
SOL PRESS
Strongest Gamer
Let's Play in Another World
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Our new worker
is a kooky
female knight?!


Mary
"If you make it of stone, the familiar sight will put me at ease."
"Bring up the wood, boys, we're reinforcing these walls!"
Barry
"Heave-ho! Heave-ho!"
"How are things going out here, chief?"
Jenny
Ann
Aoi Kousaka


A sudden breeze tossed Mary's hair, and I watched as black chased it from tip to root.

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Prologue

Why do people fight? What motivates them? It's a trite question. Countless people have asked themselves the same thing, each of them coming to a different answer.

My reason is simple: It's fun! The rush of fighting a worthy opponent is what gets me going. Maybe that would sound unsettling to most people, but it's a common view among gamers.

Screw easy mode. I'm not done until I've gone toe-to-toe with the AI on insane. And when I get tired of the AI, I'm going online, finding the highest-ranked player, and challenging them. I'm a PvP gamer, first and foremost. I fight for the thrill.

Sometimes I think my view is a bit simplistic, so that's why I like asking other people whenever I get the chance: "Say, why do you fight?"

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The sun began to set on a lonely patch of land devoid of artificial light. The rocks and trees of the forest were hidden, except when moonlight cast faint shadows on the wild landscape. A narrow ravine crouched in a corner of a vast savanna, a vibrant landscape flourishing within. Streams of pure water seeped from the walls, trickling down and joining larger rivulets before feeding into ponds sprinkled across the bottom of the ravine. Mosses and grasses thrived along the banks. The moss emitted a faint glow in places where the moon didn't shine, bathing the whole ravine in an otherworldly blue-green light.

And in a corner of that wondrous scene stood a humble cabin, filled with warmth and life.

"Aoi, three guys on the right. They have crossbows!"

"Ann, you take care of the ones ahead of us. Leave the right side to me!"

Only a cabin door separated that fantastical view from the sound of a pair of gamers, playing by the light of a fluorescent lamp. We were hunkered down in front of a pair of LCD screens resting on a table in a corner of the cabin. Each

time Ann shouted, I heard her twice, once from right next to me and once at a slight delay through the speakers of my headset, but I was too busy with my mouse and keyboard to care about the echo.

Yes, that was me, the manager of Labyrinth #228, which encompassed the entire ravine. As the name implied, I was in charge of developing and managing the labyrinth. An unusual facility management company back in Japan had hired me, an ordinary guy and lifelong gamer, to manage this property in another world. The girl sitting next to me was Ann. She was the first person I'd met when I arrived in this world, and she was half kobold. Ann was my only employee in Labyrinth #228, and was considered part of my family. We lived together in the cabin.

"Think you can take us alone, small fry?!"

"Damn it, I can't shoot him down!"

The enemy players' voices crackled through my headset. Apparently we were pitted against a bunch of my countrymen again. It was a little unusual that we kept running into Japanese groups since it was an international game. Both Ann and I were mashing our keyboards for all we were worth, and our avatars danced and dodged across the screen in response, real as though they lived and breathed. Well, not quite. No living being could dodge bullets and knives the way our characters did. I equipped the dagger in my inventory and began working my way through the crowd of enemies.

"What the fuck, how does he move like that?! Is this guy human?!"

"Dude moves like a fuckin' snake. What a freak!"

"Rude. Doesn't he realize we're bustin' our humps out here?"

The game in question was first-person, so moving around the area quickly made the screen tilt and whirl and flash like crazy. Motion sickness was a very real problem; being good at the game and managing not to puke while playing it were two different matters.

"Hey, another Japanese guy?! Fuck this dude! Whoa, hey, don't do— Aaaaah!"

I dealt enough damage to stun my target, leaving him helpless, before

finishing him off by stabbing him through the throat. Recently, foreign games made you end the match with a flashy finisher, even though you'd technically already brought your enemy down. Some people were into that merciless showmanship angle, and I had to admit, it did make the game more intense. It was nice getting to play with Japanese players every now and then. I wasn't homesick or anything, but there was a different feel to interacting in Japanese rather than English.

"Ann, how are you doing over... there?"

I called out to Ann, who was gazing fixedly at the screen, and then looked at her monitor to see how she was faring. She'd finally gotten used to the mouse, but she still had trouble with the keyboard from time to time. I'd been listening to her clicking like mad, so I figured she was doing just fine, but I wasn't prepared for the scene that awaited me on her screen.

"HOLY SHIT!"

Ann's pint-size avatar capered across the battlefield, the massive poleaxe whirling in her hands. The enemy soldiers screamed in terror as they tried to dodge her tornado of death.

"Take this!"

Each cute little shout from Ann accompanied the sight of her impossibly huge weapon slicing clean through someone's armor, cutting the enemy inside into ribbons. It was pretty entertaining to watch the dying animations of the trail of one-shotted players she left behind.

"Oh, I'm almost done here, Aoi! Be with you in just a minute!"

Ann switched her weapon to one hand and gave me the wave emote with the other. It was pretty cute, but I bet I wasn't the only one to find it a pretty brutal display.

"The cute voice only makes her scarier!"

Yeah, it sounded like the people on voice chat agreed with me.

"Hey! It's impolite to call a lady scary!"

"Oh shit, here she comes!"

Oh. She took out the last two with a single swing of the poleaxe. Talk about a slaughter. I could hear weeping in the distance through my headset.

"C'mon, Ann, let's loot them. We went to all that trouble, so we might as well reap the rewards."

"Sure thing. Leave the heavy stuff and focus on the valuables, right? I'm on it!"

Our party was a well-oiled machine. I kept a watchful eye out while Ann set down her weapon and rifled through the corpses' packs.

The two of us were playing a popular FPS/MMORPG called G*un Gust* from within our cabin in Labyrinth #228. The game was set in a collection of vaguely British countries, and it boasted thousands of die-hard players. You could choose from a variety of weapons, from ranged weapons like throwing knives, bows, and crossbows, which basically worked just like guns, to close-range mainstays like swords, spears, and axes. The game had both PvE and PvP, so you could play whichever you preferred.

Today, we were part of a mercenary group supporting an assault on a player-built fortress located in the woodlands in the middle of the main continent. Sadly, we hadn't been able to take the fort, so it had turned into a retreat. The mercenaries, including Ann and I, were protecting the fleeing troops by covering the rear, but the morale of the players in our unit was strangely high.

"Thanks, my man. You rock. We're all set to kick some tail!"

"How's it look over there, Mister Blue? I'm almost done mopping up this area."

"All clear over here. Get me some fresh orders on the double."

Victorious in the counterattack despite the enemy's overwhelming numbers, our side managed to fend off the enemies and report back to base.

"I see the next beacon already. Our next target is about twenty minutes away. Busy day."

"Copy that!"

I felt a hint of pride at having been chosen to lead our mercenary group, but I

knew the smiles on their faces were all thanks to Ann.

“Ann, you know what to do.”

“Yep!”

She was right next to me, both in-game and in real life, so I just whispered to her. With a grin and a nod, she started shouting into her headset.

“Hey everybody, are you all enjoying the fight?”

“Hell yeah!”

“I’m so glad to hear that! Now come on, let’s go out there and fight another round. I’ll be right behind you, cheering you on!”

“Aye aye! You can count on us!”

“Hey, you dogs! Ann is the vice commander. Show some respect! Do it again, and properly this time!”

“Ma’am, yes, ma’am! One, two! One, two!”

All right! Ann was a cure-all when it came to firing up our teammates. I’d been coaching her on how to rally the troops. Thanks to her pep talk, their morale was so high it seemed like they’d forgotten all about their fatigue from the last scuffle. As I contemplated the power of her siren’s song, a thought crossed my mind.

With Ann’s encouragement fresh in the back of their heads, those players were ready to throw themselves into the thick of battle, even if it meant risking death, for the simple reason that this was just a game world. But what would be enough to push someone to take up arms and risk their life on the battlefield in the fantasy world we of Labyrinth #228 called home? I’d put my life on the line once, partially to protect someone dear to me but also partially because, as a hardcore gamer, I just thought it sounded fun. I was well aware I wasn’t the norm. To be completely blunt, I probably had a few screws loose. But that made the question all the more interesting to me: What would it take for someone to risk their life in battle, in the real world?

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I probably owe an explanation here about how I got both a top-of-the-line

gaming computer and internet access inside Labyrinth #228. That story begins one month earlier, around the end of summer. Karumi had called me to the management office at company headquarters back in my world. We were in that same building near the train station.

"Seriously, another bonus? I thought you already paid me what you said I'd earned."

The undecorated office didn't look much different from the last time I'd seen it. Karumi and I were in the lounge, sitting across from each other at a table, and she had a paper cup of instant coffee in hand. Karumi was a real looker. Between her long locks of naturally blond hair and her sapphire blue eyes, she looked like a foreigner at first glance, but the delicate features of her face were unmistakably Japanese. It was an exquisite combination.

"Yes, we already paid your bonus for your contracted work."

Her delivery was a low, patient murmur. She was a cool beauty, through and through.

It'd been a few days since we'd finished sorting all that out. Milt, a village near Labyrinth #228, had been raided, and even though it wasn't part of my duties, I'd gone out of my way to save the villagers. The Great Dark Lord, who was both the sponsor of Karumi's management company and also the ruler of this world, had then sent me a thank you letter as well as a handsome bonus on top of my normal salary. The management chain at my job was still a little fuzzy to me, but I figured what I'd done was sort of like unintentionally bailing out another division of the company.

Karumi had informed me when the bonus had been transferred to my account and asked me to confirm it, so I did. The number of zeroes staring back at me from my bank balance caught me by surprise, to say the least. I now had enough to buy a decent house in the middle of Tokyo, if I wanted to. All the money I'd saved up in my life, and all my living expenses since I'd gone out on my own, were just a fraction of that huge sum. I didn't know whether to laugh or to cry, but I settled for a dry chuckle. Compared to other hobbies, especially gambling, a gamer's expenses weren't all that big. Besides, I'd been spending all my time in the labyrinth anyway, so I couldn't even think of anything useful to

do with the money. That said, I did need to keep tax season in mind...

“Here. This is a catalog of special rewards for labyrinth managers. Can you pick out ten items?”

She handed me a binder with a few documents tucked inside, so I took it and looked it over. The professional-looking catalog even had a bulleted list of features for each item. I flipped to a random page and took a closer look.

▫ Set of dungeon management tools which restore stamina automatically.

▫ Special paint that expands ten centimeters after it dries and has the endurance of steel. (Five drums. Paint brushes sold separately.) ▫ Doorknob with unpickable look. Comes with matching magic key. (Door not included.) ▫ Do-it-yourself labyrinth trap creation kit for beginners. (Instructions and tools included.) ▫ Three vouchers for official Dark Lord mercenary force engagements, free of charge. (Three mercenaries per voucher.) ▫ Windproof watchtower creation kit. Ideal for plateau regions! (Construction workers included.) “I see what you mean about these being rewards for labyrinth managers.”

I mean, what would I use a watchtower for in the middle of Tokyo? The order form was a neat little index card where you just ticked off boxes next to the items you wanted, but the catalog was chock full of vibrant photographs. It looked like it should be advertising fancy holiday knickknacks. This was a difficult decision. Sure, intellectually, I could figure out how this stuff would be useful to someone in my line of work, but it was kind of hard to put myself in the right mindset when I was just flipping through a catalog. And there just wasn’t anything we urgently needed for Labyrinth #228 in here, nor was there anything that looked like it’d be really useful down the line. Some of the items were oddly specific, and some sounded like they’d come in handy, but did I really *need* any of them? Any time I stopped and considered that question, I’d end up thinking, “Nah, not really.”

“Karumi-san, there is something I want, but it’s not in the catalog. What do you say?”

“That depends. What do you want?”

Karumi looked surprised, but I figured she wouldn’t be once she heard my

request, assuming the employees she scouted were all gamers like me.

“A standard electric power supply and an internet connection. Also, permission to bring some personal effects into the labyrinth with me. Specifically, my computer.”

It would be inappropriate for the fantasy setting and all, but I missed my PC. We had no video games in the labyrinth. We’d crafted our own card and board games, but anything that required electricity was beyond our capabilities. And that was fine, I thought. All a gamer needed was someone to play with, right? But the moment I was able to go back to Japan whenever I wanted, the new titles and the flash sales called out to me!

After giving it a good long think, Karumi spoke up.

“Do you remember the clause in your contract about bringing modern technology into the workplace?”

“Yes.”

I was only allowed to bring my briefcase and anything I could fit inside it. All the magic stuff was way beyond anything in our world, but the place was pretty underdeveloped, technology-wise. Some things that we could mass-produce with ease required a lot of labor and manpower. That was pretty common in fantasy settings, I supposed. You could probably make a pretty hefty profit, trading raw iron ore from there for steel goods from here, actually, though I imagined their economy would go to hell if I tried to pull something like that. The blacksmiths would lose their jobs overnight, and any progress towards industrialization would grind to a halt. They had all those regulations in place for a good reason.

“And beyond that one, there’s the broader restrictions on intentionally spreading this world’s science and technologies, which I’m sure you also recall.”

“Yes, I do.”

There was also a flaw with trying to directly import science and technology. Given the existence of magic, the laws of physics in a fantasy world obviously couldn’t be the same as those in our world. Therefore, it was likely that many technologies simply wouldn’t work. Among the assets of Labyrinth #228 was a

certain giant robot which bore a striking resemblance to a fixture of the local arcade scene, a mech by the name of Comet. However, the one at the labyrinth wasn't a product of science, but rather a golem powered by the magic technology from that world. That said, even though it was magic-driven, the labyrinth manager built it to look and work just like something from our world. That was just the way he wanted it to be.

"I do sympathize with you, Kousaka-san, but we can't just spread technology and industrial advances at will in that world. If you're so eager to have this world's current level of technology, it would be faster if you built a factory there and hired Japanese workers for it, rather than importing the finished products."

"Makes sense."

Though if the Great Dark Lord was going to be bothered by my starting an export company, he'd probably be just as annoyed at me for bringing in Japanese workers. Or workers from anywhere, for that matter.

"Technology is a difficult matter. This is kind of an extreme example, but let's say I give iron tools to a civilization still back in the Stone Age. Most of the time, once they're handed that new technology, they stop advancing entirely. Admittedly, it's not uncommon for Stone Age civilizations suddenly thrown into the Iron Age to last a long time, but if they stop developing basic technologies just because iron is so convenient for them, their technological progress stagnates, and so does their whole civilization."

"I'm aware."

I'd played my fair share of civilization development simulation games.

One specific incident came to mind. There was this series that had made its way to Japan about half a year back. The goal was to establish a new civilization and eventually grow your town into a city-state or a full-blown country. Something like *Age of Imperials 2*. There were a lot of single-player games in that genre, but this one was different because of its sheer scale. The game incorporated a lot of MMO elements and had pretty deep mechanics. I jumped right into it the day the international edition hit the shelves. I used to play on the US-West 3 server back in the day, which had advanced all the way to medieval civilization. So far, so good. Until the overtechnology incident.

One country, given the memorable nickname of Diggy Diggy due to their passion for archaeology, was exploring some ancient ruins when they came across a fully-functioning flying warship packed to the gills with cannons. It wasn't long before they were building their own primitive cannons. I remembered well the chaos that ensued. Taking cannons onto a battlefield previously dominated by swords, lances, and crossbow-wielding cavalry demolished the balance of power. The players who'd made the discovery expanded rapidly, but it was only a handful of days before espionage saw the secrets of airship and cannon manufacturing leaked to the whole world. Things went downhill fast from there.

The overtech spread across the world like drops of ink corrupting a pure well. Everybody shifted their focus to manufacturing airships and mounting invasions, leaving only the countries with the most resources standing. The craze continued until a bunch of players started complaining about how the server was falling behind the others in terms of progress. The cause was plain to see. Instead of advancing uniformly through the tech tree, everybody had grown fixated on mass production of airships and cannons, tying up all their resources in production and maintenance. By that time, the other servers had advanced far enough to be producing tanks and airplanes, roughly on par with World War I-era technology, but our server was still plagued by cannon-loaded airships manned by sword-wielding knights.

"I'm painfully aware. I've seen it happen myself."

It really had been painful. All I'd wanted to do was develop my country, but I had my hands full just protecting myself from invaders. All my budget and talent went into defense. Before we got out of the slump, a tremendous amount of assets had been wasted. We'd burned through an insane amount of both resources and people in our world war.

"Oh, have you now? Then you should be aware just how little value you would actually derive from bringing a modern computer to the labyrinth."

So that's where she was going with this, huh? Maybe it'd make some things easier if I had my phone and the internet at my fingertips, but that would just be a crutch. "I appreciated the warning, really... but she was missing the point here."

“Of course, I understand that. But see, all I want is to play games.”

“...”

It was unusual to see Karumi so puzzled. She opened and closed her mouth a couple of times. I gazed back at her, cold and serious. I had to stay firm. I wanted to make her believe the only way to keep me happy was to satisfy my request.

During my training period, I’d lived for three months straight in that fantasy world. It’d been hard work just to survive, but it’d been fun, too. I could still remember all the intense moments I’d endured, all the danger and uncertainty I’d overcome. Every day had felt fulfilling, like a good adventure game should. That said, life wasn’t as hectic in the other world, compared to Japan. My days went along at a more relaxed pace. If the most excitement I was going to get most days was the simple games I made for myself, it’d mean certain death for a gamer like me.

It wasn’t that I was dissatisfied with having just Ann as my gaming partner. She was a ton of fun to be with! I would never have made it through without her, and I owed her my thanks. But I’d been in there for three months. Can you imagine how many new releases I’d missed? The lineup at the arcade must’ve been completely different from the last time I’d set foot in one, and I bet I was ages behind on the popular online games.

I had no issues with the working hours. The expectations from HQ actually seemed quite fair. From what Karumi had told me, there were a fair number of labyrinth managers who commuted between Japan and the labyrinth for work each day. Apparently they had trained individuals around to take care of the labyrinth during their absence.

But there was no one but me and Ann in Labyrinth #228. I couldn’t just go back home and leave her alone every night. It didn’t matter how many times she told me she’d be fine. I couldn’t bring myself to leave a girl alone at night like that. So even if I took a day trip back to Japan, I would definitely be returning to the labyrinth that night. That was why I was so starved for games.

“So you really intend to use the computer just for gaming? And you really, truly need it?”

She asked the question once more, but she sounded a little shaken this time. She looked like she was desperately searching for a way out of some terrible predicament. Was it really all that bad?

“Yes. It’s vital to me.”

I nodded firmly. Just like bunnies died from loneliness, gamers had been known to perish if you took their games away.

“Very well. I’ll figure something out.”

“Thank you very much.”

I positively beamed at her.

“All right, now that that’s settled, I’ll be heading out.”

I stood up, grabbed my bag, and headed to the shiny metal door with the iridescent glow at the back of the office. I put the key to the keyhole engraved with the company’s logo, turned it, and before my eyes, the door creaked open to the scent of loam and the familiar sight of Labyrinth #228. It was so nice that the travel from my office to my workplace only took a couple of seconds. It seemed all the labyrinth managers departed from here, each with their respective door and key, but I hadn’t come during normal opening or closing office hours yet, so I hadn’t met any of the other managers.

Later that day, a delivery arrived at the labyrinth. The Tundra representative brought me an oblong, vaguely watermelon-shaped package. I unwrapped it to find a jet-black object, the surface smooth like polished stone. When I slid the cover aside, I found a couple of old friends: an ordinary power outlet and a LAN connector. Now, the black spheroid wasn’t connected to anything else, which admittedly troubled me a bit, but when I plugged my computer into its power outlet and LAN port, everything ran just fine, so I decided to not sweat the details and just appreciate the marvel. If I started analyzing all the magic in this world, I’d probably lose my mind.

And that was how Labyrinth #228 ended up with an internet-connected gaming machine. I brought in a fluorescent lamp as well once I got the computer, since staring at a monitor in a dark room could ruin your eyes. A true pro was in it for the long haul—you had to take care of yourself, or your gaming

would suffer.

Maybe a month or so after it arrived in the labyrinth, Ann started using the computer to play games as well. She still wasn't that familiar with the keyboard, and she mostly used the mouse instead of hotkeys, but even so she was adapting pretty well.

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"So you used one vitality potion and one stamina potion. I'll replace the empties. Now, let's see how the other potions here are doing. Execute Appraisal. Hmm. Still pretty good quality! They'll work just fine for a while yet, but make sure to use the older ones first next time you need a potion."

"All right. You're a lifesaver, Aoi."

I'd come to Milt, the pioneer village near Labyrinth #228, to check on the magical potions I stocked at the mayor's place. We'd struck a deal very similar to how provincial doctors once worked, where I kept the village stocked with quality medicine, and in exchange the villagers would bring me fresh vegetables, grains, and sometimes even meat.

"Please, have some tea. I just prepared it."

"Thank you very much."

While the hulking minotaur of a mayor went to put away the medicine box, his wife, July, offered me tea. Mayor Hopper and his wife were a study in contrasts. Where he was bulky and muscled, she was slender and elegant, with delicate, youthful features. Her pointed ears sat horizontal, as I'd come to expect from the elves in this world. The smile on her face was gentle. She gave a remarkably distinct impression from Deneb and her seductive grace, though I couldn't pinpoint exactly what it was that made them so different.

"Sorry for the delay."

Mayor Hopper returned and sat across from me at the table. The chair gave a pitiful creak as he eased himself into it. His tea cup, which I almost mistook for a beer stein at first glance, looked small and delicate in his massive hand.

"The truth is, I wanted to ask for your advice. Oh, but wait, there's something

else I need to attend to first.”

The mayor placed a sturdy-looking leather sack on the table. Looking inside, I found a number of DL coins—the Great Dark Lord’s currency was accepted everywhere in this world. Mostly copper and silver, but even a few gold coins were mixed in. It was a considerable amount of money.

“What’s this for?”

I certainly wasn’t expecting a bribe.

“The lord of the land entrusted me with this. It’s your share of the ransom for those humans and the big things they brought with them. Uh, what were they called again? I’ve forgotten.”

“The Extended Knight Armor?”

“Right, yes. This is the ransom fee for the Exten...whatsit.”

I’d heard about what happened to the giant clockwork armor the invading humans had brought along. Apparently the armor suits were quite expensive, enough so to warrant sending troops to collect them. I wouldn’t have had any use for them, even if I’d brought them to the labyrinth, so we’d requested the feudal lord to take care of them.

“Would you mind explaining what happened in a little more detail?”

“Mm, of course. You’ll need to understand more about our country first.”

After his explanation, things made more sense.

Per the Dark Lord’s order, there was no slavery in this country. When a human was captured, if they were a normal citizen like a peasant or a merchant, they would be released on the spot, but soldiers and enlisted civilians were generally released only after they were ransomed by their country or family. If neither the country nor the family paid up, the prisoner was made to work off their ransom. The fee was quite high. It seemed that a simple soldier would have to work for several years to pay off their debt.

The policy towards slavery seemed surprisingly upright for a place like this, and I found myself admiring the efficiency of the system. Handling slaves was hard. A slave with no hope of release wouldn’t be motivated to work, so you’d

have to both hire people to keep an eye on them and also prepare some kind of reward so they felt like they were working towards something. Good food or other pleasures, for instance. In the end, simply hiring people to do the work generally ended up being cheaper than hiring supervisors, preparing incentives, and maintaining the slaves. Whippings, beatings, and forced labor were the sort of thing that came to mind with slavery, but you'd be mistaken if you thought a whip was all you needed to get someone to work. A slave wouldn't be able to work if they were injured, and if a wound festered and the slave died, you'd be lucky if the worst fallout was a drop in morale and production. On the other hand, if you pampered a slave too much, the work might progress to some degree, but you'd likely end up getting less out of your workforce than if you'd just employed them normally.

Why did I know so much about this? Well, I had once played a foreign game which tackled the theme. It wasn't sold domestically through the normal channels, for obvious reasons. The game put you in the shoes of an up-and-coming farmer in ancient Rome, managing slaves and building up a successful plantation. The game was called *Green Hortus: Paradisus Perditus*. It was a fairly hardcore management simulation game. Go too easy on the slaves, and they'd revolt. Go too hard, and efficiency would plummet and maintenance costs would rise. If you chose bad supervisors, there was a chance they'd go behind your back and abuse the slaves. Forget about growth and profits, just staying afloat was difficult enough. Coincidentally, the same day *Green Hortus* came out, a Japanese indie game company released a game called *Unpaid Overtime 3: Wage Slave's Revenge* that put you in the shoes of a company president. You were supposed to exploit your workers in a gloomy, oppressive work environment. Amusingly enough, it was actually way easier than the one where you were a Roman slaver. I didn't know whether to laugh or cry.

"And so, all the captured humans were ransomed, and this is your share. It's customary for 70% of the ransom money to go to the person who captured the criminals."

And the remaining 30% was divided between the country's coffers and the lord's pockets? All things considered, them taking 30% to take care of everything actually seemed a bit cheap.

“Gotcha, that makes sense. Now, what was it you wanted to ask me?”

“Well... July, would you go get Mary?”

“Of course. Wait just a minute.”

July went back further into the house and returned with a girl in tow. She wore modest clothes, just like the villagers, but in contrast to them, she had a sheathed sword at her waist. She was, in a word, regal. Her short blond hair swayed slightly as she walked in the room, and her azure eyes shone with determination. Her noble bearing was obvious at a glance. Since she had rounded ears, my gut told me she was human, but what with all the differences over here, I couldn’t be certain of her age. If I had to guess, I’d say she was around eighteen? Her posture was flawless, and her poise gave her an air of refinement. To give a more relatable example, she was like that cool, athletic girl who captained all the sports teams and who all the other girls looked up to.

“Mary, this is the man I mentioned before, Aoi.”

“I see. So this is him.”

Mary looked me over from head to toe. She wasn’t exactly hostile about it, but her stare brooked no argument; she was making a decision of some sort about me, and she was going to look at me until she was good and done.

“I wanted to introduce you two. Mary here is a human knight who has been staying with the village since a while back.”

A knight? Did she have anything to do with that giant clockwork armor?

“Pleased to meet you. My name’s Aoi. Miss Mary, I’m not really familiar with any other humans around here, so would you mind if I ask you what exactly it means to be a knight?”

“A knight is one with the power to wield the armor.”

So basically, knights were people who piloted those suits of armor. It seemed the term “knight armor” was more literal than I’d realized.

“So you were one of the pilots during the earlier assault?”

“Indeed. I was the one who struck you by surprise when you were piloting that red copycat armor. Incidentally, you can just call me Mary.”

So, this cute girl was the terrifying soldier who resisted until the bitter end? Was it really a good idea to let her walk free like that, and with a sword, no less?

“Got it, Mary. You can just call me Aoi as well.”

“Very well. I must admit, Aoi, you are not what I expected when I heard I would be meeting the violent warrior who piloted that red armor. I didn’t think you would be so polite.”

Was I acting particularly polite? I was just using the typical courtesy one shows to a new acquaintance. Well, I guess people expected soldiers to be a little on the uncouth side.

“Same goes for me. When I imagined what kind of person was piloting the armor that nailed me down, I was thinking you’d be a grizzled veteran.”

I couldn’t believe it was this sweet girl inside that hulking metal suit all along.

“Oh really? Well, if that’s the impression you got, then it seems my daily training hasn’t been in vain.”

Mary looked pleased, which was reassuring. I’d been debating between “Compliment her on what a badass she is” and “Compliment her on how cute she is”, and it looked like I’d made the right decision.

“Mayor, does Mary here have anything to do with what you wanted to ask me?”

“Indeed, she does. You see, while the ransom was paid for the remaining knights and soldiers, and they’re all safely homeward bound, it seems Mary doesn’t have anyone to pay hers.”

So they just paid the ransom and then went their merry way home. It was a far cry from war in our world, at least as far as I understood it. However, if they didn’t have anybody back home to pay the ransom, then years of indentured servitude was their only recourse. I didn’t know exactly how high a fee they demanded from knights, but it was surely more than what they asked for rank-and-file soldiers.

“Mary is looking for employment, but it’s proving hard to find an occupation

for her.”

Judging by the graceful way she handled herself, I was willing to bet Mary was nobility. It must’ve been difficult for a woman like her to take up such a strenuous physical profession. She must’ve had big career ambitions. I knew how that was. I’d been in the same boat, not so long ago.

“Mary has little more than the clothes on her back. She doesn’t think she’ll be able to afford housing much longer.”

Man, does that ever hit close to home.

“We helped her look for ways to earn a living in the village, but sadly no one is in a position to hire her.”

The pioneer village wasn’t exactly swimming in money, so that made sense. I was a little worried about the villagers, since the attack hadn’t been so long ago, but they must have been getting by as much as ever. There were no casualties on their side, and fortunately for Mary, they weren’t the type to hold a grudge as far as I’d seen. Mary looked at me, eyes shining with hope. Well, I could see what he was driving at. The only people around here capable of paying an employee would be a manager of one of the Dark Lord’s labyrinths or a peddler like Fez. Sure, some of the farmers around here might have needed a helping hand or two if you asked around, but the kind of pay they could afford to give her would have meant a long, long time working in the fields.

“Aoi, would you consider employing me to work in the labyrinth? I may be a woman, but I’m also a knight. I’m both strong and diligent. The only skills I know are armor piloting and swordsmanship, but I’ll do anything if I can get work. I’ll do chores. I’ll serve you any way you ask.”

Mary snapped to attention, placed her right hand to her heart, and bowed her head. Was this some sort of salute? I didn’t know exactly what she was trying to say with the gesture, but I could at least tell that she was utterly sincere. *Damn it! I was jobless a year ago. Talk about hitting me right in the feels.*

“Sorry, don’t mind me. Just need to check something. Execute Appraisal.”

I used the voice command for the skill I’d gained when I became a labyrinth

manager, and I checked out Mary's abilities.

Mariet Di Savillant <Knight> **Vitality**: 180/180 **Stamina**: 123/143
Willpower: 35/35

Skills: <Knight: Advanced> <Knight Armor: Advanced> The results displayed on a UI window hovering in the air, but unfortunately they were vague as always. Didn't really give me much information. Her stats were pretty high, though. Most of the villagers had stats in the double digits because of all the hard work they put in, but she even had two stats in the triple digits. It seemed she had two separate skill trees. I wondered what the distinction was. Maybe one for melee skills, and one for piloting skills? She was gifted, no doubt about that. Honestly, the biggest problem would've been if I hired her and then the only thing to do around Labyrinth #228 was menial chores.

"Are you sure you want to work for me? It wasn't personal, but I'm still the one who took you prisoner."

Sure, the humans had been the ones who'd invaded, but she wasn't some bandit, terrorizing the countryside for her own self-interest. She was a soldier under orders, and I'd been the one who not only prevented her from completing her mission, but also ended up getting her held for ransom. She had plenty of reasons to resent me.

"I can answer that easily enough."

Mary didn't so much as bat an eyelid at my pointed question, which was a relief.

"I did indeed lose to you, but defeat is a possibility I accept every time I go into battle. One must be ready both to win and to lose, and in the event that one loses, one must be prepared to follow the winner's commands. We humans were invading Daemon territory in the first place. Why would I resent you for protecting your countrymen and their homes?"

She spoke without hesitation, her eyes clear and confident. My assessment of Mary rose a notch. She'd delivered that statement as though it was simple common sense, but I would have been hard-pressed to find people who could view their situation so objectively if the same thing happened to them. It's all

too natural to blame others for one's hardships. She could've easily pointed at me and demanded that I make amends as the source of her suffering.

What a pleasant surprise. People like Mary were precious and rare in games with PvP elements. I couldn't even count how many times I'd kicked some dumb player's ass in a duel he demanded, only for him to say, "You got me good, but I'll have my revenge," and then start harassing me constantly. They were practically a staple in MMORPGs. And if people were that inclined towards holding dumb grudges in games, how much worse must they be in real life, when they were facing real consequences?

"I'm sad we had to meet on a battlefield, but more than that, I'm glad we met at all."

A smile spread across my face. Now this was the kind of person I'd like to have as a rival.

"Frankly, it's a relief to finally meet you. The mayor told me about you, but I could only picture the crazed warrior who bested our Extended Knight Armor in combat. I was worried you'd be aggressive, but it seems I was mistaken. I'm overjoyed that the person I crossed swords with turned out to be worthy of respect."

I couldn't take my eyes off Mary's proud smile. She still held her hand over her heart as she spoke, as though swearing an oath.

"I'd just like to make one thing clear. Right now, I'm a prisoner, and I will work for my living. I accept that. But I am a knight, and when my debt is paid, I will return to protecting my people. When I do, I may again face you on the battlefield."

Her earnest gaze was too bright, too pure. In a corner of my mind, I wondered if this was some elaborate ploy to win me over, but I knew from the sincerity in her voice that she wasn't that kind of woman.

"So, yeah. Can you take care of her until she goes home?"

"Is this still acceptable for you, Aoi?"

"Yes. I understand how important one's home and people can be."

So, we would meet again as enemies one day. Well, not like there was much I could do about that. And of course, it was a situation I'd been in countless times before. Whether in fighting games, or strategy games, or anything with a competitive element, it was all too common for today's enemies to become tomorrow's friends, and vice versa.

I once played an aviation-themed MOBA called *League of Aces*, where each player took control of a fighter jet. Each team had four players, and four teams were randomly matched for each game. It got pretty hectic with 16 people out there. The random matchmaking meant that you could easily run into your guildmates—the same folks who taught you everything you knew about strategy and micro—on the opposing team, and your only option was to think of how best to beat each person's style. Though admittedly, most of the time when that happened to me, I'd just get my butt kicked.

It wasn't personal or anything. It was just that when you saw a team and you knew one of the players wasn't quite as strong, you had to stomp on that weak link in the chain for all you were worth. ...Come to think of it, I used to wonder why I'd always get focus fired whenever I ended up across from my buddies. At any rate, I was getting my hopes up that, if Mary had a change of heart during our time together, I could get my hands on a loyal, high-spec unit.

"You're an odd one, that's for sure. You brushed off my threat like it was nothing."

"Maybe this is weird, but to be honest, I'm not all that bothered by it because of, well, you. I'm a little self-conscious about admitting that, though, hahah."

"Oh, are you? Well, we can't have that, now can we, Boss? Hahahah!"

She gave me a grin and threw her arms up in the air. Apparently she liked to joke around, too.

"Would you all mind giving me a bit of time before making a final decision? If I do hire Mary to work in the labyrinth, she'd have to move on-site, so I need to consult with my family first."

"Sure thing."

This was a good opportunity for me, and I wanted to take it, but it would

mean one more person around the house. I didn't think Ann would be against it even if I decided without her, but I still wanted to consult her first. It was also true that there wasn't that much work to do. She'd probably end up doing odd jobs.

"Oh yes, we have to consider Ann's feelings as well."

The mayor nodded understandingly.

"I see, you need some time. Still, I would appreciate an answer as soon as possible, Aoi."

Mary looked uneasy. Her wallet must've been screaming.

"Regrettably, I must admit that I'm currently only eating by the good grace of Mister Hopper and the credit he extends me, and you see, the cold glare his wife gives me whenever she serves dinner is not exactly easy to bear."

Wow. A deadbeat knight. That was kind of sad.

"Her judgmental stare hurts the most whenever I request seconds. Her smile is always so gentle and kind, but those eyes as cold as ice, those eyes that look at me like I'm human garbage... They're simply too much!"

She shivered and shook her head.

"I'll try to give you an answer as soon as I can."

I had to look away, seeing this wonderful newfound rival reduced to such a sorry state. Particularly painful was the fact that, not so long ago, I'd been in a very similar situation. When I saw her, I could only see how narrowly I'd dodged that particular bullet myself. I bowed to both of them and left the mayor's house in a hurry.

◇

Ann was visiting a friend in town, so I met up with her and we headed back to the labyrinth together. That meant I got the opportunity to talk with her about Mary right away.

"There's someone I'd like to hire to work in the labyrinth. How would you feel about that?"

“Umm. Is it a man or a woman?”

“A woman. She looks a bit younger than Deneb.”

Deneb also looked pretty young, but it was hard to tell with elves.

“Well, I’d like to meet her and talk with her first.”

That made sense. Who would immediately agree to live with a stranger?

“You’re too naïve and too kind for your own good! I have to make sure you’re not being hoodwinked.”

Ann squeezed my hand and nodded to herself. So she was worried about me? I had to admit, I was pretty ignorant about the world outside of the labyrinth, so I couldn’t really argue.

“I see. Thanks for always taking such good care of me, Ann.”

“Haha, leave it to me!”

Since we were outside the labyrinth, she was in her fluffy, cuddly kobold form. I stroked her hair, and she wagged her tail. I’d have to introduce them. Mary was such a sincere person, I was sure they’d hit it off great.

Chapter One

Just after breakfast the next day, a visitor came to call at the labyrinth. The sound of a wooden door creaking open—even though we didn't actually have a creaky wooden door—preceded Karumi's appearance. I sure hadn't been expecting my supervisor to drop in.

"Pardon me for bothering you so early in the morning, Kousaka-san, but this is urgent."

She was wearing a modern women's suit that looked completely out of place in Labyrinth #228, and her smile looked rather strained. I couldn't really judge her for wearing out-of-place clothing, though—I was wearing a suit myself.

That smile was making me nervous. The last time she'd given me a smile like that, she'd just realized that she'd forgotten to have me fill out some document before joining the company, and I almost didn't get paid my initial salary. Karumi was an incredibly capable woman most of the time, but even she had her airheaded moments. It was Karumi's carelessness that had gotten me thrown into a rough cabin in a forgotten patch of land called Labyrinth #228 with just the clothes on my back, leaving me in a three-month survival game.

"Is something the matter? Again?"

"Erm, yes. Again."

"Not again."

I hoped it wasn't as bad as the previous time, at least. She looked so clever and responsible, which made this dorky side of her rather cute. I would've been grinning if I wasn't the one who always ended up suffering because of it.

"Wait a minute. I'll get you some tea."

It probably looked like I was being hospitable, but the truth was I just wanted to calm my nerves with a nice cup of tea.

"Okay, sorry for the delay. Now, what happened?" Karumi and I sat down, each of us with a cup of herbal tea that Ann had prepared earlier, and she cut straight to the chase.

“In six months, Labyrinth #228 will be evaluated on its achievements for the past two decades.”

Evaluation? What, like a company performance review? It wasn’t like they were going around badgering labyrinths for results, right? If their goal was to make money, they’d have been better off just selling the land. Also, if this was going to be a twenty-year evaluation, would they really be looking at my labyrinth? It was still unfinished, and I hadn’t even been there for half a year yet!

“Why is there an evaluation on the labyrinth in six months if it’s not even completed?”

“The official records state that it is fully operational, with all facilities up and running.”

Oh right, it was all coming back. That was the real reason I’d gotten thrown into such a tight spot in the first place. My labyrinth had been a victim of embezzlement. The previous manager had absconded with the budget, leaving behind nothing but a lousy cabin and a slip of paper claiming all the work was done. This wasn’t good.

“But remember? The last guy did nothing but run off with all the funding that was supposed to get the labyrinth running.”

“...”

The way she didn’t respond to that was pretty ominous. T*hrow me a bone here, Karumi!*

“I did think the budget was strangely flexible for this project.”

“Is that so.”

No point in pressing the issue, I decided.

“So, what are they going to expect from the labyrinth at this evaluation?”

“It differs from labyrinth to labyrinth. The main purpose of Labyrinth #228 is to attract people, so the key metrics are number of intruders, number of repelled intruders, and number of deaths inside the labyrinth. Those will be added up and weighted to give you a score.”

So, I needed intruders. Hold up, but nobody could even get into or out of this place until I dug that staircase in the cliff, right?

“I don’t know if I want to hear the answer, but how many of each of those do I have currently?”

“Zero, across the board.”

Figured. For someone to stumble across this place, they’d probably have to be *trying* to get lost.

“How do the other labyrinths pass their performance evaluations?”

“Almost none of the labyrinths under my supervision ever have intruders.”

Well, yes, full-fledged labyrinths weren’t exactly popular hangout spots.

“So they don’t get a lot of points that way. Instead, most of them try to earn points off of deaths inside the labyrinth.”

“How do they get so many deaths, if you don’t mind me asking?”

“Usually by breeding livestock and then slaughtering them for meat. Similarly, you can raise fish in ponds or lakes.”

So ranching and farming fish counted towards labyrinth deaths? It kinda felt like they were gaming the system.

“A handful of managers have turned their labyrinths into hospitals and provide cheap medical care to nearby residents. Even a death of old age is still a death, and the lives of humans and Daemons are worth more points than livestock or fish, so they go more for quality over quantity.”

Most people would go to the hospital if it was cheap, and certainly a lot of people did pass on from old age, as well as from illnesses and whatnot. But I wasn’t sure I wanted to go to a hospital where they got points if I died.

“If we tried one of those methods for Labyrinth #228, would we get enough points in time?”

“No. Those are slow-and-steady methods, sufficient to pass the evaluation if you do them constantly for twenty years, but not enough to put up the numbers you need in half a year.”

Yep, thought as much.

“And what will happen if I don’t pass the evaluation?”

I was probably looking at a hefty pay cut.

“Your labyrinth will be subjected to a detailed inspection. If one’s facilities and personnel are up to snuff, they can certainly pass the inspection, but in your case...”

Facilities? I glanced over at the only building gracing the undeveloped natural landscape of Labyrinth #228, my lousy cabin. And personnel? There was just me and Ann. Hell, the shabby houses in Milt were more developed than this place.

“Can we pass?”

Karumi’s smile was more of a grimace. She slowly shook her head. Was she laughing? And also crying? That bad, huh? Hahahah... I kinda felt like crying, too
“What happens if I fail?”

“The usual procedure is just to fix up the labyrinth and get it operational again, but in extreme cases, they might opt to shut down the labyrinth. They typically only do that when the loss of the labyrinth won’t mean any real loss of assets... which is certainly the situation here.”

Karumi gazed out at the nearly empty Labyrinth #228, her eyes distant.

“What’ll happen to me and Ann?”

“You’re an official employee, so you’d be relocated to a semi-operational labyrinth. One that’s in progress but not occupied yet. Think of it as getting transferred.”

So I’d be transferred before I’d even been at my post for a year? I’d gotten kinda attached to Labyrinth #228. I’d regret leaving it all behind so soon.

“Aoi...”

Ann, who had been eating some candy Karumi had brought, reached out and took hold of my sleeve.

“Since you have hired Ann, she’ll be treated as the manager’s family, and it’ll be up to her whether to transfer along with you or to resign and return to the

village.”

If Ann came with me, she’d be separated from her friends and family in the village for the rest of her life. But if she resigned, then the two of us would have to part. It would have been hard enough to say goodbye to the villagers after all we’d shared, but leaving Ann was simply out of the question.

“I don’t want to leave you, Aoi.”

Ann looked up at me, her eyes filled with worry, so I put my arms around her and stroked her hair.

“Don’t worry. I’ll make sure that doesn’t happen. And you’ll help me, right?”

“Yeah! I’m always here for you!”

Ann gave me a winsome smile. Ahh, I could feel my heart warming. Just knowing I wouldn’t be alone was encouraging. In a part of my mind, I’d been worrying that Ann wouldn’t want to stay with me.

“I would like to find a way to pass the inspection.”

I gave my answer as Ann snuggled into my chest.

“That would be ideal. If one of the facilities under my supervision fails its evaluation, the Great Dark Lord will most likely call me in for punishment.”

Karumi went pale as she spoke. It seemed failure was not an option for subordinates of the Great Dark Lord.

“Is it really that bad?”

“Father practically idoli—pardon, that is to say, he cares for me deeply, so I’m in no real danger.”

Oh yeah, I’d forgotten she was the Great Dark Lord’s daughter. Had she been about to say he idolized her?

“If I were taken in for punishment, well... First, Father would have me outfitted in a gown suitable for a princess. Then he would hold a ball in my honor and demand to pamper me, just like he did when I was a child.”

Karumi laid it all out in such great detail that it was apparent she’d been through it before. Come to think of it, given her occasional bouts of

airheadedness, she'd probably been through that more than a few times. My terrifying image of the Great Dark Lord was crumbling fast. But still, Karumi was worried about it, so I wanted to help her out. *She's got a great figure, though. Bet she'd look fantastic in a gown, whatever the style.*

"I'm a grown woman. I don't deserve to be subjected to the princess treatment anymore. It isn't right!"

She must've had some bad memories about it. She was tearing up a bit, her shoulders quivering. Karumi was always so cool and collected, but my heart skipped a beat when I saw her looking so distraught. Had she always been this cute? Man, I could kind of understand how the Great Dark Lord felt about her. Though, yeah, she was a bit too mature for the whole princess look. Man, was it weird that I kinda wanted to get away from this train of thought and go back to the gloomy conversation from before?

◇

I got us another round of tea and returned to the table in front of the cabin. We needed to get back to looking for a solution to our performance evaluation problem.

"I'm so sorry about all of this. I'll do everything I can to get the inspection canceled."

Karumi took a sip of the tea, which seemed to soothe her nerves. Well, by now I was certain I'd been on the right track when I first noticed she was a bit of a dork.

"I'm going to find a senior instructor to support you. Truth be told, I was hoping to let things settle down around here before doing that, but it doesn't seem we can afford to wait."

"Sorry, a what now?"

"We have a mentorship system in place where labyrinth managers with at least two years of experience help guide new managers. Technically, you should have gotten one as soon as you finished the training period, but Labyrinth #228 has some special circumstances."

"I'll take all the help I can get."

Given the utter lack of progress on Labyrinth #228, it wasn't like I was going to learn much about how to deal with employees or how to do anything of value, except maybe cook. Maybe if the mentor was a gardener, or a bonsai enthusiast or something, they could give me some advice on how to tend the vegetation. But honestly, there was nothing remotely labyrinthine about this place.

"Sound advice will improve your odds of success dramatically."

Karumi gestured with her hand, and a window appeared. She pressed a few buttons with her long, slender fingers.

Communication restrictions have been lifted. You may now contact a senior instructor.

Lines of text scrolled by as Karumi flicked through the UI window.

"The instructor hasn't been on the job long, but she's been producing great results over in Labyrinth #370."

I felt like I remembered that labyrinth. Had I bought something from there on Tundra? Oh, right, that was the place that sold the salt and fish paste. Man, they were a lifesaver! Karumi pressed a button on the UI, and a large window opened up in the air, with just the word "Calling". I bet it made a sound like a phone ringing on the other end. I mean, I hoped it did, at least. I kinda liked the sound of digital ringtones.

"Hello, Labyrinth #370 here. Katou speaking."

A girl dressed in a skirt suit just like Karumi's appeared on the screen. Her suit looked a little cheaper than Karumi's, but then again, Karumi's looked like it had cost a fortune. Her eyes and hair were a very Japanese shade of black, and her long hair was held in place with a hairpin. My first impression was that she was a fashionable, peppy girl.

She was obviously shorter than both Karumi and I, and I suspected she was even shorter than Ann. Honestly, she looked *very* young, but she sounded composed enough. She had to be, what, a middle schooler? I wouldn't have believed her if she said she was in high school. I just managed to stop myself from muttering, "A little kid?"

“Hello, it’s me, Karumi. Do you remember the senior instructor arrangement we discussed a few days ago?”

“Oh, yep, sure do.”

She glanced my way.

“I’m Aoi Kousaka, manager of Labyrinth #228.”

I kinda wished I was in the sort of game where I could throw out a snappy military salute. Reality is so boring—just normal greetings and bowing all the time.

“I’m Suzu Katou. Since I’ll be mentoring you, we’re gonna be talking a lot, so let’s keep it casual, okay? You can call me Suzu, and I’ll just go with Aoi for you.”

Dropping the formalities right off the bat, eh? Worked for me.

“Sounds good. Nice to meet you, Suzu.”

“Heh, how about that. I’d have thought a cutie like you would be a little more uptight.”

Suzu grinned at me.

“Well, I guess I’ve been through a lot.”

I figured the reason I wasn’t as ‘uptight’ as she was expecting was the fact that I’d spent most of my life screaming into a headset.

A lot of multiplayer games had voice chat, after all. Whenever I landed in a game with foreigners, it’d be “fuck this,” “that’s bullshit,” and so on, non-stop. If I wasn’t careful with my language, I slipped into that kind of thing pretty easily. I owed a lot to a guild leader from an FPS game I’d played back in the day. When you were talking to him outside the game, he’d be totally calm and courteous, but once the game started, he’d be cursing like you wouldn’t believe, laughing like a madman the whole time. And it wasn’t like I was practicing being super polite while playing single-player RPG games or management sims or whatever to make up for the foul-mouthed multiplayer time, so I kind of got out of the habit.

All that aside, I had mixed feelings about this middle schooler calling *me* cute. And what was with that smug look? She had her chin tilted up and was looking

down her nose at me with this absolutely unbearable grin on her face. Was it intentional? To be honest, I knew a few guys with certain questionable proclivities who would've been turned on by it.

"A DL for your thoughts."

"Oh, uh, it's nothing."

Oh shit, she was definitely onto me.

"Kousaka."

Karumi pressed another button and gestured for me to look at the display.

"Suzu Katou, Female, 22. Graduated from a private college. Joined the company immediately after graduation. Three years of service."

22? No way, she didn't look a day over ten. And I didn't mean that as a compliment. So she'd been working there for three years, huh? I was always seeing products from Labyrinth #370 pop up in the Tundra catalog, so it seemed like she was making the most of her time. I could see why Karumi had chosen her to help me out. There was no questioning her competency.

"Karumi told me you were in a bit a of a pickle, but she didn't mention you were hanging out in dullsville. Where even are you?"

"This is my workplace. Labyrinth #228."

"So it's a foresty one, eh? Kinda nice, actually. Karumi said you were the cream of the crop this year, but have you even finished the tutorial?"

"Uh, no. I actually didn't even know there was a tutorial."

"What the heck? You should've gotten a user's manual and a new manager tutorial! Even if there wasn't, you could've asked your hecking supervisor!"

Well, yes, normally there would've been documentation to consult, or a coworker or manager to ask for help. But I hadn't had that luxury.

"I didn't have a manual, or a tutorial, or a supervisor to ask for advice."

"What, for real? Explain."

"Yeah, I've actually been wanting to vent about this."

I explained my situation to Suzu, being careful not to sound *too* mad given Karumi was around and all. Her jaw practically hit the floor when I told her how the place had been when I first got there, and she looked pretty indignant on my behalf for a while, but she calmed down as I kept explaining. By the end, she was looking at me with this pitying look, like I was a little lost puppy she'd found on the way home. Man, it sure felt good to get all that off my chest.

"Jeez, dude, you're lucky to be alive."

She seemed pretty impressed by how I'd started fending for myself without so much as a guide.

"Well, I did work my ass off. And I have played a lot of survival games and whatnot, you know? Hahaha."

"Oh come on, you seriously think there's anyone else out there who would actually last through a situation like that just based on what they learned playing video games? I play a lot of hecking games myself. Mostly management and strategy games, though, not so much the survival thing."

I was surprised to hear that Suzu was a gamer, too.

"I'll play pretty much anything as long as it looks like fun, but I'm mostly into competitive games. You said you're into strategy games, Suzu?"

But, in retrospect, I should've seen it coming. Familiarity with games had been right there in the help wanted ad.

"I bet those games set you on the path to success as a labyrinth manager. Maybe I should call you the labyrinth tsarina."

She'd worked her way up from a nobody to a top-tier labyrinth manager in only three years. I had to give her props for that.

"That's a rather specific choice of words. Hey, Aoi, you ever play a game called *Flaming Crest*?"

Now that was a blast from the past. *Flaming Crest* was a series of historical strategy games focusing on post-World War II power struggles. I wondered if people were still playing it.

"Yeah, for sure."

If Suzu associated the word “tsarina” with that game, maybe we’d even played on the same server?

“I don’t remember hearing about anybody named Aoi playing it. If you’re such a hardcore gamer that your survival game knowledge pulled you through getting dropped into an unbuilt labyrinth, I’m sure I would’ve heard of you.”

Suzu put her hand to her chin and thought. Sure your handle would only be notorious within the game where you used it, but truly great players were as well known to the gamers as any pop star to a normal person.

“Aoi... Wait, so like, Blue? Were you the guy called ‘Blue’ in US-West 3?”

She got it in one. I’d even gone out of my way to use a nondescript name back then.

“Yeah, that was me. Did you play on that server too?”

“I did! That Blue guy ran the northern alliance that beat us over and over again. You remember right after the unification war, when infantry rifle armies became the norm? I was in charge of the southern tsarship back then.”

Huh, so she was on the other side? Man, I remembered how insane the southern tsarship’s resource productivity was. That’d been a close match.

“That was a great match. It’s one of my fondest memories from back then. Suzu, were you Tsarina Belka?”

“You bet your ass I was. Man, you wiped the floor with us each time, no matter how much prep work we did. By the end of it everybody was calling me the Loserina!”

She may have looked back on it as a failure, but the way she’d always been able to go back and amass another huge force, despite getting completely wiped out each time, was proof of her ludicrous management abilities.

“I can’t believe this shit! I worked so hard at management games and still couldn’t reach the top, so I became a labyrinth manager and worked my way up, and now you’re here too?!”

Suzu flailed her arms around a bit, pouting.

“Pardon me for interrupting your friendly chat, but could we focus on the

matter at hand?”

Oops. We’d gotten a bit carried away reminiscing. Karumi dragged us back onto topic, explaining to Suzu how we needed to get Labyrinth #228 into a shape where it could pass the performance evaluation.

“...I see. But really, there’s no way you’re going to make up for twenty years’ worth of work in six months. Maybe if you at least had a functional labyrinth, but all you’ve got is a hut.”

“I see your point, but we have to do it anyway. How do you rake in all your achievements, Suzu?”

“Me? I’m located near a sea, and my labyrinth’s purpose is to gather resources, so I made a salt pan and gather salt and fish. I dry the fish and stockpile it all in a warehouse, selling it off for a steady income stream. It doesn’t even matter how much I sell as long as the warehouse is always stuffed, so passing the evaluation is easy.”

Man, that sounded nice. Sure, she needed high productivity and a sound business strategy, but all she had to do was gather stuff. But it made sense that someone had to do it; if all the labyrinths lost money, things probably wouldn’t work out. Someone had to balance the budget.

“Your labyrinth is the typical kind where you’ve got to lure in intruders, right? It’s totally impossible to do twenty years’ worth in six months there, at least with the usual steady approach.”

“I agree. So we won’t do the usual steady approach.”

I wasn’t going to find some cheat code that would turn my labyrinth into a hangout spot, obviously. But if we used the normal approach, we were bound to fail. We had to do something drastic.

“So, the thing my labyrinth gets evaluated on specifically is luring invaders and repelling them...”

I tried to think back to some fantasy games I’d played and how people thought about labyrinths there.

“Karumi, do you get the most points off of attracting intruders and repelling

them?”

“Definitely, but it’s not all about the score. As long as the labyrinth is in excellent shape, you can pass with only minimal results.”

Karumi navigated a few more menus, eventually landing at a page filled with numbers.

“Let’s see. You could pass the evaluation if you got at least one hundred and eighty intruders, and if your traps repelled about thirty percent of those.”

I was horrified at those numbers, but they really wouldn’t be that bad spread over twenty years. Less than ten intruders a year, right? I could have managed that. This all meant I would be turning this idyllic ravine into a death trap, but unfortunately—or fortunately, I suppose, given the circumstances—that actually sounded entertaining to me.

So we were changing genre. I would be going from a survival game to a PvP labyrinth management sim. Nice.

“All right then, it seems like we have our work cut out for us. We need to lure in some intruders, and then we need to kick ‘em right back out.”

There was one final option, of course. Bribery. But that one could fail pretty spectacularly, so I didn’t want to rely on it except as a last resort.

“Mhm. And how do you think you’re gonna get that many humans out here? Heck, how are you gonna get *anybody* to come to a labyrinth in the middle of nowhere like this? People only care about the ones at locations of conflict between humans and Daemons.”

Well, that hit a sore spot. The last time humans had invaded this area, they ignored the labyrinth completely and went straight for Milt. Maybe the answer really was to start aggressively raising livestock and farming fish.

“Here’s the thing. The labyrinth’s purpose is to attract people, but nobody says it has to be humans. It counts if Daemons try to break in as well. And though repelling intruders is required, and killing intruders gets us points, nobody says we *have* to kill people to pass the evaluation, right? You with me so far?”

“Sure, but you can’t seriously be thinking what I think you’re thinking.”

“I think I am. I’ll lure in Daemons instead. We’ve only got six months, so let’s split it down the middle. I’ll spend three months building the labyrinth up as much as I can. Then, for the remaining three months, I’ll lure in every hunter in Daemon territory with the promise of prizes, if they can make it through the whole dungeon. I’ll rack up the points by repelling my makeshift intruders.”

In human territory, that sort of people called themselves “adventurers”, but in Daemon territory they preferred the term “hunter”. Anything like a labyrinth was typically under the Great Dark Lord’s jurisdiction. Sometimes dungeons formed naturally, but those were few and far between. Adventurers didn’t get a lot of opportunities to hone their skills. They were a sort of jack of all trades. They’d travel to distant lands and return with valuables and animals, or do detective work like investigating and settling disputes in cities. However, their main goal was to exterminate monsters. Monsters were common everywhere, and some of them were quite dangerous. Since hunting down monsters was their main purpose, the adventurers in Daemon territory came to be known as hunters.

“That might actually work. You’re right about the intruders clause not restricting you to humans, too. Whaddaya say, Karumi?”

“If you can pull it off, it will satisfy the evaluation criteria. As long as you satisfy the conditions, it’s completely up to you, as the labyrinth manager, how you do it. If all your intruders happen to be Daemons, then that’s fine too.”

Karumi double-checked the conditions on her window and gave us the green light.

“You’re gonna need a prize, though, and a good one. The hunters are busy professionals. You’re not gonna get them traveling all the way out here for a trinket, and you’re not gonna pull a fast one on them; those guys are sharp. Maybe because they’re so poor.”

I wondered idly if Suzu had been through a bad experience with hunters.

“I’ll use this.”

I opened up the lizard leather belt one of the villagers had made for me, took

out a potion, and showed it to Suzu.

“A diamond flask? So what? Sure hope the juice you’ve got in there tastes real good, or you’re shit outta luck.”

“This is a Grade 6 vitality potion. Hunters are constantly putting themselves in harm’s way, so I imagine a lot of them would love to have something like this handy, just in case the worst happens.”

“Whoa, whoa, hold the phone. Grade 6?! No freaking way! I mean, I don’t want one or anything, but you could make a killing selling that thing!”

Wow, that got a bigger rise out of her than I thought it would. That was almost as dramatic as Fez’s reaction. I knew it sold for a high price on Tundra, but the herb I used for it grew like weeds all over Labyrinth #228, so I had trouble internalizing how special they really were. Maybe this was how farmers who grew high-quality crops and fruit felt.

“Is it that valuable?”

“Don’t ask me. I live and work on this side, so I wouldn’t know.”

Karumi wasn’t going to be any help with this one, it seemed.

“You bet your butt it’s valuable! Even Grade 8 potions are valuable, and the market is flooded with them. If it’s higher than Grade 8, it’s both powerful and scarce. That’s a premium product you’ve got right there!”

She was practically bouncing on her toes.

“Now wait just a darn minute. I heard there was a new labyrinth manager putting out the occasional high-level magic potion on Tundra a while back. That was you?”

“Yeah, must have been. I cashed out a few on Tundra a couple months ago.”

“What the heck were they thinking, making that place a battle-type labyrinth when they had such amazing materials available?! If you had a production and storage labyrinth, you could meet your quota in a few *days* with top-notch potions like that! Seriously, give me a break here. Bleh, whatever. Anyway, that’ll be more than enough to lure in your hunters.”

“Well, if you say so. Then I guess we’ll run with the plan.”

Seriously, they were that valuable?

“Now, what about a labyrinth guardian? You don’t have any personnel, do you?”

“What’s a guardian?”

“Uh, hello, you’re obviously gonna need a big scary boss at the end. Like, what if they made it through the labyrinth and found you? They’d kick your tail! That’s why you need a boss for them to fight at the end.”

“Is that how it works?”

I looked over at Karumi.

“...This should all have been written in the documentation you were supposed to receive.”

Karumi hunched her shoulders defensively.

“And unfortunately, there’s just the two of you here.”

Karumi seemed a little down about the sorry state of my labyrinth. After all, it wasn’t as though she’d helped me find Ann. I’d had to build my own family.

“So, sure, I need a guardian. But aside from me, the only person in the labyrinth is...”

I looked down to Ann, who had been quietly listening to the conversation while clutching my sleeve.

“What’s wrong, Aoi? Oh, um, I should say hi, shouldn’t I? Nice to meet you, Miss Suzu. I’m the manager’s... family? My name is Ann. I’m very happy to be with Aoi!”

Ann gave a little bow.

“Oh, hello there. Nice to meetcha. Just call me Suzu.”

“Okie dokie!”

“Aww, aren’t you just the cutest little thing?”

It seemed Ann’s natural charm had already won over Suzu. I could relate to that. So you could see why I objected so strongly to making Ann fight while I

watched from the sidelines.

“We absolutely can’t make Ann the guardian.”

“I wholeheartedly agree.”

“Heck yeah. I’d be judging you so hard if you’d suggested it.”

I was glad Karumi, Suzu, and I were all on the same page.

“Okay, so tell me more about the expectations of a labyrinth guardian. What kind of training would they need?”

“The main thing is that they need to be capable of putting up a powerful defense. Physical strength is the most important qualification.”

Some of the villagers were crazy strong, but none of them were familiar with fighting, so they were all out of the question.

“They’ll need to be sturdy, too. If a hunter puts your guardian completely out of commission, the labyrinth is done for. You really need someone with good defense and a high vitality stat.”

So an offensive unit wouldn’t work. Made sense. If you thought about it like an RPG, when you were clearing out some dungeon, the boss would almost always be something tanky with a ton of HP.

“And most importantly, they need courage. Guardians usually fight at a disadvantage: one against a party. This isn’t a job for a coward. Even seasoned warriors can find it a bit much when the numbers are turned against them.”

Man, did I know anybody who could do this? The only one who came to mind was Fez, the ex-mercenary wolfman peddler, but he’d said he couldn’t take up the sword again.

“All right, guess I’ll add looking for a guardian to my to-do list, along with building up the labyrinth.”

“I can introduce you to some of the Daemon mercenaries I have connections with. They’re a bunch of pansies when you get right down to it, though, so I can’t exactly recommend them.”

“Thanks, Suzu. You’ve done a lot for me already. With your help, I know I’ll

pull through this.”

I offered her a humble thanks, bowing my head. I was sure I wouldn’t have come up with this solution on my own, and I attached a lot of importance to thanking people who had helped me.

“Aw, shucks, it’s no big deal. I’m your mentor, right? Kind of what I’m here for, dude! And we’ve got a long road ahead of us, don’t forget.”

Suzu blushed and smiled, trying to play it off. Her reaction was different from Ann’s would have been, with her simple innocence, but it was sweet all the same.

“Just call me if you need anything. I’m here to look out for you, and don’t you forget it!”

And with that parting shot, she hung up.

“All right then. I’ve got to find an overseer for the construction, and that’s not going to be easy. Karumi, can I count on you to scout out the capable hunters and figure out some way to entice them here to challenge the labyrinth?”

“Yes, let me handle that. I know we’re asking a lot here, but I believe in you.”

Karumi offered me a little bow and summoned a door, then opened it and returned to her office.

◇

“Whew.”

I collapsed into a chair and took a sip of my now-lukewarm tea.

“Karumi just turned my world upside down, and I’m still processing it. Ann, did you listen to all of that just now?”

“Yeah. There’s a lot of it I don’t really get, though.”

“Well, that’s fine. Good job sticking with us.”

“Mmm...”

I put an arm around Ann, who was practically glued to my side like she was trying to protect me, and patted her head.

Whether she was in kobold form or human form, she always had this soothing scent of fresh-cut hay about her.

“Complicated concepts get easier to understand if you start thinking about them in gaming terms.”

Most people would look at something new in a game and make an analogy to something in the real world to understand it better, but truly hardcore gamers did the opposite, using their superior gaming knowledge to get better at real life.

“Our victory conditions are clear: we have half a year to achieve a certain score and a certain level of dungeon. So, yeah, we just need to think of it as a management simulation game rather than as a survival game.”

It was in fact my job to manage this labyrinth, so it wasn’t so much a simulation as, well, work. But the difference between the game of life and the kind of games I spent my life on was ultimately the tiniest of margins.

“We have two things to keep in mind. First, it doesn’t matter who we bring in. Second, we either need a lot of deaths or a lot of invaders to repel. Racking up deaths seems too difficult. Lots of work, time, and funds. The other path to victory looks tougher, but given the time constraints it’s our only option. So, we’ll be luring in and repelling invaders.”

If I bought obscene amounts of livestock and slaughtered them for meat, maybe I’d be able to pull it off, but it would definitely take too much time and effort. Even setting aside how expensive livestock had to be in this world, the logistics of getting so many of them to the labyrinth would have been a nightmare.

“So, we’ll run a plain old labyrinth where we lure intruders and throw them back out. Ann, you remember that game I had you play, *Soul Collector 4*?”

“Yep. That was the one about turning a lousy magician into a powerful wizard who trapped people in his magic labyrinth, right? You told me it’d be good reference material, so I tried it out.”

“The *Soul Collector* series is a staple of the labyrinth simulator genre.”

You’d trap humans in your labyrinth and harvest their souls to grow stronger.

Then you rinse and repeat with more powerful traps. Sometimes you even got a chance to sacrifice humans to summon a demon to help you out. One interesting angle was that you had to capture your prey alive. The soul left the body when it died, so you didn't get to snack on souls if your traps killed the humans.

You got the most points by capturing humans without putting a scratch on them, but you could make the traps as fake-scary as you wanted. Planting the occasional sprung grizzly bear trap with a mangled corpse in it was a great way to send the humans screaming and running away through your labyrinth, directly into another trap. One crowd favorite was the honey trap, where a succubus mimicking a captured village girl would beg for help, enticing the intruders to go help her and be ensnared. Man, what a great game. If you really wanted, you could always soften up the intruders with some fire or electric traps, leaving them easy meat for a pitfall, but that wasn't very efficient, both because it was expensive to set up and because it gave you fewer points.

I hadn't really explained any of this when I set Ann up with the game. I mean, I knew about stuff like that because the honey trap combo was a staple of the series, but she didn't have that background. I did kind of regret not playing it together and overseeing her after teaching her the basics, though. Ann was playing the PC remaster, *Soul Collector 4 HD*, so it would've been a new experience for me, too.

I decided to check her save file. In only three days, she'd shown phenomenal progress. All the physical traps had been replaced with a variety of demon traps, particularly the succubi. Her labyrinth was a veritable crucible of lust. I felt a brief pang of regret for the loss of Ann's innocence. *Gun Gust* may have been violent, but it was pretty tame otherwise. The overall survival rate in her labyrinth was 10%, but for male adventurers it plummeted to only 2%. I resisted the urge to check the world leaderboards, but I had a feeling Ann would have been up there.

It seemed she was a natural labyrinth manager. Still, I had my reservations about putting that to use. I didn't want her name going down in history as a villain. Raising Ann to be a respectable lady was going to be a rocky road.

"I don't think those exact mechanics are quite what we're looking for, but at

least the big picture is the same; we'll be building up a labyrinth, attracting and kicking out intruders, and fulfilling certain conditions within set time limits."

"Aww, we can't do it like this? But the succubus ladies would practically do our job for us!"

There was that pang of conscience again. I'd chosen poorly. I should never have shown her that filthy game.

"Suzu will come in handy, that's for sure. There's no bigger advantage than an experienced ally."

Even just having her there as an advisor made our chances of success much higher.

"I never thought the tsarina would come to our aid."

"Suzu's really that amazing?"

"Yeah. She's so good at production and management, she's almost a living legend. She's had me on the ropes a few times."

Actually, it was more than a few times. I'd struggled to stay ahead of the tsarina more times than I cared to admit.

"A long while back, the tsarina attacked a city of mine with five times the troops I had. We somehow held off the overwhelming numbers through sheer guts, but the next day, she came back with ten times the troops I had! It was a nightmare."

And that'd kept going, too. No matter how many times we beat them, they just kept multiplying. The thought still gave me the shivers.

"It was like she'd built a summoning circle to the foot soldier realm. The tsarina was so famous, you'd have to look hard to find someone who hadn't heard of her, no matter what game you played."

She drove off invaders with sheer numbers and overwhelming industrial might, rising through the ranks and establishing her tsardom of ice and steel. In every corner of the internet, people knew the name Belka. I'd devoted my life to games, but there was no question who was more well-known. I'd had a lot of rivals, but none who induced nearly the amount of trauma that Suzu did.

“Huh. So no matter how many you beat, she’d bring more the next day? That sounds tough.”

“Yeah, she’s horrible to run into on the other side of the battlefield, but by the same token, she’s a dependable ally.”

Unfortunately, our position didn’t really play into the tsarina’s strengths. Labyrinth #228 needed a lightning onslaught, with minimal time to build up our productivity. We couldn’t afford attrition tactics or overwhelming our enemies. We had to do more with less.

“I’m glad we’ve got Karumi on our side as well. She’s always been more of a neutral bystander before. She’s earnest and understanding, and I think she’ll work hard since she’s got something on the line as well.”

“Yeah, Karumi’s the best. She always brings me candy!”

Karumi and I got along well, and I trusted her to do right by me even if she wasn’t in harm’s way, but I thought she’d be less likely to screw up when her own neck was on the executioner’s block.

“I can’t believe I thought she was the perfect coworker for a full week after I was hired.”

She’d managed to hide her true nature for a week or so, but like a mostly-white cat covered in baby powder, her dark side became visible before too long. She was a klutz.

“Really? I think she’s cool. I wanna be like her when I grow up.”

“You should tell her that next time she visits. I’m sure it’d make her happy.”

And now I was just praying that Ann didn’t learn to be a klutz from Karumi.

“Oh. But I would like to have bigger breasts than her.”

“Whatever you do, don’t let her hear you say that. We’ll all regret it.”

I explained that Ann was permitted to compliment Karumi on her slender figure, but that any other related commentary was strictly forbidden.

“O-Okay.”

“The next thing we’re going to need is workers. If we weren’t in such a rush, I

wouldn't mind just the two of us building the whole thing, but we've only got three months to get this done."

I brought up the labyrinth manager UI and checked my status.

Aoi Kousaka <Manager of Labyrinth #228> **Vitality**: 208/208 **Stamina**: 952/952 **Willpower**:205/205

Skill(s): <Dungeon Management Tool> <Appraisal> There were my same three stats again, and precious little detail about what they meant. Still, they had risen sharply ever since I'd gotten here, what with all that work digging out my own set of stairs—thanks for nothing, Karumi—and saving Milt in their moment of need. Looking back at it, I really had been through a lot. I couldn't detect any physical changes—no bulging biceps or six-pack abs—but I *had* switched from swinging the pickaxe with two hands to swinging it with one. My stamina had improved so much that I could run all the way from the labyrinth to Milt without getting winded. Ann's stats had risen just as much as mine. But our stats would only take us so far. No matter how far we pushed ourselves, we still had limits.

"We need as much help as we can get. I'll explain everything to Mayor Hopper, but I'm sure this isn't going to be cheap."

"It's autumn, too. Even I'm helping every day in the village."

Autumn was harvest season, the busiest time of the year for farmers. The farmers in Milt generally raised crops that grew year-round and in a relatively short time, so they were a little less focused on this time than traditional farming villages, but fall was still a hectic season for them.

"You'll have to feed them if they're here helping, you know."

"Oh, you're right. Even if we persuade them to work, we'll still have to arrange meals and drinks for all of them. Man, I feel a headache coming on."

In the modern world, you could just pay your workers and expect them to take care of food for themselves, but things didn't work that way here. They'd be doing hard physical labor here. Asking them to commute all the way back and forth for each meal, not to mention prepare three meals a day for themselves, was out of the question.

“If you make delicious food for everyone, I bet people will work harder.”

Milt had no inns or restaurants to speak of.

“I’ll need to purchase food, transport it, and hire people to cook and serve it. And worse, I’ll need to feed all of those people as well. The more people there are, the more expensive this gets.”

Thankfully, the prices were cheap out here in the sticks, and I could sell my potions on Tundra for a tidy profit. Still, I felt like this was not exactly going to be a cheap project.

“We’ll need someone experienced with working with the land if we’re gonna dig underground. They’ll need to be comfortable giving out orders, too.”

The labyrinth would be largely underground. We’d need a lot of stone for the part of the building above ground, as well, and preparing all of that would require a lot of time and technique. Thankfully, I had the <Dungeon Management Tool> skill, so procuring pickaxes and shovels would be easy.

“Like a foreman?”

“Yeah, right. I’ll ask the mayor to recommend someone, but I’m worried. It’d be easy to find the kind of person we need in a mining town, but I’m not so sure about Milt.”

“Hmm. Well, Mister Barry told me he dug an underground tunnel once.”

“Barry? Is he a kobold?”

“Yeah.”

“Huh. Guess that’s why I don’t remember him well.”

I still couldn’t tell most kobolds apart from each other in Milt. You could kinda tell who was who by the patterns on their fur, but face recognition was hard; they all kinda looked like dogs. The only kobolds I could recognize at a distance were Ann and her aunt Jenny.

“Okay, good suggestion, Ann. We’ll ask him later.”

“Mmm!”

I stroked Ann’s hair, and she murmured ticklishly. From the way she reacted,

it must've felt rather different from when she was in her kobold form.

"And the last thing on the list is a labyrinth guardian. Someone strong."

I still needed to build up a labyrinth, of course. A big empty space with a boss in the middle of it wouldn't really be a proper labyrinth. If push came to shove, I could fight. I'd grown a lot stronger during my time here, and though I was completely untrained, I could always grab the cursed sword from my warehouse and let it take care of the hard work at the expense of my health. It had certainly come in handy when crisis came to Milt. Since the cursed sword literally moved me on its own, it felt more like controlling a game avatar than actually doing things. All these dumb imaginary "skills" rolling around in my brain were finally coming in handy. Besides, it was important to have a backup. Even though I'd be paying my guardian for full-time work, the labyrinth didn't take days off, and they'd need to rest. If I could take up the sword and tag in for them every now and then, the burden wouldn't be so extreme. I'd always noticed that labyrinths in games were populated with undead and golems, and my new perspective gave me a lot of insight into why they were so useful. Golems and the undead didn't need food or rest.

"Oh, wait a minute. There actually *is* a combat veteran in the village."

Wouldn't that prideful, clumsy knight be perfect labyrinth guardian material? I'd been planning to hire her to do odd jobs anyway, pending Ann's permission. I decided to ask.

"In most games, I'd have the luxury of trial and error. Even if I messed up, I could reload, and once I got it right, I could save and move on. This really is hard mode."

But the harder it was, the more fun it was!

"Yeah, I'm only happy when the difficulty's as high as it gets. This is perfect."

I realized that I was actually getting pumped up about my labyrinth-building time trial. And why wouldn't I? Build a labyrinth, rack up points, and do it on a tight deadline. It was classic game material! I'd spent countless hours playing games back when I was a student, but ever since I'd found a job, I'd switched to playing the game of life, and it was a whole lot more serious.

“All right, I think we know what we need to do. Wanna come to the village with me, Ann? We need to lock down our guardian.”

“Okay!”

I was really hoping Mary would accept the job of protecting the labyrinth. It wouldn’t be easy work, but I could certainly make it worth her while. Besides, one of my favorite game mechanics had always been making enemy units into allies.

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“Heya! My name’s Ann!”

“I’m Mary. Um, Ann, do you mind if I pet you?”

“Oh, um, go ahead.”

“So fluffy...”

Ann and I paid a visit to Mary at the mayor’s house. A wave of bliss crossed Mary’s face as she stroked Ann’s soft fur. It would seem she had a soft spot for fluffy things. At least the two of them were off to a good start.

“Mary, this is the girl I told you about. Ann is part of my family. You two would be seeing each other every day if you came to work at the labyrinth, so, do you think the two of you can get along?”

“D-Do you mean to say I could pet her like this every day?”

I was worried that, being a human, she would have some aversion to Daemons, but given she’d been content to stay at the mayor’s this whole time, maybe I was overthinking the problem. Still, I decided to ask.

“You won’t mind living with a Daemon?”

“Oh, so that’s what you’re concerned about. My house was close to the border. Moreover, we had Daemon servants since I was a young girl, so I hardly think of them as anything out of the ordinary. Though I admit, most humans do not share my views.”

Servants? I’d heard the humans turned captured Daemons into slaves, but to think Mary’s family had done that... It was small consolation that they were

putting them through forced labor, rather than trying to drive them to extinction.

“At any rate, the other day we talked about you coming to work for me. I’d like to hire you for half a year. Would you be willing to do chores and to serve as my labyrinth guardian for that time?”

“What tasks does a guardian perform? Stand guard over the treasure at the heart of the labyrinth?”

She didn’t know about the goal to attract people to the labyrinth, of course, but she did at least have a good handle on what a guardian’s job was.

“Yeah, that’s more or less the idea.”

“Chores aside, are you sure you want to entrust the labyrinth to me? Perhaps I shouldn’t be the one to point this out, but it wasn’t long ago that I was attacking this village.”

“Well, first of all, you seem like the kind of person who keeps her word. And second, it turns out I really need your help.”

“I’m pleased you think so highly of me, but I would like to understand why you require my aid specifically.”

Mary tilted her head and listened as I explained about the labyrinth’s upcoming performance evaluation and the expectations placed upon it. How we owed twenty years’ worth of intruders and only had six months to get them all. I even told her about the plan to attract hunters to try to rack up enough points in six months to meet our quota.

“A dire situation indeed.”

Mary stroked Ann’s fur through the whole story. She was like one of those kids who wouldn’t stop pestering the poor, tired worker stuffed inside an amusement park mascot costume. I had complicated feelings about it. I could understand why she wasn’t in any hurry to agree to the proposal. If I’d been one of this world’s humans, I’d have been pretty alarmed to hear that those horrible Daemons were building labyrinths teeming with traps, and were counting up the number of deaths they inflicted.

“If my role shall be to fight, rather than merely to do chores, then I would ask a favor.”

Mary raised her head and met my eyes.

“Let’s hear it first.”

“I don’t mind if you wish to train beforehand, but I would like to challenge you to a duel of swords. Or of any weapon, I suppose, as long as it’s a duel. I’m aware you’re a civilian, not a soldier, and I’ll admit I find you an agreeable enough man, but I must test your mettle to determine if I can respect you as my superior. You can learn more about a man by spending a minute crossing blades with him than you can by speaking with him for an hour.”

I hadn’t seen that coming. In a game, this would be a branching point, and the story would change depending on whether I won or lost. But it was clear that if I wanted to win Mary’s approval, I’d have to at least take her on.

“Very well, I accept your challenge. I would like to use sheathed swords, rather than wooden swords.”

You really ought to use wooden swords for this kind of thing, but I had no sword training at all, so I couldn’t even fight unless I depended on the cursed sword. That was why it had to be real swords. It sure would’ve been nice if I had a game I could practice with. Maybe some up-and-coming VR game developer would make a game where a cursed sword took over your body. I sure wished they would hurry up and get on that.

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I’d gone back to the labyrinth to fetch the cursed sword, and now I was facing off against Mary in the backyard of the mayor’s house, sword in hand. I actually felt like I’d grown somewhat accustomed to the single-edged blade, but I was still a bit nervous whenever I remembered that its only mode was “all-out attack”. I left the sword mostly in control of me, basically just willing it to prepare to engage with Mary. This must have been what it felt like to be moved around with a controller or keyboard. Mary held her double-edged sword, what I assumed to be standard issue for a knight, with the tip pointed straight at me.

“I’m ready whenever you are.”

You know, life in this place was hard, but it sure was fun. I'd gone up against people of all ages and nationalities while playing games, but I'd never had a chance to cross swords with a knight before. Mary's concentration and experience were evident in her stance. Her sheer presence was overwhelming, rivaling that of any top-ranked pro I'd seen. No, she surpassed them all. In a situation like this, the information floodgates opened up, and your brain picked up on every little twitch of muscle, every flicker of the eyes. The eyes were the key; the windows to the soul. It looked like Mary intended to let me take the initiative. I mentally thanked her as I briefly reviewed the one-handed and two-handed sword combos in *Gun Gust* before selecting one. As I pictured the preparation stance from the attack where you launched from the back row around the enemy's flank to cut at them from the side, the cursed sword interpreted my thoughts and made my body enact them.

"Here I come!"

I imagined myself pressing my Shift+W hotkey to quickly close the gap between us, and then Ctrl+1 to use the skill, and a smile spread across my face. But I wasn't using a keyboard or mouse, and this wasn't a game. I had to be conscious of that and provide input to the cursed sword the way it expected. *Close the distance. Slash. Regain my balance when she evades. Quick, intercept Mary's slash from the right! Now, dodge the follow-up and get some range.* There weren't any fancy visual effects, but the clash of our sheathed swords striking was far more impressive.

"You can do it, Aoi!"

Ann gave me a cheery yell. Seriously, shouldn't she have been scared or something? Clearly I'd let her play too much *Gun Gust*.

I had to parry another cut from the right, and then again move to parry her follow-up thrusts low to my center. Mary was ruthless. If this were a game, she'd have gone pro for sure. No, her skills here were beyond any gamer I'd ever seen.

"Good luck to you too, Mary!"

She had me cornered. If she'd been one of the many rivals I'd found over my years of gaming, I'd have put my trust in being able to avoid every attack and

gone for a high-risk technique to break the stalemate. I pictured the go-to combo move I'd invented in *Gun Gust*, Flash Blade, which mixed a movement skill and an attack skill. It was kind of plain, but it always got the job done. The cursed sword accepted my input and closed in on Mary with blinding speed before throwing out a fast feint. Mary didn't bother with parrying, and instead tried to avoid the feint altogether, just like I'd hoped. I stepped in and rearranged for the real attack, slashing hard with my sheathed sword, and... miraculously, Mary's sword made it there just in time to parry, now clutched in both her hands. I kept linking together combos from the game, and every time, Mary would parry, evade, or deflect them, sometimes even throwing in a counterattack. We were risking our safety out there, but our swords flashed as we twisted and turned as though we were locked in a dance together. Man, jumping around and getting actual exercise like this was crazy fun. I wondered if VR games felt this good. Even though I was pushing myself hard, I wasn't breathing particularly hard. Maybe leveling up my stamina so much was coming in handy?

"Hah!"

Mary parried another attack and pushed me back, creating some distance. My heart was crying out, telling me it wanted to keep fighting, it wasn't done playing. It was a damn shame, really. If this had been a game, we could've played until our lives were spent.

"Mary, shouldn't you have a shield?"

It was a good fight, even if I didn't think I'd win, but the whole time I could tell something was off about Mary's technique. She was almost exclusively using her sword one-handed, only grabbing on with the other hand when she was forced to parry. The way she fought made me certain she was used to carrying something in her free hand.

"I left my shield with the soldiers whenever I rode the armor."

She was looking at me in surprise, her eyes wide. Probably wondering how I'd noticed. But come on, I'd seen countless enemies wielding a sword and shield, and some games even had different animations for characters when their equipment set was incomplete. Mary's style was just like a sword-and-board

knight whose shield had lost all its durability.

“I should admit defeat. Even with you handicapped by the lack of a shield, I’m not quite on your level. If you were fully armed, I wouldn’t stand a chance.”

Even with my cursed sword channeling all my game experience, I was at a clear disadvantage. If I wanted to seriously fight with Mary, we’d have to both be prepared for it to be a battle to the death. I’d only seen Mary piloting her armor before, but I’d never dreamed she’d be this strong. Now I really wanted her for Labyrinth #228!

“Are you satisfied?”

Man, what a powerful unit! But as much as I wanted to recruit her, I tried to keep the enthusiasm from showing on my face. *Play it cool, Aoi.*

“Yes, I’ve seen enough.”

Mary’s smile told me all I needed to know. It seemed I’d gotten full marks on this event.

“Well then, let me ask you one more time. Mary, will you come work with us?”

“It would be my honor.”

Our combat trial concluded, Mary’s face was aglow. Someday, I’d have to ask her what she thought about our fight.

“Here is my offer. In addition to your duties as labyrinth guardian, I’ll also be asking you to do chores periodically. In exchange, you’ll be provided with lodging and meals, and you’ll be paid 150,000 DL per month. How does that sound?”

“I’ll do it! Maybe it’s just a temporary thing, but mind if I call you Boss?”

She grabbed me by both hands and looked up at me, her eyes sparkling. It was harder to gauge her mood since she was human, but I was willing to bet that if she were a kobold, her tail would be wagging furiously. She was so excited she even stopped with the flowery knight talk. Huh. Would I have been able to skip the fight if I’d just told her how much I’d be paying her?

“Just keep calling me Aoi, like you have been. Mind if I stay casual with you as

well?”

“Of course, Aoi. No need to worry about that. Even if I’m just a hired hand, it’d be strange for us to be overly polite.”

Helping around the house or working in the fields would probably have gotten her no more than her daily meals. She’d have been working herself to the bone to earn any money, if it weren’t for my offer, so I supposed it was natural for her to be so excited? Any prisoner needed ransom money, but as a knight and a noble, she’d need to pay a lot. It made sense that she wouldn’t be able to say no to a high-paying offer like mine. July was standing just behind Mary, holding a tray with cups of tea. When I mentioned money, her eyes turned predatory.

“Oh, that’s wonderful. I’m so glad you found a job.”

“Yes. I’m so glad to have finished searching, so I won’t be idle anymore.”

Mayor Hopper looked sincerely happy, and Mary simply looked relieved.

“Here, consider this your relocation fee. You’ll be working on-site from now on, so you can use this to prepare whatever you need before moving in.”

I handed her a leather bag with about 200,000 DL inside. I expected it would cover the money she owed the mayor, at least, and have some leftover for whatever necessities she’d have to buy. I could get what she needed on Tundra, and the quality might be higher, but I was certain it would be far more expensive as well.

“I’m grateful, Aoi, for everything, but there is one problem. Being the labyrinth guardian means I’ll have to fight, correct?”

“Well, yeah. That’s what guardians are for.”

“The issue is, I had to sell my armor to a wolfman peddler to be able to afford staying here. Is there anything that can be done about that? I don’t need the full Extended Knight Armor, but it would give me an edge against challengers to at least have my normal armor.”

“Ah, that must have been Fez. Gotcha. That said, was it okay for you to sell your armor? You’re a knight, after all.”

“No, it was absolutely not okay, but my options were limited, and it was

better to sell my armor than to sell my sword."

Wow, talk about a choice of evils. Imagine being a knight and being forced to pawn either your armor or your sword just for living expenses. Talking with Mary never failed to make me pity her.

"I'll have a chat with the peddler and see if I can buy it back somehow."

"I'd be very thankful. Whatever the cost, it doesn't matter. You can take it out of my earnings. Though saying so makes me realize that all I've really done so far today is to increase my debt."

Mary's shoulders drooped. True enough, buying back something you pawned tended to be pretty expensive.

"We'll be waiting for you at the west entrance to the village, Mary. Come meet us whenever you're ready."

"Absolutely. I'll try to settle everything quickly."

Ann and I exited the house just as July laid her hands on Mary's shoulders, a malicious smile on her face. I heard a little shriek and looked back to see July dragging Mary into the back of the house. It looked like she was going to be squaring up with *one* of her debtors today.

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"I suppose everywhere around the village is like this, but truly, this is a rather dreary place, is it not? There is hardly any greenery."

Ann and I were headed back to Labyrinth #228 once more, this time with Mary in tow. Her purse was light once again after paying off her debts and buying necessities. This whole region was nothing but dry wilderness as far as the eye could see, so I had to nod in agreement. The tilled fields surrounding the village weren't an awe-inspiring sight by any means, but at least they were cheerier than the occasional dead tree or boulder you could look forward to seeing out here.

"Daemon villages are usually in places like that. There's monsters all over most of the nice spots."

"That's why they live in such arid terrain? I'd always heard that Daemons

simply disliked greenery, and that they preferred to live in a less tame area. I never suspected they were forced into it."

Mary looked somewhat distressed on hearing Ann's explanation. In a fantasy game, you'd kind of expect the Daemons to like rough places; it just came with being a Daemon, you know? But if there hadn't been supernatural monsters around, of course they would've preferred to live somewhere with more fertile land, where it was easier to get by.

"Yep, that's what Auntie told me. She said the better the land is, the bigger and meaner the monsters there are. She also said that monsters will come make nests in the fields, if they get too nice, which is hard to plan for."

Well, that explained why the hunters never ran out of work, if the monsters were attracted to developed areas. I'd seen my share of monsters and people like the Daemons in RPGs I'd played, but this struggle for survival between the two of them here seemed more painful than usual. Actually, I still had never seen one of these monsters, so I didn't quite know what was the difference between them and any old beast. I figured maybe they were just particularly fierce, like, more so than a wild boar or something.

"Hmm. You say they tend to congregate where the land is particularly bountiful. Does that mean monsters are largely herbivores?"

"Yeah. They like going into the fields and eating the vegetables, as well as weeds and stuff. But they have really big fangs and claws, and they'll hurt you real bad if you come too close."

"I see. So when a monster settles in your field, the only solution is to exterminate it. That's when you would send for a knight like me, or maybe a soldier or an adventurer in human territory."

"If you let too many of those vegetable-eating monsters gather, even bigger monsters will come out from deep in the forest to eat the littler ones. When that happens, you just have to give up and run away. The big monsters are super strong, and they hunt people too."

This was a harsh world, even for those who only wanted to farm the land in peace.

“This is a pretty scary place, seems like. Hey, Mary, how do you deal with monsters over in human territory?”

Since these monsters were such a threat to Daemons, and Daemons were generally built sturdier than humans, I was curious.

“Um, well, as far as I’m aware, though there are some pests which make the lives of the farmers more difficult, there are no threats great enough that they can’t be defeated by a few men with basic training. There simply aren’t that many monsters to begin with.”

Mary’s answer was somewhat troubled. It seemed like the peasants had an easier time over in the human lands.

“You can certainly find large monsters if you venture deep into the forests. Their meat, bones, and hides are all useful and valuable. We have many adventurers, which seems to be a similar profession to your hunters, who take on requests to hunt monsters simply to collect those materials.”

Interesting. So they were valuable for crafting. The meat was probably nutrient-rich, and perhaps the organs and bones could be processed to make medicine. The durable hides were no doubt useful for making fine armor or clothing. If the bones were sturdy enough, you could even make weapons or tools out of them. They would be like whales or tuna back in my own world, where no part went to waste. Rich people must have been tripping over themselves to acquire monster materials.

“However, in most forests, the monsters have been hunted to the brink of extinction. The feudal lords have already learned of this risk and have banned hunting, but poaching continues, driving the monsters further and further towards the inevitable.”

“...”

Mary’s last remark left both of us speechless. Jeez, humans were a scary bunch. I mean, sure, monsters seemed to be weaker over there, but even so, they’d nearly hunted them to extinction?

“Ahem. On another topic, I couldn’t help but notice how unusual your attire is, Aoi. What do you call those clothes? They look rather well tailored. Are you

perhaps a noble?”

Noticing our shock, Mary cleared her throat and attempted to change the topic. Well, yes, my business suit certainly did look out of place in this world. But what other option did I have? You couldn’t be a Japanese businessman and not wear a suit to work. Maybe they weren’t ideal fighting clothes, but that was beside the point. Mary had her sword strapped tight around her waist and a tattered cloth bag slung over her shoulder, which she must have bought in the village. Without any armor, she looked more like a regular village girl than a knight.

“Ah, well, this is the standard-issue labyrinth manager uniform. And we aren’t really part of the class hierarchy, so I’m not a noble.”

Admittedly, Karumi’s office didn’t actually have a dress code, so I wasn’t *required* to wear a suit. And I could have just brought in casual clothes to wear around the labyrinth, if I’d wanted to. But this was my job, and I didn’t feel right about it. Without my suit on, I wouldn’t have felt like I was really working. Even when I slept, I still wore the slacks and the button-down shirt. That may have sounded a little odd, but I had my reasons. See, as long as I was in this world, I was still on the clock, awake or asleep. If something unexpected happened in the middle of the night, it was my job to get up and deal with it. Most managers apparently commuted to and from home each day, so they usually had their Daemon subcontractors deal with issues that arose during the night, but I didn’t have anyone I could leave in charge like that. Not that there was much that could really happen to Labyrinth #228 in its current state. Maybe once we’d built up a proper labyrinth, then there’d be things to deal with. To be honest, the way I was racking up all this overtime by working all day every day, even though there wasn’t anything to do over the night shift, made me feel a bit guilty about how much pay I was taking home. Come to think of it, the only other manager I’d met so far was Suzu, and she’d also been wearing a suit. I wondered if her reasons were the same as mine. I’d have to ask her.

“Labyrinth managers aren’t part of the class system? You handled yourself with such poise that I felt certain you were nobility.”

“I’m happy you think so highly of me, but honestly, these are just work clothes.”

I didn’t really know much about the nobility, but I did know that Daemon nobles were appointed based on merit, not just bloodline, so it seemed education was a big differentiator for them. Perhaps, as a Japanese guy with a higher education, I could be considered nobility.

“The stitching and the design are both rather good. I know I’m imposing, but would you happen to have a spare set of those clothes, Aoi? I would be more than happy to buy it off you.”

Oh man, Mary wanted a suit? A female knight in a business suit, what a combo!

“I don’t mind, but it’s pretty expensive.”

Mary would be working as the labyrinth guardian, so a few items from my world here or there wouldn’t be a big deal.

“Oh. May I ask how much?”

“The jacket and pants together would be about forty thousand DL, and the shirt another eight thousand.”

The exchange rate for labyrinth managers was roughly one DL per yen, so that was about what they’d cost me.

“Unbelievable! I shall pass. I cannot afford to spend so lavishly on clothing.”

Mary looked crestfallen. Perhaps she was still scarred from her recent poverty, having such a hard time affording living expenses even at Milt’s cheap prices.

“Aoi, if you aren’t nobility, why would you wear such expensive clothes?”

“The place I lived before I came here was simply more expensive. If you were looking for a job there, it was common practice to wear clothes like this.”

The price of a business suit in Japan, on sale, hovered around 40,000 yen. There were no dry cleaners in this world, so you had to buy one that wouldn’t get too wrinkled when you hand-washed it. And the price only went up from there if you wanted something decent.

“Labyrinth managers are well compensated, it seems.”

She was right about that, at least. In part that was because my pay was calculated based on the cost of living in central Tokyo, but even for the location, it was high. Compared to the amount people were paid in a village like Milt, I was quite the high roller. Though they always direct deposited my salary, so it wasn't like I could use it in here anyway.

"Labyrinth managers are thrown into difficult situations and expected to make tough decisions. Besides, it's a dangerous job. So I guess the salary reflects that."

Yeah, right. Sure the job paid well, but they dumped me alone in the wilderness for six months, and then I had to go to battle against an invading force. And that was just the trial period! Suddenly I wasn't so smug about my pay anymore. Plus, if they'd at least put me in charge of a functioning labyrinth, I'd have been able to sleep through the night, rather than constantly waking up in a panic about my massive achievement deficit.

◇

"Oh, those are the stairs. We're almost there."

Labyrinth #228 rested at the bottom of the Great Saredo Rift. The only indication of the entrance was a signpost I'd made out of branches from a waterdry tree. We walked towards it until you could just see the dim glow of the bluelight moss lamps I'd hung around the entrance. The big staircase was easy to miss, since I hadn't put up a rail or a fence or anything. One time, I'd gotten lost trying to find it, and after that I'd slapped together those landmarks and put them up. Simpler times. As we descended the cut stone steps, the gentle reflection of the sun on the smooth rock walls wrapped us in its warm embrace. It may have only been the sun's reflection on stone, but the light glinting off motes dancing in the breeze made for a magical sight.

"This view is breathtaking."

The staircase was barely two meters wide and had no railing at all, so the view was the same as if you were walking down the cliff face. The sting of the wind that went whistling through the valley sent a thrill up my spine. Mary was hugging the wall as she walked down, and probably wasn't paying as much attention to the view as she claimed. Well, I could empathize. It'd taken me a

while to get used to walking next to that sheer drop, too.

“This is truly a hidden gem. I never thought there would be such a vibrant cradle of life at the bottom of a ravine.”

Mary stopped for a moment to appreciate the basin of the Great Saredo Rift. We heard the trickle of tiny waterfalls dripping down to form rivulets through the many varieties of moss that covered the ravine in a tapestry of green and blue.

“Pretty amazing, huh? The air isn’t so dry here, and the plants smell great!”

Hearing Ann boast about our home brought a smile to my face.

“How is this possible? Surely a land this verdant should draw powerful monsters! And yet, there are none that I can see. Is this some kind of illusion?”

“They probably just haven’t realized yet, since you couldn’t really get down here until we dug out this staircase recently. Also, it seems most of the vegetation growing in here is poisonous. It’s all safe to touch, but many of the plants are dangerous if you eat them. So maybe that’s also part of the reason monsters avoid it.”

Most of the vegetation growing in the ravine basin could be used as alchemy ingredients to make both magic potions and regular medicine. About half of them were considered legendary materials. And in retrospect, those two things were probably related. Plants that were raw materials for potent medicines or magic potions obviously wouldn’t be fit for everyday consumption, whether for a human, an animal, or a monster. That kind of dosage would usually be toxic.

“So this is all poison as far as the eye can see?”

“The plants and moss are toxic, but if you treat them with care, they’re valuable medicinal materials. While you could wipe out a city or two with all the poison in them, you could also save ten times that many lives if you used them to treat illness.”

Medicinal herbs here weren’t so different from those in my own world in that regard.

“Ultimately, whether they’re poison or medicine is up to you, when you

decide how to use them. Incidentally, the water here is incredibly high quality, in spite of the plants being what they are."

"I see. Life and death are both ready-at-hand, and you have only to choose. What a remarkable place. Truly, this is fit to house a labyrinth of the Great Dark Lord."

I worried a bit about how much Mary was getting her expectations up. She was in for a rude awakening when she saw our shabby cabin, that was for sure.

◇

"Okay now. Hey, Aoi, would you look the other way for a sec?"

When we finally reached the bottom of the steps, Ann set down her bags and put her hands together as if praying. Though she kept up her kobold form when we were outside the labyrinth, she always changed back into her human form when we returned. I dutifully turned away from her. Apparently being seen while transforming was a lot like having someone watch you change clothes.

"..."

Mary's jaw dropped in surprise when she saw Ann turn into a pretty girl.

"You can look now! Oh, what's wrong, Mary?"

"She seems surprised. Wonder why."

Ann had been all skin and bones when we first met, but now she was the very picture of health. In her kobold form especially, she was wonderfully soft and fluffy. What was there to be surprised by, I wondered.

"How shocking. And even more shocking is seeing how commonplace you two treated it. This really is the other side of the world. Are you in fact a human, Ann?"

Ohhh, right, the transformation itself had caught her unawares. Yeah, that'd confused me too, the first time. She and I had slept together at first as if she was the family pet, but then she'd suddenly shapeshifted into a beautiful human girl. It was such a strong temptation, and it'd come on so suddenly, that I'd almost done something terrible to her back then.

"Ann is a half kobold. These are both her real form, and she has the strengths

of both a human and a kobold.”

“Since she’s such a pretty girl, I asked her to change into kobold form outside of the labyrinth to help keep her safe. You’d have to be another kobold or close family to tell if a kobold was normal or pretty, right?”

“Um, I see. Well, I may have lived a sheltered life, but far be it from me to be frightened off by something like this.”

Mary couldn’t hide her surprise, but at least she was understanding.

“Am I a strange-looking human?”

Ann looked down at the ground and rubbed her hands together nervously. It seemed she’d spent most of her life in kobold form, so she wasn’t too comfortable with her appearance as a human. I thought she was absolutely beautiful, but you try convincing a girl of that.

“No, perish the thought! You’re simply adorable!”

Mary rushed over to stroke Ann’s head. Oh, good call, she liked that.

“Naturally, I understand why you would find it safer to appear to be a kobold in this part of the world. What surprises me is that a child can be born from a union between a human and a kobold in the first place.”

Fair enough. I’d played my share of games, but half kobolds were a new one to me.

“Are mixed races common in the Great Dark Lord’s territories?”

She looked to me for an answer, but I was the wrong guy to ask.

“Where I’m from, we only have humans.”

Despite being one of the Great Dark Lord’s labyrinth managers, I was just a human from another world. I wasn’t an expert on local anthropology.

“There’s lots in the cities especially, but most of them prefer one form over the other and just live that way, so people don’t really realize.”

Ah, that made sense. You’d never really know a half kobold from a kobold if they never transformed.

“Is there a reason why you use your human form in the labyrinth?”

“Yeah, because Aoi’s here! I’m safe as long as he’s around.”

Her radiant smile warmed my heart. We’d been through a lot of happy times, and also a lot of worrisome times, since Ann had started using her human form with me. Like when she would have trouble sleeping and undo most of the buttons on my button-down shirt that she used instead of pajamas, leaving her practically naked on top of me. Or when, half-asleep, she would hug me tight and nuzzle my chest. Both of those were a daily occurrence. Honestly, you probably got less fanservice from a typical visual novel than I got in my regular life with Ann. But I had to hang on to the tattered shreds of my self-control and act like this was all no big deal, just one of those things that happens when you lay down for a nice, relaxing rest. I just wished she’d make it a little easier on me!

Now, look, I’d obviously feel lonely if she stopped acting so intimate, but she was taking it a bit far! Still, I wasn’t in Japan anymore, and she certainly wasn’t Toto. I was in another world, and one where she was considered mature and self-sufficient. Rationally, I knew that the proper thing to do would be to introduce her to the adult world as soon as possible, but when I thought about Ann losing her purity, my hand wavered. Ann herself wasn’t aware of the temptation she represented for me, and I could see that the fondness she felt for me was more that of a doting younger sister idolizing her big brother. But regardless of how we ended up, I was prepared to do right by her. I wanted to watch her back, and to be there by her side as she matured into an adult, however long that took her.

Don’t misunderstand me, though. I wasn’t being wishy-washy, asking myself if Ann was really the girl for me, or anything like that. I’d made my decision on that front long time ago.

You see, one thing I’d learned was that, corresponding to the wild variation in races inhabiting Daemon territory, there was also a wild variation in reproductive customs. The laws took this into account, only stipulating two requirements for marriage: that the two parties must consent, and that when two people wanted to be married, they should notify the village mayor or city warden. The people also seemed completely accepting of interracial marriage.

In other words, I had options.

Now, just ask any gamer: What's the best possible romantic outcome? The harem ending, of course! Ann was the only girl I had my sights on at the moment, but it was important to dream big.

"So, a half kobold and a human. You must have interesting family reunions. I must admit, I'm envious of the trust you have for each other, as I never had a brother myself."

I got the feeling Mary had misunderstood our relationship, but I didn't feel comfortable correcting her. Well, whatever the official records said, Ann and I considered each other family, and that was what mattered.

◇

"Welcome back. It seems your recruiting trip was successful."

"Oh, Aoi's back? Sweet, now we can get to work."

We returned to find Karumi and Suzu, visible again through a floating UI window, both drinking tea. I didn't mind Suzu relaxing, but I got a little miffed seeing Karumi there, just calmly sipping tea. The world was unfair if the source of my suffering got to sit around while I had to go out and cover for her mistakes.

"Karumi, Suzu, I'd like you to meet Mary, a knight of the human kingdom and my new labyrinth guardian. Mary, this is Karumi and Suzu."

"It's a pleasure to make your acquaintance."

"Ooh, a human knight, and so polite. Nice find, Aoi! Whaddaya think, Karumi?"

"I'm surprised, to say the least. She's certainly strong enough to serve as the labyrinth's guardian."

Karumi looked Mary over carefully. Wait, that was all she had to do to measure her ability?

"Suzu, does Karumi have some ability beyond our <Appraisal>?"

All labyrinth managers learned the <Appraisal> ability immediately, which showed basic stats like vitality, stamina, and willpower when used on a person. But it didn't show much beyond that and wasn't as useful as it sounded.

“Yeah, Karumi’s skill is different from ours. I’ve heard she can see more detailed info, like numerical values attached to skills and abilities.”

Sounded pretty handy. How come we didn’t get that?

“Aoi, are these two women attached to the labyrinth in some way?”

“Ah, right, I should tell you more about them. The one at the table there is Karumi, my superior. And the one talking through the window is Suzu, a colleague of mine and a fellow labyrinth manager... Hmm? What seems to be the trouble?”

“Well, there was a labyrinth near my old home, but it was a dreadful place where miasma would gather. If anybody was brave enough to dare challenging it, they were beset by vile creatures. I must admit that I’m shocked to find they were staffed by humans.”

Miasma? Crazy.

“I guess Suzu and I don’t really look like labyrinth overlords, do we? Maybe a minotaur like Mayor Hopper would be a better fit for your image of a labyrinth manager?”

“The appearance isn’t the issue. Even knowing a Daemon was in charge of one would be upsetting. To think that a person was in charge of all these... But do not worry about it. I’m fine now.”

I figured things were pretty different over in the human kingdom, and Mary was still coming to grips with the differences. It must have been hard on her.

“Kousaka, have you and Mary signed a contract?”

“No, but we have a verbal agreement. Do we need something written?”

In a world like this, I figured giving your word should be enough.

“Yes, you do. Ms. Mary, could you come take a look at this? I have your contract here, and... Oh, Kousaka, just to confirm, you’re hiring her as your labyrinth guardian right?”

“That’s the plan.”

If she was strong enough to pass Karumi’s inspection, I certainly wasn’t going

to change my mind now.

“Then we’ll need to file her labyrinth guardian registration as well.”

Karumi rummaged around in her briefcase and pulled out a few manila folders and documents. She laid them before Mary to sign, explaining the details of each one.

“Excellent, that’s all we need for registration. Kousaka, can you fill out this paper detailing her signing bonus?”

“Of course. This one here, right? Let’s see, the amount was... this.”

I went on to fill out her salary as well, but something about this wasn’t sitting right with me. When you hired a wandering swordsman or whatever, wasn’t this supposed to be the big scene? Like, shouldn’t there be some sweet line about guarding you with their life, and maybe some over-the-top ritual involving blood or whatever? It seemed almost criminal that all we were doing was signing a pile of documents. This was even worse than buying groceries and paying with your phone.

“All right, now that that’s all signed, we just need it properly notarized. That means it’s my turn.”

Karumi took a resin case from her bag, removed a stamp from it, and pressed the stamp firmly to the document, leaving an intricate black seal on the page.

“And now it’s official. Welcome to Labyrinth #228, guardian. We’re expecting a lot from you.”

Karumi made some closing remarks as she stashed the documents in her briefcase.

“Aoi, is that really all there is to it? This is worlds apart from the rituals I went through when I was made a knight.”

Seriously. This was a little too modern an approach for hiring a knight.

“Well, you’re better off not thinking too hard about how things normally work when you’re in the labyrinth. Trust me, I know how you feel.”

I put a comforting hand on Mary’s shoulder. She was finally a member of Labyrinth #228. We had a guardian, and gofer in chief.

“Did I really become your labyrinth guardian? I thought there’d be some change, but I don’t feel any different.”

Mary pats herself down. She had a point. If this were a game, a class change like going from knight to labyrinth guardian would come with a strength boost and a palette swap, at the very least.

“Labyrinth manager is just a title. It doesn’t change anything in particular.”

Admittedly, it would’ve been kind of extreme if she’d turned into some beefy boss monster immediately after signing a few papers.

“Actually, I’ll have you scrubs know, labyrinth guardians do get a few perks.”

“Oh, really?”

Mary and I asked in unison, and Suzu went on to explain.

“Becoming a labyrinth guardian makes you officially a subject of the Great Dark Lord, and a high-ranking one at that. That means you get a bunch of tax breaks! Plus, now you can use Tundra, as long as your labyrinth manager gives you permission. Oh, um, Tundra is this special shop that only labyrinth managers and their authorized employees can use to buy and sell goods.”

Wait, that was it? I was imagining some crazy new ability or something. Lame.

“Here, Ms. Mary, this is for you.”

Karumi presented a black plastic card to Mary.

“What is this?”

“This is your labyrinth guardian ID card. Please be sure to always keep it with you. Not only is it an ID, it also gets you discounts at state-operated institutions!”

“I-I see. I’ll be careful not to misplace it. This does all sound beneficial, but certainly not in the sense I had imagined it would.”

She accepted the black card in its plastic slip case and stared at it, bemused.

“Look, I totally get where you’re coming from, but try to roll with it, okay? You’ll get used to this eventually.”

The perks were nice, but they just weren’t quite what you were hoping for.

Like, shouldn't she get some labyrinth-exclusive skill or something? But that particular disappointment was one I knew all too well, and Mary was going to have to learn it too.

"So, can you show me what I'm going to be protecting?"

Oh. She wasn't going to like this.

"See that cabin right there?"

"Indeed. It looks a little worse for wear."

"That's the full extent of Labyrinth #228 as it currently stands."

We stored all our vegetables and grains there, but there wasn't really anything that needed to be fiercely guarded. On reflection, the only intruders we were likely to get were like, mice? We probably should've hired a cat to protect our food stash, not a knight.

"Surely you jest, Aoi."

"Now that we have you, we're going to start building the actual labyrinth. In the meantime, you're on standby. I'm going to build the whole thing in three months. Somehow."

If I couldn't manage that, Mary's job security was in question.

"Very well. You can count on me. In the meantime, I shall protect this cabin."

Oh gosh, she looks like a little lost puppy. I'm sorry, but I can't show you a labyrinth that doesn't exist! You're still getting paid the same, so why do you care so much?!

"So she'll be protecting your house. This is less like being a labyrinth guardian and more like being in the home security business."

Look, that thought crossed my mind too, Suzu, but I wasn't actually gonna say it out loud!

◇

"Hey, Aoi? Mary's a fine choice for a guardian, but what're you doing for monsters? You're gonna need trash mobs as well as a boss."

"Could you tell me how you have your labyrinth set up, Suzu?"

“Yeah, sure. #370 is a production and storage labyrinth, right? So I just hire mercs. They kinda patrol, chase out any monsters, that sorta thing. Maintain order, you know? Just in case, I’ve got this contraption that produces skeleton-type golems when you feed it raw resources, but it’s a pain in the neck to use, so now it’s basically a hat rack.”

Huh. Pretty weak security. Though, if she had mercenaries strong enough to drive away monsters, she was way better off than me.

“That doesn’t really give me any ideas. Your objective is to produce a lot of stuff and make money, right? And all you need to protect your warehouse is some mercenaries?”

“If things get serious, I just go around and hire every single Daemon mercenary in the nearby villages and towns. When push comes to shove, I can scrounge up enough numbers to be the envy of a decent-sized fortress.”

So she would grow her military on demand in emergencies. That gave me some nasty flashbacks.

“I remember one time I was pitted against you. I’d taken over this defenseless town with a skeleton force, and you showed up out of nowhere to lay siege to it with a full battalion not even half a day later. That was pretty intense.”

“And I’ll give a taste of that to anyone who wants to pick a fight with me. You may have slipped away back then, but most people aren’t so lucky.”

Suzu grinned. No matter how many times you beat her down, she’d always come back tenfold like some damn zombie. The ordeals she put me through had left me scarred for life.

“Say, why’d you go and run away that time? I worked real hard to put together that siege force. I was gonna decorate my office with a Blue animal.”

Scary. I’d only gotten away that time thanks to the elite soldiers I’d brought with me, and even with them at my side, we’d sustained heavy losses.

“Anyway, I suggest you use Daemon mercenaries. You can get as many as you want, if you’ve got the scratch, and they’re sharp cookies, so they’re easy to handle.”

“You said you were going to talk to some of them for me, earlier. How’d that go?”

“Oh, sorry about that. I tried asking the guys on my payroll, but they’re all contracted by the local villages, not to mention me, so they’re not really available for a long-distance gig.”

So her mercenaries and hunters had put down roots in the area. Well, you’d have to be a fool to walk away from a steady source of income like that. Suzu’s approach did lend a lot of stability to the region she operated in.

“Karumi, is Suzu’s labyrinth far from here?”

“From Labyrinth #228, it’s about sixty kilometers southeast as the crow flies. In the grand scheme of things, it’s fairly close. But you have to bear in mind that everybody gets around here by walking, or at best riding a carriage.”

“If it’s sixty kilometers as the crow flies, then it’s going to be even longer on the roads. Not an impossible distance to travel, but not something you could do casually.”

The roads were almost certainly not flat, either. You were probably looking at a week of walking. If there were a well-maintained road it would be one thing, but when you considered the dangers of building and maintaining a road that passed through forests where monsters lurked, things got a bit more interesting.

“Suzu, what’s the difference between a mercenary and a hunter, among Daemons?”

“Mercenaries fight people for pay. Daemons, humans, whatever. Hunters mostly fight monsters. That said, the boundaries are kinda blurry. Like, the mercenaries I hire also double as hunters, a lot of the time.”

More or less what I expected. If you were a sword for hire, you probably weren’t too picky about what you were sticking your sword in.

“Then it’s probably not a good idea for me to hire too many Daemon mercenaries, right?”

“Huh? Why’s that? Oh, wait, I get it. Your plan is to get hunters to challenge

the labyrinth in the first place.”

“Right. If I hired all the mercenaries, there wouldn’t be enough people to challenge the labyrinth.”

I didn’t know how many people were actually going to show up, and I wanted to maximize my chances of success. Admittedly, I didn’t want there to be too many intruders either, but too few would be the worst possible problem.

“Also, I bet they’d be annoyed to find one of their fellow hunters waiting to ambush them in the labyrinth.”

“Yeah, I expect you’re right about that. If something went wrong in your labyrinth, it would damage the reputation of the owner of the labyrinth. In other words, the Great Dark Lord.”

That sounded like a career-limiting move. Lord knows Labyrinth #228 didn’t need another scandal to add to the pile.

“Okay. So I have to watch out for both the number of visitors and the labyrinth’s reputation. If we’re targeting Daemons in this labyrinth, we have to handle it with tact.”

Suzu pursed her lips.

“It’s certainly easier to manage with the way you’re luring intruders, but it does seem to complicate the situation somewhat.”

“Okay, let’s assume we’re not using any Daemon mercenaries at all, for a minute, and see where that gets us.”

If there were too many intruders to handle, or if some emergency arose, I could always reconsider.

“Then your next option is monsters. That said, you can’t breed them without permission, and they’re not exactly docile. Merchants stay well clear of labyrinths with monsters, and you wouldn’t want one of the villagers to get injured.”

Yeah. That all rang true. As the labyrinth manager, I’d feel absolutely awful if one of the monsters I brought in harmed one of the merchants or villagers.

“Just making the labyrinth good at luring and repelling intruders is hard

enough, but when you consider it's supposed to have a positive effect on the surrounding community as well, things get so complicated. How am I going to set up trash mobs for this place?"

Suzu and I were both stumped.

"Kousaka, since it was my error which caused all this hassle, could I ask you to let me handle providing the beasts for your labyrinth?"

Karumi interrupted our reverie with a surprising offer. *Incidentally, Karumi, this isn't a one-time thing, the way you're making it sound. Your screwups are pretty much the source of all my misfortune.* But I couldn't very well say that to my superior, so I put on a fake smile and seethed inside like a good adult.

"Any help you can offer would be great, of course, but how exactly are you going to do that?"

"I know of one excellent option which is commonly used in fully functional labyrinths. Let's see... a dozen of these two-meter-tall humanoid battle golems should do. They follow orders meticulously, incur no maintenance at all, and are incredibly easy to use. I'll pay for them myself, of course, so you can rest easy on that front."

Honestly, golems would be perfect. I'd seen them for sale on Tundra, and I knew they would provide what I needed, but the price was so high that I had dismissed them out of hand.

"I'd be grateful, but are you sure?"

"Yes. Let me do my part to make this right."

The price of golems varied depending on quality, but even the cheapest one cost about as much as a used car.

"Could you show me what type of golem you'd like?"

I opened the labyrinth manager window and navigated to the Tundra catalog, where I pulled up the battle golem page and sorted by price.

Autonomous Patrol and Battle Humanoid Golem (Garta) == 600,000 DL

Seller: Manager, Labyrinth #89

Rating: ★★★☆☆

Reviewer: Manager, Labyri nth #32

- Works even in harsh desert terrain, and its durability is amazing!

Even though there's sandstorms all the time, these babies never fail me. Like the name says, they're good at patrolling, but they're not that strong, so I'd recommend against using them for anything heavy-duty. The quality is about what you'd expect from the price. Don't expect them to do much aside from keeping watch.

Rating: ★★☆☆☆

Reviewer: Manager, Labyrinth #201

- These are heavy golems, so don't try to use them in marshland.

When I took them out on patrol, they sank into the swamp, and it took me forever to get them out. Seems like I can't use them around most of my place. I've got them standing guard in front of my treasure warehouse, but I kinda doubt they'd even deter an intruder.

Rating: ★★★☆☆

Reviewer: Manager, Labyrinth #13

- Pretty well made and reliable, but there's no heart in them!

The price is reasonable, and they perform okay, but that's it. If they were gonna make humanoid golems, you'd think they'd have gone to the trouble to make it so the golems could walk properly, instead of only in a perfectly straight line! Plus, those hideous rods they call arms and legs are just unsightly. This thing sucks!

"That won't do at all."

Karumi slid her finger across the screen, flipping pages in the catalog.

"Ah, here we are. This is what I had in mind."

She stopped many pages after the one I'd shown her.

Autonomous Armor-Type Golem Soldier (Big D, Mark II) == 4,800,000 DL

Seller: Manager, Labyrinth #477

Rating: ★★★★☆

Reviewer: Manager, Labyrinth #552

- Just like the price, you have to see them to believe them.

They can fight barehanded, but they're pre-programmed to be able to handle any weapon you give them as well. They're poetry in motion. Those smooth moves are out of this world. The only problem is that high price tag. With humanoid golems like these, you'll just keep wanting more of them, but they'll put a huge strain on your finances.

Rating: ★★★★★

Reviewer: Manager, Labyrinth #16

- Very efficient.

They obey orders perfectly, especially combat orders, and the way they carry them out is a sight to behold. Their maintenance needs are minimal, and they'll likely keep doing exactly what you tell them to until they stop working. Everyday use? Look, don't buy a high-end battle golem if you want a robo-maid.

"Shall I buy a dozen?"

Forget a used car, each of these was like buying a brand new luxury sports car. I knew Karumi was the Great Dark Lord's daughter, but she had to be filthy rich.

"Well, aren't you Mr. Lucky! Battle golems are sturdy, and they don't get tired or need refueling. What's more, if you give them a directive not to kill, they can reliably take down human invaders without killing them in the process, even if they have to rough 'em up a bit. Hey, come on, let me have just one of 'em!"

"Not a chance. Karumi, you're really going to buy these for me?"

"Of course. Leave everything to me."

Karumi gave me a dazzling smile. Hmm. Perhaps Karumi was the type of woman who liked it when people relied on her? Nah, I was probably

overthinking it.

◇

Okay, so we had a boss and we had trash mobs. Now all that was left was the easy part: building an entire labyrinth.

“Something on your mind? You won’t get anywhere puzzling it over alone.”

I was glad I had Suzu looking out for me. She may have looked like a little girl, but she was a real adult on the inside where it counted.

“Hold it. Were you just thinking something dirty?”

“Please, let’s keep this serious. I’m just considering how one builds a labyrinth.”

Actually, that was kind of a dirty thought, but she wouldn’t realize it if I played it cool. I wasn’t at my best when it came to dealing with women, but there were more girls playing online games these days than there used to be, so it wasn’t like you didn’t interact with them. If you were part of an active guild or clan and didn’t how to at least talk to women, you were in for a rough time.

“I mean, you just kinda do it.”

“They aren’t exactly selling handy dandy instant labyrinth kits on Tundra.”

“So, you probably don’t have anybody with construction experience on your team, but like, that just means you need to hire some contractors, y’know?”

Outside help? But the only other person who came here was Deneb, and all she did was bring food from the village every once in a while.

“...”

I glanced over at Karumi, who was looking the other way with her hands over her ears, blushing. That was cute and all, but I was still annoyed.

“So far, I’ve built everything here myself. Are you saying it’d be okay for me to hire someone else to work on it, like the people in the village?”

“I don’t know what to say. This is so pathetic it’s depressing to even watch.”

Suzu looked pretty upset about my situation, but it was just another day in the life, as far as I was concerned. I didn’t know what kind of privileged

environment the other labyrinths had, because I'd never even had a labyrinth at all.

"Look, just hire people, okay? We've got a deadline, and we're not going to make it if you're the only one building."

"True. I'll hire as many villagers as I can."

In retrospect, it had taken Ann and I two months of backbreaking labor just to make those stairs.

"Hey Suzu, so I was thinking we should do something relatively simple. Do you know of any way to build an underground structure without breaking the bank?"

"So that's how you wanna do it. One thing to keep in mind is, the deeper you build it, the more it's gonna cost, and it'll take longer to boot. For starters, maybe only aim for a single-story labyrinth."

"Got it, stick close to the surface. Oh, actually, wait a minute."

I raised my hand and summoned the labyrinth manager UI window, opening the <Dungeon Management Tool> skill and selecting <Terrain Improvement Tool: Soil>. I felt a slight sense of fatigue as an iron shovel emanating particles of light appeared in front of me.

"That shovel just appeared out of thin air!"

"Yeah, he can make tools like that. I don't really know much about it, but apparently it's some magic he got from the Great Dark Lord."

"Ohhh, I see. Magic. That makes sense."

...People around here were way too accepting of that explanation.

I stuck my shovel into the ground, and a cross-shaped rift opened up around the spot where it sunk in. I applied a little force, pushing the shovel deeper into the ground.

"And... there we go."

A cubical chunk of ground, maybe ten centimeters in all dimensions, popped out of the ground with a satisfying plop. Seeing my tools producing perfectly-

shaped materials never got old. I brushed aside the moss and grass that had tumbled into the hole and watched it carefully.

“Figured as much. There’s water seeping in already.”

Muddy water gradually filled the now-empty cube of land. There was water everywhere in this ravine, so I’d kind of expected this.

“Whatcha doin’ over there, Aoi?”

“Confirming the terrain. At least in this area, if we try to build underground, the construction is either going to give out because of the soft soil or flood with water.”

“Lousy starting conditions, eh? Looks about the same everywhere that I can see. You think your whole ravine is gonna be like that?”

“Yeah. If we need to build an underground labyrinth, we’re going to have to do something about the land first.”

It’d have to be drastic, too, like building a dam to hold back the flow of water, or even reversing the flow. Doing that in a world without heavy construction machinery would be a nightmarishly complex project that could easily take decades.

“You can see the water seeping out of the sides of the ravine easily enough, but there’s groundwater too. Digging isn’t going to get us anywhere.”

“Looks like you’re caught between a rock and a wet place.”

“What’s more, we can’t just go destroying the ecosystem here. This ravine is a treasure trove of medicinal herbs.”

The vegetation here was too valuable. In game terms, the mosses and herbs were SR-class materials. More importantly, the magic potions I concocted with them were my main source of income. If we wiped that out, I’d have to find a new way to make money, or I’d end up broke, fast. Maybe I could start cultivating them, but I was certain that damaging the environment here would be tying the rope around my neck.

“Oh yeah, I keep forgetting how you’re the one making those top-class potions that pop up on Tundra.”

“Yep, and I need all these herbs to make them. If we build the labyrinth here, I bet we’ll disrupt the ecosystem. Talk about a kick in the teeth.”

“This isn’t something to joke about!”

So the bottom of the ravine was out, and obviously we weren’t going to carve into the stone sides. Maybe we could use the area up above?

“Karumi, would the labyrinth still be officially recognized if we built it up there?”

I was worried about going outside the ravine, even if it was just on the edge of the cliff. If we did all that work up on the surface and then didn’t get any credit for it, that’d be the worst.

“Just a moment, let me double-check the terms. Let’s see, Labyrinth #228...”

She navigated the UI thoughtfully. I was frankly terrified of trusting Karumi with anything at this point, so I was glad to see she was being careful.

“Ahh, here we go. These are the formal requirements regarding location. As long as the structure is within half a kilometer of the Great Saredo Rift, it will be recognized as Labyrinth #228.

Pretty sloppy specifications, but at least that gave us liberty to build where we wanted to.

“Then that settles it. We will build the labyrinth up there, outside the ravine, on good solid ground.”

But starting would have to wait until tomorrow.

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Dusk settled in as we began our dinner preparations.

“Okay, Mary, I need you to be honest with me. Do you remember when I said being the guardian wasn’t your only role and that we’d also need you to do odd jobs?”

“Of course. A knight holds her promises very dear.”

“Good. So, Mary, can you prepare meals?”

“I’m good at slicing things up.”

Well, that both was and was not an answer to the question.

“Let me rephrase the question. Can you cook?”

“I can’t vouch for your safety if you eat anything I cook, let alone your enjoyment of it, but I welcome the challenge.”

That go-getter attitude was great and all, but it didn’t change the fact that she couldn’t cook.

“Can you make a fire?”

“It may take me some time, but with the necessary tools and my firm dedication, I can accomplish anything.”

“Then, can you light a fire for the furnace? Ask Ann to show you where we keep the firewood.”

“Leave it to me.”

Mary walked over with determination and began working on starting the fire. Human knights seemed to be from the noble class, so it was no surprise that she didn’t know how to cook, but I was starting to worry that perhaps I’d misjudged her and she wouldn’t be good for anything but fighting.

“I was hoping bringing in a new chef would mean some diversity in our menu, but no such luck.”

I was getting damn near sick of steamed pumpkin. Ann and Deneb must have felt the same, but Milt was a modest village and it reflected in their eating habits. The locals ate anything that was cheap and filling, without much regard for flavor. I’d been expecting Mary to teach us human recipes, but since she couldn’t cook, that would probably be asking a lot.

I went through our storage and set out some of our seemingly endless stock of demi corn and pumpkin, and then began steaming and mashing them. I dished up the makeshift corn and pumpkin mash along with some jerky, as well as some fresh bread I’d found on Tundra. It was simple fare compared to modern Japanese cooking. The mashed pumpkin was pretty stringy, and despite everything I tried, the corn always tasted dry. But a place like Milt simply couldn’t afford to prepare food with a lot of flavorful seasonings. In fact, every

time Deneb came to visit, she'd smile and tell me how delicious my food was, so we were eating pretty well, comparatively. And as far as Ann was concerned, anything I made was delicious, so she wasn't the most helpful person to have around if I wanted to improve. I appreciated that she was such a sweet girl, not to mention that she wasn't a picky eater, but still.

"Aoi, shouldn't we get one of these for Mary?"

Ann showed me the Tundra page she had open in the labyrinth manager window. Ever since Karumi had approved my application for Ann to join my family, she'd had access to her own UI. It was somewhat limited compared to the full labyrinth manager interface, but at least she could open Tundra. She also could see the status of both the labyrinth manager and any other family members, so it wasn't all that bad. Ann currently had a window open displaying a modest set of dishware.

"Oh, that's the same one we always buy porcelain from, right? Labyrinth #112. Their goods are a little pricey, but they're high quality and sturdy. Good choice."

Labyrinth #112 stocked a lot of porcelain items, ranging from daily necessities to works of art. I wondered if the manager there was simply a pottery enthusiast. Their prices were kind of high, but the design and quality never disappointed.

"Mary, over here!"

Ann grabbed Mary and showed her to the delivery box alongside the cabin, then showed her how to fill the piggy bank above it to pay for goods.

"See, just put the money in here."

Ann inserted the DL coin through the slot on top of the piggy, and her UI window popped up a message indicating successful payment. Another window opened up in the air, and a cardboard box with a sticker on it saying "Handle with care" slid out and gently fell to the ground. The dispenser tended to be absolutely silent when it was a fragile item.

"Thanks for your purchase. Have a looooovely day!"

A cheery voice offered us a greeting—Ann and I just called the owner of that

voice “the Tundra guy”—and the window closed as fast as it had opened.

“...Ann, what the blazes just happened?”

Mary rubbed her eyes as if she couldn’t believe what she’d just seen. Her expression was half surprised and half exasperated. No, maybe 80% exasperated? It was quite a look, at any rate.

“What, just now? That was the Tundra guy. He delivers things.”

Ann retrieved the paper cutter and opened up the cardboard box with ease, then removed the tableware from its cardboard cushioning.

“Here, these dishes are yours. Make sure to wash them before you use them for the first time.”

Ann handed Mary her plates and then showed her to the spring we used for washing dishes. I felt like this was going to work out okay. Even if Mary was useless at housework now, she had Ann there to teach her, so I was sure it would be fine.

“Aoi, I expect a proper explanation upon my return.”

I nodded at her and watched as Ann dragged her off.

When Mary returned, I explained to her that Tundra was a marketplace and distributor for labyrinth managers and their families and subordinates, permitting them to trade their local goods with each other. I could almost hear the sound of her preconceptions shattering like glass. The Great Dark Lord implementing such a system in this primitive world was bound to raise a few eyebrows, so Mary’s shock wasn’t completely inappropriate. But like I kept telling her, you just had to accept things as they were and roll with the punches.

I plated our dinner for three. When it came to having company at meals, my philosophy was, the more the merrier, and I was used to cooking an extra portion for when Deneb came around. Mary struck me as the type who could really pack it away, so I made double the usual, just in case she wanted seconds.

“Well, let’s get to it before it gets cold.”

“Yeah!”

Ann dug in straightaway with a cheerful shout. Man, the way she looked so

excited about dinner always made the effort I spent on cooking feel worth it.

“Thanks for the meal.”

Mary, on the other hand, sounded a bit more hesitant. Maybe eating at July’s table had left her with some trauma.

“This is delicious!”

“What a pleasant surprise. The seasoning provides a lovely balance between sweet and salty. I had heard the food in your labyrinth was good, but to think it was of this quality.”

Ann was kind as always, but Mary’s delighted surprise was something new. Though I wasn’t actually much pleased by her flattery. I’d kinda just thrown in all the seasoning I had. It seemed the humans in this world didn’t have particularly refined tastes, any more than the Daemons I’d met.

“I’m glad you like it, Mary.”

The surface of the mashed corn and pumpkin ball I’d cooked had grown somewhat cold, but a pleasant smell wafted from it when I cut it in half with my chopsticks. I popped a piece in my mouth, but the corn was as dry as ever, and the pumpkin was still stringy. The jerky was kinda rubbery and hard to chew, too. We were better off than before we’d finished the grand staircase, which had given us access to food from the village, but I still wasn’t content with the situation. Still, in spite of my misgivings, the girls were enjoying it, so I smiled awkwardly and bit my tongue.

The highlight of the meal was the bread, for sure. We didn’t have any butter, so the only taste you got was the bread itself, and boy was it good. It didn’t have the hard, crunchy mouthfeel or the heavy salt content of bread made to last longer; this was bread that you had to eat the day it was made. Man, I really had to pat myself on the back for making a point of monitoring Tundra to learn the exact moment this bread was listed. There was no substitute for bread fresh out of the oven, still piping hot. It was so popular that it usually disappeared within thirty minutes.

“Aoi, um, this is all so excellent. I don’t suppose I could trouble you for more?”

“You want seconds? Sure, I made a lot tonight, so eat as much as you want. Oh, I don’t have much of that fresh bread, though. You mind the regular kind? I have to warn you, it’s not as soft.”

“That’s more than good enough for me. I’m grateful simply to be able to eat.”

She ate that hardtack like it was nothing. Maybe she was used to it? I couldn’t believe how contentedly she was munching on that stuff; if you asked me, it was about the same as eating a rock.

“And it’s okay to have more of the rest of this, too?”

“It’s fine. I made extra tonight.”

I’d been thinking maybe there would be leftovers that we could have for breakfast tomorrow, but it looked like she was gonna scrape the pot clean. She enjoyed the food so much, it was hard to complain. I was pretty impressed that she could maintain such a killer figure with an appetite like that. It wasn’t like I had X-ray specs and could take her measurements through her clothing, but she didn’t look like she had an ounce of extra fat on her.

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“Kousaka, may I have a minute?”

I was at the spring washing dishes when a window popped up, accompanied by Karumi’s voice.

“Yes, of course.”

Actually, two windows popped up. One displayed “Connecting: Sound Only”, while the other one showed Karumi sitting at the office table, upon which was set a steaming water heater and an extra-large cup of noodles proudly proclaiming Tom Ramen.

...She didn’t want me to see this.

I set the clean dishes atop a nearby rock and took a seat. The bottom of the ravine was covered in luminescent moss, which provided a bit of light, but not much in comparison to the fluorescent lights of the office on the other side of the window. I could see the train station through the window in the office. They had a lot of lights on there as well.

“I wanted to ask you about Mary, actually.”

Karumi pressed the button on the water heater, dispensing it into the cup of noodles. Three minutes until dinner time.

“Sure, go ahead.”

“Knights are a bit different there than they are here, and they really come in two classes. First, those who pilot the Extended Knight Armor, the mechanical devices which you dealt with in Milt. Those are fairly common in scuffles between humans and Daemons.”

Right, Mary had said the same thing: people who could pilot the armor were called knights.

“The other group is less familiar to me. It’s possible Mary herself isn’t terribly familiar with them. They’re a clan of powerful members of the human colony, tasked with protecting their race. It’s rare for one of them to be born with less than exceptional strength.”

“Hmm, so that’s the other kind of knight, huh?”

Maybe that was why I’d seen two different skill sets when I had used <Appraisal> on Mary?

“Yes. It seems Mary has training as both kinds of knight. The second variety may have faded into obscurity after the Extended Knight Armor grew in popularity, but Daemons are still wary of them. As a member of that clan, someone born into the guardianship of the human race, she has outstanding physical prowess.”

So she’d be like, a champion NPC or something if this was a game. No surprises there. Her stats were too high to be a simple soldier, however well-trained. The others who had been with her during the raid had been normal.

“So you see, as a sworn protector of humanity, she would find it difficult to betray her people. If she tried, her knightly instincts would make her feel revulsion at her actions, leading her to avoid it by any means possible.”

At least it didn’t sound like any kind of terribly painful experience, or like a physically binding restriction, but she did have some kinda fuzzy shackles. That

whole thing about being the chosen guardians of her people was pretty amazing. Karumi seemed to be implying there were a bunch of other people like her. If they were all that amazing, they'd probably go down as a family of heroes on Earth, or maybe like a line of top military commanders or something? I wondered exactly how one became a knight here. It sounded like you had to be born into the clan, but Mary had said something about her initiation being difficult, so I wasn't so sure. Anyway, that question could wait. I had something more important to ask first.

"Can she still be a labyrinth guardian?"

I didn't think Karumi would've let her sign a contract if she couldn't actually do the job, but I still wanted to make sure.

"Things should be fine as long as she's working towards returning to her kind. Even if she is temporarily allied with the Daemons, it will all be to benefit the humans in the end."

"I see. As long as this isn't going to restrict her too much, we'll be okay."

So Karumi had called to warn me, although there was nothing to worry about immediately. The sight of Karumi lovingly tilting her cup of noodles to drain the water from them cut the tension of the moment magnificently.

"Can I ask you one more question? What would happen to a knight who betrayed her people?"

Karumi had said that a knight would find it difficult, not that she would find it impossible. A subtle but important distinction.

"I'm very sorry, but I can't answer that question. There are restrictions on what I'm allowed to tell labyrinth managers, and frankly, everything I've told you so far is already forbidden."

So Karumi wasn't allowed to tell me much. Though they must've been pretty lenient about it, if she could just call me up and tell me about it quietly. Sounded more like an "only on a need-to-know basis" kind of thing, rather than a "strictly confidential" thing. At any rate, I was just relieved that Mary would get to stay on as our labyrinth guardian.

"Thank you for contacting me. Enjoy your dinner."

“Oh, thank y— Wait, Kousaka, how do you know that I’m about to have dinner?”

Karumi looked sorrowfully at the little timer on the table, which probably indicated that her noodles had been ready for a long time now, so I cut off the call. I sure hoped her noodles hadn’t gotten too soggy.

◇

“Aoi, where should I sleep?”

After putting out the fire and returning to the cabin, Mary called out to me, a single blanket clutched in her hands. It was worn and discolored, but it looked like it had originally been of quite high quality. Was this one of Mary’s few remaining personal belongings?

“I’m accustomed to roughing it, so I could sleep on the floor if need be, but if you do have a mattress to spare, I would be greatly in your debt.”

“Oh, yeah, you’ll need a bed.”

Damn, I’d forgotten to prepare a place for Mary to sleep. The only bed in the cabin was the one Ann and I used. I’d bought a bed for Ann, but she’d insisted we just push the two of them together to make one big bed. There was room for another bed in the cabin, but it would leave things a little cramped. Hmm. I could buy her a mattress stuffed with hay. Those were nice, since you could remove the stuffing and fold them up pretty small when you weren’t using them.

“You should sleep with us, Mary!”

Ann, having just changed into one of my button-down shirts, interrupted my train of thought.

“I-I wouldn’t want to disturb the two of you at your rest, Ann.”

“Nah, the bed’s plenty big. We can all fit in easy.”

Well, she had a point. We’d pushed two beds together, and Ann was pretty tiny, so we probably could fit three people in it.

“...”

While Ann and Mary talked, I reached into my pouch and took out a few dried leaves, which I popped into my mouth. Ah, that familiar, minty taste.

“I want us to sleep together. We can all snuggle up!”

The way she talked about it, it was like a precious experience she’d missed out on. Crowding everyone into one big bed together was a normal enough experience for a young kid in a family. I realized once again that I still didn’t know much about Ann’s past.

“Um. I see. I’m, uh, not so sure.”

Mary gave me a fleeting glance, which told me she was thinking the same thing I was. Her sharing a bed with Ann was one thing, but it would be a bit different for her and me. I was reluctant about the plan as well, but I was staying calm. The way Ann clung tight to me every night was already hard on me, and I figured Mary being around wouldn’t make much of a difference. Most importantly, I had an ally in my nightly struggle: my minty friend.

I checked the stash in my pouch. Hmm, looked like I was running low on herbs. I slid my index finger to the right, and the labyrinth manager menu opened up. I selected the Tundra catalog.

Samathi Herb (Dry; 8 pc. set, 15g) == 1,800 DL

Seller: Manager, Labyrinth #201

Rating: ★★★★★

Reviewer: Manager, Labyrinth #16

- A handy herb for when you need to pull all-nighters. Boil the leaves with hot water and you’ll get a relaxing, bittersweet tea. Great for calming your nerves when you’re staying up all night. I ran a few tests to analyze the components, but I didn’t find any addictive agents or anything with harmful side effects. Unfortunately, if you try to extract the active compounds, the nature of the effect changes, so you can’t mass-produce medicine from it.

Rating: ★★★★★

Reviewer: Manager, Labyrinth #228

- A good friend for those sleepless nights. Pour a little water on it, pop it in your mouth, give it a chew, and it'll calm you right down. Talk about convenient! I just need to take a bit of it when I'm having trouble sleeping, and boom! I'm out like a light. The taste is all right, and it doesn't seem to have any side effects. It's my favorite.

"There's plenty still in stock, so I should be fine waiting until tomorrow to place another order."

"It'd really bother you that much to sleep with me, Mary?"

When Ann turned on the puppy dog eyes, I knew the game was up. What was most impressive was that she did that naturally; she wasn't even trying to be manipulative.

"Of course not! In the military, we used to sleep huddled together from time to time. I don't mind at all."

And Mary was down for the count. She didn't even last through round one.

"All right then, I'm gonna go to bed first!"

Ann skipped over to the bed and plopped down right in the middle.

"I suppose this ship has already sailed, but, Aoi, do you mind me sleeping in the same bed as you?"

"I'm a little worried about it, but it's fine. If I said I wanted to sleep somewhere else, Ann would throw a fit."

"Would she now. I see."

Mary and I shared a whispered conversation. It seemed my answer convinced her.

And so all three of us lay down in bed, with Ann between me and Mary. I'd played 3P scenes like this in visual novels and whatnot, but I sure never expected to get the experience in real life. Ann fell asleep quickly. Long nights playing online games had caught up with her. On the other side of her, Mary was wearing form-fitting pajamas and had her arms wrapped tight around Ann, her face completely red. She'd boldly claimed she would be fine, but sleeping huddled together in the military was a far cry from sharing a bed with someone.

In the end, Ann had successfully convinced the both of us, even though we were embarrassed about it. I couldn't imagine telling her I didn't want to sleep beside her, and Mary's clumsy kindness did her in as well. My ears pricked every time Mary took another deep breath. She was clearly still wide awake, and restless. Me, I was already going under. I could feel myself slowly slipping away into the land of dreams, a slight smile on my face. Heh. Just like Ann, I'd also been up late gaming recently. Lack of sleep really came in handy sometimes.

◇

I woke up to warm sunlight filtering in through the window. Once upon a time, when I'd still been a dedicated gamer, I couldn't wake up on time without an alarm clock. Man, those memories from a year ago seemed so far away now. Still, today's wakeup was unusual for several uncomfortable reasons. It was indeed light outside, but it was still earlier than my usual wake-up time. And while I was used to feeling the warmth of Ann glued to me when I woke up, I was *not* used to being sandwiched in like that. It was uncomfortably hot.

Something momentous had happened. I was sure of it.

I steeled myself and opened my eyes. Mary was lying beside me, still sound asleep, our noses nearly touching. Ah, then the warmth behind me must have been Ann. This was a bit troubling. Mary had her arms wrapped around me, pulling herself tight up against me. Meanwhile, she had both her legs wrapped around me from the other side, clamping her to my back.

What was I, her favorite plushie?

Okay, so what to do about this. There was no way I was escaping without them noticing. In game terms, we'd gone way past hard difficulty and right on to chaos mode. It was morning already, so if I moved even a little, they were sure to wake up. How had we ended up like this? Well, Ann was prone to tossing and turning in her sleep and had probably ended up behind me. Then Mary hugged me, thinking I was Ann. Incidentally, the only reason I was still hanging onto my sanity was the lingering effect of the samathi herb I'd popped into my mouth last night. I had to think of something, before it was too late. I had to get out of this alive! THINK! You must have learned something from all

those games, right?! I had two beauties pinning me to the bed, one on either side of me, and... *Yes! That's it!* The answer came to me the moment I turned the question upside down.

Why not just stay like this?

This was paradise. You couldn't get something like this in my world unless you were ready to shell out some serious cash. This softness, this warmth, this sweet scent... These could only be my reward for a life well-lived! As a gamer, I could hear the truth in my heart: this was the greatest event of my life thus far.

When I realized all this, the perfect solution came to me. If Mary woke up while I was awake, disaster would strike this cabin. But if the opposite happened, everything would be fine. The visual novel cliché was that the girl woke up right after you, and then she slapped you silly. Given Mary's nature, she'd be horribly surprised and panic, whether I was awake or not, but if I was asleep, there was a chance she'd just gently let go of me and pretend it never happened. Granted, there was also a chance she'd just up and slap me anyway, but still, I liked my odds better like this. I was always sleeping together with Ann, so no need to worry about that side.

Now, the other concern was my sanity. However, my self-control had been tempered in the mighty crucible of Ann's nightly attentions, and with the further aid of my trusty herbs, I could lie back and enjoy this ride for as long as it lasted!

So there you had it. I closed my eyes and tried to burn the sensation into my brain. It was totally cool if I hugged her a little tighter, right? Yeah. Mmm. Man, this softness was the best. I could feel Mary's heartbeat gently thumping against my chest. Enveloped in happiness, I decided to fall asleep a second time. Good night, world.

I dozed off blissfully, and in my slumber, I thought I heard a cutesy shriek.

"Yo yo, good mornin' to ya. I've gotta plan out my schedule today, so I was hoping you could tell me what you're... Hey, Aoi, did you do something to Mary last night?"

A transmission opened up as we were all eating breakfast, and Suzu quickly became suspicious of me, for some reason. Mary looked composed, but she

was acting rather distant now, and she was being careful to always position herself so that Ann was between the two of us. I didn't know whether the memories from this morning were still fresh in her mind or if she was just shy, but her face was still a little flushed. Not that you'd catch me pointing that out; only an idiot would step on a mine like that.

"Of course not. Hell, Ann was there the whole time."

And that was a hundred percent true. I hadn't done anything, even if a happy accident did occur. Plus, I was pretending not to know anything about my good fortune overnight. You know, I could really tell my fortitude had grown. It hadn't been all that long since I was freaking out over sleeping with Ann in her human form, and now, in spite of a moment of panicked hesitation, I was able to live in the moment and really enjoy it. No doubt I had Ann to thank for my newfound tolerance, with the way she pushed the boundaries of my self-control night after night.

◇

"Good morning! Is Mister Barry home?"

Ann had guided us to the home of a certain fellow who she thought could handle being the foreman for our labyrinth construction project. The house was a red brick bungalow located a little ways from the center of the village. Between all the kobold children playing in the garden and the house's weathered condition, the impressive structure looked less like an exercise in ostentation and more like a result of necessity. Big families needed big houses.

"Aye, is that you, Ann? My, how time passes."

A well-muscled male kobold walked out of the house. Though his physique was impressive, his most striking feature was his missing arm. His body was covered with scars, and he sported a big, furry beard. Though not exactly frightening, he did look a little rough around the edges.

"You look well! Haven't seen you around in a while, so I was getting worried."

The old man smiled broadly and produced a sweetened rice cracker from his pocket, handing it to Ann. He looked like a doting grandfather sneaking some candy to his favorite granddaughter. Ann had described him as a kindly old

fellow. Spot on, if you asked me.

“Oh, this looks grea—wait, hold on, me, don’t get distracted! Mister Barry, I’m here on business today!”

“Oh, are you now? What business do you have for me, Ann?”

“Ummm... You tell him, Aoi!”

Wow, way to set me up for success, Ann.

“It’s a pleasure to meet you. I’m Aoi, one of the Great Dark Lord’s labyrinth managers.”

“Oho, Ann, this must be the fellow. I can’t believe you didn’t tell me you got married!”

Uh. Hmm. I had picked up a few title changes in my past two months here in Milt. I’d started as “The Guy Who Hired Ann”. Then, after about a month, I’d leveled up to “Ann’s Sugar Daddy”. Now, apparently I’d been promoted all the way to “Ann’s Husband”. Rumors always grew out of control in tiny communities, but this one was turning into a real wildfire. I couldn’t believe how much it had grown in just a month.

Incidentally, every time the rumor got crazier, Ann’s best friend Sara would storm into our hut and start grilling me, asking me if the stories were true and just what did I think I was doing to her Ann. I shuddered to think what the stories were saying about us now. I had my suspicions about just who was sowing all these irresponsible rumors about us: the village’s fiercest matchmaker and Ann’s staunch advocate, her aunt Jenny. I’d already accepted my fate with Ann, but Jenny didn’t seem satisfied with that and wouldn’t accept anything less than the removal of all possible obstacles between us. I hadn’t proposed to Ann, or even initiated a romantic relationship, but I had said a few words to her at one point, and denying those now would be in poor form. I couldn’t bear the thought of breaking her heart.

Ugh. This marriage thing was clearly Jenny’s work in action, but even if I could see it coming, I couldn’t dodge this bullet. I mean, I couldn’t just go and deny this kind of thing outright, you know?

“Married, eheheh...”

Ann ran up to my side and glomped me, her eyes shining and her cheeks flushed. Yeah... Denying that was clearly not an option. *Throwing a bucket of cold water on Ann when she's this happy would be worse than sadism. It would be inhumane, I'm telling you! Absolutely inhumane!*

"So, uh, at any rate, I came here to offer you a big job, Mister Barry."

I stifled my urge to object and tried to continue the conversation. Barry looked at me approvingly, so at least it looked like I'd made the right call there.

"I'm trying to build a new underground extension for the labyrinth I manage, under the orders of the Great Dark Lord. I'd like you to be the foreman for the construction project."

"Oh really. Now that's a grand enterprise if I've ever heard one."

His voice was soft, his mood sober. He'd gone from an affable old man to a canny expert in a heartbeat.

"Would you really want to hire a retired old hound like me for such a big job? I reckon there are plenty of young, active workers if you go to the nearest town."

"That's true enough."

I nodded. I would certainly have been able to find a more active construction foreman if I'd made the longer trip to an actual town. But there was a reason I was looking for a foreman from the village itself.

"But I want you, and I also want every worker on the project to be from Milt. You know the villagers better than any city foreman would, and you know what jobs they'd be best at. You would be the perfect manager for them."

If I were hiring professional builders, familiarity would be less important, but the villagers here were farmers, not construction experts. Having a foreman they knew and trusted would make all the difference in the quality of their work.

"Hmm, I see. A good reason, that. Plenty of folks think there's nothing more to a construction project than throwing money at it until it's done."

I'd been doing some amount of management lately in my job, but I felt I knew

the field intimately from my gaming experience. I remembered one administrative sim in particular, the sixth in a long-running series of city-building games called *Some City*, which I'd poured a ton of time into. As the foreman, you were supposed to oversee large construction endeavors, and the game emphasized the importance of good relations among your workers. Knowing their individual strengths was important, as was managing their fatigue. If you made the most out of their skills and status points, you could dramatically improve both the quality of construction and the time to complete a job. The series had been orchestrated by an actual civil engineer, so the game was as close to reality as possible, from the construction methodology to the logistical planning. Recently, I'd been desperately studying it in hopes of building up at least some familiarity with the basics of architectural planning and execution.

"I'm well aware that, while you do need funds to undertake any construction project, that isn't all you need. Barry, I think you're just the man I've been looking for."

"Well now, I just don't know. I'm delighted you'd turn to this old man for help, but I'm not as spry as I used to be."

Barry stroked his beard and murmured. I may have landed Mary by offering her a fat paycheck, but I had a feeling that wasn't going to work with this retired artisan. Fortunately, I had a secret weapon.

"Ann, you're up."

"Roger! Leave it to me!"

I whispered Ann her cue, and she leaped into action.

"Oh please, won't you help us, Mister Barry? Pretty please? You're the only one we can count on!"

"R-Really? All right, all right. May lightning strike me down before I deny my precious Ann anything. I suppose these old bones have one more job in them."

All it took was Ann asking, and every ounce of reservation he had melted away like snow under the sun. Ann's cuteness was a force to be reckoned with. I couldn't tell if Barry was just weak to children, being a grandfather, or if Ann's

persuasion skills were just brokenly OP.

“All right then. I’m Barry. Half kobold, half dwarf. I may be a bumbling old fool, but I deliver when it counts. Here’s to a good partnership.”

Barry turned and gave me a courteous nod. You know, I did think he was a little beefy for a kobold. Half dwarf, huh? Did Barry have a dwarf form, the same way Ann had a human one?

“The pleasure is all mine. I look forward to working with you.”

His handshake was so firm you would never have thought he was an old man. So, we had our foreman. One more item to mark off the to-do list.

“I’m going to the mayor’s house to ask him about hiring some of the villagers. Would you be willing to come along? I’d like to get your opinion.”

“Aye aye, boss. No need to be so stiff with me. You’re in charge now.”

Listening to Barry gently ribbing me, I grew certain that I’d made the right choice. This old man was more than he seemed.

◇

Barry and I had gone to see the mayor, and after we met up with him, we all took a break in a nice clearing near his fields. The minotaur towered over the rest of us. I got the feeling he could pick us all up in one hand, wooden bench and all. It was always strangely charming, seeing him sipping tea from his giant wooden cup.

“My, my, Aoi and Mary, and Barry too? What an unusual combination! Ohoho.”

“Good day, Mayor Hopper. There’s something we wanted to consult with you about, if you have a moment.”

“I was just taking a breather myself. Your timing couldn’t be better. If you’re here with Barry, maybe you’re planning to dig a well?”

Surprisingly not far off. We would certainly be doing a lot of digging, at least.

“I’m looking to expand the labyrinth, and I’d like to hire some of the villagers. I realize it’s the middle of harvest season and people are busy, but I’m willing to

pay accordingly. Do you think the villagers would be able to help?”

“Hmm. So you need some extra pairs of hands.”

The mayor folded his arms and looked thoughtful. Would they be too busy?

“We’re all greatly in your debt, so I’d like to help you out. You’re right that we have our hands full with harvest season, but I think the chance at earning a little money on the side would be a boon to many, out in this distant country village.”

It was a difficult trade-off for the mayor. He couldn’t diminish the labor force too much during harvest season, but he also didn’t want to give up the rare chance to earn money.

“I do have one concern. Aoi, are you planning to feed the workers you hire? And if so, how?”

I sure was glad Ann had brought that up earlier. In my own world, the expectation was that employees brought their own food, and I was sure if I’d been put on the spot without preparation I would’ve just said that.

“We don’t have enough food stockpiled in the labyrinth to feed more than the three of us, so I was hoping to buy additional food from the village. I was also hoping that I could hire some of the housewives in the village, both to transport and to prepare food for all the workers.”

Suzu’s symbiotic relationship with her surrounding community had led me to that conclusion. If my labyrinth could benefit everyone in the village, and they could all help me, that would be the best outcome. And I realized I’d already begun to make some progress in that area myself, with the way I provided health potions to the village and Deneb provided me with food. Though it wasn’t like I was running some kind of charity. I got no donations, and no support or financing from the top. Hell, I was paying money out of my own pocket just to save my boss’s skin!

“Ah, that’s great! If you would do all that for us, then the village would be happy to support you. You’ve been such a boon to us, helping with your construction project is the least we can do.”

And that was the moment the locals and the labyrinth manager joined forces. Though arguably it was more of a business deal than an alliance.

“Thank you very much. How many people can you spare?”

“Let me see. I think the most we could manage would be about thirty men and fifteen women. Any more than that and I fear we wouldn’t be able to do everything necessary for the harvest.”

So, 45 people, all told. He sure did come up with that number quickly. I was curious exactly who he had in mind, specifically what races they were and what they were good at. But 45 adults was nothing to scoff at regardless, especially for a tiny village like Milt. I certainly couldn’t complain.

“Barry, do you think that will be enough?”

“That’d really depend on how big a project you have in mind, but with that many, I reckon we can do decent work. To be frank, any more than that and I don’t think my old eyes could look after everyone properly.”

Huh, so he had a cap on the number of people he could manage. I hadn’t thought about it, but in retrospect it was obvious. It’d be one thing if all he’d had to do was bark instructions, but these were mostly inexperienced workers, so he’d have to show them the ropes and keep an eye out for accidents. If I wanted to do construction on any larger scale, I’d have to do like Suzu said and hire specialists.

“Negotiations sure are fun! Sharing what you have and making everyone’s lives better is important, don’t you think?”

While Mayor Hopper and Barry discussed who exactly we would be hiring for the construction work, Ann and I were having a chat. Ann had apparently gotten pretty excited watching me negotiating with each of them. Her enthusiasm was both reassuring and a little alarming.

Ever since I’d let her play that company management game, she’d been thinking about these things in game terms. Enterprise management games were a classic genre. The one I’d shown her had you giving detailed instructions to little franchise shops of your company to help them grow. But the bigger your conglomeration grew, the busier you got, leaving you unable to deal with the minutiae of every shop. At that point, you had to start working with middle managers, negotiating deals with them so you could solve higher-level problems. It was the perfect game for leveling up Ann’s view of the world.

“When did you become such a smooth talker?!”

“Hey, Ann, that’s unfair. It’s not like I’m bad at negotiating or anything. I just wasn’t familiar with how things worked around here.”

“Is she wrong? To tell the truth, I share her doubts.”

Even Mary expected me to be a bad negotiator?!

“Okay, seriously, both of you are being too hard on me. I just don’t understand how things work around here, and I have no head for money, that’s all. I happen to think I make an excellent labyrinth manager, thank you very much.”

“Those both seem like excellent reasons to worry about you.”

“...Actually, I can’t argue with that.”

“Now I feel kinda bad.”

Then maybe you should’ve kept that thought to yourself!

“Um, I don’t think you’re dumb, Aoi! I rely on you!”

Aw, that gave me a little jab to the heart. Like, the painful kind, not the good kind. Just how much of a hopeless failure did Ann think I was?! No, wait, better not ask that. If she thought I was a lost cause, should I be happy that at least she still wanted to look out for a failure like me?

“Aoi, how much were you planning to pay the villagers?”

“Oh, hmm.”

Tough question, especially given that, like I’d just mentioned, I was pretty bad with money. I’d kind of gotten a rough idea for a ballpark figure, but now she was asking for hard numbers.

“They’ll be commuting from their village and doing physical labor all day. How much is that worth to them, and to you?”

“I was thinking four thousand DL for one day’s work.

That would be a lot for a rural area like this. Right...?

“But Aoi, what about people who aren’t super strong like the mayor? Will

they still get paid the same?”

Ann yanked on my sleeve and suggested a concern I hadn’t thought about before.

“Not everyone can be good at everything. For instance, it’s not Aoi’s fault he’s a weakling.”

Ugh. That smug grin on Mary’s face was getting on my nerves.

“Will they get any days off?”

“Let’s see. It’d be bad if they don’t get enough rest, and just as bad if they get too much. I would like them to have the market day free, at least. It won’t be much of a break, but it’d disrupt their normal lives too much to miss out on participating.”

So, one day off per week? They had to get at least that much, since we couldn’t very well take market day away from them. Milt didn’t have a general store, so that was the only day the villagers had to barter for and purchase food. I was a bit concerned about the pay. 45 people at 4,000 DL per person came out to 180,000 DL per day. Tally up that much per day, six days a week, for three months, and it came out to a whopping 14 million DL. It was really hitting me that my daily expenses to support myself and Ann were a world apart from what it was going to cost me to build this labyrinth. I would’ve liked to economize, but if I didn’t pay a fair wage, their motivation would drop and the quality of their work along with it. Not to mention, it would be bad for the villagers themselves. I really didn’t have any good choices here.

There was this one MMORPG I played where I was the mayor’s advisor in a vast, unexplored world. The game was called *Harvest Rune*, and the game’s main hook was that you didn’t just go out slaying dragons or whatever, you actually cleared out a spot in the wilderness and set up your house there, wherever you liked. Now sure, there were plenty of games where you could build a house, but in this one, natural events like snowstorms, floods, and monster attacks wore down whatever you built. Maintaining your house and your fence and whatnot was hard work! If you upgraded to a mayor’s house and got approval from a majority of the players with houses in the area, you could become the mayor, incorporating all the surrounding structures into your

jurisdiction. At that point, you'd set up tax rates and collect them, and then use the money to fend off threats, maintain roads, improve infrastructure, and so on. It certainly was a unique game.

So, anyway, I was the advisor to one of these players who'd made themselves a mayor. Doing the accounting, like figuring out what taxes were coming in and how much was being spent on various maintenance projects, turned out to be a nightmare. Add that to the monster invasions, not to mention actual combat and stuff, and it left both of us with our fair share of sleepless nights. I had one fond memory of both of us, bags under our eyes, asking ourselves if we were sure this was really a game, rather than our job, and then laughing our asses off. The village we operated grew to be a little over the middle of the pack in overall ranking and was considered a medium-sized rural town in terms of development, and that was good enough for us. But I remember hearing a rumor about the highest-ranking players, who apparently took a different approach. Rather than raising taxes, they'd actually hire the town's residents themselves, paying them high wages to develop the area, maintain the town, and boost the economy.

If I was going to be paying for the labor on this project out of my own pocket, I wanted to hire the people of Milt so that I could improve their quality of life. Hiring a bunch of unknown workers from across the country just didn't sit right with me. That said, it wasn't like I could just give out money willy-nilly. I wouldn't have minded paying outrageously, if the only consequence were that I personally went bankrupt, but I had to plan for the future. I had to establish a reasonable rate now, in case I needed to hire them again sometime down the line. Figuring out what qualified as reasonable was easier said than done, though.

Well, if I was still agonizing over this, it was probably time to turn to my last resort.

"Ann, I want to pay the villagers an amount that they'll be content with. How much do you think I should pay them per day?"

I whispered my question to her. This was my secret weapon, which I'd dubbed "Teach me, Master Ann!" It was incredibly convenient and highly reliable, but if I resorted to this option too frequently, I felt like I was leaning on her too much,

so I usually avoided it.

“Uh, hmm. Lessee. You said four thousand DL a day before, right? I think that’s fine. You could go a little lower for the people making the food, but I think they’ll be happy to all be paid the same.”

Hmm. Well, it was true that slaving away on the construction all day was going to be a harder job than hauling, preparing, and serving food. That said, I wasn’t offering a big pay raise for the construction workers, compared to what they would make working in the fields. Overpaying a little for the food prep would be my way of boosting the total amount that went to the village.

“Four thousand DL per person per day, whether doing construction or preparing food. What do you think?”

“I’m certain they’ll be happy to hear that.”

Mayor Hopper nodded with a gentle smile on his face. It seemed my offer was good enough. Ann watched with a proud grin as the mayor and I shook hands. Hmm. It seemed that when we were outside the labyrinth, our positions reversed.

◇

“I’ll let Barry handle assigning tasks to the villagers.”

I didn’t feel I had a firm enough grasp on all the villagers’ strengths and weaknesses yet—I didn’t even know them all by name—so delegating that to Barry was the best course of action.

“Let’s see now, let’s see. The kobolds and dwarves should handle excavation, for starters. The ogres and giants are the strongest, so we’ll ask them to do all the hauling. Lots of soil and wood to haul in construction. Say, you think you could hire a guard to escort the villagers what need to forage and lumber in the forest? I reckon the sound of chopping trees’ll attract no end of monsters.”

We’d need wood? Oh, to reinforce the passageways and rooms, I supposed. I was probably going to need proper tools for lumbering as well. And I’d have to take measures to protect the villagers from monsters while they were doing it. Good attention to detail there, Barry. He really knew his stuff.

“How many guards would you say we need?”

“We’re talking about monsters here, so a few mercenaries with some experience hunting would do. If you can find three or four folks who can hold their ground rather than run away with their tail between their legs when they come face-to-face with a monster, that’ll be that. You’ll need double that if you’ve got nothing but beginners, though.”

“If I can find skilled people, why do we still need so many of them? Four seems like a lot.”

“Strong monsters don’t show their ugly mugs too often, but you’ll want to be prepared just in case one comes knocking on your door. It wouldn’t be a pretty sight if one of the hired swords didn’t make it back to their family. Getting everyone home alive is what matters most here.”

Wow, wasn’t expecting such a cautious answer. I guess people living out in the backwoods learned to be cautious.

“At any rate, it sounds like I can’t use the folks Suzu was trying to recommend me, if we need reliable guards. Maybe I’ll see if Fez can lend me a hand.”

The truth was, I didn’t have a whole lot of connections to leverage. Even setting aside the fact that I rarely ventured outside the labyrinth, there just weren’t a lot of travelers who came to this remote region in the first place.

“Mayor, do you know when Fez is planning to be here next? Market day isn’t too far off now, but that doesn’t mean he’ll show up.”

Fez set up his wagon on the same day of the week, more often than not, but if it was raining or if he just couldn’t put together enough of the right sort of stock, he wouldn’t make the trip out and would show up the next day instead. The villagers were used to it, and would even defer holding the market day so he could appear. Compared to Japan, where everything and everyone ran on a tight schedule, it seemed like a rather loose way to run things, but I supposed it was a reasonable arrangement, for a fantasy world with limited transportation and distribution options.

“Ah, Fez? He stopped by not too long ago. He should be at his usual spot tomorrow.”

Oh, he'd showed up early? Perfect timing.

◇

Fez's wagon was resting where it always did, near the village's north gate. The gray wolfman himself was there, loading and unloading goods.

"Long time no see, Fez."

"Aoi, my man. Been a while."

I put my hand up by way of greeting, and he put up his and gave me a high five. The two of us were about the same age, and we'd had something of a bonding experience on a battlefield not too long ago, after which we'd ended up on very good terms. I guess you'd say we were brothers in arms.

"Now, isn't this a colorful bunch. I had a hunch my lady knight here would end up with you."

Fez gave Mary a nod of greeting.

"I see you've met Mary already."

"Mister Fez helped me search for a job. I'm in his debt."

"Mm, yeah, I poked around a bit back in town, looking for a job for my lady knight, but I didn't have any luck."

Ah, so he'd been trying to help her out as well. I was curious to find out how that had happened, but I decided to leave it be. I didn't want Mary to dwell on her struggle to find a job.

"Yer a whole day early, if yer here for business. Can't imagine yer making social calls now."

"You guessed it. The thing is, I'm planning to extend the labyrinth, and we're going to need to do some work in the forest as part of that. I wanted to hire hunters to protect my workers, but I don't know any. I'm looking for professionals, the kind you can rely on even when the going gets tough. You know anybody who'd fit the bill?"

"My merchant senses are tingling, talking about that labyrinth expansion, but it's hunters ya need, eh? And reliable ones, too. Yer settin' the bar pretty high."

“I’ll be asking them to escort the villagers, so I need people who can be trusted to treat them with respect, as well as to protect them.”

Maybe it was an unusual request, but it didn’t make sense to me to hire bodyguards who weren’t going to be concerned for their charges.

“Do you know anyone?”

“Maaaan, part of me wants to tell ya that yer askin’ too much here, but the truth is, I know just the folks. They’re a skilled bunch, and they just wrapped up a contract. Now they’re just sittin’ around on their tails, bored to tears and wonderin’ where their next paycheck is gonna come from.”

“Huh. Is that a common problem for hunters?”

“Sorta, yeah. These folks, well, they used to roll with a seven-man crew, but first one of ‘em retired to get married, and then a couple of ‘em had kids and had to retire as well. Now there’s only four of ‘em left, so they can’t take on the real dangerous jobs. Tough trade, huntin’.”

“You sure do know a lot about this crew.”

“’Course I do. I’m the one what got married!”

The hell, he’s just trying to get me to hire his friends?! Well, actually, it was probably a good suggestion. Fez and I had been through a lot together, so I was inclined to trust him. He wouldn’t try to dupe me into hiring a bunch of slackers. He was a bit sloppy in his new trade as a merchant, but having once been a skilled mercenary, he surely had a good eye for talent.

“How long you gonna hire ‘em for?”

“The initial contract will be for three months. Depending on how things go, maybe three more.”

I planned to finish the construction in three months, but as soon as it was fully operational, I’d be gathering hunters to challenge it. Once things were in full swing, I’d probably need a few additional guards, and if Fez’s people proved trustworthy, it’d make sense to use them.

“Phew, got a nice long contract there, eh? Pretty sure they’ll jump at the chance. Fall’s just rolled around, so most hunters have their next gig lined up

already, otherwise they can end up with nothin' to do through the whole winter. Most hunters would sell their soul to get a contract that'd carry 'em through to spring."

In fantasy games, the characters just went from adventure to adventure as the whim took them, but real life wasn't so cushy. From what Fez had said about winter contracts being hard to find, I had a suspicion that monsters hibernated in the winter, on account of the decreased food supply.

"That so. About how much would I need to pay a mercenary, for this contract?"

"Well, lessee. These folks are as good as they come, so yer payin' for quality, but on the other hand, the work ain't so hard."

Fez folded his arms and nodded to himself as he ran the numbers.

"You could hire the four of 'em for ten thousand DL per day. That'd run you about nine hundred thousand for three months."

Far cheaper than I'd expected. Cheaper even than employing the villagers. I glanced at Ann for confirmation, and she gave me a furry thumbs-up and a nod.

"Please do ask them. I'd like to start the work as soon as possible. How long do you think it would take for them to get here?"

"No time at all."

"I beg your pardon?"

Surely he'd have to go find them, talk them into it, and then come back. I wasn't aware of any long-distance communication in this world, let alone teleportation. If people could teleport around, peddlers like Fez would be out of business. Obviously there was the Tundra system, and the communication system the labyrinth managers used, but that was exclusive to the labyrinths. More an exception than the norm.

"Remember what I said about work being hard to come by? They had less than nothing to do around the city, so the sad sacks followed me out here to try their luck in Milt."

Wow, reduced to looking for a job out in the sticks. Life wasn't easy for

hunters.

“There ain’t much work in remote villages, but I’d guess they’re at the mayor’s place right about now, tryin’ to scare up any job they can.”

We must have just missed each other.

“I bet he won’t have anything for ‘em, and they’ll come around here before long with their ears droopin’. While we’re waitin’ for ‘em, what say you and me discuss the steep discount on the magic potions you’ll be sellin’ me tomorrow...”

Fez produced a piece of vellum, and the two of us set to making a deal.

“Say, Ann, perhaps I’m mistaken, but it seems to me that Aoi and Fez are rather friendly. Do you know how they became so close?”

While Fez and I negotiated prices and quantities, Mary and Ann gossiped about us.

“I dunno! I guess they’re just like, best friends.”

“Hmm, I see. What a strange sight. I never thought to behold a human labyrinth manager and a Daemon peddler who’d built such a rapport. It’s somehow soothing.”

◇

“Oh, so you’re Aoi! Fez just won’t shut up about you. My name’s Carla. Nice to meetcha!”

The leader of the hunters Fez introduced me to was a cheerful girl with short silver hair and foxlike ears on top of her head. She seemed about the same age as Mary, maybe? Older than Sara, at least. Asking a lady’s age was rude no matter what world you were in, and between the variety of Daemon races and the different ways they changed as they grew older, it got hard to guess how old they were just by looking. I decided to stop fretting and just think of her as being the age she looked. You could tell at a glance that she was a hunter. She wore form-fitting leather armor, reinforced here and there with bits of metal, and had a wicked lance strapped to her back. If this were a game, maybe she’d have been a lancer class? That leather armor looked like it’d be good for

mobility. They were probably better suited for hunting monsters than plate or chain mail. I mean, it was basically a staple in games. Wearing heavy equipment bogged you down, lowering your agility in exchange for defense.

"Get yer shit together, girl!"

Carla gave me a two-handed wave by way of greeting, a big, goofy grin on her face, but Fez was having none of it. He rapped her on the head with his paw.

"Ouch!"

"How many times have I got to tell ya, first impressions matter! Act ladylike! Be polite!"

"Aww, gimme a break. It's just us cute girls in the group now, so we might as well work with what we got!"

"Now see here, little missy. You can make bank with that airhead act in damn near any other line o' work, but consider what yer doin' here! Ya think this guy's gonna want to hire a buncha scatterbrains to protect his people from monsters?"

For all the world, he looked like a caring older brother scolding his little sister. What a touching sight.

"..."

"..."

I shared a knowing grin with three more girls, all of whom were wearing armor similar to Carla's and standing off to the side, watching from a safe distance. The rest of her party. You could tell from the way they nodded at each other and rolled their eyes that scuffles like this between Fez and Carla were common.

Two of the girls had dark eyes, cat ears, and lustrous hair, both exactly the same shade of black. Probably sisters? The last looked more doglike, perhaps. She was more human than the cat sisters or Carla—kind of a middle ground between normal humans and beastmen like Fez. Her short, tawny hair and her physique were more human, but she had a few distinctly animal features as well, particularly the gray fur covering her skin. I marveled once again at the

variety of Daemons around. Even within a single race like the beastmen, there was so much variety. None of them, not even Carla, really had the muscles you'd expect from someone who fought monsters for a living. If anything, they looked rather frail. But perhaps the kind of lithe strength you saw in a cat or a wolf was simply a trait of their race.

"I'm Carla's partner, Ruth. Don't be fooled by the way we look. We're all Rank 7 hunters; you can count on us."

The puppy girl walked up to us with a wry smile on her face, the two cat girls trailing behind. *Hunters have ranks?*

"This is the first time I've heard of hunter ranks. Mind filling me in on the details?"

"Oh, of course not."

She explained to me that a hunter's rank determined the kind of work she could accept. Hunters improved their rank through a combination of completing jobs and passing examinations. Apprentices were Rank 10, novices were Rank 9, and newly recognized fledgling hunters were Rank 8. Carla's group being entirely Rank 7 meant they were all veterans. You could find hunters from Rank 10 to Rank 8 wandering all over the place looking for work, but from Rank 7 up they were almost exclusively attached to a specific town. The world was a hard place, so they were quick to jump at the promise of stability, once they found a steady job and a long-term residence.

"Gosh, Fez, is that how a gentleman talks to his sister-in-law? Show me a little respect here!"

"Don't you dare bring that up. Acceptin' a brat like you as family was the absolute worst part about gettin' married, I swear."

Well, that certainly clarified their relationship. I did remember hearing how he'd had to retire and get married when he got a girl pregnant. So apparently that was when he'd married Carla's sister.

"Anyway, Aoi, it's awfully nice to *meetcha*."

As she shook my hand, she turned and stuck out her tongue at Fez.

“Uh, right.”

Hmm. Being polite was just good manners at a first meeting, but these were Fez’s friends. Maybe I should make an exception.

“Nice to meet you too, Carla. I’m Aoi.”

In the end, I decided to be casual.

“That’s the spirit! Now, Fez here was tellin’ me you wanted to hire us. That true?”

“Yeah. It’s a little complicated, though.”

So I told them about the labyrinth, the construction, the monsters. Basically the same spiel I’d just given Fez. And when I finished...

“Oh man, you’re a lifesaver! We’ll be set for winter! I was gonna have to crash at my parents’ place if I didn’t find a job soon, and man was that gonna be embarrassing.”

“Huh. So, you don’t have to answer if this is a touchy subject, but what’s so bad about staying with your parents?”

Carla turned to the side, then looked at me out of the corner of her eye.

“Well, it’s just a little awkward ever since my sister had her baby. They’re not pushing me to get married or anything, but, you know...”

They sounded like nice parents.

“It’s just like, the way they look at me, like half worried and half resigned. It bugs me, you know?”

“Oh, I see. Yeah, I know how that feels.”

I was familiar with that look. Like, when they were wondering if you were really okay. I remembered it well, from when I’d been hunting for a job.

“All right, then how about we talk details?”

While Fez returned to his cart, looking worn out from his discussion with Carla, the rest of us sat down and discussed the job. In the end, we agreed I would pay the first month’s rate in advance, and Carla’s group would live in an unoccupied house in Milt and commute with the villagers.

◇

The next day, I went to the market, along with Jenny and the housewives. Barry had suggested I ask a woman from my household to act as mediator and manager for the women who would be preparing and distributing food, but I wasn't exactly from the area, so I didn't have any relatives I could ask to fill that role. Ann was all the family I had, and she simply wasn't qualified. So I'd decided to ask Ann's aunt, Jenny, to take on the management role.

"Aoi, we'll want five sacks of dirt onions. Can't make a good hot soup without onions!"

Jenny enthusiastically ordered me around. Ever since I'd told her she was the only family I could ask, she'd been in a very good mood. I paid the farmer for the sacks of dirt onions, and the housewives started loading them up on the simple wooden carts they were dragging along. Only a few months ago, bartering had been the only system in Milt, but these days most items had price tags on them, which made it much easier to shop. The way seasonings like salt and fish paste had become an indispensable part of their diet ever since I'd started selling them never failed to bring a tear to my eye. I wondered, was this really a positive change for the village? They hadn't seemed particularly inconvenienced by bartering with goods and livestock. The only business that had used currency in those days was Fez's stall.

"Next, we'll need eight sacks of demi corn flour. C'mon now, hop to it."

The housewives loaded up the goods Jenny ordered, one by one. I couldn't believe the first time I saw one of those housewives hauling around a forty-pound sack of produce like it was nothing. They filled up three whole carts with grains and vegetables, and we continued our circuit of the market, eventually reaching the village's communal warehouse.

"Oh, hi, Aoi! I'm almost all sold out here!"

Ann waved a paw at me as I reached our stall. I'd begun selling seasonings to the village on a lark, but they'd quickly turned into an absolute must-have for the villagers. I never brought all that much, but my stock always sold steadily, week after week. I made a pittance off it, but the villagers would always tell me they'd be back the next week for more, so I couldn't let them down now. The

villagers had been content to eat simple food for their whole lives, but going back to that insipid diet was unthinkable once they'd gotten a taste for food with more flavor. I hadn't yet shown it off outside the labyrinth, but I was considering introducing them to sugar. For the time being, I was holding back because I doubted their wallets could afford the temptation it would offer. It was much more expensive than salt.

"You okay, Mary?"

Mary, who I had entrusted with looking after Ann while she manned the stall, was sitting in a corner, her legs tucked up and her arms wrapped around herself in the fetal position.

"Aoi, is that you? I have learned that commerce is a foe utterly beyond me. Resilient though I may be, strong though my sword arm may be, I think that I shall never make a customer smile."

Yeah, in retrospect, I couldn't exactly see Mary as a waitress, delivering an order with a smile on her face.

"Nah, don't sweat it. To be honest, when Ann's here, all I do is sit and watch. She's a natural saleswoman."

Ann's ability to handle the villagers far surpassed what could be expected from an outsider like me or Mary. I'd gotten better with them over time, but it wasn't uncommon for someone to bargain for a little extra when they were trading for fresh vegetables from their own fields, or to try to lowball us on something. When they did, I really couldn't deal with it, so leaving everything to Ann was the best option. The problem was, I just didn't know enough. I was studying every aspect of Milt's economy as hard as I could, but I still wasn't up on all the details of the principal crops, especially analyzing their quality and recalling their value in each season. All told, it was probably more complicated than understanding the entire Japanese financial system.

"Even you find this difficult? Thank goodness. I'm not the only one."

Mary gave me a look of relief like I'd handed her a full canteen of water in the middle of the desert. I reached out my hand to her, and she took it firmly and let me pull her to her feet. I felt like we'd finally found some common ground.

“Jeez, you two would be lost without me, wouldn’t you?”

Ann gently needled us, a smile on her face. We were quite a pair: a helpless labyrinth manager and his helpless guardian. As Ann looked at us fondly, I reflected on how far I had to go—no, how far we both had to go. Maybe it was just our human nature.

Chapter Two

"Timber!" Ann shouted cheerfully, followed by a crash that made my ears ring. As the tree fell, branches broke and tumbled down alongside it. The trunk was bigger than Ann's waist, and it must've measured five or six meters tall. When it landed, the twigs snapped clean off, and on the ground there now lay convenient piles of branches, leaves, and a single, perfect log, the remains of the massive tree. It seemed the tools created from the <Dungeon Management Tool> all shared that convenient special ability. I'd used the axe from the <Terrain Improvement: Land Foundation> option, and just like how the shovel and pickaxe had turned things into cubes of material, this one chopped down trees and turned them into neat logs when they hit the ground. Even the branches which were thick enough had been turned into convenient wooden rods. I tried out my Appraisal skill on the tool.

Name: Minor Iron Axe ("The Logger") **Creator**: Aoi Kousaka **Durability**: 850/850

Special Abilities: Effective against vegetation. Turns target into logs.

The flat ends of the logs were as smooth as if they'd been sanded, and though the rods from the branches varied in length and thickness,, their perfectly round shape made them easy to work with. The axe wasn't particularly sharp, but Ann nonetheless managed to take down a whole tree with a single swing, thanks to her high stats. The villagers gathered around, lifted the neatly shaped log, and set it on a massive wooden rack for the giant and ogre Daemons to use.

A little ways from the lumbering group, Barry, the kobolds, and the dwarves were binding wood together with ivy to make more wooden racks for the giants to use, as well as looping ropes around the logs to pull them into position. Construction had begun, but we weren't ready for digging just yet. According to Barry, we'd need a lot of wood once we started working underground to reinforce holes and passageways, as well as to set up scaffolds. We'd also need it as a raw material for making normal pickaxes and shovels.

Wood was practically the first resource you had to gather in any game where

you built stuff, so this seemed pretty reasonable to me. The sprawling forest that lay west of the Great Saredo Rift served as our initial gathering spot.

We'd planned to work together to chop down the trees, but it turned out I'd miscalculated. But that didn't mean I was going to let Ann do all the work alone!

"Timber!" I gripped the axe in both hands, holding it a little lower to the ground than you would a baseball bat, and then twisted my whole body into a swing. I felt the impact ripple through me and watched the tree slowly tip in the opposite direction and fall, turning into logs and rods when it hit the ground.

I mentioned my miscalculation earlier. You see, we were so fast at cutting down trees that we could have easily overwhelmed the transport team. The soil in the forest was soft, and roots interrupted most of the pathways, so pulling things along in carts proved infeasible. Our only option was to load up the largest, strongest villagers with the logs tied to racks on their backs, lashed in place with rope. It took several of the smaller villagers just to load one of them up.

If we'd been using normal axes, we'd need to clean the branches off each individual tree, not to mention turning the trees into workable logs. But thanks to the <Dungeon Management Tool>, every tree we cut down was ready to go the moment it hit the ground, so Ann, Mary, and I were able to make a ton of progress with just one swing of the axe. I'd known Mary was strong from the start, but Ann's usefulness had really surprised me.

"Aoi, what can you tell me of the half kobolds?" While I waited for the men to haul away the tree I'd just cut down, Mary, who had just taken down a particularly large tree of her own, walked up to me.

"From my understanding, the kobolds have clever hands and are gifted at producing fine, detailed work, but are generally physically weaker than other races."

"Timber!" The sound of Ann's shout accompanied the crunch of an axe biting into wood, and shortly thereafter came the ominous crash of yet another tree hitting the ground.

"Physically weaker, eh?"

I'm sure a girl on the cusp of womanhood like Ann would cry if I called her brawny, but it would be a bit of a stretch call her weak!

"Ann is a dungeon dweller. She's probably a little outside the norm."

It took two or three adult kobolds to drag away one of the logs, struggling all the while, so it seemed safe to say that Ann's strength was the exception rather than the norm. It had been less than half a year so far, but she'd been living in the labyrinth with me the whole time, so I figured she'd gained a few levels and her stats had gone up. That's how fantasy worlds worked, right? I wasn't able to see most of the details on people's stats, though, so I didn't know exactly how character growth worked here. Maybe they had a purely skill-based leveling system.

As logs accumulated, Barry and his group finished the wooden racks and brought one to me. I fastened the rope bundling the logs together around my back and started hauling. My shoes were sinking into the ground. Did they load this one up with too many logs?

"You, um... You are human, correct, Aoi?"

"These days, I'm not so sure anymore, but I think so, more or less." I was hauling a wooden rack loaded up with logs, something intended for one of the giants. My strength was definitely inhuman.

"This isn't exactly normal, is it?"

"Indeed not, particularly with your physique. Even the traders are more muscular than you. You look like a government clerk who sits at a desk doing paperwork all day. A normal human with your build would find it difficult to lift even one log."

I already suspected as much, but it seemed a labyrinth dweller's physical abilities were beyond those of normal humans from this world. If we ever had the free time, I really wanted to try inviting the village residents out to the labyrinth for training. Oh man, what nostalgia. That reminded me of these labyrinth manager sims I'd played, and strategy games and stuff, where you recruited subordinates and trained them up. Ah, the joys of gameplay.

◇

As I hauled logs from the lumberyard to the construction site day after day, I observed the progress at the sawmill, listening to the sound of hammers on wood and smelling the smoke from the kitchens.

“How are things going out here, Chief?”

I called out to Barry, who I found supervising a few workers driving a wooden log into the ground, its ends sharpened down until it was more of a stake.

“That you, Boss? Thanks to you and Ann, we got our wood faster than I expected. Keeping that lumberyard in good shape has been a mighty pain. On the upside, we finished building a proper kitchen oven out of stone, as well as clay from the forest.”

The villagers had taken to calling Barry “Chief”, which made sense given they were working under him, but my situation was different even though I was doing the same work as all of them, so in turn, he’d started calling me “Boss”. The hierarchy was a little funny, but the names were clear enough.

I headed over to take a look at the kitchen, where Jenny found me and made me help set up. The simple oven of stone and clay was already complete and ready to make meals, but Jenny quickly dragged me up to the roof. It seemed she wanted to rainproof it, as well as to secure the building from the grit that inevitably blew in on the wind in this arid terrain. The dwarven villagers had not only made the oven from clay, they’d also used it to secure and support the logs that were holding up the roof. The village’s giants had used their massive hammers to drive the pillars into the ground, fixing the roof support in place. Ordinarily, doing work like this required setting up scaffolding and whatnot, but giants made easy work of many such tasks. I watched them hammer away, feeling the shock of each stroke traveling up through my legs. Over at the lumberyard near the forest, soup was simmering in a few big metal pots on top of more clay ovens. I hadn’t really minded being alone in the labyrinth, nor had it bothered me much when it was just Ann and I building the stairs together, but I sure was having fun working alongside all these people.

I’d played a lot of sandbox games in my time, and a lot of survival games where you had to tough it out alone in extreme conditions like snowy mountains and barren deserts. Those were fun in their own way, but there was

a special joy in interacting, cooperating, and even competing with other people in a multiplayer setting. Sure, there were a few drawbacks to this situation: I was paying out wages and even worker's compensation for people who got injured, for instance. But when you sat back and saw all this hard work going on, or better yet when you really jumped in and took on your own responsibilities, it turned out the game of life wasn't half bad.

◇

Several days after we began gathering wood, I found Karumi waiting for me in front of the cabin.

"Good morning. Pardon the abrupt visit, but I've brought a few things that could aid you." Towering behind Karumi was a mountain of cardboard boxes, all bearing the Tundra label. Barrels peeked out of every box, all with the same logo branded on them.

"Good morning. What's with the barrels?"

"Read this."

Karumi handed me a little paper booklet entitled *General Purpose Coagulant (Standard Construction Stone Framing: Liquid Solution) Instruction Manual*. I scanned the detailed explanation. It sounded quite easy to use. Just paint an area with the material, and whatever you applied it on, from soil to sand, the spot and its surroundings turned into solid stone.

"This seems really convenient. It'll make construction easier."

I sure wished she'd brought it along sooner. This opened up all kinds of possibilities. For example, we'd planned to shovel up cubes of regular dirt or even sand, which were going to go to waste. Now we could instead turn them into stone building materials and reuse them. Sure, I could go take the pickaxe and carve out the stone we needed to use, but it was heavy, and we'd still have to do something with the soil and sand we dug up. I'd never had any call to try using it for anything before, since those cubes crumbled under any kind of impact.

But did I really need fifty barrels of this stuff? Kinda seemed like overkill.

"I've never seen this in the Tundra catalog before."

There was a certain pleasure in browsing the Tundra listings, so I did it often, but it was my first time seeing this stuff. Maybe it just sold out as soon as it was listed; it certainly was useful enough.

This almost seemed too convenient. Even a novice like me could tell that this sort of material would make construction work fast and easy. “Are there restrictions on where you can sell this stuff?”

This kind of thing happened from time to time, especially with PC games. The platform would apply restrictions on particularly desirable goods in certain areas, bringing many a tear to the unfortunate region-blocked gamer’s eyes. Karumi nodded, confirming my suspicions.

“These are intended to be supplied only to labyrinths operating in forward zones, but, well...” Her voice trailed off.

“Smuggled it in for us, did you? Well, I may be new to all of this, but I know a desperate situation when I see one,” Mary solemnly spoke up.

I was thinking the same thing, and was relieved to find that she was able to look the other way, even if reluctantly, when the rules needed to be bent to save someone on the brink of destruction. Perhaps she’d seen the same thing herself and learned to accept it while fighting on the front lines. What a relief to find she wasn’t completely by-the-book.

“You see, we never know how much the labyrinths will need, so a large supply is always kept in reserve. But due to the nature of the reagent, its effectiveness weakens over time in storage, so these barrels of coagulant won’t actually turn anything to the hardness of stone. At best, the result will be the consistency of soft wood.”

Degradation of industrial chemicals was a fact of life. Still, even turning things into soft wood would come in handy for construction purposes.

“Working labyrinths generally cannot use them in this state, so they were slated for disposal.”

It was a believable story. Even stone walls and floors would need frequent upkeep in a labyrinth frequented by adventurers.

“Although these were supposed to be disposed of, they’re not without their

uses, so I've built up a steady supply. I get them from the control center for operational labyrinths with the intent of using them in case of emergencies for the public works labyrinths under my oversight, like yours. It's fully within my authority to provide you all of this material, for your own usage."

"Being in charge of labyrinths sure is hard work."

The light faded from Mary's eyes as she was once again exposed to the full scope of the bureaucracy associated with my job. You could almost hear, faintly in the distance, the sound of her dreams being strangled to death.

I left Mary behind stewing and went to test out the coagulant. At first glance, the mountain of barrels looked to be made of wood, but on closer inspection they turned out to be cardboard. I kind of thought you'd want to transport liquids in something sturdier, but meh, whatever. I ripped off the tape on top of one and removed the lid, then I took a closer look at the viscous white fluid inside. I picked up the brush that had been taped to the top of the barrel, dipped it in the liquid, and spread a bit of it on a block of soil I had handy.

"Doesn't look any different to me. And the instructions claim you don't even need to wait for it to dry, right? This stuff sure is handy."

I produced a shovel with the <Dungeon Management Tool> and dug into the block of soil to which I'd applied the coagulant.

"Oh, wow, look! It's not crumbling, Aoi!"

Ann stared at the mossy cube of dirt. I picked it up in awe "It's firm enough that this shouldn't crumble so easily anymore."

I rapped on it with my knuckles, but instead of breaking apart, it gave a satisfying thonk. Man, seeing a chunk of damp, soft soil turn into a single solid cube really reminded me of this one game I'd played a while back...

"Wow, that's so weird! It feels moist, but my hand isn't getting wet at all. This is freaky."

Ann had taken the mossy soil cube from me. Or, I guess it was more like a mossy block? She lifted it up and eyed it, squeezing it here and there.

"So let's see, it comes with a dissolving agent, or you can pour hot water on it

for long enough and the effect will wear off. I see.”

The instructions even had a section on undoing the effects. It somehow made sense to me that boiling water would undo the effects of the coagulant, and it was a nice emergency measure in case you ran out of the dissolving agent. It wasn’t like intruders were going to build a sauna inside the labyrinth, so it probably didn’t present much of a risk to the integrity of the building materials.

“Okay, the manual doesn’t cover this, but I gotta try it out anyway.” I dug up eight mossy soil blocks and stacked them into a cube then coated it all with the coagulant and tried picking it up.

“Yep, they’re sticking together.” I picked up my jumbo-sized block and shook it around, but it didn’t show any signs of breaking apart. The eight blocks had hardened into a single big block.

“Cool. So not only does this harden soft soil, it also works as an adhesive.” I couldn’t rely on it too heavily, because it only made things as hard as soft wood, but I could still use the hardened earth and sand as building materials.

“This is a godsend. We’ll be able to finish the labyrinth faster now for sure.”

“I’m pleased to be able to fulfill my duty of aiding my labyrinth managers.” She was hiding it well, but I could tell Karumi was elated about having done something useful. Ann nodded at her brightly.

“Man, it’s gonna be a lot of work hauling these all to the construction site.”

“Oh no!”

Apparently neither Karumi nor Ann had thought of that. But come on, just use your head. We had at least fifty of these giant barrels, all filled to the brim with coagulant, and here they all were at the bottom of a deep ravine. Maybe I’d be fine if this were some game where I could just stick them all in my backpack and they’d magically take up no space and weigh nothing, but I didn’t think Karumi had any trick like that up her sleeve. Hell, even if she did, she probably couldn’t let me use it. The thought of hauling them all up out of here was giving me a headache.

◇

“Careful with those tools, now. I don’t want any injuries on my watch.”

Barry supervised the work, blueprint in hand, his booming voice rallying the workers. Once the supporting infrastructure was built, we directed our efforts towards the next task: excavation. The kobolds had begun digging what would become the entrance, according to our blueprints. They used shovels produced from the <Dungeon Management Tool> to dig out blocks of soil, applied generous amounts of the coagulant to them, and carried out the now-solid blocks.

“Man, at times like these, you can really see the difference between games and reality.”

The team consisted of two kobolds digging, one applying coagulant to the blocks, and ten hauling blocks away. Although their cubic shape made them easy to transport, they weren’t exactly light. The blocks measured about ten centimeters to a side. Humans and kobolds could carry one or two by hand, and even with a carrying rack, the most they could carry was about five. The giants and ogres could handle two or three times that, but fitting them in the tight confines of the excavation site had proved impossible. The dwarves and kobolds hauled the blocks just out of the dig, and the giants and ogres carried larger loads of them off to a second site further away.

“Heave-ho! Heave-ho!”

Ann stuck out like a sore thumb, walking along happily with a rack on her back piled up with just as many blocks as the giants were carrying. She had almost twenty of them stacked up on the rack, and she was so small, it looked almost like the rack was moving along by itself. The villagers would see her and smile, chattering about how a girl who worked every day in the Great Dark Lord’s labyrinth really must be something special, but something about it felt off to me. Jenny stood dumbfounded, her mouth hanging open, when she came by to bring cups of water to the workers. Now that was more the reaction I’d expected.

“Oof.” I set down a barrel of coagulant in a corner of the workshop, having just hauled it up from the bottom of the ravine. I’d found myself in the envious position of carrying them all to the construction site.

“Bring up the wood, boys, we’re reinforcing these walls!”

Man, that sure looked like fun, working together like that. Not that I was jealous or anything. *Carrying barrels is my favorite!*

In half a day, they’d finished a set of stairs leading down to what would become the labyrinth’s first floor. The area above the staircase was left open to make it easier to work through the rest of the excavation and construction on that floor.

“It’s coming along nicely, Boss. That coagu-whatsit of yours is amazing, let me tell you. Makes carrying out all the soil we dig up much easier. We’re thirty meters down, and the sun isn’t even set.”

As evening approached, Barry and I looked over the day’s progress. Down in the deeps, it was mainly the kobolds working, with their good night vision. Just then, a pair of them with matching fur patterns appeared at the top of the stairs with a load of blocks, which they set down for the giants to carry away. Perhaps the two were brothers. The ogre tasked with hauling blocks away from the entrance went into action.

“Barry, what’s the status of the tools?”

“We’ve got more than enough left. I’m still a little weirded out by these perfect blocks and rods, but those shovels and pickaxes work like a charm. Besides that, we’ve got more than enough wheelbarrows, and more magic potions than we could use up in a lifetime of injuries. I’d get smacked upside the head if one of my builder buddies heard me complaining about anything here.”

“Glad to hear it. When the girls and I finish bringing up all the barrels, there won’t be much left for me to do, but I still want you to come and get me right away if anything happens. Got it?”

“Of course, of course. Keeping you up to date is part of the job, my boy.”

I’d wanted to help out with the actual digging as well, but the agreement we’d come to was that I was only to help with bedrock, or anything the villagers would have a hard time with. I’d wanted to work alongside everyone, but I was a limited resource and had to put my abilities to use only where they were

really needed.

“Make sure you show up at mealtime. Eating out of the same pot and sitting around the same fire goes a long way.”

Nice. I wouldn’t even have to cook today.

◇

As soon as the girls and I finished our task of carrying the mountain of barrels up from the ravine, the three of us returned to our quiet little life. The only difference now was that, instead of it being just the three of us all the time, we went to eat breakfast and dinner at the construction site, chatting with the villagers. I felt a little antsy thinking about the construction going on while I was just taking it easy in the cabin, but it wouldn’t help any for me to try to rush things. And I realized I had a favor to ask of Mary, now that we found ourselves with more time on our hands.

“There’s something I hoped you could help me with, since you’re a knight—well, no, actually, since you were raised as a noble.”

“Of course. What can I do for you?”

I’d been a bit hesitant, but Mary’s warm response put my mind at ease.

“It’s about Ann. Do you think you could teach her to be a lady? She used to live with her aunt, who didn’t exactly help with that, and it’s not something I can teach her. I just want her to grow into a proper woman.”

It wasn’t exactly my place to worry about these things. I mean, who was I supposed to be, her father? But the thing was, I just couldn’t deal with it anymore! The way she acted around me was driving me mad with temptation, and I needed any help I could get.

“I see. I’ll do what I can.”

Mary looked uncertain about the task she’d just signed up for, but she reluctantly agreed.

A few hours later, Mary returned to me dripping wet, with Ann in tow.

“Aoi, I have nothing left to teach Ann.”

Already?! No, no, I had to at least hear her out.

“Mhm. So, what did you teach her so far?”

“I knew already that I had nothing to teach her regarding either personal grooming or attitude. Her manners may not be as refined as a human noble’s, but they are more than sufficient for one who was born a peasant.”

“Oh, huh. Well, I guess she wasn’t unrefined to begin with. Ann, did someone teach you etiquette?”

“Yep! Sara taught me all about it when she studied manners.”

Sara did act like a proper lady, despite living in a tiny village. If Ann had learned from her, she probably did have a decent grasp on it.

“Next, I attempted to teach her about cooking, cleaning, and laundry. The domestic skills. As a noblewoman, I have little experience in such things, so I could only teach her the basics. However, I must admit that I am not exactly gifted in those pursuits, and though I gave it my all, I burned the food, broke the broom, and fell into the spring while attempting to do laundry. Humiliating though it is to admit, I required Ann’s assistance with every task.”

Mary reported her failure in painstaking detail, tears shimmering at the corners of her eyes, a little quiver in her lips. I found myself unable to do anything but listen. I’d realized she wasn’t exactly great at housework, but I’d never imaged she would be *that* bad.

“That’s gotta be just because you don’t have enough practice. Like, you know, you’re great with swords and all because you practiced a ton, right? You’ll be great in no time if you just practice cooking and cleaning, I’m sure of it! I’m not any good at them either, so let’s have Aoi teach both of us!”

“Thank you, Ann. Yes, I’d like that.”

Ann’s attitude towards Mary had changed remarkably in the few hours since I’d seen them. She used to look up to her like a wise master who could do no wrong, but now she was acting more like a little sister who had to cover for her klutzy older sister. Not exactly how I’d expected this whole thing to go, but you know, maybe it was for the best in the end. Sadly, this meant I was still the one in the house with the highest level of Mom Power. I was glad they relied on me

and all, but the irony of it made me weep.

From that day on, I observed as Ann instructed Mary in housework. Ann had always been a fast learner, but it seemed she was also an excellent teacher. Her lesson on peeling potatoes was impressively thorough.

“Okay, watch how I do it! You gotta hold the knife like this, and the potato like this. See? And then the trick is, you move the potato instead of the knife to cut it.”

Ann demonstrated with a little twist.

“Okay, now it’s your turn. First, show me how you hold it. Just like that, perfect! Okay, now try cutting it.

“That’s it! You’re so good at it!”

“Really? But I’m peeling off so much of the potato along with the skin.”

“Nah, you’re doing great. First, you gotta focus on getting rid of the parts you can’t eat. Like, with potatoes, it’s important to cut out the sprouts and stuff. You’ll get better at peeling off less of the meat with practice.”

“I-Is that so. Oh, this is such a relief. I’d convinced myself I simply had no talent for these pursuits, but if you believe I can do it, then it must be true.”

A little lesson, and then a heaping helping of praise. Ann’s teaching strategy put a big smile on Mary’s face. When I’d started teaching Ann how to play games, I’d remembered something a veteran had once told me. People don’t learn unless you show them how to do something, let them do it themselves, and then praise them when they do it right. That was how I’d taught Ann, and now she was paying it forward.

“Check this out, Mary!”

Ann had run off to hang our clean laundry on the makeshift clothesline we’d put up in the sunniest place in the ravine. Mary turned to me.

“She’s such a sweet girl.”

“Isn’t she? Ann is a handful, but she’s worth it, and more.”

“To think I once believed her less than human. At best, I used to see the

Daemons back home as servants, never as people.”

“That’s just how you were raised. I can’t blame you.”

It would be natural enough to fault her for holding that viewpoint in the past, but this world was far removed from my own. And hell, my own world had gone through its own crises with discrimination, and still did today. Who was I to lecture her?

“Yes, it’s a view shared among humans, especially in my country. But seeing Ann has forced me to rethink it. I once took pride in being a knight, and in supplying servants... No, in kidnapping. I’ve extinguished many a smile under the pretense of ensuring prosperity for my fellow humans.”

What a tangled situation. This world had ethnic conflict, ideological conflict, and racial differences to divide them. It was hard to find a right answer to this, if there even was such a thing.

“You know, Mary, I’m just a labyrinth manager. Just one of the Great Dark Lord’s lackeys. And hell, I’m not even from here. So I don’t know much about the conflict between humans and Daemons, and this may not sound terribly convincing as a result, but I think it’s wonderful that you’ve opened your eyes and started making your own decisions, rather than just believing what you’ve been told. Thinking for yourself about what’s right and what’s wrong is a good start.”

Of its own volition, my hand plopped down on Mary’s head, so I decided to go with it and stroke her hair. Seeing her down in the dumps helped me realize, for the first time, that she wasn’t just a knight. She was also a girl, a little younger than me, and sometimes she needed to be cheered up.

“I’d appreciate if you didn’t treat me like a child. I do not approve of this.”

And yet, in spite of her complaints, she didn’t shake my hand off.

◇

“Ann, I wish to repay your kindness for teaching me. Is there anything I can do for you?” Mary suddenly asked Ann one day, just after we’d returned from the construction site.

Our regular walks out to the site still had us talking to the villagers, eating, and hearing a progress report from Barry each day. As we ate, I'd noticed that Mary seemed a little restless. It seemed she'd been steeling herself to ask Ann this question.

"Umm. Something you can do for me? Hmm."

I tried to tell myself that the long pause was coming from her thinking of so many things she could ask for, rather than from her not feeling confident that Mary could actually do any of them. The thought of Mary breaking down and crying in shame over her uselessness was not a pleasant one.

"Yes, anything within my power."

"Okay, I got it! Teach me how to fight!"

Say what now?

"Huh? You want to learn how to fight?"

Mary shared my confusion.

"Yeah! I wanna learn how to use weapons so I can protect Aoi if he's in danger!"

I had mixed feelings about the ongoing inversion of gender stereotypes, but I was happy she felt that way!

"Well, you heard her Aoi. What do you think?"

Mary seemed conflicted.

"I'm okay with it. In fact, I'd really appreciate it if you would. The question of her protecting me aside, I'd like Ann to be able to defend herself."

Ann's stats were way higher than those of the villagers, but since she didn't know how to fight, she wasn't that much more capable than a normal person. True, she was savage in online games, but all she really would've learned from that would be to never lose hope and to keep her focus, and maybe an instinct for when to run away.

"Ann's a very pretty girl. She's perfectly safe with the villagers back in Milt, but I worry about her all the same."

Despite the way she tormented me at night, she was quite innocent, and she had a knack for putting herself into risky situations.

“You make a good point. It would be good for Ann to learn some self-defense.”

It seemed Mary was on board.

“Ann, I’d like you to choose a weapon that suits you, and I’ll teach you combat technique. We’ll use sheathed weapons and wrap them in cloth or leather, but you’ll still be learning with the genuine article.”

Ah, right, we’d have to procure a weapon for Ann. I had the cursed sword back in the warehouse, but if something happened, only one of us could use it. Besides, the whole point of the cursed sword was that it bestowed skill and technique on you, even if you were a novice. It wasn’t exactly a good tool for learning.

“What do you think, Ann?”

Ann opened up Tundra and flipped through the catalog. Magical swords were expensive, but I could afford to splurge a bit and buy something decent. I still remembered back when I’d first gotten here and bought a cheap wooden lance that lasted for maybe half a day. Now that was quality.

“Um. Hmmmm. Lemme see. Oh, here we go! Can we get this one?”

Ann’s face broke into a grin as she rotated the window towards me. It looked a whole lot like Ann’s favorite weapon from *Gun Gust*: a big, freaking poleaxe. Apparently she’d taken a shine to it. 80,000 DL? Pretty good price, honestly. Maybe because only the little bladed part was made out of cast metal?

“Don’t worry, no price is too high for your safety.”

I stroked Ann’s hair and ordered the poleaxe from the catalog, plus a little something extra. I took out a few coins and put them into the porcelain Tundra piggie. So, I was finally buying a gift for Ann, but instead of it being a cute hairpin or a pretty dress, it was a polearm. *That’s my Ann, I guess.*

“Thank you for your purchase! Have a good day!”

A long thin cardboard box fell to the ground with a thump. Impressive

turnaround time, as always.

“Go ahead and open it. Careful not to cut yourself.”

Ann looked excited as a kid on Christmas.

“Woof!”

She was so happy she popped into kobold form. In a frenzy, Ann tore apart the box and worked her way through all the cardboard protecting the edge of the blade.

“Wow, it looks just like the one from the game!”

She carefully pried away the last protective strip, and when it was all uncovered, she turned the poleaxe over and over, admiring it from every angle.

“I see, a poleaxe. Truth be told, these tend to be difficult for women to wield, but with Ann’s staggering strength, I believe it may just work.”

I could see Mary glancing back and forth between Ann’s slender arms and the ludicrously big axe, doubt in her eyes, but she’d also seen the raw power Ann had displayed at the construction site. I could certainly understand her concern.

“One more thing, Ann.”

There was still that something extra that I’d ordered, a leather bag tucked into a corner of the box the poleaxe had come in. I pulled it out and handed it to Ann. Inside there was a hand axe, Ann’s sub-weapon in *Gun Gust*. Not only was it a lovely weapon both for throwing at distant enemies and for surprising an opponent who had you on the ropes, it was also a convenient tool for cutting firewood and whatnot, even in games.

“Oh wow, thanks!”

She gave me the sweetest smile, the poleaxe in one hand and the hand axe in the other. I couldn’t help but smile back.

Though seriously, seeing the real Ann with a poleaxe was kinda scary. Man, what was I thinking? I obviously should’ve told her to use a longsword back when we started *Gun Gust*.

◇

The clang of metal on metal echoed down the walls of the ravine. The weapons had been sheathed and wrapped in leather to prevent training accidents. Mary only defended and dodged Ann's clumsy attacks. Her moves were a sloppy imitation of the techniques she'd seen time and time again while playing *Gun Gust*. She followed a simple pattern: swing, swing, swing, as fast as you can. The axe suited her in that, at least; it emphasized power and speed over skill. Mary fended off her every attack, a look of concentration on her face. Each time their weapons came together with a clash, the clamor it raised was so intense I could hardly believe they were sheathed and wrapped.

"That's enough for today. It's hard work, using a weapon you're not used to. You'll need to build your stabilizer muscles."

They trained for about thirty minutes, I think?

"Yes, ma'am!"

As Ann skipped away to clean and care for her poleaxe, I turned to Mary.

"What do you think? Pretty good for her first time, in my opinion."

"...Is she gone?"

"Uh, yeah. I think she went back to the cabin so she could polish her poleaxe or something."

It made me happy to see that she'd taken to heart my lesson about caring for your weapon, back when I'd first been teaching her *Gun Gust*.

"Oh, thank goodness."

She sighed in relief and sat down on the spot.

"What's wrong? You're not getting sick, are you?"

"No, no, I just need to rest. I'm exhausted! I can't recall the last time my sword arm was this sore. Aoi, Ann will become a splendid warrior. She shows great promise."

Mary had looked so in control of the situation, but it seemed she'd been having a tough time of it. Ann's offensive barrage must have been taxing to withstand, considering her abnormal strength. I sure as hell didn't want to be on the receiving end of it.

“Thanks for doing this. What do you say I get you a nice shield to show my appreciation for your ongoing lessons? That should make things easier for you, right?”

“Are you sure?”

“Let’s just say I’m buying it for the labyrinth, and you’re borrowing it from me while you’re here. Oh, but you can buy it from me any time, if you want.”

I opened the Tundra catalog, selected the military equipment category, and turned the display to Mary.

“My, so many of them look simply wonderful. I’d only be borrowing it? Oh, but you said I can buy it afterwards, hmm. I’ll have to choose carefully.”

Nearly an hour later, Mary finally settled on a high-quality shield that cost 1.8 million DL. It wasn’t magic or anything—that was just the price you paid for top-of-the-line goods. Mary seemed satisfied and in a good mood as she pressed the purchase button on the shield, but if she really intended to buy it off me later, she’d have to delay her return home quite a bit to save up enough.

...

How convenient.

◇

I had a good reason for not participating in the labyrinth’s construction.

I really had wanted to join the kobolds and dwarves in digging up the underground. In fact, it was killing me, not getting to be part of the team! I’d told Barry to at least be sure to call me if they hit bedrock, or a particularly large boulder, but I had to dry my tears and give up my hopes of joining in the fun. You see, I had to make the potions we’d be using to bait hunters into challenging the labyrinth in the first place.

“Hmm. The fundamentals of alchemy are much the same as the fundamentals of cooking. Combine a few ingredients and cook them, and you can end up with something very different. There are rules to the changes things undergo, but the talent, condition, and fortitude of the alchemist has a huge impact on the quality of the end product. Moreover, the rules aren’t all that clear, or even

completely deterministic in alchemy, which makes things even more difficult. It's like I'm going through online guides for a game and they're giving me conflicting info."

It wasn't all that efficient for me to mix everything myself, so I'd been thinking about teaching the girls how to help me make magic potions. But even though I knew the basic recipe, I felt like I wouldn't do a good job of explaining the process of making them, so I'd ordered an alchemy book from Tundra. The author was a labyrinth manager who'd undertaken a great deal of field research.

The Essentials of Practical Alchemy (312 Pages) == 650,000 DL

Seller: Manager, Labyrinth #16

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I'd found many cookbook-style books, with detailed recipes and sketches of materials, and a few describing where to forage for certain plants, but I'd hardly found any talking about the theoretical foundations. Perhaps there weren't a lot of scholarly types among the labyrinth managers. The textbook had no reviews yet, but I figured I didn't have much to lose, so I bought it anyway. It turned out to be surprisingly detailed, but unfortunately, the best I could say for it was that it presented its concepts in a logical manner. A lot of the time, it was simply too complicated for me, not to mention poorly written, and I had to re-read most passages a few times to really get it. Not the best book ever.

"This book says it's only got the essentials, but it has university-level terminology in math, physics, and chemistry all over the place. Plus, you're supposed to be well-acquainted with alchemy systems in fantasy games, and have a basic understanding of cooking techniques *and* a knack for cooking in the first place, otherwise you won't be able to appreciate the book. Talk about gatekeeping."

I'd played a lot of niche games in my time, so fortunately I did meet the minimum qualifications to read the book, but still, I felt like the author could've at least made an attempt at appealing to a mainstream audience.

I'd seen books like this in games before, like in this one foreign MMORPG called *The Eldest Scrolls*, which had been marketed as being extremely realistic.

Game worlds worked under different fundamental laws than the real world, so players always had to be informed just what you could and couldn't do. So the developers in that game had introduced scholar NPCs who sent you on quests to unearth old arcane books detailing the knowledge you'd need. It was a great game, if you had a lot of curiosity and enjoyed the thrill of exploration. You could only make one character, though. So if you chose a magician for example, you were sent as a student under some mentor, and from then on your primary goal was basically to be recognized as an independent player. I made the mistake of choosing a wizard initially, assuming it was like any other game where you could make a bunch of characters. The harsh requirements for reaching the endgame just made me want to do even better, so I traveled from one old wizard to another, becoming a disciple of anyone who would teach me. They sent me to libraries sprinkled across the world, where I read books both sanctioned and forbidden, doing anything in my quest to become a full wizard. I was adept in healing magic and offensive magic, a true master of my craft, and by the end the foreign players had dubbed me Mr. Monk, thanks to my diligence grinding out those books.

I hung out in both the Japanese community, which had barely thirty players, and one other in-game community called "Black Magic Theorists". I still talked to most of the gamers I met in that crazy place, and we even played together sometimes. Masochistic difficulty was a surefire recipe for building friendship. The game was deemed too hardcore for people to play in a foreign language, so they'd even localized it to Japanese, but it only got about 3,000 people playing it across the world, so splitting up servers was kind of pointless. If you were Japanese and wanted to play the game, you were better off importing an international copy. The game was still alive, and there were still active forums centered around it to this day.

You know, if I was able to decipher that damn game and become a wizard, maybe I could simplify this book so it was more friendly for newbies?

"Jeez, it's like four percent as long as it used to be. Did I cut too much?"

I'd tried my hand at simplifying the 300-page mammoth of a book, summarizing all the important parts in handwritten notes, and it'd turned out to be only twelve pages.

“This thing really does go beyond the essentials. I think I’ll just teach alchemy to Ann the same way I would a new dinner recipe. Personally, I think it’s better to learn to make stuff through trial and error.”

When I read through my notes, I realized what I’d written was best described as the theoretical foundations underpinning how alchemy worked. Well, now I could see why there were so few books on alchemical theory. Still, no biggie. I was sure the inhabitants of this world would figure this stuff out for themselves sooner or later.

“Hey Ann, wanna learn how to make magic potions?”

“Sure!”

I prepared the equipment for Ann to use and began teaching her how to make the magic potions we’d be giving out as prizes.

“Aoi, what shall I do?”

“Oh, hey Mary. Um, you should probably do some training, or maybe help out with the construction to get some exercise. I’ll be counting on you once the labyrinth is up and running, so I can’t have you getting rusty on me.”

“Absolutely! I’ll go for a run outside at once!”

Mary left her stuff in the cabin and went right out for a jog.

“Mary’s not gonna study with us?”

Ann sadly watched as Mary disappeared into the distance.

“Everyone has their role to play. There are some things only we can do, and some things only Mary can do.”

I felt a twinge of guilt. The truth was, I wanted to teach Mary as well, but that book was right when it said you needed at least some talent for cooking to do alchemy. Mary was still a complete novice who burned everything she tried to make. It would’ve been cruel to force her to try something this complicated until she’d had some more time under Ann’s wing.

Ann and I practiced mixing, and by the time the labyrinth had almost completed, she could reliably make Grade 9 and Grade 10 potions every time. The difference in level between our work must have had something to do with

that fortitude stat the guide had mentioned. It was unclear to me how much Mary had improved during her cooking lessons with Ann. Whenever I saw Mary's handiwork lurking in a corner of the table, I would frown and think how teaching Mary to cook was perhaps the only thing I had yet to see Ann complete with flying colors.

◇

The labyrinth's construction was going smoothly. The blocks of soil and rock produced as a by-product of the digging had accumulated into a pixelated mountain beside the workshop. What's more, Mary had grown accustomed to her life here in Labyrinth #228, as demonstrated by the fact that our happy little morning accidents now only happened perhaps twice a week. One day during dinner, Barry informed me that the interior of the labyrinth was now 8% complete. He asked me to bring Mary along the next day to pin down some details regarding the guardian's room.

Before we went down, I put on the hard hat I recently bought on Tundra. It was a little different from the ones back home, since it was made from iron instead of plastic, but it had the same shape, and it would protect me either way, so I couldn't complain. After we descended into the labyrinth, kobolds with torches guided us to the guardian's room.

"Ah, how nice and spacious. Mm, and not too many pillars either. This will make a good arena for fighting."

It seemed Mary had no complaints.

A single kobold's torch illuminated the room. It was about a thirty meters on each side, with four large stone pillars supporting the ceiling.

"You haven't decorated yet? I don't really care for the bare dirt aesthetic, at least."

"That's why I brought you here today, Boss. I was thinking we could line the labyrinth's passages with clay and cut stone, but the guardian's room is the star of the show, so I wanted your thoughts on how to give it a little oomph."

"Gotcha. It'd be one thing if our guardian was a monster. Then a dark and creepy cave would do just the trick. But with Mary, we need to pick something

more suitable.”

Made sense. If the labyrinth’s final boss was a lovely girl, we’d want her room to do her justice.

“I’m sure we could do a fine job ourselves, but I thought Mary should have the final call for what she’d want it to look like.”

“You intend to leave it to me? Aoi, is it okay for me to decide?”

“Yeah, of course. Do whatever you want. You’re going to be spending a lot of time down here when the labyrinth opens up, so I want you to like it.”

“Here’s what we’ve got available to use for the interior.”

Barry took out some miniature sample materials from his bag. He had tiny bricks, wooden planks, all kinds of stones, and little mud walls reinforced with wood.

“So many to choose from.”

Mary selected a few of the samples and inspected them carefully, one by one. It felt a bit like watching someone pick a paint color for their new home.

“I’d like you to make the floors and walls out of stone.”

“Yeah, can do. That’s easy enough. You sure you wanna go with something so simple?”

“Yes. If you make it of stone, it will be very similar to the training grounds I used long ago, in my parents’ home. The familiar sight will put me at ease.”

So, a familiar feel was more important to her than a flashy appearance? A very Mary decision.

She looked at me for confirmation, and I gave her a smile and a nod.

We went to see the completed guardian room a few days later and were astounded at how grand it had become in such a short time. According to Barry, the coagulant worked wonders in making smooth walls.

“It looks just like a room in a fortress or a castle.”

The interior was brightly lit by torches set in sconces around the walls and pillars, giving it a certain medieval flair.

“My parents’ house is an old stone fort that was remodeled into a mansion. This kind of room is just like the one where I learned my swordsmanship.”

“It’s important to feel comfortable when you’ve got a job to do, especially when your work requires a lot of focus.”

I voiced my agreement. Like, when you play arcade games, you really have to go to your favorite arcade if you want to play your best.

“I’m so glad you understand!”

Mary was delighted to find someone who empathized with her, which honestly made me feel a bit guilty for comparing her situation to arcade gaming.

◇

Although we’d been up to our ears in construction work, I hadn’t forgotten about gaming. In particular, I’d been trying to get Mary to join me and Ann, though sometimes it made me feel like a devil whispering in her ear—a labyrinth manager under the command of the Great Dark Lord tempting a pure and righteous knight onto the dark path of gaming.

“So Aoi, is this box some sort of toy? The only games I am familiar with are those that children play, like tag, or hide-and-seek.”

“This is more like a game for adults.”

Recommended for people aged fifteen and over, if I remembered correctly.

“It’ll be easier to show you than to tell you. Here, why don’t you sit behind us and watch, and I’ll explain while playing.”

Maybe it was unwise to use the dangerously addicting online gaming scene for her introduction to video games, but it wouldn’t be fair to show her less than the best.

“Ann, can you log in to *Arena*? You know the account password, right?”

“Yep!”

I’d decided to teach her a game called *Gun Arena*, another game from the makers of *Gun Gust*. It was effectively another mode of *Gun Gust*, where you

logged in with your characters from *Gun Gust* and duked it out with other players for prizes. You could earn special equipment and items in *Arena* that you could use back in *Gust*.

“Is that a knight? Oooh, it’s on horseback, and it has a lance!”

I’d figured Mary would enjoy the knights. I was mounted, and Ann was armed with a pike and on foot as my squire. Mary was getting pretty pumped up over the mounted knight. Maybe she was so used to knights in this world piloting Extended Knight Armor that she hadn’t thought of them riding anything else?

“Ann is your companion? Will you be fighting together?!”

“You make your own character to be your avatar in the game world, where you live and fight. What we’re doing now is kind of like a war game. It’s a great way to show off how strong you are.”

It was a team competition on a decent-sized battlefield. As Mary watched the ten knights and forty squires clash, though she didn’t say much, her breath began to come faster, and a flush rose in her cheeks. It was strangely erotic.

“So, the battle is over now, but you see those people talking and pointing at us, over by the fences? Those are scouts looking to hire soldiers for their lord.”

It wasn’t uncommon here to see freelance mercenaries looking for *Gun Gust* partners, or feudal lords looking for capable soldiers to protect their lands. Nobody had called out to Ann or me because we had an indicator that we were under contract, but without that, I was sure a lot of scouts would have been pestering us.

“Do you want to try?”

“May I? Though it seems... complicated.”

True, getting used to a keyboard and mouse probably would have been a bit much for most of the inhabitants of this world.

“He taught me, too. It took me a while, but I can play now, so you should join us. It’s super fun!”

It was a point in my favor that I had clearly been able to teach Ann, but Ann’s request was surely the thing that pushed Mary over the edge. Could anyone

refuse her? I knew I couldn't.

"Very well. I'm not particularly talented with these sorts of things, but would you be so kind as to teach me, Ann?"

"Sure!"

I stood up and let Mary have my seat, and Ann started instructing her right away. G*ood, good, all according to plan*, I thought to myself, twirling my imaginary mustache.

From that day forth, Mary and Ann played games together every night. Mary wasn't as quick a study as Ann, but she was steadily grinding experience as a soldier, working her way up towards a class change into a knight. She was enjoying it so much she even managed to remember where her shortcuts and hotkeys were on the keyboard. By the end of the week, she was moving her character around just as naturally as any new gamer.

"Aoi, I would very much like my character to learn the horse riding skill."

"You have to save up for a horse, and you'll need to get stronger before you make any real money. You're still a long way away."

"I see. Still, I won't give up. I *will* become a horse-riding knight, no matter what it takes!"

Yep, she was hooked. I'd have to get a computer for her, too.

◇

"What a nice breeze."

I was sitting on a blanket laid out on the corner of a field in Milt with a cold cup of water in hand, enjoying the feel of the wind on my face. The labyrinth's construction was almost complete. We'd reached the stage of reinforcing the walls and floors, and installing traps. But today was the construction workers' day off, as it was also an important day for the village economy. Today they were harvesting a special kind of wheat that they could only reap once a year, and which sold for a pretty decent price. The high price made it worth the expense of tending it so carefully for a long time just for a single harvest. Milt harvested all the wheat in a single day, and they held a little harvest festival in

the fields when it was all done.

That was why I'd come. We'd reached the village just in time to see the golden rows of wheat still adorning the fields. Ann spotted Sara and rushed over to her. It'd been a while since the two had last met; it seemed Sara had been left in charge of tending the village's children, since there were so few adults available for the task lately. The kids looked like they were enjoying the story she was reading them.

That left me and Mary alone together. I had to admit, I wasn't too hot on the idea of doing farmwork, and Mary was already being worked to the bone every other day of the week. The villagers sang as they worked, perhaps a song to celebrate the harvest. They sang out of time and even out of tune with each other, and the song itself was nothing special, but you could feel their happiness in every note.

"Hmm hm hmmm♪"

Mary started humming along. Maybe she was doing it unconsciously?

"Say, Mary..."

"What is it?"

"Is your hometown anything like this place?"

Mary's tender gaze as she watched the villagers at work had piqued my interest. Perhaps she was nostalgic? Granted, the only experience I had analyzing women's feelings was from visual novels, which didn't help much with real women. The three of us had been living together a long time, but Mary had never said much about her life before. Something about the wistful look on her face told me that now was the time to ask.

"My hometown, well... It's in a much colder region. This view of villagers harvesting crops is nostalgic, but back home they would have done it much earlier, before autumn truly set in. The snow begins to fall quite early, you see. By this time of year, the sight you see when you walk outside is that of children playing in the snow."

Mary paused for a moment before continuing.

“In human territory, especially in my country, the peasants are quite low. They’re hardly treated better than the Daemons kept as property by the nobles and landed gentry. Children pay little heed to race, though, so you can often see human and Daemon children playing together. Much like here.”

Mary looked on fondly as the village children played. Humans, elves, dwarves, ogres, goblins, minotaurs, and so many more, mixed and purebred, all playing merrily. No small number of them were helping the adults working in the fields.

“Are you worried about your hometown?”

It had to have taken Mary more than two weeks to make the journey all the way to the Daemon territories. After the battle, she was then held in the village for some time. And it hadn’t been a short time since she had come to join us in Labyrinth #228. Mary already felt like part of the family, but her situation was different from mine or Ann’s. I could come and go whenever I wanted, and Ann lived only a short walk from her home, but Mary was a prisoner of war, a captive far from home.

“No, not particularly.”

Her answer came quickly, but there was a hint of sadness in her voice.

“I left the care of my hometown to my uncle’s family. His child, my cousin, is younger than I, but my uncle and aunt are determined that she should succeed the territory’s lordship. At first I lamented the situation, but it was a shallow wound. Now, I find myself glad that she will be able to take over without me in the picture.”

Nobles had such complicated family troubles. I hadn’t been expecting such a heavy story, so I was at something of a loss for what to say, but I felt like I had to say something.

“You don’t get along with your cousin?”

“We were not on bad terms, at least. She has always been a hard worker and sincere, though she depended on me, almost treating me as an older sister. She may still be young, but I’m sure she’ll do a splendid job of safeguarding my hometown with my uncle’s guidance.”

So even if she was released, she didn’t have a position to return to. Maybe

it’d been a mistake, bringing up her hometown.

“Mary, would you like to stay here, even after you pay off your ransom? Ann loves you like a sister, and I’d have trouble finding a guardian to replace you...”

No, that wasn’t what I wanted to say.

“...Aoi?”

“...It would make me very happy if you stayed.”

I’d grown fond of this dignified, dorky knight.

“Thank you, Aoi. I can’t tell you how pleased I am to hear that. But I’ve chosen the life of a knight, and I have no intention of leaving that path.”

Mary answered me with a radiant smile.

“I see. That sucks.”

Her gorgeous smile stole my wits, and before I knew it, the words were out of my mouth. *So I guess the goal of this event was just for her to tell me more about herself. Oh well. Might as well enjoy it for what it is.*

“Yes, it truly does, doesn’t it?”

Mary and I didn’t speak anymore until Ann returned from her work, but the silence we shared was a comfortable one.

◇

“Hey, Fez. You have a minute?”

When the market day rolled around, I paid Fez a visit, as usual. He looked a little annoyed when he found out I had some questions for him.

“You only ever bring me headaches. Fine, fine, what is it this time?”

“I feel like you could at least give me a smile and a nod. You’re making a killing off me lately.”

A lot of Fez’s wares were also available on Tundra, but it was cheaper to buy from him. Just as importantly, I could actually see the goods in person with him, so whenever possible, I bought from his cart. Ann, standing beside me, had been perusing the goods. She gave a little nod and handed Fez some money,

then put a few things in her bag and handed the bag over to Mary. I felt like I was leaning on Ann too much, but I still wasn't a good judge of quality and price for everyday goods here. I had a lot of studying to do.

"The one keepin' me afloat is this little lady here, not you, Aoi. Oh well, guess I can at least hear you out."

"Remember how we're expanding the labyrinth?"

"Yeah. Yer doin' some big business there. I'm a mite jealous of ya."

"So, we've actually got a pretty compelling reason for doing that. Here's the scoop."

I explained how we had to build up the labyrinth, lure in intruders, and fend them off to rack up points, otherwise the labyrinth was going to go out of business.

"So you see, I need to bring in some Daemon hunters to challenge the labyrinth. You know any way to scare up some folks?"

I knew the magic potions were my ace in the hole to talk people into it, but I didn't know how to find people in the first place!

"Lemme think..."

After I finished telling my story, Fez took out his pipe, filled it with his favorite herb, lit it, and took a long pull.

"Let me ask ya somethin' first. Trespassing on a labyrinth can cost ya yer life. Yer not plannin' on killin' anyone, are ya?"

Of course Fez was going to be concerned for the wellbeing of anybody who challenged our labyrinth. He may have acted tough, but deep down, he was a pretty caring guy.

"No, we're working hard to prevent any deaths. All we need is for them to enter the labyrinth and then give up and leave. There will be traps, not to mention creatures for them to fight, so I won't promise there won't be injuries, but I'm giving it everything I've got to ensure there are no deaths on my watch."

"Ya did say you got the most points for a kill, though, right?"

“If killing is the only way for my labyrinth to stay afloat, I’d rather shut it down.”

“Aight, then you’ve got me on your side. I know we’ve got a history together, but I still had to hear ya say it. Sorry for doubtin’ ya, mate.”

I couldn’t fault him for wanting to make certain on that particular point, especially when he was so kind as to apologize for it.

“Don’t worry, I know you’re just a big ol’ softie under all that fur.”

“Oh, shut your lid. Now, tell me more about this labyrinth.”

“I think it’s your typical affair. Like I said, there’ll be traps, creatures, and a guardian at the end. I’m thinking hunters can use it as a training facility, and whoever breaks through will win a really good prize.”

“Hmm. That’s a right good pitch, I’d say. If we sell it right, you’ll get the people ya want.”

“Perfect, that’s exactly what I wanted to ask you for.”

I didn’t think I was going to get by just passing out flyers in Milt. I had advertising experience from a few sim games I’d played, but I didn’t really have a handle on the details of how it would work in this world.

“So, ya can tickle a hunter’s ears with talk o’ profit, but what really grabs ‘em by the nose is when they smell *easy* money. Okay, how about this. I’ve got a few talented hunter friends back home. What say I invite ‘em over for a test run as soon as the labyrinth’s complete? Ya get some word of mouth going, and then the newbies will start floodin’ in.”

Ooh, good idea. Do a big trial with the top-notch guys first.

“That sounds great. Would you mind? But seriously, I can only pay you so much for the referral fees.”

“It’s a deal.”

So now I had some advertisement, and even some beta testers. What would the real deal be like when I had my grand opening? I had to start planning ahead.

Chapter Three

“I brought ya some slackers, Aoi!”

“Hey, I’m not a slacker! I just have a lot of free time, that’s all.”

The labyrinth was basically ready, and we were putting the finishing touches on the main gate in the forest when Fez showed up with a few visitors.

“This is Aoi, the manager of Labyrinth #228. Go on, introduce yourselves.”

“The name’s Donnel. I know the jokers behind me look like they just popped out of their mommies’ skirts, but don’t let that fool you. They’re experienced hunters, and I’m their leader.”

Fez had brought about ten grizzled hunters. Their weapons had all seen better days, and they were kitted out in metal-reinforced leather armor. Every one of them had a hand near their weapon at all times and exuded an aura of wariness. I would’ve known what line of work Donnel was in even without the introduction. He was a beastman... probably? At any rate, he was a muscular guy with a confident smile and cat-like features. He wore thick leather gloves on his paws, and the effect was so odd that I had to take a second look to make sure I’d seen what I thought I’d seen.

“This here’s an old friend of mine, and he’s worked from one side o’ this continent to the other. He ain’t the most social guy, so he’s been havin’ a hard time findin’ long-term contracts.”

Aha, so they had a history, and probably not the good kind.

“Now remind me again who’s bad with people? I remember a story or two where you...” Donnel gently needled Fez, his voice melodic.

“Ahh, well, I’ll just save that tale for later. Now, I heard you’re lookin’ for labyrinth challengers. My crew’s tough, and we’ve even got a medic, so you can do your worst, heh.”

He tried to smirk at me, but he couldn’t really pull it off. Donnel seemed like a trustworthy sort, but he still had something of a villainous air about him. *Fez wasn’t kidding when he said Donnel was bad with people, huh?* Some of

Donnel's party were beastmen—basically humans with cat ears—but most of them were more like plain old cats, with furry faces and whiskers. They had an air of quiet dignity, as befitted battle-tested veterans, but at the same time they all looked so soft and fluffy that my heart was crying out for me to pet each and every one of them before I let them challenge the labyrinth.

"Sounds great. We've just finished setting up, so if there's anything you think we should adjust, I'd appreciate hearing your opinions. And I will of course be happy to pay you for any feedback you have."

"Thanks, sonny. Let's get right to work, then."

After a handshake to seal the deal, Donnel tried to give me a friendly pat on the back. I was used to the fluffy sensation of Ann patting me, but instead I nearly got knocked off my feet. His paws packed a punch!

We signed a contract, with Fez as our witness. Mary used the back door to head down to the guardian's room, and the challenge began.

"Let's do this."

I led them to the entrance, where we were still putting on the finishing touches. Donnel and his party divided into two groups of five, and they entered the labyrinth with torches in hand.

"How long you plan to keep this thing open, Aoi?"

"The whole thing is only one floor, so I was thinking maybe half a day? I'm planning to close it off by nightfall once we're doing this every day." Mary would need a lot of rest, so I'd settled on taking in hunters during the morning, and then not accepting any new ones after noon.

"Wanna go get some tea while we wait for Donnel and his boys to come back? It's cold in here."

"Sure."

I was bored out of my mind. If this had been a game, I'd have been able to watch the intruders' progress in the labyrinth, but we hadn't installed any sort of monitoring system to keep an eye on them in real time. Man, if only I could at least watch from the golems' point of view.

In the end, we decided to just return to the workshop and drink some tea.

A few hours later, just as dinner was being served, Mary returned, along with Donnel's party, their fur looking a little ruffled.

"You did a good job. The place is well-constructed, and it should do well as a training facility."

Donnel sat down and took a few spoonfuls of soup before continuing.

"You've got some nasty trap locations in there. The traps themselves were pretty basic, but the placement was spectacular. You impressed our scout, let me tell you."

Seemed like Barry had a good eye for setting traps for adventurers. *What a random skill for a construction foreman.*

"Those golems of yours put up a mean fight. Taking 'em head-on is just asking to get your head handed to you. All in all, everything up to the guardian's room should be good training for bored hunters looking for something to do. The only problem is our lady guardian here."

Donnel's turned his cat face to Mary.

"What's the problem?"

Mary seemed to be satisfied with her first fight in a while. In fact, she looked rather smug.

"Your guardian's got some serious moves, and she puts her all into it. Makes an excellent guardian. If we hadn't been an oversized crew, she would've outmatched us easily. Thing is, that means she's too strong for a training labyrinth. Most hunters are in for a nasty surprise if they make it that far. There's no getting past her unless you put your life on the line."

So she was simply too strong? I supposed I would've been mad if I'd gone somewhere with the goal of training and then ended up almost dead. Hmm. Tuning difficulty was harder than it seemed. If the goal of defeating Mary made the labyrinth too difficult, maybe I needed to change the goal. I had to think of both the hunters' safety and Mary's, or I'd be a failure as a manager.

"Okay, what if I leave a certificate in the back of the guardian room? As long

as you get it and bring it back, you can claim the prize. Rather than having to defeat Mary, all the groups need to do is make it to the guardian's room and hold her off until they can claim the certificate."

Kinda like a test of courage.

"Hmm, yeah, if you don't have to actually take her down, that'll make it much easier. Besides, hunters have a lot of practice at just holding off boss monsters."

Donnel settled in to offer advice on a bunch of other smaller issues, like the location of traps and golem patrol routes. It turned out that proper QA was vital, no matter what you did. I gave Donnel a handsome bonus on top of the agreed-upon rate. His fur stood on end when he saw what I was handing out to him and his party: the same vitality potions I was planning to give hunters who passed the labyrinth's test.

"Well, I'll be damned. You'll pull in every hunter on this side of the continent with prizes like this. Won't he, boy?"

"Knew you'd say that, ol' man."

Donnel stared in awe at the magic potion in his paws.

"Fez, I've got an idea! You should open up a magic potion trading stall back in town. You'll make a killing when all the hunters come!"

"And I knew you'd say that, too! Gonna have to change my schedule now, ain't I?"

"Heheheh. I'll spread the word around, so cut me in on the action, eh?"

"Chill out, Whiskers. I gotta make a profit for myself first."

Every few minutes, Donnel would slap Fez on the back and offer up another business scheme. I felt a little bad for Fez, being told how to do his job by a grizzled old hunter.

◇

I prepared a detailed plan for operating the labyrinth and presented it to Mary, Fez, Carla, and Donnel to get their opinions.

・All hunters who wish to challenge the labyrinth must register at the

reception desk in Milt one day in advance.

・Hunters can challenge the labyrinth two times at most, regardless of whether attempting it alone or as part of a group.

・Hunters who manage to make it through the labyrinth, best the guardian, and bring back the stone slab enshrined in the final room will earn a prize.

・Participation in the challenge will be free of charge for the first three months.

・Entry begins in the morning and ends at noon. No entry past noon permitted.

・A special rescue team will be dispatched at sunset to assist any trapped and distressed hunters, and once the rescue team has completed their sweep, the labyrinth's doors will be closed.

・Anybody caught disobeying the rules or causing any disturbance in the village will be summarily banned.

The only part I was worried about was the retry limit. There was a part of me that wanted to let them challenge the labyrinth as many times as they wanted so I could rack up more points, but that would let them get used to it and make it through to Mary's room through sheer dint of repetition. I wanted to keep the burden on Mary to a minimum. Mary would get a chance to rest in the evenings, but we also needed time each night to rearrange the traps and to maintain the labyrinth, and for the rescue team to sweep through and rescue any injured or trapped hunters. Unlike most labyrinths, we had to keep the well-being of our intruders in mind.

"Let's see now, we have the team leader's name and city of origin. No party members. Challenging solo, huh? And, yep, that's it, you're all registered. Make sure to enter the labyrinth before noon tomorrow!"

"Thanks, lass. Keep up the good work."

A wolfman hunter who looked a bit like Fez wrapped up his registration with Ann and gave her a pat on the head. Even the coldest lone wolves warmed up before her sunny charm.

“The campsite for lodgers is over thataway. Just check the map here in case you get lost! We have a tent rental service, food stands, and even a sit-down restaurant if you like. Please enjoy your stay!”

She pointed to a sketched map to guide the hunter to their prepared campsite. It had a simple watering hole, space for setting up a tent, and a blanket to sleep on.

“Well, well, I even get a campsite? Glad to hear there’s somewhere to get a bite to eat.”

That’s right, dear hunter, nothing hits the spot like good home cooking! It was a great arrangement. The hunters got a good meal, and the villagers enjoyed an influx of money, making good use of whatever excess crops had been harvested earlier in the year. I wished I could claim credit for the restaurant idea, but it had actually come from the village’s housewives. It seemed the joy of earning a living through cooking had been kindled inside them during the construction work. I wanted to believe it was just a coincidence that all the servers were the village’s available bachelors and bachelorettes, but it was tough convincing myself of that after I witnessed Jenny and the other housewives instructing them on how to carry themselves and how to chat up customers. They, err, were just selling food... right?

Ann gave a cheerful wave to the wolfman as he set off for his campsite, then she took a peek at my notes as I jotted down my impressions of the hunter and his equipment.

“That was the third group today. We’ve got six people challenging the labyrinth tomorrow, right?”

“Yeah, things sure are busy. Mary told me she’s seeing more traffic down in the guardian’s room, too. The word must be spreading. Ann, can you check how we’re doing on magic potions?”

“Sure!”

With all these outsiders, I’d decided to extend Carla’s contract, and I’d additionally hired Donnel’s party to patrol the village and keep an eye on the visitors. About eight groups had challenged the labyrinth in the one week it had been open, totaling up to twenty hunters all told. I felt pretty good about that

number, since pretty much all I had for advertising was Carla and Donnel spreading the news. Communication and travel were both slow in this world, so I had to temper my expectations.

The reward for clearing the challenge was one of the high-class potions I made, but I also took the opportunity during our nightly maintenance sweeps to litter the place with treasure chests containing the lesser potions Ann made, and these little gifts were quite popular with our challengers. Among the hunters who had used up all their tries for now and had lost their right to challenge the labyrinth, some of them had opened up consulting shops where they would offer strategy advice to new challengers. The village was really jumping these days.

So far, my main sources for information were Donnel's group and Carla's catgirls, though sometimes I overheard hunters gossiping myself. Mary was also a font of data regarding the challengers who made it to her room. At dinner each night, she'd give me a rundown on how many there were and what they'd been like in combat. It was nice to get some amount of information from on-site.

"So yeah, that's about it. I think it really helped, making it so they didn't have to beat Mary to win the big prize."

"Not bad, not bad! I'm just glad to hear the village isn't any worse off for all this crazy tourism you're bringing it."

After I returned from the labyrinth one evening, I got in touch with Suzu and updated her on our progress.

"Thanks for spreading the word with the mercenaries and hunters over in your area. A good 30% of our visitors come from there."

Suzu's labyrinth was a bit far for me and Ann to walk to, but it wasn't that bad for hunters, who traveled light and were used to longer journeys.

"Aww, it ain't no thing. I just made sure to plant some juicy gossip with the traders."

In fact, Fez had told me that we were seeing more caravans transporting salt from Suzu's region, and moreover, that the number of hunters escorting those

wagons had gone up substantially. Suzu's helping hand was obvious, but I opted not to say anything.

"Any thoughts on what to do about labyrinth traps getting stale?"

I decided to ask her a few questions about the labyrinth itself. The hunters liked to exchange info, so the new ones benefited from the info brought back by the trailblazers, which made it easier for them to avoid my traps over time. I sometimes overheard them chatting, and I'd ingrained in the maintenance personnel that they had to change the layout of the traps every day, especially around the entrance, but it didn't really have much effect.

"Can't help you there. We don't really do intruders at my labyrinth."

Oh, right, Suzu's labyrinth is a glorified warehouse.

◇

The labyrinth opening wasn't an instant smash hit, but we did have a steadily growing stream of challengers. One day, around when I'd gotten used to the new rhythm of things, I headed to the workshop to help out with cooking. There was less hustle and bustle compared to when construction had been in full swing, but between the patrollers, the emergency crew, and the maintenance crew, the place was still always crowded.

"This is real bad!"

On my way to the workshop, as I stepped around the mountain of leftover blocks of soil from the construction, Ann came running.

"Aoi! The lady at the reception desk just told me that six of the eight adventurers who entered the labyrinth brought back certificates, and it isn't even noon yet!"

"No way!"

What had happened to Mary? Even on the busiest days, no more than one out of every three hunters got past her. For so many to have cleared the challenge, and so quickly, something had to have gone wrong.

"Ann, did they have enough potions on hand at reception to exchange for the certificates?"

I wanted nothing more than to rush off to check on Mary, but I had to confirm that first. I absolutely couldn't allow the hunters to lose faith in the fairness of the labyrinth challenge.

"Oh, that's right. The lady said they all wanted the same type of potion, so I'm on my way to the workshop to get more!"

We kept a small selection of potions at reception, but we stockpiled most of them in the workshop. So Ann had run here all the way from Milt?

"I can look out for Mary. Ann, you need to... Oh, hey, there's George, perfect! Can you accompany Ann to the village?"

The sun was setting, so I wouldn't dream of letting her go alone. Fortunately, I noticed one of Donnel's guys sitting in one of the workshop chairs, licking himself clean. George was a quiet fellow, but his excellent work ethic had garnered him a lot of fans among the village girls, so the housewives with unmarried daughters all kept a close eye on him. When I called out to him, he looked my way and nodded.

"I'm going to go check on Mary. I know you're worried about her too, Ann, but I need you to trust me to handle this."

"All right. Make sure she's okay!"

Ann looked concerned but still went along with my plan. She was such a good girl; I really didn't deserve her.

I asked around, but nobody had seen Mary leave the labyrinth, so I took the back door near the workshop and headed for her room. At the bottom of the stairs, I opened the door with Mary's name on it and went straight in, being careful not to spring any of our traps on the way to the guardian's room.

"Oh, thank goodness you're all right."

I found Mary sitting on the floor of the guardian's room. I ran to her and nearly collapsed in relief when I realized she wasn't hurt.

"Aoi? Why are you here?"

Mary looked up at me, her face drawn and haggard. Had she not realized how late it was?

“Mary, the labyrinth is closed. I heard a lot of hunters got certificates today, and I got worried about you. Did something happen?”

A shiver of fear ran through Mary’s face when I mentioned the hunters. I’d never seen that look in her eyes before. I took a closer look at her, fearing the worst, but her clothes didn’t look ripped anywhere. Nothing out of place either.

“You’ll catch a cold sitting on that stone floor. Come on, up you go.”

I gave Mary a hand standing up, but she staggered into me, and I was left with my arms wrapped around her. She didn’t say a word. Normally, she got flustered over this sort of thing.

“They were... the same as me.”

Mary murmured, her head hanging low.

“The hunters today were humans trying to earn money to pay off their ransom. When they saw my sword, they realized I was an Extended Knight Armor pilot just like them. I’m useless, Aoi. At the end of the day, I’m a knight with a duty to serve her people. When I realized my job here was to stand in the way of my countrymen, and all they wanted was to go home, I could only step back and let them go.”

So we’d finally found our guardian’s weakness.

“I couldn’t ask them to sacrifice themselves to help me pay my debt. I’m a knight! But I’m also sworn to fight them as your labyrinth guardian. I could say nothing, could do nothing. I’m so sorry...”

Mary’s grip on my coat tightened.

I remembered Karumi’s warning, long ago now, about the limitations placed on knights. I hadn’t expected her to be bound so firmly. Did that mean it wasn’t even her own decision, and she couldn’t face humans at all? She had nothing to apologize for. Serving both of her two oaths to the best of her ability was a heavy burden to bear. As her employer, I should have reprimanded her. But as her former rival, her friend, and now her family, that was the last thing I wanted to do. I knew she was torn. I didn’t want Mary to be the sort of person who could coldly abandon her oaths to her people and country.

I made my decision. I knew it was selfish, and a little arrogant. But I wanted to make this lost girl smile, even if it meant coddling her a little. My gaming intuition told me that if I wanted to trigger Mary's flag and make her join my party, I had to be gentle with her in this event. I had to spoil her. If this were just a game, that would've obviously been the right move. You take any opportunity you can to secure yourself a powerful unit. But thinking of her as just another piece on the chessboard when she was genuinely depressed would have made me truly heartless.

"I'm sorry, Mary. I'll figure something out for the next time a human adventurer shows up."

At long last, Mary lifted her head and looked me in the eye.

"Aoi, why would you do this for me? You put your faith in me, and I failed you."

So because I was relying on her, she had to do everything perfectly? That was a pretty warped view.

There were two routes before us, now. She would finish her job and return home, and where once we had been intimate, we would return to being enemies and rivals. And on the other route, I would persuade her to stay and become my ally. No matter which path we chose, I was sure it would be a fulfilling story. But I knew which ending I wanted to see.

If the alternative was to see her fighting back tears on the field of battle, I'd much prefer to put a smile on her face and make her my ally. It was time to exercise every ounce of persuasion I had and forge a new path forward for the two of us. How hard could it be? I had a lot of practice making my dreams a reality in the game of life.

"Why? Because when I see a girl crying, I want to hold her and tell her it's going to be all right."

The dam finally broke, and a single tear trickled down Mary's face.

"Don't say that, Aoi. I have to do this on my own."

But as she said that, she buried her face in my shoulder and tightened her arms around me. This wasn't making a whole lot of sense to me, but I decided

to respond to her actions, rather than her words.

“You’ve had a really hard life, haven’t you? I won’t tell you to give up, and I won’t tell you to tough it out on your own. I was thinking, instead, maybe we could get through it together.”

I knew I wasn’t making things any easier on her. Far from it. But I was going to see my choice through to the end.

“Please, Aoi, stop. I have to stay strong!”

The tears were streaming down her face now.

“I worked so hard. I traveled wherever they sent me, and I forced myself not to cry at night until I thought I couldn’t feel anything anymore. Why must you be so cruel to me? I don’t even have any parents to tell me I did a good job. Why must I keep suffering alone? Why, Aoi?!”

Mary’s anguished cries echoed around the guardian room. She had been aloof since the day we met, but there really was a warm, human girl underneath that iron armor. My next step was to tell her she’d done a good job. You know, this was a lot easier in games, where you just clicked one of like three choices and your character said a whole prepared monologue. I, on the other hand, was stuck winging the whole thing. Man, if only the real world had retries.

“You’ve worked hard for a long time, and you’ve done a great job, Mary. Thank you.”

I slowly stroked her hair.

“Ah... Waaaaaaaah!”

The cutesy wailing caught me by surprise. Mary arms tightened, crushing me against her. Seriously, her grip was so tight I was worried I was gonna crack a rib. But I endured and just kept stroking her hair as she cried.

“...”

Ten minutes passed before she finally settled down. She’d finished crying, but neither of us knew what to do next.

“Aoi, would you please say something? I’m about to die of embarrassment here.”

Mary's forehead was still firmly pressed against my chest, and I was still stroking her hair. I noted with interest that her ears were bright red.

"Uh, let's see. Umm. That was really cute?"

It was all I could think of.

"I'm going to kill you, and then kill myself." Evidently that was not what I was supposed to say.

"Honestly, Mary, I'm really happy that you let me hold you while you cried. I think it's way better to let someone give you a shoulder to cry on than to just bottle everything up. Don't you agree?"

"Are you sure? To be honest, it felt wonderful. If you truly don't mind it, I might just keep doing it."

Mary looked at me in surprise, her eyes shining with hope. Just one more little push now...

"I never thought you'd say that. Fortunately for you, I'm totally into spoiling people."

I had a little sister, though she wasn't grown up like Mary, and I'd spoiled her rotten for her whole life. I loved it. And more importantly, I wanted to see Mary happy.

"If you say so. Then, do you mind holding me a little longer? I feel safe like this."

"Do you mind if I contact the guys on the surface first? They're probably starting to get worried."

"No. This is Mary time."

"All right then."

Firmly reprimanded, I held my ground, my arms still wrapped around Mary. I couldn't see her face, with her forehead pressed against my shoulder and her arms wrapped around me, but I was just relieved she wasn't crying anymore.

"Thank you, Aoi. I think I would like some time alone now."

After a bit, Mary calmed down and left me behind. I took a seat on the floor

and pondered. Did I clear the event? Somehow, this one had been even more exhausting than the time we'd fought. Finding the route where Mary stayed with me had left me completely spent. For the longest time, I'd just been asking her to stay every chance I could get, but that had clearly been going nowhere. I'd finally found the right approach.

Whew. I was tired, but I had no regrets. In fact, I was ecstatic that I'd finally landed on the true route. But just as I went to stand up and breathe a sigh of relief...

"...?!"

I looked up to see Fez, Donnel, and Carla, all peering at me through a little crack in the guardian's door that Mary had just used to exit. All three of them had the most insufferable grins I had ever seen. I straightened up in surprise, and they all waltzed into the room.

"Now ya've done it, Aoi. *Another* wife? You're as bad a criminal as me, I swear."

"Aren't you the lady-killer? Now, Boss, how much are you gonna pay me to keep my trap shut?"

The guys came up on either side of me and each threw an arm around my shoulder. I was never going to live this down. Actually, Donnel's fur was kinda warm and soft, but his smirk ruined everything.

"Yeah, yeah, how much ya gonna pay us, Aoi?!"

Carla, did you really have to sound so excited about blackmailing me? Fez and Donnel got too into it, and I ended up decking both of them. Unfortunately, I hit them a little too hard and knocked them both unconscious, which meant I was forced to drag them up to the surface, as I tried to force out a smile for Carla. Donnel and Fez should both have been at the village, which meant they must've come running here out of concern for us, but I was sure hell would freeze over before they would admit that.

◇

Mary had managed to pull herself together and resume her job, but she still wasn't at her best whenever human hunters came along. We'd added a section

to the hunter application form for race. Whenever humans were on the schedule, I'd go along with Mary down to the guardian room in the morning, and she'd go at it with the Daemons, while I took on the humans. We were able to scrape by with that strategy.

"Another busy day, huh?"

The last hunter exited the labyrinth, so I locked the door for the night and headed to the workshop and slumped over. It'd been two weeks since I'd started fighting the human hunters. Today there had been a group of four, and it'd taken me a good while to dispatch them. Most of the hunters were solid fighters, so it wasn't unusual to end up in a pitched battle. I had plenty of physical stamina for it, but it was wearing me out mentally.

Human hunters didn't have the raw strength of Daemons, so it shouldn't have been a huge deal, but I was still having issues. The cursed sword let me fight by recreating moves I'd learned in games, but it seemed like it was a bit *too* good at applying lethal force. The cursed sword's purpose was killing. It didn't really understand the distinction between a fight for one's life and a training battle. It put a lot of extra burden on me to use moves that would neutralize my opponents without killing them. Perhaps that was partially because, in fighting games or beat-em-ups, the standard set of moves was distinctly intended to kill.

"Just thinking of that time I had to fight Mary gives me shivers. If these hunters were as strong as her, we'd be completely out of potions."

Since I was holding myself back, I was also taking more injuries. For example, there was one hunter I'd faced today where I'd gone for a lunging stab, only to have to stop in a hurry to avoid killing him. He saw the opening and thrust his lance at me, giving me a hard hit to the shoulder. He turned out to be a friendly old codger, and he started profusely apologizing. I assured him that it was fine, that accidents happen. I was secretly relieved that it'd gone down while Mary was off on break; I'd have felt awful if she got all worried over me for taking an injury that was clearly my own fault.

You know, I could try to hide it from her, but then pass the truth along to someone else and let the rumor mill do its thing. Having her fret over me actually sounded kinda nice. Still, I didn't want to push too hard; getting greedy

and trying to unlock every event immediately never ended well.

The wound healed up in a jiffy thanks to my magic potions, but I could still feel the phantom pain of that lance piercing into my shoulder, so I'd decided to take a rest at the workshop before returning to the cabin. There wasn't so much as a scar left, but still, fleeting as it was, the feeling of that hole in my shoulder had been unsettling.

"Heya, Aoi, how's it hangin'?"

"Oh, hi Carla."

Just as I was about to head home for the day, Carla scampered up and offered me a high five. I'd asked Carla and her crew to guard all the spots Mary and I couldn't cover. Incidentally, I'd heard from the people around the workshop that Mayor Hopper had given her a place to stay in Milt, apparently in hopes she'd find a husband and settle down. She was a reliable, hard-working girl. She usually guarded the workers around the forest, and I'd only heard them say good things about her. Since Carla and company were all girls, beyond just being fighters, they also served as excellent morale boosters. They really brightened everybody's day.

"Hey, Aoi, I need to ask ya something."

"What is it?"

She edged a little closer and lowered her voice.

"You got hurt today, didn't you? The girls and I don't mind keeping it hush hush, but you need to take care of yourself, okay?"

A shiver went down my spine. I was wearing a Japanese-looking overcoat which I'd found on Tundra, but the hole in my suit beneath it was still there. I'd left the bloodied white shirt back at the workshop, but I didn't exactly have a spare suit. I'd snuck out the back door of the labyrinth, but on the way I'd run into Carla's party, guarding the area around the workshop. Caught red-handed. Or, red-shouldered, I guess.

"What are you talking about? I didn't—"

"You've been working too hard lately. Got something on your mind? Maybe

something to do with Mary?”

Carla stared intently at me. My god, that stare was brutal. I’d only ever seen game protagonists fold under this kind of pressure, but apparently it was pretty darn effective on me too.

“If you’re not gonna tell Mary and Ann that you got hurt, maybe I should. Unless you’d really, *really* rather I didn’t?”

Damn, so that’s where this is going. I should’ve seen it coming.

“Carla, is there anything I could get for you? Anything you want?”

“Heheh. Ohhh, well now that you mention it, remember the cream cake you got me that one time? I’ve just been dying to have another one. Who knows, maybe that sweet flavor will drive the memory right out of my head!”

“Fine. I’ll get you one as soon as I can.”

I wondered if perhaps Carla wouldn’t have made an even better merchant than Fez. She knew just how to get to me, and when she was done softening me up, her price was reasonable. A labyrinth manager made those cakes and sold them on Tundra, but as with all high-quality baked goods, demand was enormous, so getting a hold of one wasn’t easy.

“Oh, that’d just make my day. I’ll look forward to it!”

Carla took a seat beside me. Not as close as Ann would have, but still pretty close.

“You still need something?”

“Aoi, you’re in pain. I’m not gonna leave you alone like this. Honest? I’d love to give you a big old hug and tell you it’s gonna be okay, but I think Mary and Ann wouldn’t take too kindly to that.”

Carla was such a sweetheart, always so considerate. I had a feeling the two of us were going to become good friends.

Chapter Four

“You’re making splendid progress. You’re nearly there!”

One morning, Karumi came and collected a status report from me. As we spoke, she flicked around the labyrinth manager UI as fast as ever, probably inspecting the labyrinth’s stats? It seemed like a very convenient way to dig into details on the labyrinth’s performance, but I wished she’d at least look at the report I’d prepared. I worked really hard on that...

“Your high expulsion ratio is quite satisfactory. I only see one cause for concern: the number of return visitors.”

I knew that would stick out like a sore thumb. Apparently labyrinths didn’t usually get a lot of repeat customers.

“Is that a problem?”

“There are no stipulations regarding it, but you’re more likely to be audited if any of your statistics are particularly out of the ordinary.”

“I’ll see what I can do, but I can’t promise we won’t keep getting them.”

The easiest solution would be to just start killing the intruders, but I obviously didn’t want to go for that one.

“Please do whatever you can.”

“By the way, how come you’re wearing a ball gown?”

Karumi was wearing the frilliest pink dress I’d ever seen. It was such a departure from her usual business attire that I couldn’t even bring myself to maintain eye contact with her.

“Can we please not talk about this? Honestly, if you can, just forget you ever saw me like this.”

She must’ve screwed up again and gotten caught this time. If only I had the smartphone I left back in the office, I would’ve pulled it out to take a few pictures. On second thought, it was probably for the best I didn’t have it.

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Mmgh! Mmmm!”

Once Karumi had arrived, Ann’s eyes had started gleaming, so I’d been forced to clamp my hand over Ann’s mouth for this entire conversation. Whatever she wanted to say was undoubtedly going to be an innocent and pure compliment, and I was nonetheless certain it would cut Karumi deeper than any knife.

◇

“Mr. Theodoran, was it? A pleasure. I’m Aoi, the manager of Labyrinth #228.”

Word arrived one day that a notable guest staying at the mayor’s house wished to meet the local labyrinth manager, and I’d headed there to pay my respects. I didn’t really have anything like a suitable meeting room at the labyrinth, so the mayor had offered us his living room so we could talk.

“Merchant extraordinaire Theodoran, at your service.”

The guest turned out to be a Daemon, perhaps a bit older than myself. A young man, mostly human-looking, though with a pair of horns coming out of his head. Finally, a really demonic Daemon! I mean, it would’ve been even cooler if he’d had blue skin or a pointy tail or whatever, but at least this was *something*. Now I was curious about what race he was.

“You appear to be staring at me, sir. Do you need something?”

“Oh, uh, excuse me. Can you tell me why you wanted to talk to me?”

Those glasses made him look like a real intellectual. I bet if I brought a picture of him back to my world, you could slap it on the cover of a women’s magazine and make bank. Between Ann and Deneb, I’d grown accustomed to beautiful Daemon girls, but this was the first time I’d seen such a handsome male Daemon. The elves around the village did have a certain quality about them, to be sure, but this guy’s air of effortless grace left one hell of an impression.

“I would like to purchase the magic potions you produce.”

He smoothly unrolled a contract on the table. It was all one piece of vellum, processed animal hide used as paper, and the handwriting on it was pristine. Somehow, I had a very bad feeling all of a sudden. I felt all the curiosity drain from me as I read the contract. Did he think I was an idiot? He was looking to

buy a huge supply, thousands of potions, but the price per potion was paltry. He was offering less than Fez was, over at the stall he'd opened in the village for hunters to cash out their potions from the labyrinth. The contract even came with an exclusivity clause which only seemed to benefit him. And lastly...

"What is this part about providing the manufacturing process details?"

"I'd like to formally take custody of one of the Daemons you employ in the labyrinth for the purposes of potion making. I'll cover their support costs, of course. This is a standard clause in any such large-scale contract; I'm only looking out for your own interests. I can't imagine letting go of one of your subordinates who can perform alchemy would hurt your bottom line terribly much?"

Theodoran directed a cold, empty smile at me. Ann's hackles rose, and a low growl came from her throat as she stepped up closer to me and put her hand to my shirt. Well, at least now I understood what he was after. He wanted it all. Cheap magic potions he could sell at a huge profit, and then the means to produce those potions himself down the line. Even if that didn't pan out, he'd at least acquire someone who could inspect and provide quality control for the goods.

So he expected me to sell him Ann.

"Hahah... Hahahaha!"

This was hilarious. Did he really think I'd accept? I couldn't stop myself from laughing out loud.

"C-Calm down, Aoi."

"Boss, this ain't good."

Ann and Donnel both whispered to me, their faces pale. Why were they so concerned? Oh man, I totally lost it there for a second. How embarrassing. And here I'd been trying to teach Ann the importance of keeping up a good poker face when you were in the middle of a fight.

"Donnel, Carla, please escort our guest to the exit. Gently, please."

Theodoran's two guards, ogres built like towers of muscle, both took a step

forward.

“Are you certain about this? You may find your life a touch more difficult than it once was if you choose to antagonize me.”

The fake smile disappeared from his face, replaced with surprise. If this were a normal labyrinth, perhaps accepting some cash in exchange for a subordinate wouldn’t have been that big a deal. But he was asking me to sell my family. I mentally reconsidered the way I viewed Theodoran, no longer thinking of him as a visitor and instead assessing him objectively. Yes, I knew that look in his eyes. He was just like the rivals I’d seen in big tournaments. That burning enthusiasm in his eyes. The will to never give up, to crush his enemies. I wondered, did I perhaps look the same? If neither side of the negotiation was willing to budge, then there was only one way to solve this. I recalled a very particular phrase I’d once heard, one which fit the scene like a glove.

Where had I heard it again? Ohhh, right, it was that famous empire-building MMORPG, *Imperialization*. The game was about the wonders and triumphs of the far western world during the Middle Ages. They’d beautifully recreated the American continents at about a one-half scale, which let them fit the entire world-wide user base onto a single server. There was no Japanese localization, but it’d still been a pretty big deal.

I’d started playing with a few friends back when the game first launched, but we’d begun running into problems when we decided to build a farm on the Pacific coast. There was this guild of Europeans who built a hotel nearby and harassed us daily. They were horribly vulgar. They were giving one of my guildmates a particularly hard time, and pretty soon he was talking about quitting the game. Once that happened, I gathered all my buddies together and hatched a plan.

I was in no mood to negotiate. I found their guild leader, pulled up the command to start a guild war, and pushed the button without hesitation. One of my guildmates tried to leave a parting shot in English, but it came out terribly garbled. Another of our pals thought it was hilarious, so he screenshotted it and uploaded it to his blog, and from there, it went viral. You could see it in all manner of parody videos and whatnot. The line was...

“So, it do be war.”

I murmured it under my breath, or at least, so I thought. Theodoran thought he was going to beat me down; I hoped he was ready to get his butt whooped in return.

“I’ll make you regret those words.”

Wow, he didn’t even blink. This guy wasn’t messing around.

He waved over his two ogres and left without another word.

“Snap out of it, Boss! You’re scarin’ the girls.”

Donnel stepped up and rapped me on the shoulder before gesturing at Ann and Carla. Ann was trembling, her arms wrapped around my waist, and Carla was huddled down on the floor, her tail curled around her and her fox ears laid back.

“Oh. Thanks, Donnel. Sorry, girls.”

I paused a moment to consider the potential consequences of what I’d just started. In my world, human history was a long saga of war and conflict. But perhaps that was not a mindset I should be bringing to a peaceful village like Milt. And I suddenly remembered what my guild pals had told me, after that day. That war had taught them the true meaning of suffering.

◇

“Theodoran? Can’t believe he came all the way from the capital to see you. Guy’s legendary for his predatory business tactics.”

Gathering intel was the first order of the day, but it wasn’t particularly hard work to learn what I needed to. Fez already knew all about the guy. It seemed our little tyrant had quite the reputation.

“Predatory? How bad are we talking here?”

“The usual: land sharking, coerced contracts. The kinda thing the commerce boards banned back when my ears were still the size o’ yours. With most of the old folks around here, you say this guy’s name and you’ve already ruined their day.”

“Is that right. Guess I’m going to need to set someone to escort Ann. Mary’s occupied, so it’ll have to be Carla.”

Donnel, with his decades more of experience, seemed the stronger of the two, but if Ann’s escort was going to be guarding her at all times, I wanted them to be another girl.

“Wait, how come? What exactly did the guy want from you?”

“Check it out.”

I handed the unsigned contract over to Fez. He grimaced as he read it, and when he finished he glanced over my way anxiously. No, maybe at Carla?

“Yo, Carla, what’s up with your tail? It cramped or something?”

“Mind your own tail, Fez!”

When Fez called her out, even more color drained from her face, and she just shook her head. I couldn’t believe how frightened she was. Personally, I found Mayor Hopper or even Fez more intimidating than Theodoran.

“Hey, Fez, can I ask you to look into this guy for me? I need to know how I can get at him.”

“Uhh, um, sure! That’s what friends are for!”

Friends, huh? The way he said it, maybe Fez wasn’t looking forward to this, either. I had a hunch I was going to be paying a pretty hefty fee for this info.

◇

“Fez came to the labyrinth’s workshop about two weeks before the free challenge period ended. “

“Aoi, where are you? They’re already on the way! Get your ass in gear!”

“Oh yeah? Thanks, Fez. I sure wish this could’ve waited until I was less worried about the labyrinth, but what can you do. How far out are they?”

I’d been expecting this, but I was still exasperated. Managing the labyrinth and dealing with Theodoran at the same time would be difficult. I’d have rather resolved the labyrinth’s performance review first, and then dealt with him afterwards.

But I hadn't just been twiddling my thumbs. I'd been doing as much as I could to bog down Theodoran. Fez and the hunters were all the manpower I could spare, but they'd all followed my orders with such zeal that I was feeling bad for overworking them.

I hadn't taken any drastic measures just yet. A few stalls and shops back in the city which were managed by Theodoran had suspiciously been struck with accidents. For example, unregistered carts filled with soil would mysteriously crash into them in the middle of the night. And, strangely, it seemed a whole lot of delicious horse feed had been left in the stables for Theodoran's pack horses, and now they were suffering from diarrhea. In another nearby city, where Theodoran's company had its headquarters, there had been a string of small fires. Very small ones, I promise.

No, no, I wasn't burning down a city. I just figured nobody would care about a few unpopulated warehouses except their owner. But even so, when he'd received his orders, Fez had come bawling to me, begging me not to make him burn anything down. So I'd resorted instead to just handing him a pot, a brazier, and a funny little monster called a wheat fish. The fish had a fat tail, reminiscent of a mouse, which it used to dash around on dry land, and it was famed for sneaking into silos to steal grain. Thing was, even if you managed to catch one, it was so greasy and disgusting that it was borderline inedible. Most people who went looking for them did it to wring them out and harvest the oil, rather than to eat them and destroy their stomachs. Seriously, they were something you wouldn't wish on your worst enemy. But as reviled as they were, I'd found they made a whole lot of smoke when cooked, enough to make it *look* like you'd set a building on fire.

I'd clearly gone soft. Back in my days playing *Imperialization*, we'd razed that hotel gang's city to the ground. Well. I guess the situation wasn't quite the same here, given there were actual lives at stake.

"He's hiding out in a huge hunter caravan. I think they've got upwards of a hundred people."

A hundred of them? It sounded like a tiny force compared to war in my own world, but when I considered it was just me, Mary, and the labyrinth against all of them, it felt overwhelming.

“Wait. A hundred hunters. How many...?”

A chill ran down my spine.

“Fez, how many of Theodoran’s hunters are human?”

“Can’t say for sure, but probably eight outta every ten?”

Theodoran couldn’t have known anything about Mary’s condition; Mary and I were keeping that secret to ourselves. There must have just been more human hunters looking for work than I’d thought.

“How long do we have?”

“They’ll be here in three days, early in the day.”

I couldn’t suppress a flash of admiration for Theodoran. I’d had Fez tracking his moves this whole time, but he’d given us the slip until the last minute. He’d really stolen a march on us, and we were going to have to rush our preparations.

“Here I’d been thinking of shutting down the place in a hurry, even if it damaged my reputation a bit.”

I looked over my records and took a few notes. We’d had a decline in challengers sometime after the two-month mark. Most of the hunters around these parts either had already made their two attempts or had found long-term contracts. We were ten people short of meeting our goal of expelled intruders. We could try to cheat. I could ask Donnel and Carla to make their forces challenge it, for instance. I didn’t really mind using underhanded tactics against Theodoran, given how he was approaching things, but I didn’t think it was a good idea to try the same with my labyrinth goals.

“Maybe I should get Suzu’s take.”

I rang up Suzu and told her about my woes.

“Wow, you’re pretty screwed. For what it’s worth, I’ve never heard about any labyrinth managers trying to scam the performance review like that, so I’d follow your instincts and do it right.”

On the video chat, Suzu was wearing pink pajamas and periodically rubbing her eyes. Had I woken her up? And was it really okay to wear clothes like that to

a meeting? I figured she'd give me hell if I pointed that out, so I decided not to say anything.

"Huh, really? So you've never heard of labyrinth managers gaming the system?"

"The only thing I've ever heard was the embezzlement story you told me a few months ago."

That at least clarified one thing for me. My labyrinth had already been victimized by one corruption scheme, so I'd wanted to ensure that was an outlier in this world, rather than the norm.

So I couldn't take the easy way out. All right, what other options did I have?

"I suppose we'll just have to roll out the red carpet for our guests. Fez, can you go talk to Mayor Hopper? I'm going to need as many workers as the village can spare for the next two days. And on your way, tell the receptionist back in Milt that the labyrinth is temporarily closed for renovation."

"Sure thing, but what are you gonna do? You've only got two days!"

Like all games, the game of life was at its best when it threw the really hard content at you. I tried to keep my excitement in check as I thought about what was coming, and I gave Fez a confident smile.

"We're gonna overhaul this place in record time."

Fez looked at me in horror. Oops, did I put on my evil grin again?

◇

I swung my pickaxe to the ring of stone splitting. My only breaks came in ten-second spurts, when the pickaxe broke apart in my hands and I had to summon a new one with the <Dungeon Management Tool>. I checked my status screen periodically, and every time I saw my stamina drop below two digits, I chugged a magic potion and went back to work.

"This passageway is supposed to open up to the right. Stop digging to the left!"

"Aye aye, ma'am! My bad, ma'am!"

“Aye, ma’am! Watch the rear! Not enough room in the back, ma’am—this is as far as we can go!”

“Keep that rope taut! Don’t drop the load!”

The labyrinth’s passageways blazed with light from the hundreds of torches and lamps we’d gathered. Workers dug out soil and rock cubes and loaded them into baskets, where they were lifted up and out of the labyrinth, one after another. We didn’t have enough hands, so we’d asked the ladies of the village to take over management of the crew, issuing orders and directing the flow of materials. Their level of organization was a lot higher than the workers’, thanks to all that time spent managing meals for dozens of hungry laborers. I watched my stamina plummet again and again, but my fighting spirit burned brighter than ever. Man, I wished I could see all the progress from a top-down view. I thought back to the discussions in the village when I’d come begging for help.

“New construction, and you need it done quick? What are you up to, boy?”

I’d started with Barry.

“I want to bring back two of the traps we scrapped from the initial design: the drain floor and the killer pitfall.”

The first was a barely noticeable trap, one that constantly sapped the stamina from intruders. It was a small thing, but quite effective over the long haul. We’d initially forgone it because it wore out the maintenance workers as well, and because it was tricky to set up. The second was a ruthless trap which put the hunters’ lives at risk, so I’d decided against using it out of concern for their wellbeing.

“Oh yeah? How long do you have?”

“We only have until dawn three days from today, and we’ll need to rearrange as much of the labyrinth as we can by then. Feel free to use every drop of coagulant we still have left.”

“Oof, talk about tight deadlines. Best get started right away.”

“Fez told me everything. How many laborers do we need?”

Next, I’d gone to the mayor’s house to secure workers.

“Every Daemon the village can spare. I know I’m asking for a lot here.”

“So many? We’ll have to arrange to care for the children, at least. This will cost a lot more than last time.”

“...Can I ask how much?”

The mayor thought it over, calculated the undiscounted price, and gave me his fair assessment. Well, that blew up my budget.

“I get what the mayor’s saying, but this is crazy. Working this fast, we’re definitely going to see some injuries. I hope you’re prepared to provide treatment for everyone!”

The mayor put out a summons, and the villagers gathered to discuss terms. More and more people congregated, until it seemed like the entire village was there. For whatever reason, Deneb ended up their representative.

“Aoiiii, what’s got you all in a hurry? This is gonna cost you a fortune! I don’t see how you stand to make any money if you go rushing around like this.”

I looked to Ann and Mary, and I had my answer. I mentally braced myself for the teasing.

“I have to do this because my family’s in danger.”

“So there you go, everyone! He’s doing it for his family.”

“Family? Makes sense.”

“Yep, no reason to try to talk him out of it.”

“Oi, Chief, let’s get rolling. Where do we start?”

“Jenny, round up all the women just like before. We don’t have a second to spare.”

A tear sprang to my eye. I wanted to thank them all from the bottom of my heart for their support, but honestly, I was too damn embarrassed. Best to just pretend I’d never delivered that cheesy line.

“Okay, Aoi, what do ya need me to do?”

“What, you’re gonna help?”

When Fez came to me offering his services, I was so shocked I gave him a rather rude response. I'd hired Donnel and Carla to fight in the first place, so I was planning on asking them to do that once again, but when it came to Fez, I honestly hadn't even thought about how I could put him to use. I supposed I could forgive myself this one. When you're orchestrating this many people, it's only natural to forget someone.

"Can you go buy some rope from the village? Don't skimp—it'll need to be strong enough to support people's weight. Oh, and how about you put some of those potions at your stall on sale at a cheap price? I'm sure they'll sell like corncakes."

"Sure, but who's gonna take the hit for my loss?"

"I was thinking this could be your contribution to the cause."

After a long pause, he answered in a chipper tone of voice.

"Yeah, I don't think that's gonna fly with the missus. She'd probably rip my tail off and beat me to death with it if I cut into the store's profits like that."

Apparently he'd been balancing the value of our friendship against the risk to his own life and limb.

"Aoi, we're done with this side of the tunnel, just need to get the blocks out. The chief said to stick to the plan!"

"Got it!"

Once I secured the blocks to a rope, Fez, who'd put on a headband and joined the workforce, started lifting them up. I sprinted down the tunnel to my next digging spot. I worked away, carving into the solid bedrock below the first floor of the labyrinth, turning it all into stone blocks. As we progressed down the line, the labyrinth slowly changed shape under the influence of my <Dungeon Management Tool>. The reinforcing wood holding it up began to bow in places, under the weight of many dug-up blocks we'd glued together with coagulant. The whole thing looked like it was made of pixel art. By this point, we were clearly skimping on the aesthetics a bit.

◇

Mary helped around the workshop, stirring pots, bringing firewood from storage, just doing whatever she could. But the entire time, she was in agony. At the root of her suffering was a letter handed to her by a Daemon hunter early that morning.

“Withdraw your aid. Betray them, if need be. If we accomplish our goal, I will pay the ransom of any humans who support my cause.”

The letter bore Theodoran’s signature and seal. The alluring offer tugged at her, not for her own freedom, but rather for the sake of the many ransomed humans. As a knight, sworn to protect mankind, she should have obeyed the commands in the letter. But Mary couldn’t bring herself to do it. It tortured her in a way she hadn’t experienced in months.

“Maryyyy, can you go get us some firewood? We’re going to be out soon!”

“Absolutely, I’ll go and fetch it immediately!”

She refused to think of it and threw herself into the work. She’d worry about the letter when the time came.

◇

“I don’t hear any screams. They must still be far away.”

I put my hand to the handle of the cursed sword at my waist and strained my ears, listening for the sound of our intruders from the guardian’s room.

“No footsteps either.”

Mary murmured beside me. Just how far away could she hear footsteps?!

We’d spent every minute remodeling for the two days we had, and we’d finished this morning—just in time. Aside from a few personnel taking shifts in the workshop just in case, all the exhausted villagers had returned home. No doubt they were fast asleep, getting ready to go to work again come tonight. I’d gotten a report from reception that a group of hunters had registered to challenge the labyrinth today. All told, there were 63 humans and 21 Daemons, and in the middle of the list was Theodoran.

When summer had started, so long ago, I’d bought a brand new suit, but after the repeated washings it was looking a bit worse for wear. I had no armor to

speak of, but my vest and leather pouch were packed full of potions. A number of people had recommended that I wear some leather armor beneath my suit, but I'd given up on the idea fairly quickly. Sacrificing mobility could be fatal.

I'd calmed down a lot when Fez informed me that Theodoran's hunters were more the mercenary caravan guard type, rather than the type that hunted monsters for a living. In game terms, rather than a sudden difficulty spike, this looked more like a bug, or a major balance issue. A bunch of caravan guards sounded like easy mode. On my left hand, I wore a black glove I'd recently acquired off Tundra—the lone purchase I'd allowed myself for this encounter. I hadn't exactly been able to afford splurging on it.

Magic Hands (three-meter radius) == 4.2 million DL

Seller: Manager, Labyrinth #89

Rating: ★★★☆☆

Reviewer: Manager, Labyrinth #315

- A retro magic glove, the real deal, for all you folks nostalgic for the days of yore.

Nowadays, you can find 2x or even 3x boosting gloves out there, but back in the day, this was the only one on the market. They were a mainstay of labyrinth warehouses. Back when this fellow started selling them, people thought they were pretty cool cause you could wash your hands without ruining them (you just needed two of them). You could argue that's what justifies the prices.

(Edit: Changed my review to reflect how it compares to the newer competing products.) **Rating**: ★★★★☆

Reviewer: Employee, Labyrinth #172

- Others have a wider range of effect, but this one's my favorite.

I inherited these way back when. I'm kinda jealous of the way other ones let people lift more and stuff, but you know, I just don't feel right when I go out fishing or gathering seaweed if I'm not wearing these.

It was a magic glove that let you grab distant objects. Ann and I used them to

lift blocks after digging them, but you could also hold people in place with them. This would've been far more useful against single hunters than against this mob, obviously. I hadn't thought of it myself; the idea had come up when I'd called Suzu last night to try and relax. Suzu didn't seem to spend much time worrying about combat. Her labyrinth didn't really require strength of arms to operate, so she was mostly concerned with items that were useful day-to-day, and with identifying new commodities.

"It's been two hours since we heard the first scream. If they were going to make it this far, they'd be here by now."

We'd set the tripwires and piled anchor traps so they wouldn't be triggered by a small number of intruders. After all, a giant pitfall in the middle of a passageway could very well kill people. I'd realized that we didn't want to take that kind of risk with our normal customers. The pit trap was three meters deep, as wide as the passage itself, and three meters long to boot. The walls were as near to vertical as we could make them, so you'd need special equipment to climb out. Without stakes or a rope you couldn't get people out of it, and that was not to mention the fact that anybody who fell in would likely be incapacitated by their injuries. The trap was bound to take out a few adventurers. I'd seen my share of nasty pitfalls in games, and I was grateful to a certain tabletop GM who'd taught me how lethal they could be, despite their cartoonish reputation. The way Barry had grimaced when I'd told him I wanted one, it was clear he too was aware of the injury they could cause.

"Wonder if Theodoran's having fun, now that the kiddie gloves are off. He has no idea who he's up against."

And so the first day ended without a single hunter reaching the guardian's room. The invaders had exhausted their first attempt at the labyrinth, and many had to be rescued at nightfall. You should've seen the way they argued and fought over who got to use those stakes and ropes to get out first.

◇

We'd survived day one, but the clang of picks and shovels continued through the night.

"I'm clearing these out. Anything left over there?"

“You checked there’s no one still stuck in the pit, right?!”

The villagers were engaged in all manner of work, prepping the labyrinth for the next day’s assault, but most of them didn’t have the strength or stamina to dig. They had their hands full just repairing the already-revealed pit trap. They removed the anchors used on the first day and greased the walls of the trap to ensure it wasn’t a total cakewalk. I also had them sand down the walls above, so the invaders wouldn’t have an easy time of attaching ropes.

While they repaired the big pitfall, I was digging another, smaller trap—one that would make it more difficult not just to get through the labyrinth, but also to use any tools. I also suspected it would lead to a lot of injuries. Honestly, I was having trouble even getting the blocks out of this one after digging them up. It was much more problematic than the first pitfall. That was why we’d decided to build it last, so it didn’t get in the way of our other efforts.

This one would be an unavoidable, deep pool of oil, designed so that when it was disrupted, it slicked several passageways, making it a nightmare just to walk around. You rarely saw this kind of trap in modern games, but it was an easy and effective way to make tools unusable, unless you had a ton of cloth on hand to wipe them clean. Oil solidified and dried, so maintaining a trap like this was a nightmare, but fortunately this was a one-night-only production. In general, you could work around the difficulties of an oil trap by digging into walls and floors with stakes, and with liberal use of rope to pull yourself along. The walls being made of such smooth stone was going to give those adventurers a hard time of it. Even if they did make it through all this to the guardian’s room, ready to face the boss, they were going to be suffering a major debuff from traversing our oily hell of a labyrinth.

People would need torches in the labyrinth, so I was using nonflammable oil to avoid things getting out of hand, though honestly the risk to me and my family wasn’t all the great. I’d been considering just buying cheap, flammable oil on Tundra and calling it a day. It was pretty sticky, too, so we could’ve easily made a deep bog out of it. If an invader had caught fire in there, they’d have been a goner for sure. We also had the option of using a tar pit to keep the heat from dissipating once the oil was ignited. Tar was so cheap that we could add it pretty much anywhere we felt like around the labyrinth and upgrade the

lethality of all our existing traps while we were at it. Humans were all too fragile. The fatality rate would have soared if we'd sprinkled the floor with dirty wooden stakes; just imagine the rate of infection, if they didn't hurry to get those nasty wounds cleaned.

I hoped Theodoran and his crooks were properly grateful for the mercy I was showing them.

"You know, I think I'm a pretty stand-up guy, all thing considered, but this does make me worry about what it's like in the labyrinths on the front lines."

I was starting to have my doubts about the company's hiring strategy. Were hardcore gamers the right people to trust with this kind of power over life and death?

◇

"Ann, we're going to the labyrinth. Stay in the village with Donnel and Carla while we're there."

Yesterday had finished up our quota for the performance evaluation, so I would've liked to simply close the labyrinth, but I was sure Theodoran would've kicked up a fuss, and I wanted to avoid a scandal. I strapped the cursed sword to my waist and stood up. Coming after us while the labyrinth was closed would be an outright crime, and I didn't think a nobleman like Theodoran would go so far, but the doubt still rattled around in the back of my head. I was worried about the sheer numbers they could bring to bear, so I had Donnel, Carla, and their crews camp outside for the night to keep an eye out for surprise attacks. Ann would be safer staying in Milt until Theodoran left. Though, that said, my life was probably in a lot more danger than Ann's at this point.

"Okay, then. Stay safe, you two."

"Mhm."

Mary didn't sound too good. Maybe she hadn't slept well? Perhaps aware of the danger we would face today, I hugged Ann for a bit longer than usual before leaving the cabin.

◇

Ann watched Aoi and Mary heading off for the labyrinth until they were just out of sight, at which point she turned to Donnel.

“Mister Donnel, did you memorize the trap locations last night, like I asked?”

“Know ‘em like the back of my paw, lassie. I learned them just the way you said.”

“Miss Carla, did you get any sleep?”

“Don’t you worry about me! Though I am a bit sleepy.”

Ann went around behind the cabin, took out her poleaxe from its hidden location, and checked it over to make sure it was ready for use.

“Aoi may look like he’s ready for anything, but he can be pretty sloppy, so I’ve gotta protect him.”

“Uhh, right. ’Course.”

“S-Sure.”

Ann had easily convinced the two veteran hunters to support her plan, thanks to the strength of her pure conviction. The moment she’d stood up straight and tall, looked them in the eye, and said she wanted to be a help rather than a burden, the game was already over.

“Say, have you heard about the slithering stalker? It’s a monster that sneaks up behind people when they least expect it!”

Donnel and Carla exchanged puzzled glances. This was a new one to them.

“You can only find them in our labyrinth. They stalk you from the moment you enter, and they’re really scary and super strong.”

Ann flashed a sunny smile.

“C’mon, let’s go be monsters.”

◇

They were still gathering up in front of the room. Eleven, no, twelve of them. I’d expected them to get past the traps this time, now that they were certainly more properly equipped, but I was a little surprised to see him waiting until the last moment to amass troops rather than just charging in with what he had.

What a good idea. Is this Theodoran's work, or does he have some skilled hunter calling the shots? All things considered, this was not a very high turnout. Had they run into trouble along the way? Maybe they just hadn't brought enough rope.

"They're readying weapons. Prepare yourself."

Even though they were on the other side of the wall, Mary could tell what they were doing. If you asked her about it, she wouldn't think it was anything out of the ordinary, but Mary was really something special.

I took the cursed sword in hand and focused on the coming fight. The sword converted my imagined techniques into physical motion, pushing my muscles and joints to their very limits to achieve my objective as quickly and effectively as possible. I was as strong as I could possibly be, given my status.

I made a fist with the black glove on my left hand. As I did, the hardened soil blocks all around me creaked and lifted up into the air. I raised them all up to my chest level. Man, this glove was seriously not all that great. I could see why people were talking up the newer models. I mean, sure, it was cool and all, but I had to expend all my own grip strength to hold these things, and then I had to lift them with my own arms too. My muscles were aching. Wish I could've sprung for the power-boosting gloves.

"Mary, you take care of the Daemons. Even if there's only one of them, that'll be a help."

"Okay."

"Charge!"

"Follow me!"

As the door slammed open, I hurled all the soil blocks at it. One hunter took a brick to the head and collapsed on the spot, but the rest rushed in, flooding the room. Not one of them batted an eye at their fallen comrade. They were used to battle. I leaped forward, closing the distance.

"Get in position!"

"Aye!"

I jumped with all my strength to clear the line of spears thrust at me.

“Take this!”

I leaped all the way to the ceiling, impacted and took a handhold momentarily, then launched myself forward again, above the spears.

“Focus, Aoi. Do the Phantom Flash.”

I kicked off the ceiling again and aimed the dull side of my blade at Theodoran. It was difficult to maneuver mid-air, but I used the glove to push off the floor and course-correct. I feinted at the hunter next to Theodoran, then turned to slash at him.

“How is he doing this?! That’s impossible!”

Theodoran parried my Phantom Flash in a hurry with a crystalline blue sword. *Wait, he blocked it?! Where’s he get off calling my moves impossible if he can do that?* He looked like the brainy type, but apparently he had pretty impressive combat abilities. Only thing for it was to keep pushing.

“Sorry for doing the impossible here, I— Guh!”

My field of vision went dark for a moment, and I pulled back in a panic. I groaned at the sudden strain and jumped backwards, trying not to injure myself further.

Cracks spread across the ceiling from where I’d landed. Maybe I was pushing the limits of how much the coagulant coating could strengthen it; blocks were falling out here and there. Failing to take out their leader in a preemptive strike was a major blow to my plan. Now they’d have their guard up. I returned to my initial position and took in the situation.

It didn’t look like they were using any kind of disruptive magic on me, at least. That meant something else was wrong. When a computer doesn’t have the specs to run a demanding game, it goes blurry and stutters. The same thing was happening to my senses. This had happened to me once before, the time I faced Mary in her Extended Knight Armor. The cursed sword had controlled my body just fine, but my brain hadn’t been able to keep up. The software in my head wasn’t as powerful as the hardware. If this was beyond even me, then we had to be talking about a task more complex than playing *Dance Dance Rebellion*

and *Shamisen Hero* at the same time. After all, my natural state was sitting in front of a monitor, mashing the keyboard and madly clicking the mouse.

The intruders formed up, settled their lances, and advanced.

“Hard mode, finally.”

I broke into a grin. I was having a blast, fighting with my own fists just as though I was in a game. I wanted more of it, to fight until I dropped. Moments like these were what a gamer lived for! I was having a hard time even holding myself back from jumping straight at them. Damn, I was fighting myself even more than I was fighting them. *Cool down, Aoi.* The number one rule in a first-person game was, don’t get outnumbered. I needed to find a way to tilt the scales. Their leather armor was soaked in oil, and probably heavy as a result. Their spears were surely in the same condition, and difficult to wield to boot. In spite of all that, they handled themselves well.

“Execute Appraisal.”

I was looking for the weak link in the chain of their offense. Most of them had vitality and stamina in the double digits, although one of the Daemon hunters had conspicuously high stats. Fortunately, Mary had already taken her down during the initial onslaught. The only ones remaining were Theodoran and nine of the foot soldiers, all human.

“All right, cursed sword, don’t fail me now.”

I knew how to deal with insufficient specs. It was perfectly common for the most recent releases to make even a high-end gaming machine cry on their default settings. And there was the answer: all I had to do was lower the settings. *Please, sword, if you can control my body, then can I at least configure how you do it?* First, I lowered my monitor resolution and sound quality to the minimum. Those two were more of a luxury than a necessity in the first place. No good... I still felt weighed down. *Okay, take out the colors.* No good? Might have to just turn off the visuals entirely and go with sound only. I blinked a few times. I could feel the air on my open eyes, could sense the light hitting them, and I even vaguely knew where everyone was, but I couldn’t see a thing. My other senses were also hazy. Just how far had I gone in lowering my settings?!

But it had worked. I could feel the strength in my arms and legs. It was time to

attack.

I kicked off the ground and dashed forward, the sound of my figure cutting through the wind a faint whisper.

“Ready lances! Intercept him!”

I heard the clash of metal on metal, felt danger at my side. I slid to the left and leaped again, getting into position to fall from above on their flank.

“Dodged again. He’s even faster now! How, how?!”

“Stab the monster!”

Hear the whistle of a lance in the air and dodge. Now, parry with the sword in one hand, twist, sword singing in counterattack. Several of them fall. Turn again, jump to land on the ceiling, ready to launch down.

“From above? You sure this guy’s human?!”

Soften the landing and get in position. Slash right, spin left. So far so good. Now, intercept that attack with a vertical slash. Ah, resistance. Little nick to my right arm. Nothing I can’t handle.

“He got my hand! I can’t hold my lance!”

“Leave this to me. Watch my back!”

Dangerous target closing in. Low slash from the left. Follow it with a horizontal cut to the right. Phantom Flash. Parry the counter with a low left slash, then harry him from the right. Don’t let him get used to the rhythm. Four, five, six, seven strikes.

“Gah! How’s he so damn fast?! Ggrh. Now, impale him!”

More incoming. Grit your teeth and parry the lances. Crap, this is bad. Heavy hit to the left thigh. Not going to be able to move well, I should retreat.

“I won’t let you get awa— Guh!”

Crouch and jump back and to the right. Now, reach out and grab him with the glove. Feel the weight in your hand. Got ‘em.

“Kkh. Ngh...”

Tighter, tighter. Don't let go. Landing, now jump back again with everything you've got. Count the seconds until you hit the ground, and get ready to jump again once your feet touch. Don't. Let. Go.

"Aoi, please, release him!"

Mary's scream cut through to me. *Sword, reload default settings!*

My senses came crashing back, along with a monstrous headache. When I looked, the group of intruders was far away from my position. I unclenched my left hand, and one of the hunters collapsed to his feet, gasping and coughing.

"Did I grab him by the neck? Sorry."

After apologizing, I looked around. One of them was out of commission, two were severely wounded, and Theodoran had taken a moderate injury. Two of them had lost their weapons as well. I had a gash on my right arm, and a big hole in my thigh, which hurt like hell! I reached out for my best potion, in the top pocket of my jacket holster, and broke it open. The liquid seeped in through my vest, the vitality potion penetrating under my clothes. The horrible pain retreated. The profuse bleeding stopped, and, as usual, I felt the wound closing itself at a speed that left me shivering. I didn't think I'd ever get used to this feeling.

With every pulse of my heart, my headache throbbed. Even if I dropped my settings again, moving was going to be a tall order right now.

"Hey, Theodoran. Can we talk?"

I forced out a smile and addressed my attacker. My body was screaming at me to rest, ready to give out at any second. I wasn't even doing anything, but my vision and hearing were fading in and out. I was not in good shape.

"Would you like to reconsider my offer of a contract?"

"Maybe if you make a few changes. I wouldn't mind going at it until one of us is crushed, but at this rate, I think someone's going to die. You're not ready to go that far, are you?"

As a labyrinth manager, I was considered a Daemon, and Theodoran was thus my countryman. I wanted to avoid having to kill a fellow citizen, if at all

possible.

“I acknowledge the offered price per unit was a tad low considering the current market. I miscalculated, assuming a novice labyrinth manager wouldn’t be savvy to their products’ value, and I am prepared to move on the price. That said, I will not yield on either the exclusivity clause or on my demands regarding manufacturing technique.”

“Those are not on the table.”

“Then I’m afraid this negotiation is over.”

Theodoran’s eyes blazed with determination. Was he truly just motivated by money?

“Draw daggers! Throw!”

“Aoi, no!”

Mary ran to stand in front me, holding out her shield. One of the hunters cursed.

“Knights don’t protect Daemons! If you’re gonna die, die for a human!”

Mary had positioned herself to deflect the daggers, but she stopped dead in her tracks, the shield falling to her side. She stood there defenseless as the daggers bore down on her.

Time slowed, and my thoughts accelerated. All I could think was, *I don’t want Mary to meet a dead end here. Even if it means...*

I didn’t even hesitate.

My joints shrieked in protest, but the cursed sword still moved me just the way I wanted it to. I wrapped my arms around Mary and spun her behind me as fast as I could. I felt the daggers hit home, stabbing into me one after the other. Even slicked with oil, they felt awfully sharp. These guys didn’t skimp on their equipment. Two sunk into my left leg, three into my back, and one of them pierced straight through my chest.

I wasn’t a goner yet. My hands trembling, I smashed two potions from my belt. Still, even moving now was going to be difficult. Theodoran’s next move should have been to send in his four remaining soldiers and watch from the

back. If I pushed myself to the limit, I could take out four goons, but if I was wrong about that, the only things I had to rely on were guts and luck.

“Aoi? Why did you...?”

When my legs nearly gave out, Mary supported me, staring at me in confusion. Even when I tried to command the cursed sword to move me, all I did was sink further to the ground. If I truly couldn’t fight anymore, I was going to have to find another way. *Forgive me, Mary.*

“I’m protecting you. I’m not ready for our time together to be over, Mary. Are you?”

I was so far gone that I wasn’t sure I could even form words, but I tried anyway. I faintly thought, if nothing happened now, maybe I’d made a wrong choice and ended up on a bad route. But I still had faith. I believed we would make it through.

“Knight, seize that man. Aren’t you sworn to protect?!”

So, Theodoran was trying to make her betray me? I had a feeling he and I would’ve been good friends, if we were gamers. Hell, he didn’t even want her to kill me, just restrain me? I had to hand it to the guy for keeping a cool head.

◇

“Aren’t you sworn to protect?!”

Theodoran’s shout unearthed the sweat and agony of Mary’s training, the blood and death that accompanied her on the battlefield. But buried among those was also a long-cherished memory. *Theodoran, if nothing else, let me thank you for that reminder.*

The dusty, nearly forgotten memory sent Mary back to an old cathedral, a majestic castle watching over it in the distance. She was still small, and a familiar warmth wrapped around her tiny hands.

“What do you want to be when you grow up, Mary?”

“I wanna be strong!”

“You do? How come?”

The nostalgic voice clawed at her heart and wrung tears from her eyes. She reminded herself, *That isn't where I belong anymore.*

"I wanna be strong enough to protect Mother and Father!"

"I see. Then maybe you should become a knight."

"What's a knight?"

"Knights are people who swear to protect what they hold dear."

Of course...

"Really?! That's perfect! Then I'm going to become a knight."

I remember, now. I remember why I became a knight.

"That way, I can protect everyone I love!"

The force that had long pushed her forward subsided, as though a tired old motor finally gave out. But in its place, rusty, forgotten gears began to turn, and a new fire kindled inside her.

◇

At Theodoran's appeal, a spark flared up in Mary's eyes. *Oh, shit. Did I miss a flag somewhere?* Well, if Mary betrayed me, at least it would make for an interesting story. As a gamer, you've got to learn to savor the bitter endings as well as the sweet ones.

"Aoi, would you grant me one wish?"

Mary's voice was strangely playful for a betrayal event.

"What is it?"

"Spoil me rotten. Never stop protecting me."

That was quite the tall order. In spite of my wounds, I had to laugh.

"Haha, what a line. Sure. It'd be my pleasure."

I was pretty sure that was two wishes, not one, but I just nodded along anyway. There was only one choice for me.

"Thank you, Aoi. I, Mariet, do hereby swear to protect and cuddle you, in exchange for the same, until the end of time, even if I make this whole world

my enemy.”

A sudden breeze tossed Mary’s hair, and I watched as black chased it from tip to root. Her silvery sword and armor flashed once and turned to scarlet and gold. Her clear blue eyes flared up and turned a ruby hue. She hadn’t lost her aloof aura, but the doubts that clouded her mind had burned away.

“Execute Appraisal.”

Mariet

<Dark Knight> **Vitality**: 240/240 **Stamina**: 300/300 **Willpower**: 380/380

Skills: <Dark Knight: Master> <Knight Armor: Expert> Wow, Dark Knight? Huh, and she lost her last name too. I wish I could say I planned this all out, but seriously, I did not see this one coming. I was pretty sure I'd used up all my luck on this event. Hard mode was fine and all, but gambling on long shots like this was not my style. Thank goodness it'd all worked out in the end.

This had to be what Karumi had told me about. Mary had changed alignment, switching from the humans to either the Daemons or just the labyrinth itself. This was the change a knight had to undergo, if they gave up being a guardian of their people. Still, I had never expected to see Mary cloaked in darkness.

"Rest. Leave this to me."

As she readied her scarlet shield and sword, I only had the strength to nod in return. Mary blurred, throwing herself headlong at the enemy and blowing away three hunters with a single slash of her sword. She thrust home the sword and shield with an unearthly grace, and as she danced the hunters piled up along the wall.

Oh man, I'd totally seen this before. This was like a scene from one of those *Warriors* games. Well, that did fit the fantasy setting, but that genre wasn't really my cup of tea. I was into more realistic games.

"Ready to surrender, Theodoran?"

After making short work of the hunters, Mary directed her sword at their leader and held it at the ready.

"It appears I am defeated. Would you mind not holding it against my hired help?"

"Sure. I couldn't care less about them. All I want is to protect the people I love."

My heart skipped a beat, hearing Mary deliver such an evil yet lovable line with so much style. *Oh man, she's a keeper.*

“I surrender.”

“Excellent. Then I will be handing you over to the authorities for... Wait a moment.”

Theodoran rolled his eyes and grinned at my goofball of a knight.

“Aoi, under what charges should I arrest this man?”

Mary looked at me with some concern. I couldn’t help but smile.

“Attempting to extort or bribe a labyrinth manager is a serious crime.”

She may have fallen to darkness, but Mary was still Mary. Theodoran began to wilt, and she ran to catch him. And as I contentedly watched that scene, my eyelids began to feel awfully heavy...

FINAL CHAPTER “YOU MORE THAN TRIPLED THE NUMBER OF REPELLED INTRUDERS, AND NOT ONE OF THEM A REPEAT. SPLENDID!”

“Oh, you’re being too kind. I only barely made the minimum.”

I was still stuck recuperating in the cabin’s bed when Karumi arrived to accept my written report.

“You can look forward to a bonus and a raise, as well as another spot bonus for unexpected risk to life and limb. We’ll have those all to you right away.”

“Yeah, can’t wait. Hey, maybe you could tell me a little more about dark knights?”

“Let’s see, is that information restricted? Well, no, I suppose this qualifies as a need-to-know situation. The guardians of humans aren’t always called knights, by the way; the term used varies depending on where they’re from. But at any rate, when one of them decides to stop protecting their people, they usually lose their powers.”

Usually?

“However, if the protector’s covenant is overwritten by another oath, they instead become a dark knight, and the sworn guardian of their new people. Typical dark knights tend to be inferior to normal knights, in exchange for casting off their restraints, however...”

“It seems like the class change actually powered her up instead.”

“You should have heard my father laugh. The recipient of the oath was a labyrinth manager, and it was sworn inside their labyrinth, but still, such a simple, obviously romantic oath ought never to have reached all the way to him. Certainly, he would have conferred his blessings and protection as soon as it came to his attention that a labyrinth personnel member had become a dark

knight, but this was an unusual case. The wish was so fervent, so powerful, that he bestowed greater power upon her than is typically done in these cases. Miracles sprout up around you, Kousaka."

Well, now it all made sense. But why did Karumi sound a little annoyed?

"Not at all. I was just doing my job."

I'd told her much the same before. I was just making sure that I would be able to rest easy at the end of the day, knowing I'd done all I could.

"I see. Well, I shall take my leave. Father will be wanting a detailed report."

Karumi sighed and left through the door which returned to the office, just like always. As I saw her off, I vowed to get a recording the next time Karumi appeared wearing a dress. I mean, she was the one benefiting from all my hard work, so it was only fair that I got something out of it, right?

A UI window had started flickering while I was speaking to Karumi, and I looked over to see I had an incoming call. The oddly persistent person who'd stayed on the line waiting for me this whole time turned out to be Suzu.

"Pick up the phone faster if you're there, stupid! I heard you passed out while defending your labyrinth!"

Suzu was hopping up and down so much, I thought she was going to burst right out of the window. Did I just see a strawberry pattern? Probably better not to say anything. Suzu seemed worried about me, so I set to explaining.

"Haahh. Can't believe I got so worked up over nothing. You poisoned yourself by drinking too many potions? How dumb a dummy are you?"

Here I did my best to offer a full explanation, and all I got in return was verbal abuse. She seemed pretty angry, though, so I kept my peace. She'd just get even more annoyed if I tried to defend myself. I'd been in bed ever since the whole Theodoran thing had wrapped up. I'd fainted after the fight, and they'd had to carry me back to the cabin. The girls had called Karumi, and she'd rushed over to diagnose me. She'd immediately pronounced I had a severe case of potion poisoning. Apparently one of the effects of overdosing on magic potions was a huge, temporary status debuff, which explained why I'd been unable to move for a while and had eventually passed out. Even though I'd recovered

from the worst of it, I was still feeling pretty sluggish.

“I swear to god, Aoi, most people don’t give themselves potion poisoning! I’ve never even heard of that happening to someone before. Hello! Earth to Aoi! What is *wrong* with you?! How many damn potions did you chug down?”

She was still going at it. You know, even if I wanted to tell her—she was already on to complaining about something else anyway—I wasn’t even sure how many I’d drunk. I’d been basically pouring stamina potions down my throat during the lightning-fast remodel, and then there’d been the battle with Theodoran where I’d taken a few vitality potions. Apparently those had been the straw that broke the camel’s back. Well, I’d learned my lesson. I didn’t even want to think about how many potions I’d used in the last week.

“Aoi, I locked the front and back doors to the labyrinth’s first stratum.”

The door opened, and Mary entered the cabin. Her black hair and crimson eyes had turned back to their original blond and blue. They changed whenever she picked up a sword, though. If I’d been a little younger, I would’ve thought maybe it was some kind of super cool special power that sapped your life force every time you tapped into it. Like, the kind that necessitated wearing an eyepatch. That’d be awfully inconvenient when it was both your eyes, though...

In its current state, the labyrinth was a dangerous trap for any kids from the village who wandered in by accident, and there was even a risk of monsters nesting in it, so I’d asked Mary to lock it up for the time being.

“Aoi, what shall I do from now on? I feel as though I can do anything!”

Mary looked ready to take on the world, but sadly I had to burst her bubble.

“You locked up the labyrinth, right? That means there’s nowhere left to protect, except the cabin and the area around it. We won’t be reopening the labyrinth for some time.”

I’d worked my ass off on that labyrinth, so of course I wanted to expand it, but I had no budget. Every last DL I had to my name had been spent on building the first stratum and then on remodeling it in the last few days. I was thinking it’d be nice to build another stratum to serve as sort of an apartment complex, so we could host more residents. Getting a bunch of tenants paying rent

sounded like a lovely way to make some passive income.

“All right, then I’ll protect you, Ann, and this cabin. Um, what shall I protect you from?”

You know, it’d be pretty awesome if she could protect me from the hardships of the world, or the bureaucracy of labyrinth management, but that didn’t really seem up her alley.

“Yeah, dude, what are you gonna do, make her a mall cop? Anyhoo, I got places to be. Catch you on the flip side.”

Stay classy, Suzu.

“Aoi, what is a mall cop?”

“Uh, yeah, dunno what she meant by that. Better ask her next time she calls.”

Mary looked at me in confusion. Damn it, it was hard to keep up a poker face when I could barely move. *I’ll get you for this, Suzu.*

◇

“Allow me to apologize for everything I’ve put you through.”

After Mary had captured him, Theodoran had been sent back to the city along with his entourage of hunters, and a huge fine had been levied against him for attempting to bribe a labyrinth manager. It seemed they hadn’t imposed any manual labor or community service, though.

He’d now returned to the village once again, and had specifically asked to see me, so we met up in the mayor’s house. Walking there under the effects of the potion poisoning had been tough. Even with Mary supporting me the whole way, the trek to Milt felt like it’d taken forever. Theodoran began apologizing profusely the moment I set foot in the mayor’s living room.

“Tell me one thing. Why apologize now?”

“I have been informed by one of the hunters working here that your labyrinth is the only one in these parts, and that you live there and operate it with your family. Knowing what I do now, the conditions I sought to impose on you were beyond unreasonable. That I attempted to negotiate such a position means I am a failure as a merchant.”

Well, that made sense. He wasn't actually so much apologizing for doing something bad as admitting a failure on the job. That seemed more his style.

"I accept your apology. However, I have a feeling you've got another reason for coming."

He seemed sincere, but surely he wouldn't have come to apologize when the wound was so fresh unless he had some ulterior motive.

"Well, yes. You see, there have been a number of accidents affecting my core business as of late. I consulted a fortune teller, and mysteriously enough, she implied that my spate of poor luck might dry up if I came to see you."

Oh yeah, that reminded me. I'd gotten a bunch of letters while I was stuck in bed. One of them was a letter from the company bigwigs, praising my performance and promising me a promotion and a raise. I'd also gotten a bunch of get-well cards from fellow employees, but I'd forgotten there was one that had Theodoran's signature on it. In the rush of remodeling the labyrinth and fighting, there was one more angle we were pursuing which I had neglected. Apparently the sabotage efforts against Theodoran's business interests had been more effective than I'd given them credit for.

"No doubt a wise woman, that fortune teller. This is the first I've heard of your business troubles, but I'm sure that, now that you've made amends, fate will smile down upon you."

"What a relief to hear. I do believe you're right."

We were dancing around the issue, but this was more like a peace talk than anything else. Anyway, I had no reason to keep fighting him, now that he wasn't demanding I hand over Ann. This guy was probably ruthless when you drove him into a corner, so knowing when to let go was important. And honestly, it wasn't like I objected to every part of the contract. I wasn't going to teach him how to make my potions, and I certainly wasn't going to let him lay a finger on my family, but as long as he didn't touch those things, I wasn't going to put my life on the line to squabble with him. You don't get continues in real life.

"Anyway, what made you come all the way out here in the first place? Why are you so desperate for magic potions?"

If Theodoran had just been looking to make a profit, he would've backed off when I first showed teeth. There were other, less hostile markets to play in than going toe-to-toe with a labyrinth manager.

Theodoran brooded a moment before speaking up.

"It's my sister. She's the only family I have, and..."

He trailed off. *Well, that sure sounds familiar.* I didn't know exactly why she needed magic potions, but for my part, I'd heard enough.

"If you did this for your family, that's good enough for me. Write up a new contract. I'll sell you the potions you need for cheap. A steady supply."

I was ready to burst out laughing. So we'd been fighting for the same reason all along, eh? No wonder he'd been in such a rush to patch things up.

"But why...?"

"I just can't hate a guy who goes to the wall for his family."

I was giving Theodoran a long-suffering shrug when something warm and soft pressed against my back and a hand descended on my head and began patting me.

"That's a good boy. You're such a dear."

Seriously? It was nice and all that Deneb had brought us tea, but she was really taking the wind out of my sails. It's hard to look like a badass when an overindulgent elf is patting you on the head.

◇

"I'm all done making potions for the day, Aoi!"

I was lazing around in bed, reading a gaming magazine Karumi had brought me from Japan and fighting off the drowsiness of the potion poisoning, when Ann slipped under the covers and wrapped her arms around me.

"Ann, I don't mind if you wanna snuggle, but could you maybe stay above the waist?" I was under strict orders to avoid all medicines, and that included my go-to sedative herb. I hadn't had to endure the full force of Ann's cuddling in a while, and keeping my composure was proving difficult.

When Ann had told me about how she'd taken Donnel, Carla, and their crews into the labyrinth that day and gone after the straggler hunters from behind, I'd scolded her for putting herself in harm's way. But then Mary had muttered under her breath about how I'd already nearly died just from facing nine of them, and it'd come out that Ann had saved me from another twenty. After that, Ann had gotten hopping mad at me instead and chewed me out for always overdoing it. The way she'd teared up as she chastised me was horribly unfair. I never stood a chance.

"Aoi, Mary, let's take a nap! C'mon, we already wrapped up our work for the day, so we deserve a break."

Ann and Mary were even closer of late. Had something nice happened between the two of them? Mary was playing *Gun Gust* more and more on her new computer, which she rationalized by saying she had to keep training. Yeah, she was hooked.

"That's a splendid idea, Ann. To tell the truth, I'd been hoping our whole family could sleep together today."

Even Mary hopped into bed. She looked happier these days, and I felt like she'd been taking on some of Ann's carefree nature.

Ann's soft snores tugged at me to go to sleep, but when I tried to close my eyes, Mary whispered to me.

"Aoi, isn't my salary a burden?"

"I wouldn't go that far, but yeah, it's going to be tough to scrape up the money."

Mary had signed a contract and was formally my labyrinth guardian, and her rate was not cheap. Well, I mean, I'd set it myself. But after I'd gone so far to recruit her to my party, I didn't want to compromise on her pay and look bad just because I was kind of broke.

"I've been fretting over it, to tell the truth, but I think I've come up with a solution, a way you won't be obligated to pay me anymore. What do you say we give it a try? I think it will solve all our problems."

She was right, but that was something we were better off saving for the

future. She murmured something about just not feeling right without a last name.

“...Not just yet. I think we’re fine the way we are.”

I was half-asleep thanks to the potion poisoning, but even in that state, my instincts still preserved me from danger, like the way I dodged mines in an FPS game.

“What a stubborn man. Oh, wait. Does that mean we’ll do it someday?”

“Someday... Okay.”

“It’s a promise, then, and I never forget promises. I look forward to that day.”

Mary nodded, looking satisfied by my answer, and closed her eyes with a cute little yawn.

“Wait. What?”

I came wide awake, my eyes popping open. I had the strangest sensation, which was somehow incredibly familiar, like I’d put my foot down on a trap and felt it sink in, and yet I’d still miraculously evaded it.

“Hmm...?”

I sat up and looked around, but all I could see was Ann and Mary, both sound asleep. Maybe it’d just been my imagination?

I lied down again and looked at Mary. As her little hand clung to the hem of my shirt and her angelic face drifted up and down from the deep breaths of sleep, I made her a promise in my heart. *Mary, I know you’ve been through a lot of hard times, but I promise you, I will never let you face them alone again. No matter what life throws at you, playing on a team makes it more fun. I can’t guarantee there will be a reward at the end of every stage we clear, but even if there’s no treasure waiting, Ann and I will make one for you. I mean, c’mon, you never read about a character going through hell in the main game, finally reaching a happy ending, and then see the fandisk come out and undo all the good things, right? No writer is that dumb. They’d get flamed right off the internet. Hell, their company building would probably get burned to the ground. I’ll spoil you every day. I’ll make you so happy you change class from Dark Knight*

to Delight. So prepare yourself, because you're going to see just how fun the game of life truly is.

The End

EXTRA “AOI, I DON’T SUPPOSE I COULD... BORROW SOME MONEY.”

“Wh-What?”

One day, as I was making magic potions, Mary turned my way and begged me in a voice utterly devoid of hope.

“I was ambushed, and I lost my beloved spear and armor.”

“Ah. Now I get it.”

I was worried for a moment that she didn’t consider her salary good enough, but when I realized she was looking despondently at the computer monitor, I understood. She meant she’d lost the equipment of her *Gun Gust* character, Mariet.

Mary was one of those players who used their real name. She’d said it would feel strange to manipulate a character with a different name. She used a sword and shield in real life, but those were expensive in-game, so she’d gone with a spear for now. Newbies like her usually had money problems, so they couldn’t afford to go buy a decent sword and shield that wouldn’t break after a few uses. So, she was having to make do with the much cheaper option of spears, until she’d built up a stable gold supply.

“What about the spares? You had two whole sets in your inventory box, right?”

The only penalty for dying in *Gun Gust* was the risk of losing all your items. Not just your equipment, but everything in your bags was left with your corpse. This made it very easy to lose everything. You could always do the run back, of course, but it was all too common to return to find your corpse already looted, either by the one who killed you or just by passersby. All things considered, when you died, you were probably best off considering all your stuff as being forfeit. That was why I’d made sure she kept two spare sets of gear in the town’s item box. I distinctly remembered teaching her about switching out gear and stuff yesterday, and I was absolutely certain I’d put the equipment in the

box. *Don't tell me...*

"Did you die three times in a row without replacing any of your equipment?"

"..."

Mary nodded, sniffling.

"Well, these things happen. Bad luck can be streaky."

It was easy to make mistakes in rapid succession, especially after the first one made you panic to try and fix things.

"Still, you must've had some rotten luck there."

Fortunately, strength in *Gun Gust* wasn't particularly dependent on your gear. Your skills and weapon proficiency were far more important. So, even if she had to use basic equipment, Mary's character was already stronger than it had been yesterday.

"It wouldn't really be all that bad for me to give you enough money to buy that same equipment again, but, well... Thing is, when it comes to online gaming, lending money is kind of frowned upon."

And you know, struggling is an important experience. Surviving hardships is just a part of life!

"I've got an idea."

"A-Aoi?"

Mary looked scared, oddly enough. I didn't make my scary face again, did I?

"You've got nothing left to lose, right?"

"I suppose that's true..."

Mary's character was equipped with nothing but the white robes one wore after revival. Unlike normal clothes, they couldn't be trashed or sold; they were just a way to prevent the revival area from being overrun with naked avatars. Well, if there were no consequences to worry about, why not go for it?

"There's a fort east of town, right? Head there."

"Um, you mean around here? It appears people are fighting."

“There’s a guild rumble going on. People are fighting for control of the east side of this city. It’s a busy time of day for the U.S. players, and this is a pretty typical control fight.”

Since the game had players from around the world on the same server, they had this area control event four times a day. It was kind of nice, and kind of not. From one point of view, there would always be some events that you could make it to. From the other, you were always getting screwed out of some event or other.

“See that dead player over there?”

She entered the fort to find the corpse of an unlucky player who’d been stabbed on his way up a ladder and had fallen to his death.

“Y-Yes.”

Mary bore a look of dawning horror, as though she knew what I was going to say but didn’t want to believe it.

“Well, loot them already.”

“I-I can’t just—”

“You have absolutely no possessions, right?”

“But I’m a knight. I can’t just—”

“Do you have any other options?”

“Aww...”

“Just take their wallet and their gear. It’s easy money.”

The game wasn’t going to get any easier in deference to her knightly pride. It was time to throw away her dignity and live like the masses.

“Mary, these people are fighting for control of the city. They’ve got it made. They won’t mind losing a little bit of money by dying. If you can’t do this, you’re going to be stuck stealing vegetables from farmers or mugging day laborers.”

“...”

Oh good, she took the stuff. It seemed she’d come to terms with it.

“Aoi, they’re chasing me!”

Mary had only taken the wallet when the unlucky player, accompanied by two others, came running.

“Well, duh, you did steal from them. Better not let them catch you. I suggest running back to the center of the city.”

There was an important distinction, in multiplayer games, between what was allowed by the game and what was allowed by the players. *Gun Gust* gave you a remarkable amount of freedom, in that it didn’t penalize you for theft or murder. However, that didn’t stop the players from coming after you for revenge.

“They’re gaining on me!”

“Okay, take the money out of the wallet and throw it on the ground. Hurry!”

“Are you certain?”

“Just do it.”

She took all the money from the wallet and tossed it by the roadside.

“Aoi... They got me. I’m dead again.”

They’d caught up to Mary, skewered her on a sword, and taken the wallet back.

“Well, you did rob them.”

“I revived. What do I do now?”

“How about you go back and pick up the coins you threw on the road? Those players are in the middle of a castle siege. They’re too busy to go scrounge for coins in the dirt.”

If she’d managed to snag the equipment, she could’ve made even more money, but she would’ve had to make it to the item box before they caught her.

“...Very well.”

Mary reluctantly picked up the coins. She’d made a good amount of money.

“Aoi, I think I may cry.”

“If you’d saved up enough to buy a spear, you could’ve joined a party and done a little grinding.”

If I hadn’t helped her from the start, she would’ve learned how it felt to have nothing. She would’ve understood how important it was to save money and take care of your spare equipment. Maybe it would’ve been a better experience for her to join the battle wielding a wooden stick. At this point, I was just glad to see Mary wasn’t still crying over losing her stuff. She would remember this pain and learn from it, but if she was hurt too badly she might end up dropping the game. At first, it was hard to tell just how much the experience had hurt her. And she’d learned an important lesson. Robbing from the ruling class was better than robbing from the working class, and that in turn was better than robbing from the peasants. Peasant areas were always bustling with beginners looking to make a quick buck, and thus they were also chock full of players looking to kill *them* for the same reason, so those areas were actually the most dangerous.

“Oh yes, this shall do nicely! I obtained a commander’s helmet, with horns and everything!”

A mere half a day later, Mary was now an old hand at looting corpses. Her inventory box back home was nearly full, so she had enough money to buy equipment for a while now. Her smile may have lost a bit of its innocent shine, but as a gamer, she’d leveled up.

“Oh, there’s something I forgot to tell you. Everything you have is tagged as stolen, so it won’t sell for that much.”

“What?”

“The game lets you get away with a lot, but it still puts some penalties on you. Selling that stuff will remove the stolen goods debuff, but you won’t get much money for selling it.”

Guilds generally frowned upon the practice as well, so I advised against doing it too often.

“Anyway, I recommend you sell it all off, buy a new spear, and go kill some

players fair and square. If your equipment is bad, everyone is going to treat you like small fry, but if you can kill off a knight or soldier player in a fair fight, your rewards will be much bigger."

"Aoi, I don't know that I can go back to making money honestly."

"Be patient. With a little luck, you'll have your original equipment back in no time."

"R-Right! I'm going to be a knight!"

"That's the spirit. It's a dirty business when you're getting started, but I can show you how to level up your skills and make some money at the same time."

"Okay."

I figured even knights-in-training had to dirty their hands until they really made it. Mary had been blessed, born into nobility and wealth, and had never been forced to endure that kind of hardship. This was a good experience for her, even if it was just a game.

"Okay, I'm going to give it a shot, so, um, will you cheer me on?"

"Yeah. You're such a hard worker, Mary—the best knight ever!"

"All right! I'm going to beat everyone!"

I stroked her hair softly, and Mary smiled like a little kid.

You know, I kind of felt bad. I probably shouldn't have pushed her to go against her nature. *Maybe I should make a dessert for her tonight. Yeah, good idea. Wash away those tears with something sweet.*

AFTERWORD

Hello, I'm game-loving novelist Yuuki Shinobu, and I'll be your host for the evening. Did you enjoy my story about recruiting a new party member to the labyrinth team, and the hard-mode mechanics along the way? For those of you reading the afterword before the novel itself, I hope you can sit back, relax, and enjoy the ride.

Let me talk about games for a bit. PvP-centric games aren't that popular in Japan, but there's still a lot of variety if you're willing to search. A lot of people think PvP games aren't fun unless you're good at them, but the truth is, nobody would play those games if the only way to enjoy them was to be a master of the controller. There's no shortage of games that value decision-making, planning, and teamwork, rather than raw skill.

Dealing with people can be difficult sometimes, but you don't stand to lose anything by trying it out. Like, there was this one survival game that was recently brought over here, with zombies and dinosaurs. I wonder if anybody else plays it? Anything goes, as long as your computer has the specs to run the game. No notion of right or wrong, just individual accountability. Groups form and compete, fighting until one side runs out of resources, money, or willpower. There's no button to report harassment or bullying to a mod or anything like that. I'm sure a lot of people think it's too difficult and awkward, since there's barely a Japanese community. But for me, it was at least interesting to experience that novel world, so detached from Japan, and all I had to do was reach out and try it. If another player approached you, pointing your weapon at them threateningly was a common greeting. Sometimes other players would just attack you without a word. Farming locations for precious resources were a major point of contention. It was really different from what you typically see in Japanese games.

For someone accustomed to that kind of world, like our hero Aoi, real life is lukewarm in comparison. That said, one thing he and I share is that our friends suspect us of having masochistic tendencies thanks to our taste in games, so I kinda try to keep quiet about my hobbies, generally.

Let me close out by saying thank you. Thank you to Itsuwa Katou, for making the awesomely cute and kickass illustration of Mary for the cover. Thank you to Mr. K, for helping me so much with editing, all the way to the end. And a very heartfelt thank you to all my readers, for picking up this book.



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