them, Nihonium alone would drop nothing for anyone but me.

No matter what they did, if an adventurer with A-rank drops farmed here day and night, they'd get nothing. It was like a barren land where nothing would ever grow.

Knowing how this world worked, it was natural that nobody would come here. That nobody would need it.

"It's become difficult to…maintain my existence."

"What do you mean?"

"Monsters typically have lifespans. Monsters that are undefeated in dungeons will go on until their natural life comes to an end… Though no humans know this anymore."

"Of course… Normal monsters wouldn't be left for that long."

Nihonium nodded and continued, "When monsters die naturally, they become air. The undead monsters of Nihonium die day and night, continually and automatically producing air."

"As in… Oxygen? The air breathed by people?"

She nodded again. Her gentle smile had faded; before me now was an exhausted woman.

"I continue to produce air needed by all, but nobody needs me, and nobody thanks me." Now she bore a self-deprecating smile. "I've become tired of repeating this cycle."

I understood her. She was *me.*

Exactly like how I'd been when I'd first come to this world. I'd worked myself to the bone, ignoring my own health, and endured endlessly. But nobody had ever thanked me. I was forced into an unrewarded life.

She was me. No, maybe she was even worse off.

"I want you…to save me."

"Someone told me this once upon a time." Words came to me like divine revelation. They were words that had spurred me to walk a new path, and it was time to pass them on to her. "People's efforts will inevitably be rewarded. It may be sooner, or it may be later, but everyone who does their best will be rewarded."

"Is that really true?"

"Yes," I replied without hesitation. Then, I smiled. "It happened for me. So…"

"So?"

"I'll make your dungeon into one that *everyone* needs."

"Can I really have faith in that?" Tears formed in her eyes.

"It's not about faith."

"Huh…?"

"I guarantee it. It's not about faith; people who work hard *will* be rewarded. As long as I'm here, you can be certain of it." This was my vow. To firm my resolve, I used strong words that I typically avoided using.

Several emotions passed over Nihonium's face—surprise, confusion, and finally joy.

"Okay!"

This was her third smile—the smile of a person who had been to the depths of hell, yet finally found a ray of hope to cling to.

290. Ryota’s Achievement

After a while, Nihonium calmed down. Venting all of the frustrations that had gotten to her for so long had lightened a load on her shoulders. Of course, we hadn’t solved anything yet; she just felt a little better for now.

“I look forward to seeing your work,” she said. “I’ll be waiting for good news here.”

“Just wait a minute for me.”

“Yes. For as long as it takes.”

I left the spirit, who seemed to misunderstand me a little, and went up to B9. It seemed like it would be faster to show rather than tell, so I used the B9 warp gate to go back to the mansion and then warped over to Aurum.

Aurum cocked her head at my sudden visit. “Huh? What’s up, Ryota? You haven’t come here in a while.”

Now that she could move around freely, I got to see her in the mansion every day. There wasn’t much reason for me to come here anymore.

“Sorry, Aurum; I need Miike for a bit. I’ll return him right away.”

“Okay, but… Well, I guess I don’t need to ask why.”

She smiled and happily handed over her new BFF, who she always cradled like a doll.

“Here. Make sure you help Ryota, okay?”

“Of course!” he replied.

With one eager Miike in tow, I used the gate to go through the warp room and to Nihonium’s chamber.

“Huh? You’re back… Is something wrong?” Nihonium asked.

“I told you to wait just a minute, remember?”

“Yes, but I didn’t expect it to be so literal. What’s going on?”

“Here.” I handed her Miike.

“Who is this?”

“Hold him, and you can leave the dungeon.”

“Huh?”

“Come live with us for a while.”

“But I’m this dungeon’s…” she started to speak, but she sadly trailed off. “Well. There isn’t much point in me staying, is there?” I could almost hear her saying, *nobody will come.*

But I was about to solve that problem, so I ignored it. I didn’t know how to fix things just yet, but it was clear that leaving her alone here was a bad idea. So instead, I wanted to take her with me.

“Okay,” she assented. “I’ll go with you.”

“Great. Hold on tight to Miike, okay?”

“Okay.”

“Happy to be working with you!” the mini-sage saluted.

I took her free hand while the other held Miike, and we went through the gate to the mansion together.

"You are a fearsome one," Nihonium mused as we entered.

"Hmm?"

"No other human in all of history has ever so casually taken a spirit from her dungeon. And yet here you are."

"It's no big deal." I gently took Miike from her. "Thanks, Miike. You're a big help."

"May I go back to Lady Aurum now?"

"Yep. Give her my regards."

"Okay!" he replied before using the warp room on his own to go back to Aurum's chamber.

After seeing him off, I guided Nihonium out of the room. "Now, we'd better get a room ready for you…"

Just then, I heard Emily's voice from the hallway. "Welcome back, Yoda." It was followed by the slapping of her slippers as she ran over.

"Perfect timing, Emily. This is…"

I was about to introduce Nihonium and make a request, but I stopped myself when I realized that Emily was staring at her awfully intently—so intently that it seemed like she wouldn't even hear me.

Immediately after, she pulled the spirit into a hug.

"Ah…" Nihonium was taken aback.

This was a familiar sight; she'd done the same thing for me once. Emily's warm, soft embrace had a way of comforting people.

She'd instinctively sensed Nihonium's pain. Impressive, but no surprise coming from her.

Nihonium, too, sensed something in her and hugged back.

From an onlooker's perspective, they looked like the manager of an elegant inn and a child, but their roles were quite the opposite as Emily tenderly supported and soothed Nihonium.

They stayed like that for a while until Emily suddenly looked up at me and said, "Yoda!"

"Y-Yeah?"

"We need to have her live with us for a while."

"Yep. That's why I brought her here. You mind taking care of that?"

"Of course!" She enthusiastically took Nihonium's hand and dragged her off. The spirit still seemed confused by the situation, but she gave up and let Emily guide her.

While I saw them off, Erza and Ina popped out of the Swallow's Returned Favor branch office.

"Ryota, who's that?" Erza cocked her head.

"A *friend* of yours, maybe?" Ina smirked and raised her pinky—a classic gesture implying that I'd brought a girlfriend home.

"No," I answered. "She's Nihonium."

"Nihonium… Wait, do you mean…"

“Another spirit?”

“Yeah. She’ll be staying with us for a while. Be good to her, okay?”

Erza and Ina looked at each other in amazement.

“O-Okay.”

“Wow…”

Maybe I should’ve realized by then—or rather, I should’ve shut them up. Considering things that had happened so far, and considering their affiliations, I should’ve made them keep Nihonium a secret.

Because early the next morning, word about her had spread to the main office of the Swallow’s Returned Favor, and all kinds of merchants and other interested parties had flocked to her dungeon, hungry to take its future into their grasp.

291. The Fate of the World

On B1 of Nihonium, I fired a single growth round at an attacking skeleton, killing it.

It didn't drop the HP seed that it normally would. Since the spirit of the dungeon wasn't here, even my drops had stopped flowing.

That wasn't the problem, though; the problem was this dungeon's normal drops.

To make Nihonium into a dungeon that people needed, I would have to make it so that normal adventurers could get drops.

While I thought of how to do that, the first thing that came to mind was selective breeding. By allowing the dungeon master to change its ecosystem, the dungeon would change its monsters and drops. But that method couldn't be used here; more precisely, it would cause too much damage.

"Speak of the devil, and all…"

The air changed, and Nihonium's dungeon master appeared.

It was a woman, about 5'4" with six-foot long hair that trailed on the ground. Her naked body, combined with the length of her hair, gave an eerie vibe. Expressionless and pale, with a faint glow—she seemed to match Nihonium's "undead" vibe quite well.

I approached her. As I did, I unleashed a perfectly timed counter.

I felt flesh tear against my fist.

Nihonium's dungeon master was typically incorporeal, but she materialized during her attacks. Using that opportunity to attack was the best strategy to deal with her.

Once upon a time, I'd really struggled to beat her. But now that my stats were capped, she was no big deal.

I countered her attacks with perfect timing over and over until, on the fifth strike, she was dead. When she disappeared, the air returned to normal.

The reason I hadn't prolonged that battle for crop breeding was that, when she was out, Nihonium alone didn't stop dropping things—*all of Cyclo* did. When a dungeon master is out, other monsters stop appearing. In Nihonium's case, that phenomenon extended to the entire city.

If I wanted to take my time crop breeding, then all of the production in Cyclo would grind to a halt. I couldn't let that happen, so I had to kill her as soon as she'd appeared.

☆

“That must be a curse,” Cell said in the Cyclo Dungeon Association chief’s office when he heard my explanation of things.

“Do you think so?”

“Based on what you’ve told me, the mental structures of spirits and humans seem quite similar. If so, this conclusion is only natural.” After a pause, he added with a serious look, “The power of Nihonium’s dungeon master is the materialization of one emotion: the desire to inflict her own pain upon others.”

“…I see.”

I understood that feeling—to see others suffer because you’re suffering on your own. Some people might find that wrong, but I had to empathize more with her than with them.

“If you so desire…”

“Yeah?”

“I can use my authority to stop all production in Cyclo for a day. What do you say to that?”

“That’d be a huge problem, wouldn’t it?”

“Not particularly, if done during a strong solar eclipse. Besides…”

“Besides?”

“You underestimate yourself too much. People now see you as a dungeon-revitalizing machine. If you were to do the same for Nihonium, not a soul would complain.”

“I think you’re buttering me up too much.” I chuckled wryly.

"Not at all. You already know that crowds are flocking to Nihonium."

"Is it that busy?" I knew that people were going there, but he made it sound like a big deal.

"Animals, plants, ore, magic, special. People connected to all kinds of drops are paying close attention."

"Not just plants? As in, not just people from Cyclo?"

"Nihonium has dropped nothing as of yet. It's not so far-fetched to expect something different might drop, no?"

"I see."

If anything, special fits the bill more, I thought to myself. The stat-boosting seeds dropped there hadn't been classified since I was the only person in the world who could get them, but in my mind, they seemed to fit that category.

It seemed likely that Nihonium would drop special items once it had been restored.

"People have approached me, as well," Cell continued.

"Huh?"

"Someone's trying to curry favor with you by giving you women. They asked that I put them in contact with you."

"Giving me…women." My tone of voice was so flat that even I was surprised. I knew what it meant, but it didn't feel real or *about me* at all.

“One of each race, all of them the most beautiful and pure maidens in the world, or something?”

“This is getting outrageous.”

“That’s just how the world sees you, Sir Sato.” He grinned at me. “You should remain aware that you command such a position and reputation that any action of yours has the potential to change the world.”

“I’m telling you, this is too much praise.”

“Very like you to say such a thing when you so casually bear the fates of both the spirits and the world.”

“The world?”

“If you fail, Sir Sato…” Cell’s grin grew wider. “Nihonium’s despair could lead to all the world’s drops disappearing, once and for all.”

“…Oh.”

Now that he mentioned it, that was indeed possible. Even now, she could stop all of Cyclo’s production with one dungeon master. If she got desperate, she could go much further.

“I was too naïve,” I realized.

“Oh, come now, you’ve done nothing wrong. Everyone knows that you will succeed in the end.”

“You expect too much of me.”

Cell’s lips curled upward, and he scoffed, “Heh.”

What? I thought to myself. Suddenly, there was a knock at the office door.

One of his employees entered.

"Pardon my intrusion. Mr. Sato, a Family member of yours is here."

"Mine?"

"Ryota!" Alice came running into Cell's office. She was breathing heavily, the monsters on her shoulders rising and falling with each heave. They'd probably be thrown off of her if they weren't holding on tight.

"What's the matter, Alice?"

"It's big! Really big! You, uh, got some presents."

"Presents… Oh." When I glanced at Cell, he looked smug, as if he knew.

However, the situation had gone far beyond my expectations.

"There are so many presents from so many places that the mansion's practically bursting!" Alice screamed.

"Okay, that's too much!"

What the hell kind of presents could fill up that whole mansion?

292. Spirits' Trust

When I went back to the mansion with Alice, things were worse than I'd expected.

A mountain of gifts practically spilled out of it. Those that couldn't fit inside were left in the garden, along with full carriages left without their horses. Each was individually wrapped and even placed in gaudy-looking treasure chests, but when they were piled up so haphazardly, well…

"It almost looks like a dump," I mused.

"What do we do?" Alice asked.

"Good question…"

Aurum, cradling Miike in her arms, cut in with a suggestion. "Want me to take it?"

"Hmm? Aurum?"

The spirit of the dungeon Aurum, a girl with literally devilish eyes, had acclimated to our mansion well. She stood nonchalantly next to me.

"What do you mean by 'take it'?"

"Exactly what I said. My room has basically infinite space."

"Your room… As in, your dungeon chamber?"

She nodded.

I see. That's where she meant.

I'd never paid much mind to the size of spirits' chambers, but it seemed they were infinitely large.

"Throw it all in there for now, and you can use your mansion like usual, right?" she said.

"No… I'm not sure that's a good idea."

"Don't be shy! We're friends."

"Nah. I'm not being shy."

"Then why not?" Aurum cocked her head. I tried to explain why, but it was answered for me before I could.

Boom!

Better to show than to tell, apparently; there was an explosion behind the mansion before anyone could say anything.

"What's going on?"

"Oh! That's a monster! We've got outsiders, Ryota!" Alice noticed first, thanks to her being born in a dungeon.

After she'd answered my question, a monster leapt out from behind the building. It was a giant eyeball monster. Several tentacles wiggled outward from the eye, each with their own little eyes on them.

Two of our Family members chased it from behind the mansion and attacked. Emily jumped at it, spinning her massive hammer. Meanwhile, Celeste held out her Bicorn horns like magic staves as she cast a strong spell.

“I thought this might happen,” I said. “You can’t let things pile up too much, or else they’ll reach places that people aren’t always at.”

“Oh! And then outsiders appear…”

“Exactly. We could probably leave everything in your chamber, but if they turned into outsiders, that’d cause big trouble. Like a kaiju war, or something.”

“I see…”

“Leaving the question of how to fix this aside… I’ll be right back.”



This was a monster I'd never seen before, called a Gazer.

Emily and Celeste struggled to fight it. Meanwhile, I analyzed the battle.

"Emily! Celeste!"

"Yoda!"

"Ryota!"

"Leave the rest to me."

"Okay!" they both replied.

Still paying attention to the Gazer, they warily backed away. I joined the battle in their place.

I loaded a special bullet into my gun and pointed at its weak point, which I'd found during their battle.

☆

Inside the mansion, Aurum appeared while Nihonium was staring blankly at the battle.

"So you're Nihonium, huh?"

"Huh? Who are you…?"

The salon, where the Ryota Family often gathered when they weren't busy, was full of presents. She alone sat there among them.

"Aurum. You know what that means, right?"

"You're…"

“It’s weird, isn’t it? I never thought the two of us would ever meet.”

“Yes… Agreed.”

“I thought I was mistaken when I saw you through the window, but I really wasn’t. Why the glum face, though?” Aurum lightly slapped her fellow spirit on the head.

Nihonium held her head unhappily and looked back at the girl, confusion evident on her face. One could practically see the question mark over her head.

“I heard about you,” Aurum said. “I get how you feel.”

“…”

“Arsenic, Selenium, Plumbum, Phosphorus, and Aurum. You know what those all are?”

“…?”

“All the names of dungeons that Ryota has helped. Because he’s amazing, see?” Aurum raised her hand and pointed at the Gazer, a monster that he’d managed to defeat instantly despite never having encountered it before.

He had used his bounty of combat experience, high stats, and various powerful items to defeat the Gazer while keeping damage to a minimum—only a small part of the mansion had been destroyed.

“If he puts his mind to it, there’s nothing he can’t do. He’ll have your little problem solved in no time, so just relax and wait for him.”

“Do you…believe in him that much?”

“Yeah. Hey, come with me.”

“Huh? B-But where?”

“We’re gonna go see Arsenic, Selenium, and Plumbum. You gotta meet them.”

“M-Meet them? How… No, why in the first place—”

“I’m gonna let them get mad at you.”

“Huh?”

“You beg Ryota for help, and then you act like you don’t trust him. That’s messed up. Miike, you can use the warp room to take us to everyone’s chambers, right?”

“Leave it to me! You’ve taken me to all those places, so I sure can!”

“Okay! Let’s go,” Aurum said and dragged Nihonium out of the salon.

The mountain of gifts symbolized the faith of others, and Aurum’s behavior symbolized the faith of spirits.

Ryota had both of their trust in spades.

293. Two Options

I had Cell dispose of all the gifts in the end.

The battle with the outsider had made a mess of them, and many had been sent anonymously to begin with. Returning them all to their senders would be impossible, so he would sell or get rid of them.

I'd considered having Erza and Ina deal with them through their employer, but they were specialized in vegetable produce, so they wouldn't be able to handle expensive gifts.

Not because of a lack of ability, that is. Erza had said, "That would be encroaching on others' territory." Indeed, it wouldn't make a very good impression if they started selling things outside their field of expertise for a quick buck.

But Cell was nobility, and he had connections. All of the gifts were expensive items, so who better to deal with them than a noble? With those thoughts in mind, I left it all to him.

Once that was over and the mansion was back to normal, I relaxed in the salon.

Aurum appeared and asked me, "Got a minute?"

"Sure. What is it?"

"It's about…her. Nihonium."

“Hmm.” I sat straight up from my deeply reclined position in the slightly worn-out sofa, in order to face Aurum at eye-level, and asked, “What about her?”

“You’re planning to help that lady, right? Naturally.”

“Well… Yeah. I’m just going to do what I always do.” I’d helped Aurum at one point, so I figured that was all I needed to say.

“Can you wait a little on that?”

“Hm? Why?”

“Because I’m planning to take her to a few dungeons.” Aurum looked more serious than usual. She was the kind of person who lived carefreely, much like Alice, so I noticed when she was especially serious.

“Do you have an idea, or something?”

“I think she needs to see the outside world for a while.”

“Do you?”

“I’m always happy that *I* did.”

“Okay,” I assented.

She seemed surprised. “That was easy. Are you sure?”

“Well, you said you have an idea, right?”

“Yeah.”

“Then I’m letting you do your thing. You’re both spirits, so if you think you know what’s best for her, then I have to trust you.”

“Thanks.”

Right after we'd come to that mutual agreement, a new voice cut in to our conversation, "In that case…"

"Whoa!"

"Eep!"

Aurum and I were both so surprised that we fell over.

"You should help me first." It was Neptune. He spoke gently, with an unceasing smile on his face.

"When did you barge in?" I demanded.

"Not telling!"

"…Are the girls here?"

"Ahaha! Come on, they're not with me 24/7."

"They're not?"

"Forget that," he brushed me off. "If you need to wait on *this* thing, prioritize *my* thing. You said you'd help with Tennessine, remember?"

"Right…"

"Sir Sato." This time, Cell had appeared from the opposite direction.

"Whoa!"

"Eep! A-Again?"

Aurum and I were surprised once more.

"What now, Cell?" I asked him.

"I'd like you to fulfill your promise to me."

"To you? Oh, about the money-printing dungeon?"

"Indeed."

"Did you deal with the political issues, or whatever?"

"Without incident."

"I see."

I'd made promises with both Neptune and Cell, and they'd demanded I fulfill them at the same time. At this point, I had to be grateful for Aurum taking Nihonium off my hands.

"Please," Neptune insisted. "There's nobody else I can ask."

"The implications of this are global," Cell pressed me. "I need your help, Sir Sato."

Both of them gazed intently at me.

Well, where do we begin?

Neptune. Cell. I looked back and forth between them.

Finally, I asked, "Where is Tennessine?"

"Thank you! Now that you're coming, my problems are basically already solved."

A big smile spread across Neptune's face, while Cell looked bitter. I felt bad for him, but this was nagging at me.

This was the first time I'd ever seen Neptune without his girls. I'd chosen him because of how unusual that was.

Just what kind of dungeon is Tennessine?

294. Tennessine 1F

After a half-day of riding in a carriage provided by Cell, Neptune and I arrived at Tennessine.

In the dusky wilderness, a tall tower cast an extremely long shadow. I couldn't see the top; it continued all the way up to the clouds.

"Is this Tennessine?"

"It sure is."

"And it goes upward?"

"Is this your first time in a dungeon that doesn't go underground?"

I nodded back in response.

"I see. Well, yes, some of them go up," he explained.

"Huh." I wasn't particularly surprised.

All the ones I'd seen had gone underground, yes, but dungeons didn't necessarily need to do that. It's only natural that some would go up.

I looked around us. "Nothing around. There's no village or town nearby?"

"Not yet. A whole bunch of different factions are involved, so ownership rights will depend on the investigation."

"Okay… By the way, what are the enemies? And the drops?"

"We don't know the drops."

"You don't?"

Neptune chuckled bitterly. "I said it depends on the investigation, remember?"

"But you must at least know the drops, right?"

"The monsters here are stronger than me. I almost had one the first time, but I missed my chance."

"Stronger than you? Wait… Only the first time?"

"Go in, and you'll understand. Remember, now: *they are stronger than me.*" He repeated those words again. The look on his face was serious. "Don't let your guard down."

"…Got it."

I knew Neptune's strength, along with his fame and the public's opinion of him. Even he had been put on the back foot by this dungeon.

I steeled myself and made my way toward it.

"Watch the carriage for me," I said. "For now, I need to return to Cyclo after I clear the first floor."

I had to keep my promise with Plumbum.

"Roger that. Leave it to me."

Neptune sent me off, and I entered the first floor of Tennessine.

It looked like a tower from the outside and the interior looked much the same.

The inside was made of stacked stone bricks, with windows that let in the sunlight. It was the brightest dungeon I'd been in so far.

Not a bad vibe, overall.

Now, let's see those monsters…

Suddenly, someone briskly approached from the other side of the floor.

"Huh? Neptune, what's going on? I thought you weren't coming along. Wait, is there an entrance over there, too—"

I quickly reacted and jumped to the side—because he'd balled up his fist and went for a punch. It tore through the air with a boom, just barely grazing the tip of my nose. It struck the ground where I'd just dodged, causing some kind of explosion that shattered the floor.

"Neptune, what the hell are you doing?!"

"…"

"Is that…not the real you?"

While I was confused, he stepped forth again and went for another punch.

I faced him head-on with my own punch. An indescribable explosive sound shook the tower.

Shockwaves rippled through the building, and we both took three steps back.

Evenly matched.

I recalled the restaurant where we'd first met. The way we traded punches was like reliving that moment; hell, the way we

moved was almost exactly the same.

"But we're evenly matched…"

I'm much stronger now than I was back then. But he's been a famous adventurer for years now. Common sense says that his level would've been capped at that point. Why is he stronger now, then?

He'd matched my SS-rank strength.

The word "imposter" crossed my mind. He moved the same as the original, so he must've been a doppelganger or something, but his power was overwhelmingly beyond the original's.

The fake Neptune attacked once more.

I fired a barrage of normal bullets, got away from him, and set up an eternal flame round trap, but the faker smoothly evaded it and charged at me at ferocious speed.

BANG!

I crossed my arms to protect myself from the powerful punch. As it launched me away, I grabbed his arm and used the momentum to throw him. He flew into a tower wall with such force that he was embedded in it for a moment. Amidst smoke and falling debris, he calmly approached again.

"Not a scratch?!" I was a little horrified. He had sand and dust on him, but not a single wound to be seen. "In that case!" I roared as I shot an acceleration round into myself.

The world slowed down around me as I charged at him. I evaded his slow-motion heavy punch with ease, grabbed his throat,

and rushed forward with my hand tightly clenched around it. Then, I pushed him against a wall and fired growth rounds and limitless lightning rounds at point-blank range.

"Is it working?!"

A normal dungeon master would've died several times over at this point. Even after all that, the faker had only sustained minor wounds. He even counterattacked.

I was getting tired of how hardy he was, but it wasn't as if it *wasn't* working.

I didn't need to do anything special. He was just many times stronger than Neptune, one of the strongest adventurers in the world.

The acceleration round was still active.

In slow motion, I grabbed his arm and threw him at the ground. His limbs were splayed now, so I fired trash rounds into each at point-blank range.

The trash rounds moved ever so slowly; even my power couldn't push them forward. Since I'd fired them into each limb, he'd been pinned to the ground.

He struggled, but he could not move. I straddled him and fired more point-blank gunshots at him. This went on until the acceleration round was about to wear off.

Finally, the fake Neptune died and dropped something.

“Matsutake mushrooms? Geez, this world’s dungeons really are all about primary production.”

The faker, easily one of the five strongest monsters I’d ever fought, had dropped a luxury food item. It was impressive, yes, but I also couldn’t help but feel like it wasn’t worth the effort.

Very typical of this world, indeed.

When I picked up the mushrooms, the fake Neptune I’d struggled so much to defeat was replaced by three more approaching from afar.

“More of them, huh?”

When they reached a certain distance, all three began mad dashes toward me. Normally, this three-pronged attack would prove fatal.

“Repetition!” I fired off my favorite spell.

All three of them died with ease, and they all dropped good-looking matsutake mushrooms. Repetition had worked—more proof that there was no trick to these monsters beyond being ridiculously strong.

“Hmm… This is looking like another tricky one.”

Why was it Neptune, though? I decided to ask him after I left.

295. Countdown

I left the dungeon and met up with Neptune outside.

We boarded the carriage and made our way back to Cyclo as planned. Along the way, he asked me, “How was it?”

“They were strong.”

“Yep. I was no match for them, really.”

“Even stronger than you. What’s the deal with that?”

“Originally, they weren’t like that.”

That made sense. Monsters that looked like humans came in various forms, but they shared one factor: all of them had originally looked like normal monsters.

“Shadow, slime, or gas. Which type?” I asked.

“Shadow,” he immediately replied.

I didn’t bother asking him how he knew, and he wouldn’t have to answer even if I did.

Neptune and I had a ton of experience in dungeons. He’d been fighting in dungeons for many years now, and I had the advantage of gaming knowledge from before I came to this world, so we were both knowledgeable. Neither of us was especially surprised or confused.

“When I first went in, they were all shadow-like monsters,” he explained. “When I was fighting them, I ended up taking a hit…and

that's when it happened."

"Why are they stronger than you?"

"This is just a hypothesis, got it?" he said. I nodded back, and he continued, "I think that's my limit."

"Your limit?"

"The limit of my innate talent, you could say. After a while, you tend to realize where your strength lands, right?"

"Yeah, I get that. Though there are exceptions sometimes."

"Right, there are exceptions. But I think those monsters are my limit, so of course, they're stronger than me."

"I see… Well, I can see why it's too much for you to handle," I agreed.

Neptune smiled the same as ever. "By the way, the second and third floors are Lil and Ran. They're not that strong."

"Really?"

"Both of them specialize in supporting me, so they aren't much of a challenge on their own."

I suddenly remembered Leia—someone who had once been human, but had been reconstructed to someone else's whims.

"You didn't do anything weird to them, did you?"

"Not what you're imagining, no."

"What did you do?" I felt my eyes narrow.

Not what you're imagining? That means he's done something.

"Kisses and sex," he replied flatly.

"…Bwuh?" I was stunned.

What the hell is he talking about?

"I said, 'kisses and s—'"

"Bwaaargh! But how does that answer my question?!"

"Lil, Ran, and I are bound by fate. That's how our love takes form."

"Okay, okay, no more. I get it."

I felt a headache coming on, so I held up my hand to stop him. Indeed, he hadn't done what I was thinking.

Right… They're H2O, of course.

"Okay. What about floor four and onward?"

"Untouched."

"Okay."

"And be careful," Neptune added. "If they take your form… Oh?"

"What's up?"

"Look." He rolled up his sleeve.

His inner arm had star marks on it. I counted, and there were eight in total.

"What about it?" I asked.

"There were twelve just before. There had been for a while now, actually."

"Four disappeared, then… Hey. I killed four monsters."

"I see!" He smiled. I nodded back.

Once again, this was neither surprising nor confusing to us.

“That must be it,” he said.

“Yeah. I agree,” I replied.

We’d come to the same conclusion without even saying it.

I’d defeated four monsters, so he’d lost four stars.

“It’s gotta be bad if it goes down to zero,” Neptune hypothesized.

“For sure.”

“And that means…”

“Down to one should be fine.”

We both nodded.

“Yeah, I knew I was right to count on you,” he said with a smile. “I wouldn’t have figured this out on my own.”

“Leave the rest to me. I’ll bring it down to two; if you see anything unexpected happen, let me know immediately.”

“Ahaha! Impressive as ever, choosing not to go down to one.”

“You’d have done the same thing.”

“Would I? Goodness, you’re really amazing.”

“Just making sure. Do Lil and Ran have twelve, too?”

“Yep. Keep it to two, please.”

“Okay.”

“Well… Good luck, friend,” Neptune said. Despite the reduction in his stars, however…

“Why are you not acting any more serious about this?”

“Haha! Because I know you’re taking it serious enough for the both of us, of course. Why should I flounder when you’ll do all the work?”

He had full confidence in me.

296. Hot and Heavy with the Hydrogen Girls

When I got back to the mansion, it was already nighttime.

Emily came running up to the door and greeted me, “Welcome home!”

“Thanks. Sorry I’m so late.”

The sun had set a while ago now. Dinner time had passed, and if this world had them, we’d be enjoying prime-time TV shows right about now.

“When do you want to eat?”

“After I rest a little,” I replied, and sighed out all the air that had built up in my lungs. Just being in the mansion maintained by Emily, which remained bright and warm even at night, made me feel as though my fatigue was draining away.

“Yoda.”

Emily hugged me without any warning, startling me.

“Hmm? Wha?!” Despite my surprise, I naturally sat down where I was standing, allowing her to hug my head.

“Thank you for your hard work.”

“It’s no big deal, really…”

“The new dungeon is hard, isn’t it?”

“Hmm, I guess it is. I mean, the first-floor monsters look like Neptune and are even stronger than he is.”

“That does sound hard,” Emily replied and gently stroked the back of my head. It was calming—so calming that all my tiredness left me. “Yoda, don’t push yourself too much.”

“…Did I look off, or something?”

“You’re too kind.”

Her answer was indirect, but I had a feeling.

Neptune was in trouble, and I wanted to help him. To do that, I needed to conquer Tennessine. That wasn’t going to be easy work. But I still had to do it; that was what was on my mind on the way home.

“It reminds me of how you looked when we first met,” she said.

“Sorry to worry you.”

“I know you’ll be okay, but I don’t want you to push yourself too much.”

“Okay. I’ll keep that in mind.”

“Good.”

We stayed like that for a while until she finally let me go. After that, she’d gone back to her usual gentle smile.

☆

The next day, after I’d gone and chatted with Plumbum for a while, I used the warp room to go to Tennessine.

I sensed several enemies—fake Neptunes wandering the floor.

I could kill them with Repetition, but due to the stars on the real one, I couldn't kill them indiscriminately.

First, I planned to climb up to the fourth floor. I carefully felt for the presence of, and evaded, monsters as I progressed through the tower. One fake Neptune got in my way, but I used a fully powered restraining round to escape from it.

I started to worry; even a fully buffed restraining round had only stopped him for three seconds. Neptune's limit was truly terrifying.

Eventually, I reached a staircase and climbed up to floor two along my path to floor four.

A monster immediately appeared: a cute girl with green hair. This monster looked like one of Neptune's girls, Ran Hydrogen.

The fake Ran disappeared.

"She's fast!" I quickly tucked and rolled to the side. The fake Ran's pickaxe smashed into the floor. "So that's what you use when you fight alone, huh?"

Her power and speed were more than I'd expected.

Next, she swung it sideways to try and decapitate me. A simple move, but when backed by such speed and power, it was truly threatening. Her stats were probably along the lines of dungeon masters.

"But!" I stepped forth in time with her charge, closed the distance between us, and slipped past her pickaxe blade. Then, I raised my arm and guarded against its handle. "Emily could've crushed me with just the handle."

Remembering a friend who used a similar weapon, I stepped even further, thrust out my gun, and fired growth rounds.

They'd grown to the point that they could kill things in one shot, but the fake Ran's defenses were no joke.

Like a pile driver, I fired multiple shots at the same spot until they finally pierced through, but she still did not die. She pushed me away with a kick and swung her pickaxe horizontally.

I swayed to barely evade the sharp tip and stayed on her, following up with more gunshots.

After ten in total, she finally fell.

Poof!

Out dropped an item.

"Black watermelon? Well, that's rare."

The fake Ran had dropped a perfectly round watermelon with a smooth surface and black sheen. Though it was a watermelon, it was an extremely expensive item. Just one could easily go for 10,000 yen back home. It was my first time seeing one in this world, but it'd probably be worth about as much.

"Given the matsutake mushrooms from the last floor, this dungeon must specialize in luxury ingredients."

I picked up the watermelon and went back down. There, I used the warp gate to go back to the mansion, left the watermelon, and returned to floor two. The warp room allowed the user to teleport to any floor they'd been to before, but when going back, you had to use the floor you'd teleported to.

That meant that when I got to a new floor, I couldn't go straight back.

The fake Ran was strong. Just in case things went south, I wanted to keep moving the warp gate upward each time I progressed so that I could make a quick escape if necessary.

Incidentally, I'd brought the black watermelon back to give to Erza and Ina later.

I eventually went back through the warp gate. I couldn't go around killing more Rans and wasting stars, so I evaded them until I found the staircase to the next floor.

Floor three was home to pretty women with long, pink hair, clad in bondage outfits and wielding whips.

She was like a queen—Lil Hydrogen. Like Ran, she was a spirit-blessed who was recognized by the spirit of the dungeon Hydrogen and another one of Neptune's girls.

"Kh!"

I was too slow. Lil's hand seemed to flicker for a moment. Instantly after, something was coiling around my neck.

I quickly put my arm in the way to stop it.

It was the whip. The fake Lil's weapon undulated like a living thing and went for my neck. Since I'd put my arm in the way, I'd managed to avoid getting strangled.

The fake Lil pulled her arm back, dragging me.

"You're strong, too?!" I screamed as I fired a growth round at the whip.

Her weapon itself wasn't too tough; one shot was all I needed to tear it apart. I did a half-turn in the air and landed on my feet, but just then, another whip came flying. When it did, I fell onto all fours to dodge, and then I jumped away as far as I could.

Her whip had somehow recovered in no time.

I changed bullets, loading a homing round this time, and fired it at the whip. The whip was torn, yet it regenerated again immediately.

"So that's how your weapon is, huh?"

It came flying at me. This time, I fired at both her and her weapon. The fake Lil deflected my shot, and the whip was severed once more. Her weapon wasn't strong. And what's more…

"You can't move while it's regenerating, can you?"

Three times was enough for me to notice a trend. When the whip regenerated, Lil didn't move much at all. She stood almost stock-still. Her power and technique were no laughing matter, but her weapon couldn't keep up.

I aimed for the whip, tearing it again before it could finish regenerating. When I kept it torn and unusable, the fake Lil didn't move at all. I held her in place while I fired growth rounds at Lil herself. She was tough, like the fake Ran, but it was easy to beat her in this state. She went down in no time and dropped an item.

"Caviar, huh?"

Tennessine really was a dungeon full of expensive foods.

297. An SSS-Rank Foe

After defeating the fake Ran and Lil, I rode my momentum to floor four.

A monster like a floating shadow appeared before me.

"Here already, eh?"

This was what Neptune had told me about. I decided I'd best kill it quickly.

The shadow closed in. It was pretty fast—around C-rank speed, in terms of stats.

I swiftly evaded and fired a growth round from the side. The shadow died without much resistance.

"No drops? This would be a lot easier if it would drop something." I chuckled to myself. Of *course* it wouldn't be that easy.

When in shadow form, the enemies here were weak. So weak that I could farm them with ease, at that.

But they'd dropped nothing. The fact that they dropped nothing for me, the only person in the world with S-rank drops, meant that I hadn't fulfilled the conditions to *make* them drop something.

Like the slime family, for example—defeating child slimes on their own wouldn't get you any drops. These shadows were like them; they probably wouldn't drop anything unless you let them change form.

I walked on and quickly encountered another wandering shadow.

This time, I went on the defensive. I activated my Absolute Rock pebble's invincibility mode to bolster my SS-rank HP, vitality, and willpower, and loaded a limitless recovery round and prepared to fire it into myself at any time.

Then, I waited for the shadow. It approached and quickly attacked. Immediately after I took the hit, it gradually took on the shape of a human, like a genie coming out of a lamp.

It had changed into me, a fake Ryota with two guns.

It was clearly me. Like, more me than Prince Ryo was. Apart from his total lack of facial expression, it made me think I was looking into a mirror.

The fake me charged.

"He's fast!" I crossed my arms to guard, but he blew through it and my Absolute Rock invincibility, launching me away.

He was strong, and he even used magic that I typically didn't bother to use—and said magic was strong, to boot.

I got dizzy. He'd dealt damage to me even through the Absolute Rock pebble.

"Guess I should've expected that!" I spat and got away from him.

I'd defeated an Absolute Rock before; the fake me could surely pierce through its invincibility. I cancelled invincibility mode, since it

only slowed me down and made it impossible for me to fight back.

I readied my guns and countered. After firing homing rounds as a smokescreen thanks to their tricky arcs, I rushed in and balled my fist.

Just as I tried to swing, though, he disappeared.

"What?!"

Where did he go?!

I searched, but an impact suddenly ran through me.

I lost my sense of up and down. Blood gathered at my fingertips. That was the sensation of being blown away at incredible speed.

"Hup!" I righted myself in midair and fired a trash round to stop my momentum.

When I landed, something dripped on the ground—my blood. Blood spilled from my mouth, showing just how much damage that one attack had dealt to me.

There was no doubt now; the impostor was both stronger and faster than me.

Just like Neptune had said, these were stronger versions of us. Seeing that, I had to grin. I could feel my lips curl upward on their own.

"Thank you, Tennessine!" I didn't know if they could hear me, but I shouted my thanks to the spirit of this dungeon.

Neptune had judged these imposters the limit of one's innate talent. I agreed. I mean, I was still *just* at SS. That stat rating screamed *incomplete.*

"I can still get stronger."

The fake me pursued. He aimed his guns and fired two bullets at the same time, fusing them to become a piercing round.

I made a decision. This was a battle against a better me; my decisions had to be instantaneous. Before the piercing round could hit me, I pointed my gun at myself and fired—an acceleration round.

Instantly after, I was in an accelerated world. Now even faster than my imposter, I dodged his bullet and charged in closer.

I saw him trying to point his own gun at himself. Even when slowed down from my perspective, he moved faster than a normal person. He was using his swift reaction speed to try and speed himself up to fight back.

"Not gonna happen!" I swatted his gun away just in time, causing his bullet to miss and hit the ceiling.

Then, I punched the fake. It launched him—but I caught his arm before he could fly away, because I knew what he would do if I let him go. He'd use his bullets to get himself into a better position while midair. I did that often; hell, I'd just done it myself.

That was why I'd stopped him. I'd be in big trouble if I let him get an acceleration round off.

I grabbed, pushed his gun away, and punched him. I repeated this process over and over, gradually dealing damage.

"Tch!"

The fake counterattacked me. Despite me being accelerated, his sharp counter had grazed my cheek.

I'd be at a huge disadvantage without my acceleration round, but this time, I'd come out ahead. It was time to end this. I focused even more, using my speed advantage to overwhelm the fake.

He tried to go invincible using the pebble along the way, but I stopped that as well.

In a thirty-second-long flurry of action, I had managed to defeat the stronger, tougher version of me. I'd done what Neptune had failed to do: defeat a better version of oneself.

298. The Countdown Begins

Neptune visited the mansion near midnight. In the salon, I rolled up my sleeve and showed him the eleven stars on my arm.

Like him, I'd started with a maximum of twelve. The reason I had eleven now was because I'd killed one fake me.

"Amazing. Really, I mean it." For once, he looked serious when he said he was amazed. He always acted so detached, even when he asked for help. I'd even call him full of himself.

But this time, he seemed genuinely impressed.

"Do you think so?"

"It wasn't worth much surprise that you'd defeated the fake *me,* but defeating your own imposter? That's huge. He was strong, wasn't he?"

"He sure was. It was a close one." This was true. If I'd let him fire an acceleration at himself, I'd probably be the loser.

"Ahaha, of course. Super high-level fights always turn out like that."

"I see." That made logical sense. "Also, I know I got your permission before, but I defeated one Lil and one Ran each."

"Yep, and I told you to do that, so no worries. Did you notice anything, though?"

"They're both strong."

"Yep. That's exactly why I think it's based on talent."

"What do you mean?"

Neptune grinned. "Consider my fake 100%, and me 90%. Those Lils and Rans are 100%, while mine are more like 1%."

"Why the difference?"

"Because it's talent. Both of them have abandoned improving their own combat abilities. If you hadn't become an adventurer, you'd work on different skills, wouldn't you?"

"…Yeah, I guess I would." I grinned wryly.

If I hadn't become an adventurer—no, if I hadn't come to this world—I'd still be a corporate slave, overworking myself to death forevermore. The only things I'd be improving would be my eating speed and the size of my eye bags.

It's even simpler than that, huh? Maximizing power and mainly using physical attacks with some magic sprinkled in… It's just a difference in training philosophies.

"So the ones there, then…" I said.

"Yep, I think they're what would happen if the girls trained their close combat capabilities. They are monsters, after all."

"I see."

"Are you going back tomorrow?"

"Yeah. I want to go up two or three more floors. I'll warp there so I can skip the lower floors and not worry about lowering anyone's stars."

“Ahaha! I really am glad I asked you for help. How reassuring! Did everyone who came to you for help before feel like I do now, I wonder?”

“I dunno.” I couldn’t answer that.

Ding!

A bell rang outside the mansion, signaling that the next day had come.

“Well, it’s late. I’d best be going,” Neptune said.

“I’ll get in contact if anything happens.”

“Yep. And if you find anything I can do, okay?”

“I won’t hesitate to call you for help.”

“Ahaha, you’re my boss now, so don’t hold back. Say jump, and I’ll ask you how high.”

“That’s not how our Family works.”

“I noticed.”

After that aside, Neptune got up to leave the mansion.

Knock, knock.

As if on cue, someone knocked on the door.

The door opened, and Emily came in—and was immediately pushed aside.

“Emily?!”

“Aaah!” she screamed.

Lil and Ran, from the Neptune trio, had barged in.

“You okay, Emily?” I asked her.

“Nep, this is bad!” Ran yelled.

“What’s the matter, girls?”

“Look at this,” Lil said, rolled up her sleeve, and showed her arm to Neptune. Like the two of us, she had star marks on it. I knew that already, but seeing them in person reminded me of how serious this situation was.

But here was the real cause of concern.

“There are fewer now?”

“Yeah. They’re going away.”

“Mine are, too! See?” Ran showed off her arm, too.

“What is going on… Hmm,” Neptune grumbled.

“What’s up, Neptune?” I asked.

“I have fewer now, too.”

“What?!” I looked at his arm. Like he’d said, there were fewer stars. “One more disappeared than the number of monster kills?”

“Yeah. Same with Lil and Ran.”

“Mine…haven’t gone down.” I rushed to look at my arm, but I still had the same number of stars.

We all thought to ourselves in silence. Eventually, we looked up at almost the exact same time.

“Did one go away because the day changed?”

“Is it the days passing that does it?”

We checked answers with each other. Our bounty of experience had helped us quickly analyze the situation.

Neptune and I nodded to each other, acknowledging the likely correctness of each other's hypotheses.

"The question is, was the time between then and now worth one star…"

"…Or will it start going down by one star every day starting today?"

We nodded again.

Our answer came twenty-four hours later, when the bell tolled once more; the Neptune Family's marks had automatically reduced by one again.

An unstoppable countdown had begun.

299. At Stars' End

I went to floor five of Tennessine for the first time. There, I stood and waited for a friend to come. After a while, a warp gate opened, and the mini-sage Miike emerged from the vortex of light.

Miike carried—or hauled, rather—a slime about his size along with him. The slime struggled, but it couldn't escape him.

"Thanks for waiting," he said. "I caught this in Tellurium."

"Thank you," I replied, accepting the slime and then firing a restraining round at it.

Indeed, Miike was the only being in all the world that could bring himself and another monster across dungeon borders just by touching it.

A unique monster—that was the term used to refer to monsters that had undergone individual evolution and obtained powers unique to them.

Miike had obtained the power to go in and out of dungeons freely, something that even dungeon masters and spirits couldn't do. Thanks to that power, he always went around with Aurum. He was even spirit-blessed as a result, giving him the name Miike Aurum.

As such, I'd had him bring the slime here.

"What are you planning to do with it, Great Ryota?"

“Check this out.” I left the restrained slime there, fired another round just in case, and had Miike leave the area with me.

While we watched from a safe distance, one of Tennessine’s shadow monsters appeared and slithered toward the slime. The poor thing tried to bounce at it in retaliation, but it couldn’t move due to my restraining round.

Instead, the shadow attacked the slime. Since it was weak, I fired a recovery round at the same time to keep the attack from killing it.

Thanks to my help, it had managed to survive just barely. Instantly after, the shadow transformed.

So a basic shadow will always transform into the first thing it attacked, huh?

“Miike, take care of the slime for me. Stay where I can see you.”

“Okay. Leave it to me, Boss!”

We stepped out of hiding, and Miike took charge of the monster. The shadow transformed into a slime, and twelve star marks appeared on the original.

Today, we were going to test what would happen when all twelve marks disappeared. I was also curious what a fake slime would drop, particularly compared to the basic slime’s bean sprout drops.

With these intentions, and having confirmed that the stars had appeared, I turned to the fake slime—

“Ghah!” A powerful charge caused me to see stars.

The transformed fake slime was fast and strong. It had attacked me the instant I took my attention off it. It wasn’t as strong as Neptune, but I’d consider its strength and speed both A-rank level.

Even within a rank, there can be minor differences in numbers. People of this world didn’t seem to think about that much, but since I’d raised my stats one point at a time in Nihonium, I did.

I fired a growth round to shake off the fake slime. After backing off, it jumped up to head height, took a deep breath, and swelled to twice its size like a balloon.

Instantly after, it spewed fire like some kind of dragon.

“Kh!” I fired a bunch of freeze rounds with both guns to try and stop its fire breath.

Fire and ice collided, creating an explosion of steam. Expecting that, I charged forward, using the steam as a smokescreen to close in.

I knew its strength and speed now. It was time to figure out its defenses. Instead of using my guns, I balled up a fist and punched the slime so I could feel it in the flesh.

It was tough. A normal slime would’ve burst to pieces from that punch, but the fake slime just flew away, more or less unaffected. It felt as if I’d just punched a hard bouncy ball.

“About B-rank vitality, huh? That’s tough.”

The slime landed. There was a dent where I'd punched it, but sparkly light glowed around it, and it began to heal.

It can even heal? The max power of a slime is terrifying.

Still, I was used to seeing slimes that could grow and get strong, so I wasn't surprised.

After I'd sized up its stats, I got serious. First, I fired a barrage of regular bullets with both guns. Then, I used them as cover to charge. I closed in on the slime and fired point-blank trash rounds at it from all angles.

By doing so, I'd immobilized it. Dents began to appear all over it. I'd discovered this method just recently. It took more time and effort, but this was like an upgraded restraining round. Restraining rounds could be torn off, but trash rounds could not be stopped, like nailing it down with eight nails that couldn't be pulled out.

While it didn't last as long as a restraining round, it had worked perfectly. Thanks to that, I defeated the restrained fake slime with ease. It dropped a white lump of…something.

Now that the fight was over, Miike slowly approached. "What is that?"

"I wonder… Oh, a truffle?" I'd only ever seen them on the internet, and never in their original shape, so it took me a moment to realize, but it was a white, fragrant fungus. This only strengthened my hypothesis about this dungeon's drops. "Anyway, how are the slime's stars?"

"One went away!"

"Okay. Keep following me, okay?"

"Got it!"

Miike and I walked around floor five of Tennessine. When I saw fake slimes, I killed them with Repetition.

As we knew already, each kill reduced the stars by one. I steadily killed eleven, leaving just one star.

"Repetition." With Repetition, I killed the final slime, reducing the original's stars to zero.

We watched the original in silence.

I'd braced myself for something to happen, but nothing did. We waited and waited, but there was no change. Another fake slime even came by, and I killed it with Repetition, but it did nothing to the original.

"…Was it all a bluff?"

"I think it might be…"

"Hmm. But it can't possibly be *nothing.*" I found it hard to believe that such a big, grandiose effect could lead to nothing.

The number twelve seemed significant. With each kill, it went down by one. Even if you stopped killing monsters, it would go down with the passage of time as well. The stage was perfectly set, but nothing was happening at zero. I couldn't accept that.

There still had to be something. I was certain of it.

"Nothing's happening. Let the little guy go."

“Okay!” When Miike released the slime, it attacked me with an angry look on its face.

I guarded. Its offenses hadn’t changed; it was just the same as any old slime from Tellurium.

“What’s going on?” I wondered aloud.

“Umm, what should we do about the slime… Oh!” Taking advantage of Miike’s distraction, the slime ran away. “Waaait!” He chased after it desperately. I decided to follow.

When I found the two of them again, they were at the staircase leading down to B4, which the slime was trying to headbutt. It headbutted it over and over, only to be bounced off every time. It was as if there was some kind of invisible wall in its way.

Miike seemed surprised by this as well; he just watched without grabbing the monster.

“Could it be…?”

“Huh?”

“When all of your stars disappear, do you end up trapped inside the tower?” I hypothesized as I looked upon the trapped slime.

300. Relief

As I watched the slime continue to headbutt the invisible wall, I said, “Miike, can you try taking it out of here?”

“Yes, sir!” He ran over at once.

The slime noticed him and tried to attack, but he evaded and managed to get a firm hold of it. In that state, he tried going down the stairs.

“Great Ryota, it’s not working. I can’t go down,” he reported, visibly troubled. Miike himself was able to go down a few steps, but the slime stayed at the boundary and made it impossible for him to keep going.

“How does it feel?”

“Umm, it feels like the slime is stuck on an invisible wall.”

“I see. Oh, what about the warp gate?”

“Ah… I’ll try it!” He pitter-pattered back up the stairs and headed toward the vortex of light that connected back to the mansion. Then, with slime in hand, he tried jumping into it. “It still isn’t working, Great Ryota. Exact same feeling.”

“Really? Okay, that’ll do.”

Miike then gave up and brought the slime back to me.

I tried one last thing. After taking the slime from him, I held it tight so it couldn’t struggle and went to the stairs. I pushed it into

the invisible wall, but it couldn't go through. It was an odd feeling when it suddenly slipped out of my hands, making me stumble as it was no longer pulling back on me.

Next, I tried firing a trash round at the slime. They often helped at times like this thanks to how they always continued at the same pace, ignoring any and all interference.

The slime's body was deformed by the trash round pushing into it, but it still could not go into the staircase.

"Ah…"

Poof!

Whoops. I overdid it a little.

I'd misjudged when to give up, getting the slime stuck between my trash round and the invisible wall and causing it to burst from the pressure.

"Y-You killed it."

"Yeah. My bad." I grimaced.

"What happens now?" Miike asked.

"Now that you mention it…"

The slime had been copied and trapped on this floor. What happened to the fakes when it died, then? Now curious thanks to Miike's question, I walked him through the floor of the tower.

The situation immediately became clear as a shadow appeared before us—not a fake slime, but a shadow.

"Looks like…it's back to how it originally was."

"I think so…"

"Let's try this again."

"I'll go catch another, then."

"Nah. This'll be faster." I took out a normal bullet, put it on the ground, and backed off with Miike.

After a while, it became a slime outsider. With the slime in hand, we walked around more, ran into another shadow, and threw the slime at it.

We…*tried* to make more fake slimes to test, but something went wrong.

"It's not changing, is it?"

"Sure isn't."

Despite my recovery round support, even when the shadow scored a hit on the slime, it didn't turn into a fake slime like before.

Could it be?

☆

During the third round of testing, Neptune came to visit and saw me among cockro slimes.

"Goodness, you never cease to amaze," he said. "It has to be the original, and you can't make imposters from outsiders. Nobody

would ever figure that out normally. I mean, nobody would ever even realize that you could turn them into monster imposters!”

“It’s not me. It’s Miike’s power.”

“Would he exist if not for you, though?” Neptune replied with a smile. Miike was a unique monster transformed by the Bodley Ryota wine, so it was true; if not for me, he wouldn’t exist in his current form. “So, I see you’ve been testing. What have we learned today?”

I arranged the information I’d gained so far and shared, “When a shadow attacks a human or an original monster, fakes appear. Defeat twelve and bring the stars to zero, and the original gets locked on this floor.”

“And if they’re not on this floor?” he continued questioning me. Naturally, I’d considered that possibility, since the four people still stuck on floor one to floor four were my primary concern.

“I had Miike take a slime back to the mansion after making the fakes. After I’d killed twelve, it was forcefully summoned here.”

“I see.”

“But it was a monster, so it died the instant it came.”

“Of course. They still can’t move between dungeons or floors.”

“I think it just traps you here if all of your stars disappear, though it might be too soon to draw conclusions.”

“If that’s true…” Neptune muttered.

“Hm?”

“We may need to recruit people who can accept working in this dungeon for the rest of their lives.”

“Oh? Yeah, maybe.” I hadn’t thought of that. I’d come to Tennessine to help Neptune (and now myself); he was here to investigate its potential as a production site. Our differences in position were reflected as different conclusions.

“Yep. If that’s all of the information we have so far, then we just need to hire people with low combat capabilities who can live here indefinitely.”

I didn’t like that condition, but it was a dungeon for high-quality foodstuffs. They could just promise people a good salary.

“This dungeon should be worth a lot of taxes, so that’s not a bad—” My eyes went wide. So wide that my eyelids felt like they’d split.

“What’s up?” Neptune asked.

I moved without saying a word, hoping to confirm whether the flash of inspiration in my mind would prove correct. I killed the original cockro slime in a safe place guarded by Miike, turning the monsters of this floor back into shadows. Then, I brought over a sleep slime we’d kept on standby and threw it at a shadow.

This turned all of the shadows on this floor into sleep slimes.

I killed six, cutting the original’s stars in half.

“Miike, bring me that sleep slime.”

“Yes, sir.”

“What’s the plan?” Neptune stood by me. Just as I hadn’t realized it before, he still hadn’t caught on because investigating the dungeon was his main priority.

I guided the two of them up to floor six.

Dungeon snow fell on floor six of Tennessine. When a shadow appeared, I threw the sleep slime to it, turning floor six monsters into sleep slimes as well. The original sleep slime’s six stars became twelve again.

Twelve. The maximum.

“I knew it!”

“Yeah!”

Neptune and I ran back to floor five. The sleep slimes there had turned back into shadows.

“Amazing! Amazing, my man,” Neptune rejoiced.

Running out of stars was disastrous, but we could reset the counter by using a different floor. This knowledge took a huge burden off my shoulders.

301. Miracle in the Basement

On floor one of Tennessine, a shadow attacked me, resetting my stars. I then defeated the fake version of me that it created and received matsutake mushrooms.

Neptune, Lil, Ran, and I took turns getting hit by new shadows to reset the stars on us. Now they had twelve stars each, and I had eleven.

"You've really saved us this time," Neptune said with a smile. Lil and Ran behind him were back to their usual selves, never taking their eyes off of him. That was how they always were—they only had eyes for Neptune. "Who knows what would've happened to us if you weren't there? I mean, just losing all of your stars *once* gets you trapped in there."

"Yeah."

I grinned wryly back at him.

I'd tried bringing an outsider shadow from another floor to fight a trapped test slime, but even that couldn't reset the captive's stars. In fact, the shadows' powers only worked on their home floor. Taking an outsider to another floor would yield no fakes.

"You've really saved us. Isn't that right, girls?" Neptune looked to Lil and Ran. Despite his appreciation, the two of them hardly seemed to be thankful—or so I thought.

“Thanks, Ryota.”

“You have my genuine gratitude.”

“…”

I was dumbfounded. If you took a picture of my face right then and entered it into a photography contest with the title “Incredulous,” You’d win. My jaw might as well have hit the floor.

The ever-prickly Lil returned to her usual cold self. “What? Is it that surprising?” Oddly, that came as a relief.

“Oh, no, I guess. I just didn’t expect an honest thank-you.”

“Well, we really are grateful.”

“That’s right. If not for you, we’d have been torn apart forever.”

“Yeah! So… Thank you, really.”

Oh… I get it.

It all made sense now. The two of them had never cared about me, just Neptune. If they were just thankful that I’d saved their future with him, then that made perfect sense.

For the first time, I started to like them.

“Now, it’s about time we took our leave,” Neptune announced.

“Going home?”

“Yep. Based on my experience, there’s a long grace period before the stars start naturally going down. I’m going to enjoy a truly relaxed day with my girls for the first time in a long time.”

“That so?”

"If you learn anything else, call me. Or if you need any help, of course…*Boss.*"

He'd said it jokingly, but when he emphasized the word *boss,* I sensed real hatred coming from the girls. Lil in particular was glaring daggers at me.

"No more of that, please."

"Ahaha! See ya."

I saw off the laughing Neptune and his orbiters.

Ran stopped, turned, and waved at me. Lil just glanced over her shoulder. We weren't exactly best friends yet, but I was glad that their attitude toward me had improved. And while we hadn't resolved this problem, we'd bought time to work on it.

I decided I wanted to go home and relax, so I went through the warp gate I'd used to get here and returned to the mansion.

When I left the warp room, I literally bumped into Alice.

"Ack!" She fell on her butt, sending her buddy monsters falling onto the floor. "Ouchie… Everyone okay?" Her chibi monsters used their adorable body language to confirm that they were okay, and they jumped back onto her shoulders one by one. After confirming that everyone was back in place, she stood up. "Sorry, Ryota."

"No, *I'm* sorry. Did I hurt you at all?"

"I'm okay! Everyone else is, too—whoa, Boney, what's that?!" One of her buddies, the skeleton Boney, had a matsutake mushroom stabbed through her empty eye-hole.

"Sorry, that's mine," I said. That was the last thing I'd dropped and brought back.

Fwoop!

When Alice pulled the mushroom out, it made a funny, airy noise.

"Ahahaha! Fwoop! It went 'fwoop'!" Alice laughed boisterously, and her buddies followed suit, mimicking hearty laughter with their tiny bodies.

Among her buddies were the master dragon Rawry and Phosphorus spirit Burny. Even the two of them, a dungeon master-tier monster and a literal dungeon spirit, laughed alongside her. If we were in a manga, they would have little laugh lines above their heads.

"Have those two always acted like that?" I asked.

"Hmm? You mean Rawry and Burny?"

"Yeah."

"Yep!" she replied matter-of-factly.

I don't think so, I rebutted mentally. Rawry aside, Phosphorus definitely hadn't acted like that before. But as they say, the apple doesn't fall far from the tree. Maybe that's true for adopted kids, too.

"Here you go."

"Thanks." I accepted the mushroom back from her.

"Is it a drop? Weird that you didn't send it to Erza. Are you gonna eat it?"

“No, that’s not quite it.”

“Hmm… Then you’re making it an outsider!” Alice theorized.

“Huh?”

“I mean, if you’re not eating or selling something, then you’re usually making it an outsider to get a different item, right?”

“I see… An outsider, huh?”

The fear—or rather, the panic over the stars—had kept me from trying to convert the drops of Tennessine into outsiders. Even when I’d tested whether outsider shadows could make fakes, Neptune had been the one to kill the shadow when it failed. I still hadn’t killed an outsider from Tennessine.

“Well, I might as well give it a try while I’m here.”

“I’ll watch!” Alice raised her hand and followed me.

The two of us went to the mansion’s basement, where I put the matsutake in the corner and backed off.

After a while, a fake me appeared.

“Ooh, Prince Ryo! Oh… No. Just Ryota?” For a moment, she thought it was Prince Ryo from Plumbum, but she stopped and cocked her head.

Unlike the shoujo manga hottie Prince Ryo, and unlike the Omnipotence-summoned Ryochin, this one actually looked like me. I instantly killed him with Repetition so that he couldn’t damage the mansion.

The risk was even greater than usual this time. I doubted this would happen with an outsider, but if it *did* try to attack Alice, that would be big trouble, so I was even more aggressive than usual with my Repetition cast.

The fake me died and disappeared.

"Huh? It didn't drop anything," Alice noted.

"Sure didn't…"

"That's weird. Has this ever happened before?"

"Not as far as I remember."

"Hmm… That *is* weird."

I quietly tilted my head in confusion. Never had I had a monster drop *nothing.* My unique S-rank drops made it so that I got drops even from outsiders.

It was strange that it didn't work now.

What's going on? Should I try another mushroom?

While I thought to myself…

"Huh? What's up, Burny?" Alice asked Burny, the Phosphorus buddy on her shoulder. As a fireball, or maybe a will-o'-the-wisp, he communicated by flickering his flames. The fact that she could understand him was proof of their impressive bond. "You mean it?! Wow, it's true!"

"Alice, what's wrong?"

"Ryota, your arm! Look at your arm!"

"My arm?" As directed, I looked…and was amazed. "They're gone…"

The eleven stars on my arm had totally disappeared, as if they'd never been there to begin with.



302. The Final Blow

Outside of Tennessine, in the wilderness where civilization had not yet taken hold, I was accompanied by Neptune and his two impatient orbiters.

In front of the trio, I instakilled a fake Ryota outsider with Repetition.

"How about now?" I asked them.

"Nope. Still eleven stars, I'm afraid. Lil and Ran?"

"Nuh-uh."

"Same here."

"Figures…" I sighed. This was my second attempt to remove stars. Yesterday, I'd managed to remove my own stars by killing a fake me outsider. I'd shared this info with Neptune and promised to try and do the same for him the next day. "This really is the worst-case scenario, then."

I'd devised a few hypotheses and tried them one after another.

Defeating a normal shadow outsider in front of him.

Defeating a fake Neptune in front of him.

Making a new fake me and defeating it in front of him.

None of them had managed to remove his stars. More precisely, since I'd defeated one of each fake, he was down to eleven from yesterday's reset.

“What about yours?” Neptune asked me.

“All gone.”

To test my own fake, I had to go into Tennessine to make new ones. That had given me the twelve-star countdown again, but it was gone thanks to me killing the fake Ryota outsider.

Neptune and I nodded at each other. As two experienced adventurers, we already knew exactly what this meant.

“So that means you have to defeat your own fake.”

“Seems like it.”

“That’s a problem,” Neptune laughed jovially.

“I’m surprised you can laugh in this situation.”

“What else can you do but laugh, really?”

“…Fair.”

Part of me understood how he felt. The reason he’d come to me in the first place was that floor one of Tennessine’s shadows had turned into Neptune clones, and he’d struggled to fight against the limits of his talent. But to save oneself once and for all, they had to defeat their own imposter.

“Straight back to square one, huh?” I sighed.

“Nah. I disagree.”

“What?” I looked at him, curious.

He was smiling like always. “If not for you, I wouldn’t have known that I have to defeat that outsider there. I’d never have

thought to make it into one, and you have to defeat one to make an outsider in the first place."

"I see."

"It's all thanks to you, as usual. I was right to ask for your help. Nobody but you could've solved this."

"Well, that aside…" I forcefully brought things back on topic. "We need you to kill your imposter."

"Hmm, but how? If I could do that, I wouldn't have come to you in the first place."

"I'll back you up. You'll only get a split second's opening at most, so keep an eye out."

"Got it," Neptune answered promptly.

When it came to this stuff, he really acted the part of an expert. Since he was always dungeoneering, he knew that a moment's hesitation could be fatal. He always made quick decisions. No ifs, ands, or buts.

I set up a black watermelon—these now dropped from fake Neptunes, since we'd had a shadow on a different floor attack him in order to reset his stars.

Everyone backed away from it. Once we were far enough, we waited for the fake Neptune outsider to spawn.

After a while, out popped an outsider—

"Let's do this!" The instant it spawned, I fired an acceleration round at myself.

Before it had even fully appeared, I'd stepped into the accelerated world and charged forth. I thrust both guns forward, having already planned where I would fire, and unleashed a barrage of trash rounds I'd prepared.

The fake Neptune was strong.

The boss of the Neptune Family, spirit-blessed and a top-class adventurer, but boosted to the peak of his potential. He'd become a monster even stronger than dungeon masters.

So I took utmost care. I fired trash rounds at the fake Neptune from all angles, covering him in projectiles that would ceaselessly push into him. An onlooker might think he was wearing lead plate armor.

Trapped by his armor of trash rounds, he was unable to move whatsoever—but I left one open hole in his suit of armor in the very center of his body, where his heart would be.

That spot alone lay bare.

I looked at the real Neptune, but I didn't tell him that now was the time. I was accelerated, so he wouldn't hear me—but he didn't need to hear it in the first place. He'd already gotten into an offensive posture.

Lil and Ran began singing behind him. Two wings sprouted from his back, and he began to charge.

I chuckled.

He came charging. Normally, he would seem fast, but he looked slow to me in this state. That gave me time to read the words on his lips.

Thank you, he had said.

"That's not necessary."

I watched him pierce through his imposter with one strike.

303. A City Within a Dungeon

That night, after a big day of work, I enjoyed a rare break with my friends in the mansion salon.

The Emily-managed home remained bright and warm even at nighttime, soothing my fatigue with ease.

Two best friends, the Swallow's Returned Favor girls, came in.

"Oh, Ryota. Good work today," Erza greeted me.

"Erza?"

"Yep. Here you go," Ina did likewise.

"Ina too, huh?" I replied. Ina handed me a glass, and Erza smoothly poured beer into it. "Oh, wow. Thanks."

"No problem!" Erza smiled. "Oh, I tried chilling this beer the way you taught me. How is it?"

"Oh?"

Now that she mentioned it, I realized that it was ice cold.

As it turned out, people in this world didn't drink beer cold like people in my old world. You could have bars serve it to you cold, but normally, people just drank it warm.

The beer itself tasted good either way. I just called it "European style" in my mind and ignored it for the most part.

"You chilled it just for me?"

"Yep!"

“I’ll have you know, she bought a magic fruit just to learn ice magic for this—” Ina started.

“Aaah! Ah, ah, aaah!” Erza screamed and cut her off. She was as red as a beet. Ina smirked mischievously.

“Magic fruit? For this?”

“Yep. They sold it claiming it would definitely give her ice magic. Not that that’s even possible.”

“I don’t really think…” Erza tried to deny it, poking her lip out unhappily.

“It’s actually not true,” Aurum cut into the conversation. She was holding Nihonium and Miike both. I saw the three of them together often lately, but Miike was typically more reserved around Aurum, putting her first. Nihonium was also on the reclusive side, so Aurum did most of the talking.

Ina asked her, “Really?”

“Yep. Ryota, you get it, don’t you?” she said, showing off Nihonium to me. Nihonium herself kept quiet, apparently uncomfortable to be put on the spot—but she was right.

“I see!”

“Is it true, Ryota?”

“Yeah. Thanks to Nihonium, I was able to pick the exact spell I wanted with a fruit this one time,” I explained.

“Wow. So it wasn’t a total lie, huh?”

“No, it was,” Aurum denied. Despite her previous help, she now pulled the ladder right out from under Erza.

“Bwuuuh?!” Ina screamed, incredulous. “But you just explained how it was possible, didn’t you?!”

“It is, but only we can do that.”

“Oh… Okay. So spirits can, but not humans.”

“Yep,” Aurum nodded. Erza was forced to agree. In this world, a spirit’s word was absolute. They didn’t have the bearing of a god, but that made them all the more persuasive. “I mean, take it as a lesson. Don’t do anything crazy like that again.”

“It’s not like it was crazy…”

“So that true love charm she hung up on the window—” Ina started saying something again.

“Aaah! Ah, ah, aaah!” For the second time, Erza screamed to cut her off. With teary eyes, she ran over to her friend. “Inaaa!”

“Ahahaha! Sorry, sorry.”

“Geez…” She puffed out her cheeks and turned away angrily. Erza was focused and reliable at work, but outside of work hours, she was adorable. I was a little happy that I got to see this side of her since she’d started living here.

I felt my facial muscles relax as I watched her, though I did take care not to gawk too much.

This time, our resident rabbit dressed in bunny jammies addressed me, “Low level.”

"What's up, Eve?"

She typically dressed in one of two ways. When she was going to a dungeon, she wore her bunny suit. At home, bunny pajamas. Her two sets of bunny ears, one fake and one real, were both cute and funny to look at.

Fwap.

Without any warning, she chopped me on the forehead.

"What was that for?"

"Carrot loss."

"Oh."

"When will you start farming carrots again, low level?"

"Sorry. My schedule just opened up a bit, so I'll go in the morning."

"Really?"

"Really. You do love your carrots, don't you?"

"I want to live in the dungeon with you." Those words would normally make my heart skip a beat if they came from any other woman, but they weren't sexy at all coming from Eve's mouth.

"You make it sound like you're going to a deserted island with nothing but a knife."

"…A fully automatic knife?"

"How convenient! Also, can't help but notice you're not denying it." I laughed and drank the beer that Erza had so kindly poured for me.

“Eve, would you like carrot juice?” Emily offered her.

“Yes! Even if the heavens and earth switched places, even if the moon and stars were swallowed by the sun and all the dungeons died, bunnies will always like carrot juice.”

Aurum, the spirit of her dungeon—essentially symbolizing the dungeon itself—laughed and protested, “Don’t just kill us off.”

“Here you go.” Emily smiled gently and served Eve carrot juice that was no doubt freshly squeezed.

Eve always got talkative when it came to carrots. I’d joke about it before, but I was so used to it now that I didn’t even comment.

I noticed Celeste glaring at some kind of notebook, so I walked over to her and asked over her shoulder, “What’s that?”

“Hyah?! O-Oh, Ryota, it’s just you. Don’t scare me like that.”

“My bad. So, what do you have there?”

“I collected the information you brought back from Tennessine in a notebook.”

“Ooh. You were asking me about it, weren’t you?”

“Yep. I thought having detailed notes would come in handy later, though I’m always happy to answer any questions you have when we’re together.” Our mage, Celeste, had the best capability for wide-ranged destructive magic in our whole Family, but that wasn’t all; she had a ton of dungeon knowledge, too. She knew everything about not just Cyclo’s dungeons, but all of the dungeons I’d been to now.

Even now, she collected knowledge. She took very helpful, digestible notes, like a top student's.

"Huh, that's great," I complimented her. "You're really good at summarizing info. Oh, and it's not just Tennessine, huh?"

"I've collected all available information in it."

"Ooh, impressive," a new voice chimed in. "Just what I'd expect from a friend of yours." The person who'd slid so smoothly into the conversation was none other than Neptune.

"…How long have you been there?" I groaned in irritation.

He wasn't alone; his H2O friends, Lil and Ran, were here as well. They were over with Emily, drinking some of her carrot juice.

"Ahaha, this is a nice place. It's clean and calming." Neptune also accepted a drink from Emily and expressed his gratitude to her, "Oh, why thank you, Great Matriarch."

"No problem."

"What's with this Great Matriarch business?" I asked.

"That's what everyone calls her. You didn't know? Great Matriarch Emily is super-famous these days. The secret puppet master of the Ryota Family."

"I knew she was famous, but…" I looked over at Emily, who smiled nervously. It seemed she knew. "First I've heard of that name."

"But it fits, doesn't it?"

"Sure does," I agreed wholeheartedly.

Any place maintained by Emily would end up as warm, bright, and temple-like as this mansion.

I could only agree with the title given to her. Hell, call her the Divine Matriarch for all I care. I'd agree with you.

"It's a lovely place," he said. "And amazing, at that."

"Amazing?"

"Even excluding the amazing adventurers living in it, it's almost unbelievable that two spirits live here."

"Nuh-uh!" Alice stopped playing with her buddies and came over.

"What's that?" Neptune asked back.

"Burny, too!"

"Oh?" He raised an eyebrow at the fireball sitting in the palms of her hands.

"Burny, too!"

"…Hmm?"

"That's Phosphorus right there," I answered for him.

"Oh!" Neptune clapped his hands in realization. "I knew of Alice Phosphorus, but I had no idea the spirit looked like that now."

"They're such good friends that you'd think they were together since birth," I mused.

"I have to agree."

"It's all thanks to Ryota! Isn't that right, Burny?" Alice asked her buddy. Burny burned a little brighter, expressing agreement.

“Well, well. All the more amazing,” Neptune said. I sensed something hidden in his facial expression.

Finding that look familiar, I asked him, “What’s up? Did something else happen?”

“Haha! Can’t fool your eyes. Oh, it’s no big deal, but I just had a little proposal in mind.”

“A proposal?”

“Yep. I’ve been thinking about things, a lot of things, and it’s clear that you’re the only one who can do it. Especially when it comes to implementing it.”

“I’m scared of how much you’re buttering me up right now.”

“Don’t worry, there’s no danger involved this time. I can promise you that.”

“It’s only getting scarier… What is it?”

“How about we buy Tennessine, you and I?”

The whole salon fell silent. My friends and Neptune’s companions alike shut their mouths and stared at us—save for Eve, anyway. She seemed uninterested, as usual.



“What happened?” I asked, worried.

“When I reported to my client, they chose human sacrifice.”

“…Seriously?”

Human sacrifice. Those words told me all that I needed to know, because I’d solved the mystery of Tennessine.

Me, of all people. A former slave of an evil corporation. Human sacrifice was basically the next logical step from there.

“And, well, I’m not really a fan of that,” Neptune added. “I figure the only way to stop it is to buy Tennessine wholesale.”

“I see.”

I thought to myself as my friends watched.

Just then, Eve caught my eye. I remembered our last conversation.

That very exchange led me to a possibility. I considered that possibility realistically for a moment.

“What do you say?” Neptune urged me.

“Let’s take it one step further,” I replied.

“Hm?”

“Let’s build a town.”

“A town?”

“Yeah. A town inside Tennessine.”

That answer must have come as a surprise, because Neptune was stunned. After a while, though, his usual smile returned.

“You never cease to amaze, friend,” he said. “I’ve never heard of anyone doing that. It never even occurred to me.”

“Is that so?”

“But…I like it.” Still smiling, he said enthusiastically, “If you and I work together, I know we can do it.”

And he held out his hand.

I shook it.

My Family. The Neptune Family. By our powers combined…a bright future began to take shape in my mind.

Afterword

People write novels. Novels are written by people.

Nice to meet you all. Or perhaps, good to see you again. I'm Nazuna Miki, a Taiwanese light novelist.

Thank you so much for picking up volume 9 of *My Unique Skill Makes Me OP Even at Level 1.*

Have you all seen the anime already? (Yes, I'm asking for the second time in a row.)

I finished writing the last volume's afterword one month before the broadcast, so I actually hadn't watched it at the time of writing.

It's currently airing, so I'm watching it as I write this one.

It feels like I'm getting to truly appreciate an incredible anime delivered by incredible staff. As the author, I could not be happier about both the show and myself.

This isn't just me being biased, either; it consistently gets high rankings on various video streaming websites, and it often sees the number one spot on some.

Finally, I have many thanks to give.

To Subachi-sama, who continues to make wonderful illustrations.

To K-sama, who continues to edit my awkward writings.

To K Light Novel Books's editorial department, who made this publication a reality.

To the bookstores who stocked this book, and to those of you who bought it.

I offer my deepest thanks to every single person involved in this work.

Here I'll put down my pen, praying that my next work will someday reach your waiting hands.

Respectfully yours,

Nazuna Miki

August 2023

Author: Nazuna Miki

Formerly a wannabe voice actor, now a light novelist.

The anime is just perfect.

Illustrator: Subachi

I'm going to keep following my heart and drawing all kinds of things!

My Unique Skill Makes Me OP Even at Level 1 vol 9

KODANSHA COMICS Digital Edition

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