

GODS[®] GAMES

WE PLAY

4

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Kei Sazane
Illustration by
Toiro Tomose



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UROBOROS

An off-the-charts god who loves being unbeaten. Took on human form because of an interest in Fay.

“Mm...Tiny Human,

You can be very bold, can't you?”

Whoever it was, they sounded almost embarrassed.



Lady Leshea in a swimsuit...?



"With the stamina system,

you'll only be able to beat back

a single God Bless with your Arise.

If you don't want to be destroyed,

I suggest you start running.

Meanwhile, I'll be chanting the words

for my ultimate technique, God Laser.

Seventy seconds from now, when I'm done,

you're all going to be wiped off the map!"

FAY

A game lover whom some people call humanity's greatest hope.



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Player.1 Once More into the Maze

Intermission (This Conversation May Not Be Recorded)

Player.2 Lucemia, Labyrinth of Death and Rebirth

Player.3 Complete Game

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Player.5 Only the Snake Noticed

Intermission (This Conversation May Not Be Recorded) 02

Player.6 The Divine Love of a God

Intermission.0 The Girl and the Boy

Player.7 The Forest of the God-Tree, Yggdrasil



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Illustration by **Toiro Tomose**

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Gods' Games We Play Volume 4

Kei Sazane

Translation by Kevin Steinbach

Cover art by Toiro Tomose

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Characters



Fay

People expect great things from this apostle, the best rookie in recent memory. He created a new team with Leshea and Pearl.



Pearl

An apostle who possesses teleportation abilities. She once earned herself the nickname Assumption-Autopilot Girl, which should tell you how much trouble she can cause.

Leshea

Full name Leoleshea. A former god who awoke after three thousand years sleeping in ice. She adores playing games.



Nel

From Mal-ra. Formerly retired, she joined Fay's team after a battle with the Bookmaker.

Prologue

A Sudden Homecoming

Gods' Games We Play

"You cannot leave this divine dungeon until you clear it. Incidentally, the number of people who have completed this dungeon in the past is...zero."

Suppose a game matching that description actually existed.

Who would want to play it? Nobody, that's who!

Wandering lost through a labyrinth for our entire lives, unable to get out? Respawning endlessly, no matter how many traps we fall into or how many monsters attack us? That sounds like a game specifically designed to crush the human spirit.

But believe it or not...

...people from all over the world were being *forced* to participate in such a game.

"Ugh. I feel sick..."

Scene: an office in the Ruin branch office of the Arcane Court. Chief Secretary Miranda lay sprawled on a couch, staring vacantly at the ceiling.

She had heartburn.

That meant her stomach was producing too much acid—a stress response. She lay down and tried to rest, but she couldn't turn off her brain, and she didn't sleep a wink.

"Eighteen cities in total. Two hundred and nine stranded apostles. And it's been three whole days since the first rescue team went in. More than eighty hours in elapsed time..."

The rescue team was made up of hand-picked apostles, the best of the best. Each was an elite agent representing their home city. And yet, despite all that

talent...

“.....”

...the rescue team had gone incommunicado, just like everyone else.

Apostles diving into the gods' games were equipped with a special device called a Godeye lens, which allowed them to broadcast video of the game from the Elements, the superior spiritual realm, once they got there. This time, though, every group's lens had been destroyed by a monster attack, usually not long after they'd arrived.

“We don't have eyes on anything that's going on in that Elements. We have no idea what's happening in there!” Miranda groaned.

And it had been eighty hours.

Eighty hours, and Miranda was still waiting for the lost apostles to come home.

“Fay... I believed in you, you know. I sent you in there because I had faith you'd get the job done.”

The Ruin branch office was home to a young man named Fay. He was considered one of the greatest rookies in history, undefeated as of yet in the gods' games.

“You and Lady Leoleshea both. Don't tell me there's a game even the two of you can't finish! Humanity would have to wave the white flag!”

The rescue team members were the most talented apostles the Arcane Court could get its hands on. If even they couldn't help those people get home, it would tank the credibility of the Court.

The gods' games would be as good as *over*.

“How many more hundreds of hours should we wait? A few dozen hours, I could take that—but what if it turns into thousands? That would be agonizing! Or tens of thousands! Would even I still be beautiful when you finally—”

Knock.

Miranda was interrupted by a rapping at the door from the hallway.

“What do you want? I thought I said to let the Vice-Secretary handle everything until three o’clock. I’m trying to nap!”

“It’s me,” said a familiar voice. “It’s Fay. They told me you were here sleeping, Chief Secretary.”

“Oh, Fay, it’s just you? Sorry, but I’m waiting for Fay and the others to get home, and I’m exhausted. Come back after my nap.”

“But we *are* home.”

“I’m sorry, but I’m *very* busy and *very* tired. And all because Fay hasn’t come home and—wait, Fay?!”

She jumped to her feet. Forcing her mind, hazy from consecutive all-nighters, to work, she ran to the door. She pulled it open to find a young man with dark hair.

“Hey, Chief Secretary Miranda,” he said.

“Just a second,” she replied. Then she rubbed her eyes.

This wasn’t a hallucination or an illusion. It was definitely Fay. The very young man who had gone into that maze to bring back the lost apostles was standing there in front of her.

“You’re...you’re back?” Miranda asked.

“Sure am. Captain Ashlan and his team are here, too. Everyone’s in the Dive Center in the first basement. I thought I’d come report in before we did anything.”

“You—You got them out!” Miranda looked to the heavens and heaved a sigh.

What a relief! She felt the tension drain from her body; she nearly fell to her knees.

“Oh, thank goodness! I’ve got a few choice words for you, but the first ones are...welcome home.”

“Sure. Thanks. Okay, I’ve got stuff to do. See you!”

“Stuff to do? What stuff?”

“Another dive, of course.” Fay turned smartly around. “I’m going back to that

maze. I might be out of touch for a while.”

“Whoa, wait! Hold it right there!” Miranda lunged after Fay and pinned him.
“Maybe you could explain what’s going on before you disappear again!”



Player.1

Once More into the Maze

Gods’ Games We Play

1

Turning back the clock about half an hour...

In the Ruin branch office’s underground Dive Center, the office’s four Divine Gates stood surrounded by barricades that made it clear no one was to dive. At that moment, every gate in the world led to a single game: a labyrinth from which no one could escape back to reality.

“““ ”””

The gates were surrounded by a handful of staff members along with the fellow apostles of those trapped in the game. Nobody said a word. How could they? It had been eighty hours since the rescue team had gone in. The other apostles were sick of waiting, the strain beginning to show on their faces. When would someone, anyone, come back? Some people leaned against the wall, while others slumped on the floor and closed their eyes...

Then the jaws of the dragon-shaped statue yawned open.

The Center was immediately abuzz.

“Wha—?!”

“Look! The gate!”

Everyone jumped up at once, staring wide-eyed at the gate, afraid to even blink. A golden-haired girl came bursting out of the dragon’s jaws.

“We’re baaaaaaaa— Ow! Ow!” She came flying into the room, but she slipped

as she landed and fell on her behind.

A raven-haired girl landed next to her.

“Are you okay, Pearl?!”

“Urgh... Yeah, Nel. Everything but my bottom, it seems...”

Two young women.

When they realized the pair were members of the rescue team, the faces of every apostle in the room lit up. Could it be *true*?

“Waaahoooooooo! We’re back! Man, we sure kept you guys waiting, huh?” said a man who came bounding out of the gate next.

“Captain Ashlan?!” exclaimed several of the subordinates who had been waiting for him.

Ashlan, captain of Team Blaze, had returned. Eleven apostles followed him, piling out of the gate one after the other. His teammates.

“Captain? That’s everyone!” said a member of his team’s support staff, rushing over.

“I can’t believe you’re all right!” said another. They were cheering their heads off—their long-awaited teammates were finally back.

From behind Ashlan, a voice said, “Oh? Made it out all right, did we?” A young woman with vermilion hair and mystical amber eyes landed in the Dive Center. The Dragon God Leoleshea—a real, live deity descended from the superior spiritual realm. “Fay! This way!” she said, waving.

“Hup! Everyone make it back?” Fay asked, emerging from the gate. He took a quick look around the room, counting the number of returnees. “Let’s see... Captain Ashlan and his team make twelve. Me, Leshea, Nel, and Pearl make four more, for a total of sixteen... Huh? Wasn’t there one more person with us?”

“It is I!”

Pop! A young woman with flowing silver hair bounded out of the Divine Gate. Her red eyes shone like jewels, and she spun nimbly in the air before landing as

easily as a cat...

...*right* on Captain Ashlan's head.

"Blrgh?!"

"And so I return!"

Captain Ashlan went down like a sack of bricks. The silver-haired girl, now standing on his back, puffed out her chest proudly.

She was very pretty—one might say super pretty—but her outfit was...unique. She wore a choker and earrings that just dared onlookers to comment, along with a jacket so big it didn't fit her. The icing on the cake was her shirt, which read *Undefeated* in unmissable letters.

"It will not do for you to forget my undefeated self, Tiny Human," she said.

"Yeah, okay," Fay replied. "Just don't forget you're standing on Captain Ashlan, please."

"Hmm? Oh? Ah! I seem to be stepping on something."

She hopped down off Captain Ashlan.

Everyone in the Dive Center started talking at once. They had seen this girl eighty hours before—wrenching open the jaws of a Divine Gate.

"I am undefeated! You have a problem with that?"

This was the doing of a god, utterly and absolutely.

As well it might be. For this girl was not human. She was the undefeated god Uroboros, feared as one of the world's Three Great Impossibles.

"Hey, Chief Secretary Miranda...isn't here? Huh? Ahh, she must be in her office," Fay said when he didn't see the Chief Secretary in the Dive Center. He gave Leshea, Nel, Pearl, and finally Uroboros a quick glance. "We better go report in. To let her know we were able to get back *for now*."

Returning to the Chief Secretary's office...

"And there you have it. We're heading right back in!"

"There I have *what*, Lady Leoleshea?! This is all just too much." Miranda took off her glasses and heaved a sigh. "Let me see if I've got this straight. You defeated a raid boss in the dungeon, revealing a save item that enabled you to save your progress and come back here."

"The raid boss was called the Sleeping Lion!"

"Ah, yes. But there are two important problems that remain to be solved." Miranda put her glasses back on. She looked at Leshea, who was sitting on the sofa across from her, and at Fay, who sat beside the former deity. "I'm asking you *and* Lady Leoleshea here, Fay. You and the twelve members of Captain Ashlan's Team Blaze got out, great. But the other 197 people are still stuck in there, right?"

"Yeah. That would be the first problem," Fay said.

He and his teammates had only managed to explore a very small area, but the trapped apostles were scattered all over the sprawling maze.



“Any word from the other rescue teams?” he asked.

“Nothing yet. They’re still in the maze. It’s possible the grave robbers have become the mummies. At least you got back here. That’s a big step forward.”

It proved escape *was* possible. With enough time, there was every chance the other rescue teams would make it back as well. There was just one tiny issue.

“You’re not liking that we ended up *saving* down there,” Fay said.

“You got it. Since you *can’t* give up this dungeon.”

Yes, Fay and his teammates had made it back to reality—but it was only a temporary escape afforded by the save item. They wouldn’t be able to play any other games until they had cleared this one.

“Next time we dive through that gate, we’re going back into the labyrinth. We can’t choose any other games,” said Fay.

“Saving isn’t salvation, huh? Just a temporary reprieve.” Chief Secretary Miranda crossed her arms, frustrated. “Remind me, Fay, what’s your current win count in the gods’ games?”

“*Officially*, six. In reality, three.”

“Ah, yes. I’d almost forgotten the official number.” The Chief Secretary nodded.

She was making a point, of course. Until a few days before, Fay’s record had been 6-0. But he’d given up three of his victories to enable Nel’s comeback and had fallen to 3-0. It would be too much of a shock for the world to find out the young man known as one of history’s greatest rookies had lost three entire wins, so they were keeping it quiet.

Miranda’s strict and extremely confidential orders were: Don’t. Tell. Anyone. If Fay could keep winning and get back to 6-0 without anyone realizing he had lost three victories, then there would be no problem. Except, of course, that that was an extremely tall order.

“Seven wins away from humanity’s long-dreamed-of ten victories. That’s quite a large step backward,” the Chief Secretary said, gazing at the ceiling. “We need you to rack up those wins, Fay. But now you’ve saved down in that

dungeon with seven victories still to go, and you can't play anything else until you finish it."

Fay nodded but didn't move from the couch.

"Uh-huh. That's why I'm thinking we better get back in there." He quickly scanned something in his hand with his gaze: a list of the remaining lost apostles. "We'd have to anyway. Look at all the people who haven't come back yet. But that leads us to the second problem we have to solve."

The fact that finishing the game was impossible.

The maze had a bug that would keep the story from *ever* progressing.

Once upon a time there was a god who loved building mazes. This god would wait in the innermost depths of its labyrinth, excited for humans to come and find it. But no one ever finished the maze, and eventually the god died of boredom.

This was the founding myth of this game, as told by the meep. It had also explained that the goal of the game was to defeat the final boss waiting in the maze's innermost chamber.

"You look very relaxed, Pearl," Miranda said.

"Huh?! E-EEK!" exclaimed the golden-haired girl, who had been leaning back and sipping a melon soda. She quickly straightened up.

"This is Fay's angle, but tell me. Did the whole team confirm this fatal bug?" Miranda asked.

"We haven't *confirmed* it, exactly, but logically, between what Fay and the meep said, it makes sense. The god is waiting in the maze's innermost depths, and the last boss is in the final chamber. It seems safe to assume the god *is* the last boss."

The boss, the god, waited in the labyrinth's depths. The human players simply needed to defeat the god to escape the maze. Only...

"Except according to the meep, that god has been dead a long time, right?" Miranda asked.

"Yes, that's the problem!" Pearl exclaimed. "The clear condition is to defeat

the last boss, but that god went and disappeared on us, and now it's impossible to complete the game. The door out of the maze will never, ever open!"

"....."

The Chief Secretary sat in silence.

A game-breaking bug—the absence of the final boss—made the game impossible to complete.

Finally, Miranda said, "Pearl? Let me ask you again. Is that true?"

"Well, uh..."

"It's still speculation," Leshea answered. She made it sound obvious. "We won't know until we get to the final dungeon chamber. It's possible the disappearance of the final boss will be counted as a player win and that the exit has been open from the start."

"I'd love to bet on that possibility," Miranda said.

"Well, don't hold your breath. Practically speaking, it's not happening."

"So we *are* stuck?!" Pearl yelled.

Miranda heaved a sigh so deep it sounded like her soul was trying to escape her body. Leshea was right, and she knew it. If no last boss = player win, then presumably the meep would have told them *The players win!* the moment they had arrived in the dungeon.

Which it hadn't.

That meant the dungeon crawl was going on despite the totally unexpected bug of a missing final boss.

"And what exactly do we do about this, Fay? This final boss you must beat is gone, which means you can't defeat it and win the game, which leaves us... where?"

"Yeah, about that..."

Fay was about to say something when the office door *creaked* loudly.

"It is I!"

Then the door slid open hard and almost jumped its track. A silver-haired girl wearing a T-shirt with the word *Undefeated* printed on it came bounding in.

“Tiny Human! My undefeated self has come to play!”

“Oh, hey, Uroboros. Perfect timing. I want to get your thoughts on this.”

Fay wasn’t the only one who had noticed the bug in the labyrinth’s system.

“This game’s got a bug. One that prevents the story from progressing.”

It’s not just me—Uroboros came to the same conclusion. Even if it’s a really depressing one.

“Listen, Uroboros...”

“Hold it right there, Tiny Human. You need not finish that sentence—I know all without you having to speak.” She shook her head, flush with the confidence only a god could have. Or so it seemed, until she suddenly turned bright red. “You wish to play with me, do you not? Oh, heavens! Whatever shall I do? For I am quite popular, it seems.”

“Huh? No, no. Sorry, but I don’t have time to play with you right now.”

“Well, I *am* undefeated, after all. I sympathize with your desire to challenge me. This game of mine, with its wildly popular content, has a perpetual waiting list of eighty-seven human years, but I might make a special exception for you, Tiny Human.”

“I would say your game is the opposite of popular—”

“Say no more, Tiny Human!” Uroboros grabbed Fay’s hand, not willing to take no for an answer. Almost before the thought was through his head, Fay found himself being whisked down the hallway out of the office. “We shall make a private trip to the Dive Center, just you and I!”

“Seriously, listen to meeeee!” Fay yelled, his cry trailing off as he was dragged down the hall.

The women remaining in the office watched Fay disappear.

“*Another* one,” Leshea remarked.

“Yes, *another* one,” Pearl concurred.

“*Another* troublemaker has appeared,” Nel muttered.

All three of them had hard glints in their eyes, but nobody noticed.

3

The Arcane Court building, seventeenth floor. The Special Advisor’s room on this floor belonged to Leshea.

At the moment, it was echoing with Uroboros’s shout.

“But whyyyyyyyyyy?!”

Her yell had approximately the same effect as an exploding missile. Cracks spidered along the window glass. Uroboros dropped the playing cards she’d been clutching.

“Tiny Human?! I, my very self, came here *in person* to summon you! I have a brand-new game ready in my Elements, and I’m waiting for you!”

“We just told you what the problem is.” Leshea, sitting beside the outraged god, grabbed a card...

...and found herself pulling the old maid Fay had recently drawn.

“Believe me, we humans aren’t any happier about this than you are. There are still 197 people trapped in that maze. We can’t just leave them there, can we?”

“Grr,” grumbled Uroboros, who sat cross-legged. She gathered up the cards that had scattered on her *Undeclared* T-shirt. “For your information, my game is extraordinarily fun.”

“I’m telling you, tempt us all you like, we can’t help you. Besides, to get to your game, we’d have to go to your Elements through the Dive Center, right?”

“Well, of course you would have to come to my Elements!” The silver-haired girl puffed out her chest. At the moment, she was in a very small, adorable package, but the true Undeclared God Uroboros was a dragon some ten kilometers long. Reports also said that, in a fit of frustration at her defeat by

Fay, she'd made herself even bigger, increasing to a good hundred kilometers.

Admittedly, Fay was curious what kind of game a god like that would come up with next—but that wasn't the point.

"I mean, we did save in the middle of that dungeon. Even if we wanted to be part of your game, the Divine Gate down there is locked to the labyrinth."

"Soft! You are too soft, Tiny Human!" Uroboros said as if she had been waiting for this. Then she pointed to her right eye. "Why do you think I gave you mine eye?"

"I will give this to you. A piece of mine eye. Whenever you are carrying mine eye, you will be guaranteed to 'draw' me."

That's what she had said.

Wordlessly, Fay dug into his chest pocket—and felt something hard. He pulled out a beautiful shard that looked like a piece of ruby.

A God's Diadem, the Eye of Uroboros. If a player was holding it when they dove into the Elements, they would be guaranteed to "draw" Uroboros. They would encounter *no* other gods.

"Oh yeah. I guess if I dove in holding this, I wouldn't go back to the suspended labyrinth game. I'd be pulled toward you instead. You mean this thing has more influence than the saved game?"

"Heh-heh! Something like that." Uroboros nodded, very pleased. "To be precise, their level of influence is equal. Gods may get along with one another or not, but there's no hierarchy. Even if you dive in holding mine eye, you'll most likely still end up in your labyrinth game. You did save there, after all."

"Huh? So there's really no way out?"

"Well, you might be interested to know—"

"The rule of *late rock-paper-scissors*, right?" Leshea said before Uroboros could finish. She looked up from where she had been focusing on her freshly drawn old maid. "The gods' powers are like a game of rock-paper-scissors where no one move is stronger than the other. So the person who goes last always wins. Which, when applied to this situation, means we just need to use

the Eye *after* entering the dungeon, right?”

“Huh?! Hey, Tiny Dragon! I was going to say that!”

“You’ve stopped playing.”

“Hrm?” Uroboros quickly looked down at her own hand. They were playing old maid, but she’d gotten so caught up in her explanation that she hadn’t noticed her turn had come around.

Dragon, huh? Never met someone who called Leshea that before.

Uroboros had realized immediately that the vermilion-haired girl was a former god. Indeed, that she was the Dragon God, who ruled over flames.

“Is that true, Leshea?” Fay asked. “What you said just now?”

“I was going to say it!” Uroboros pouted, puffing out her cheeks. Her behavior suggested it was the truth. Finally, she said, “Yeah, it is. Priority among the gods’ powers can change based on who goes last. So you would dive through the Divine Gate and enter the labyrinth game. Once inside, you would shatter mine eye. My power would ‘go last,’ and you, Tiny Human, would be drawn into my Elements.”

“I see. Interesting to know there’s rules and logic to all this.” That meant they had two choices. Two games they could pick from. “I’m assuming Leshea would be happy either way. Pearl, Nel, how about you?”

“M-me?!”

“What do you mean by ‘how about us,’ Master Fay?”

“There are two games we can play. We have to get back to the labyrinth game. It’s our duty as part of the rescue team. But we did finally reach a save point, so I could see taking a break for a quick change of pace to play with Uroboros.”

He flicked his thumb up—sending Uroboros’s ruby eye arcing and sparkling through the air, where Pearl caught it.

“R-right,” she said. “I admit, I wouldn’t mind a break from the dungeon crawl. We’ve been wandering around there for days, and I’m exhausted.”

“I feel the same,” Nel said, nodding slowly. “The one thing that concerns me is what new game Mistress Undeclared might have come up with. I’d be happy to play a game without any stakes, but one of the gods’ games where we wager a precious win or loss?”

Uroboros looked adorable but also upset by Nel’s hesitation.

“Hrmph. Are you afraid, Rumpy?”

“Did she just call you a rump?!”

“You’ve made your comeback by Gremoire’s power. What do you have to fear now? Put yourself out there and play!” Uroboros said.

“...!” Nel’s breath caught.

“Where’s the fun in being worried about losing before you even start the game?”

“W-well, that’s true,” Nel said, caving under the pressure.

Uroboros grinned widely.

“I’ve thought of a special game, just for you. It’ll be all kinds of fun, okay?”

“Listen, Miss Undeclared!” Pearl said. She was staring intently at the god. “You’re not putting us on, are you? It *will* be fun, won’t it?”

“Sure it will!”

“Just to make sure...fun for *who*?”

“For me!”

“What about for us?”

“.....”

“Why aren’t you saying anything?! That’s the most important part!”

“N-no, no! It’ll be fun, I bet! I mean, I came up with this game, after all!” Uroboros shook her head vigorously. “You must trust me, Chesty!”

“You’re nicknaming me after my chest?!”

“Mine game is fun! Otherwise I would not say it has highly popular content!”

“I smell a rat. One more question, then.” Pearl shoved her face right up to Uroboros’s. “Shoot straight. The dungeon crawl or your new game—which is harder?”

“Mine, of course!” Uroboros said, her eyes shining. She jumped up on the sofa and spread her arms expansively. “Just wait until you see what I’ve got in store this time! It’s a hundred times harder than the last game. Even if you cleared it as fast as you possibly could, there’s no way it would take less than ten thousand hours at least!”

“...Hoh!”

“...Wow.”

“...Hmm.”

“...*Sigh!*”

“It takes place in the vast, open sky, players falling endlessly through the air as the most brutal monsters, tricks, and traps ever devised assail them, calculated to shatter their spirits! After a trail that will be strewn with thousands—tens of thousands!—of corpses, a final confrontation awaits with none other than me! By the way, my attack hits the entire field for instant KOs. No one will ever clear this game on the first try! And there’ll be plenty to enjoy the second time around.”

“I see. Yes, I completely understand.” Pearl nodded, a broad smile on her face. She looked down at the Eye of Uroboros she was holding in her hand. And then... “Toss!”

Without a second thought, she flung the priceless treasure straight into the trash.

“Send that thing out to burn. It’s cursed!”

“Ahhhh?! You must not throw out mine eye! That’s a divine treasure!”

“It’s garbage, is what it is.”

“You dare call mine eye garbage?!”

Uroboros dove straight into the trash bin, digging furiously until she found the stone.

“Haaagh... All right, I see how you feel,” she said with a sigh. “I realize your saved game calls to you. You want to finish what you started so you can give your full attention to *my* game. With its highly popular content.”

“Wrong. Wrong, wrong, wrong.”

“So on that note...” Uroboros sat down again, cross-legged on the sofa. “I can see the writing on the wall. I don’t like to intervene in another god’s game, but this time, I’ll help you. Let’s get that maze done!”

“Huh?! *You’re* going to help us, Miss Undefeated?!” Pearl’s voice cracked a little.

Behind her, Fay traded glances with Leshea and Nel. There was unexpected, and there was *unexpected*. Apart from Leshea, Fay had never heard of a deity taking the humans’ side in the gods’ games.

Having Uroboros with us would be like having a cheat code. It’s almost too good to be true... Makes me worry we’re going to get hit with some kind of penalty to compensate.

It was unheard of—like, *completely* unheard of. Fay wasn’t even sure if it was technically within the rules of the gods’ games.

“You sure that’s all right? I’ve never heard of the games letting anything that crazy go on.”

“I warn you!” Uroboros held up her pointer finger. “It is only for this one time!”

“Yeah, it’s that one time that I’m kind of worried about... You think it’s okay?”

“Dunno.”

“Excuse me?!”

“All in the name of getting you to play my game! Ah, but don’t misunderstand me, Tiny Human.” Strangely, Uroboros smirked. Sitting there with her arms crossed in front of her chest, she radiated confidence. “I’m not just going to get all buddy-buddy with you. You are my opponent, after all. I am the rarest of rare gods, the kind that waits only after you defeat the secret boss of the secret dungeon that you discover after defeating the final boss of the regular

dungeon, and even *then*, you must fulfill the special conditions to reach me!”

“I don’t think you get to call *yourself* a rare god...”

“If you wish for me to join your party, I would say you need at least five thousand consecutive wins in the gods’ games.”

“Forget it, then,” Fay said promptly.

“Guh?!” For some reason, Uroboros seemed very surprised by that. “N-now, just a second, Tiny Human! Do you not wish me to join your party?!”

“Yeah, but five thousand wins? That’s a bit much.”

“V-v-very well! I would accept five hundred! I am sure good things will come to you if you get me to join you! I am undefeated, after all!”

“Hrm... Still not very realistic...”

“Fifty wins, then! No, how about forty?! Come ooon!”

Uroboros, now flushed, pulled on Fay’s sleeve as he sighed and said, “Let me guess. Chief Secretary Miranda wants me to babysit this one, too.”

4

Night in Ruin.

Far from the sleeping city, the sun sank toward the horizon. It was late, everyone else in town abed, but on the ninth floor of the Arcane Court building—where the administrative offices were located—lights were still on.

“*Yawn*... Argh, and I was just about to go to sleep!” Miranda sat there, staring intently at the monitor.

It was nearly three at night. Or rather, almost three in the morning.

At the moment, Miranda was wearing just a robe pulled over some thin sleepwear—not a very ladylike ensemble. Moments ago, she’d been dozing off in bed, but she had jumped up when certain information had reached her.

Rescue team, return 1: Sacrament City of Ruin (4:19 yesterday)

Rescue team, return 2: Ocean City of Fisshara (23:08 yesterday)

Rescue team, return 3: East Asia City of Pol-a (2:01 today)

Rescue team, return 4: Myth City of Heckt-Scheherezade (2:01 today)

(Note: Returns 3 & 4 linked up in the maze and returned together.)

Three more rescue teams had successfully gotten back, each with a dozen or so trapped apostles in tow.

“That’s more like it, rescue teams! I knew the world’s most elite, hand-picked players could do it. Of course, we would have been pretty screwed if they couldn’t...” Miranda rubbed her eyes and continued to stare at the screen.

She was in the video conference room. Names like Fisshara and Pol-a were added to the list of attendees one by one, all cities that were home to Arcane Court branch offices.

The first person to appear on camera was a mature-looking young man with golden hair.

“Phew, sorry about that! Getting through that labyrinth took a while,” he said. “Ezrace, Ocean City of Fisshara rescue squad, reporting in. Boy, that was even tougher than they said. The final raid boss, the Dancing Marionette General, was a real beast! It took twelve party wipes, but we got past it somehow. Oh! And we succeeded in rescuing seventeen trapped players.” He smiled enthusiastically, and then he seemed to look right at Miranda. *“The Ruin branch office really pulled its weight, Chief Secretary Miranda. From what I hear, Fay got back way before we did.”*

“Hmm? Oh, no, I wouldn’t say way before.”

Fay had returned twenty-two hours earlier, while this young man, Ezrace, had arrived three hours ago. In most games, admittedly, a nineteen-hour gap in reaching the goal would be a pretty serious difference, but in the context of this staggering maze, it was a drop in the ocean.

“Congratulations on getting home. They don’t call you ‘The Second’ for nothing.” The second-best rookie, that was.

“Hmm? Hah, gosh, that takes me back. You mean last year,” Ezrace said with a wry smile. *“It was just a numbers game. As far as this maze goes, Fay was the first to escape, and I was, well, the second. I get it. Under other circumstances, I would have loved to have a little contest, see which of us could get out faster.”*

The Rookie Award was given out each year by the Arcane Court headquarters; the year before, Fay had taken first place, and Ezrace had been second. The fact that Fay and Ezrace had also been the first and second people out of the labyrinth only further proved what excellent apostles they were.

“Well, thank you. Through your efforts, more trapped apostles have been saved,” Miranda said.

“It’s my pleasure. By the way, where is Fay?” Ezrace looked around the screen. Only Miranda was in the room—Fay and his companions were nowhere to be seen.

“Time difference. It’s past two in the morning here in Ruin, and Fay and his team are understandably tired. I made an executive decision that they needed some rest.”

In fact, Fay’s fatigue wasn’t helped when Uroboros had been added to the roster of people he had to keep an eye on. She was even more unpredictable than the former god Leshea. Upsetting her could lead directly to the extinction of humanity.

At least gods are very direct. Fay’s the only one she affectionately calls “Tiny Human.” Everyone else is just regular old “human.”

The Endless God Uroboros seemed to have a special regard for Fay, the only person ever to win her game. If any other human carelessly approached her, though, they risked incurring the deity’s wrath.

“Right, let’s get back on track. I’ve already learned something very interesting from your report, Ezrace. You called the raid boss you defeated the Marionette General?”

“Are you saying Fay’s boss was different?”

“Yes. He reported something called the Sleeping Lion.”

The Lucemia labyrinth was just too big. Fay, and each of the groups that had succeeded in coming back to reality, had simply defeated the closest raid bosses to their save points.

“What about you?” Miranda asked, turning to a young woman with muted red hair.

She bowed politely before introducing herself.

“I’m Nayuta, from the East Asia City of Pol-a. One thing I can say for certain—I’m sure glad to be back.”

Her vestment was designed to look like an outfit called a kimono, and as she sighed with relief, even Miranda could see how someone could easily fall head over heels for her.

“We just got back a few minutes ago. I don’t mind saying I wish I could’ve taken a shower first.” Nayuta smiled grimly. *“I’ll keep it brief. The raid boss we defeated was...uh... What was it called, again? It was a really dumb name. And it looked stupid, too, but it was wicked strong.”*

“The World’s Bounciest Rubber Ball,” someone said.

Silence.

With a flicker, a new face appeared on the screen: a man with neatly cropped brown hair and a hard look in his eyes.

“It might sound stupid, but it bounced around faster than the human eye could follow, and if it touched you, it meant instant death. It took us about forty tries to fully understand the ball’s angle of reflection.”

The newcomer had a vestment decorated with gold embroidery. Anyone in the Arcane Court would know what that meant—this guy was a member of headquarters.

“Kilhiedge, headquarters rescue team, reporting. We met up with Nayuta’s team in the labyrinth and began working together. We just returned, ourselves, and I don’t know exactly what’s going on yet.”

“Unfortunately, one thing to note is that all our teams together have managed to rescue less than a quarter of the trapped apostles,” said the

golden-haired Ezrace with a sigh. *"We were able to find a save point and all, and that's great, but our poor little junior apostles are still trapped in there. People are already shouting for us to head back in."*

"That's exactly what I wanted to talk about," Kilhiedge said with a grim nod. *"As we now know firsthand, that labyrinth is simply too big. Even with all our rescue teams, at the present pace, I don't think we'll ever rescue all the remaining one hundred and fifty apostles. I suggest a change of strategy. I think we should shift our priority to clearing the game."*

Nayuta and Ezrace both gasped and looked wide-eyed at Kilhiedge.

Of course.

That's the only option.

Judging by their expressions, that seemed to be what the representatives of the two cities were thinking at that moment.

"The objective of the game is to defeat the boss at the end of the maze, right? You've got my vote," Ezrace said with a shrug. *"I mean, that's your point, isn't it? That it would be faster to defeat the final boss than to try to find every last missing apostle?"*

"Yeah, that's right. We defeat the god, every player in the game should get sent back to reality at once."

Poof, just like that.

On the screen, Kilhiedge held up a thick stack of paper.

"Headquarters has been gathering data. They want a map of the dungeon, and they want as much info as possible on the monsters we encounter, the locations of traps, and raid boss patterns."

"Oh, I get it!" Nayuta said, clapping her hands. *"We go into the maze. We get as much info as we can about the monsters, the raid bosses, whatever, then come back via a save point and report to headquarters."*

"Exactly. We're going to make a guidebook, if you will, for every corner of this dungeon. A strategy guide."

It would show the shortest route through the maze, explain how to beat the

bosses and how to craft the rarest and most powerful items. By sharing it with Arcane Court offices around the world, they would show that the labyrinth, while time-consuming, *could* be cleared.

At least in *theory*.

“.....”

One member of the meeting, though, remained silent. What would she say next? Miranda was busy thinking: *I can't blame them. They've just gotten back thanks to their save items. That's all they can think about right now.*

Sooner or later, they would realize.

They would notice the game-breaking bug in this dungeon.

“Hmm? Ruin branch office Chief Secretary Miranda? Everything all right?”

“Oh! Ah. Sorry, Kilhiedge. I was just thinking. Guess you spotted my frown lines?” Miranda slid her glasses up the bridge of her nose, then looked around at the apostles who had attained a temporary reprieve from the divine labyrinth. “I’m going to go ahead and tell you what’s on my mind. You’re all a lot smarter than I am; you’d probably figure it out eventually anyway. Please take this purely as the Ruin branch office’s individual opinion—but you’ll never finish that guidebook.”

“And what makes you say that?”

“The last boss.” For the space of a breath, Miranda gave Kilhiedge a look. Then she said, “The god *is* the final boss. And that god is already dead.”

“What?”

“Huh?”

“So that’s what’s up...”

Three people, three different reactions. Kilhiedge, his eyes wide. Nayuta, exclaiming in surprise. And Ezrace, a small smile on his face.

They all immediately understood the implications. The game’s win condition was to defeat the last boss and escape the dungeon—but without a last boss, the win condition was impossible to fulfill.

In short, the divine Lucemia labyrinth couldn't *be* cleared.

Nayuta put her head in her hands.

"Tell me you're joking." She was shaking a little. "We almost went crazy trying to get to that save point. Trying to get back home. Chief Secretary Miranda... who came up with that read on the situation?"

"Someone at our office. The only one who could."

"Fay?"

After a second, Miranda said, "My mistake. It's so late, I didn't invite him, but I should have known trying to explain without him here wouldn't do anyone any favors." She scratched the back of her head. "Funny thing, though. God or no god, Fay seems to be set on clearing the maze, too."

At that very same moment, Fay was walking around the grounds of the men's dorm. Not a creature was stirring—except in the bushes outside, where Fay's silhouette could be just made out, illuminated by one of the faint outdoor lights.

"I'm so tired," he groaned. "It's pitch-dark out here. And it's cold..."

It was around three in the morning.

Why was he out so very early? It was because he'd only just now finished what he'd been doing and returned to the Arcane Court building.

Yes, despite Chief Secretary Miranda's assumption that Fay would be asleep, he was very much awake.

What had he been doing, exactly? Playing a game, of course.

Not one he had wanted to, though, but one at the request of the gods.

"The gods...have endless energy... It's not fair..."

To review, Fay's schedule for the day had been:

Spend eighty hours tromping around the labyrinth, finally getting back at four in the morning.

Then get wheedled into a twenty-three hour "endurance game contest" by

Leshea and Uroboros.

In other words, since getting back to the human world at four ^{AM}, he'd been playing games nonstop until three the next morning.

"Please tell me Uroboros doesn't plan to stick around in the human world..."

One thing he knew for sure: Uroboros loved games, human ones almost as much as her own. Cards, chess, darts, and on and on. She'd examined every game in Leshea's room and had picked one after another, exclaiming, "This one next!" After eighteen solid hours of this, Pearl had collapsed.

Thump, and she was out. With a chess piece still in her hand and a smile on her face, she'd keeled over like a puppet with its strings cut.

Nel had followed at the twenty-one-hour mark.

"And I don't remember anything after that, myself," Fay grumbled.

That had left him, Leshea, and Uroboros—one human, one former god, and one current god. They'd begun a three-way game of Othello...and the next thing Fay knew, he had left the Arcane Court building and was standing outside the dorm.

He was so sleepy, he couldn't even form a coherent thought. In a desperate haze, he somehow stumbled his way to his own room. He didn't have the strength to take a shower. In fact, he didn't even think to change out of his clothes before collapsing into bed...

"Huh?"

Pompf.

When he fell into bed, he thought his hand brushed something soft. It must have been his imagination. The fatigue was making him woozy.

"Mmf...", said a small, muffled voice. "Mm... Tiny Human. You can be very bold, can't you?" Whoever it was, they sounded almost embarrassed.

Still, it was probably just his imagination.

"Hey, Tiny Human? Do you like me that much? Ahh, but...when you leave your hand there...even I start to feel a tickle..."

There was that voice again.

He was so tired, he was having auditory hallucinations.

“Hoo... It seems Tiny Human is pleased with mine own body. Well, I *am* undefeated. It just makes sense my body would be, too.”

The voice sounded impressed with itself. Fay had closed his eyes and was trying to sleep, but he couldn't keep the voice out of his head—because it was coming from right next to him. He could almost feel it in his ear.

“Hrm?” he murmured. Weird. Was it not an illusion?

“.....”

No, no, it had to be. This was his room. His bed.

Fay's eyes fluttered open.

The first thing he saw in the darkness was a ruby-colored gleam.

It wasn't a reflection—it was a god's eyes, imbued with an unmistakable divine light even in the gloom. The eyes stared back, then the face grinned.

“Ah, you're awake, Tiny Human.” The silver-haired girl giggled.

They were lying next to each other in bed, so close their foreheads were practically touching.

And this bed was only meant for one person. In fact, it was barely big enough for that.

Fay discovered the hand he'd thrust out was squarely on top of the word *Undefeated* on the girl's shirt.

The word was printed right over her chest. Meaning he was touching...

“Yikes!” Fay jerked his hand back. “Uroboros?!”

“Are you not going to sleep, Tiny Human?”

“I was trying to! I mean, uh... Look...” He was so tired, his brain wouldn't work. Weren't they supposed to be putting Uroboros up in a room in the Arcane Court building? And anyway, wasn't this the *men's* dorm? “What are you doing in my room? In my bed?”

“Was I not behind you the entire way, Tiny Human? I called out, but you didn’t hear, thus did I follow you all the way home!”

“What? You did? You’re right, I didn’t hear a thing...” Fay forced himself to sit up, his body feeling heavy as lead.

Uroboros, meanwhile, continued to lie there.

“Heh-heh-heh. Well, I suppose I cannot blame you. I did make myself invisible and also neutralize mine own aura.”

“What, did you think we were playing hide-and-seek?”

“Let us return to the point. I am not yet sated with playing. It was clear our group was breaking up, so I followed you. But...” Uroboros sat up, perching cross-legged on the bed and staring fixedly at Fay. “Tiny Human is, after all, human. Judging by your looks, you only have three life points left.”

“How many is that?”

“If a dog barked at you, you would die.”

“Whoa, I’m on death’s doorstep!”

“That is precisely why I followed you!”

“Yikes!”

Uroboros grabbed his hand and tugged, pulling Fay further onto the bed. He scrambled to get away, but his face was suddenly buried in something much softer than his mattress.

“I shall protect you!”

“...?!” Fay made a choked noise; he couldn’t have spoken if he’d wanted to. Uroboros was pressing her chest into his face from above. Her “twin peaks” pushed down on him with far greater weight than her delicate appearance would have suggested.

“Heh-heh! You have permission to feel honored. My undefeated self shall hold you close all through this night as you sleep. Will that not enable you to rest peacefully?”

“...!” Fay choked again; she was holding his head tightly.

As for Uroboros, she looked as happy as a girl with her favorite stuffed animal.

“Hee-hee! You need not act so shy. After all, I’m—oop?”

“You’re teasing him.”

Shoop. Uroboros’s head was pulled away from her embrace with Fay by a hand that held her in a death grip.

“I *thought* something fishy was up.”

“Hngh?!”

As soon as the hand grabbed her, Uroboros began to quiver. She would never have been intimidated by any regular show of strength. But she had subconsciously detected she was at a disadvantage in this place. A sort of *Oh, shoot* moment.

“Tiny Dragon...?” she ventured.

“Hello, *interloper*.”

There in the dark of night, a pair of gleaming amber eyes bored a hole through Uroboros.

“I seem to remember you leaving my room not long ago. What did you say? Ah, yes. ‘I, too, shall sleep. Farewell.’”

“Oh, d-did I say that?”

“You’re not a very good liar,” said the first of two figures who appeared beside Leshea.

“We all heard you,” said the second.

Flanking the former god on either side were a black-haired girl and a golden-haired one, both looking grim.

Uroboros cringed again.

“I-it’s all a big misunderstanding! I was going to protect this tiny human all through the night...”

“You can tell us all about it *outside*.”

“It’s interrogation time.”

“Trying to sleep with Fay—that’s not allowed!”

“Ahhhhhhhh!” Uroboros cried as the two girls each grabbed one of her arms.

They dragged her away, leaving only one person in the bedroom: Fay, who was out cold. He didn’t know what was happening, and he didn’t remember any of it when he woke up.



5

The next day, Fay, who had forgotten everything about the night before, came to Leshea's room to discover...Uroboros with her wrists bound in a pair of handcuffs, looking thoroughly worked over.

"Hrmph... To administer on me such a forceful warning, and in this manner! Well, I *am* undefeated. The great always attract attention."

"*You* were just trying to get ahead of the rest of us," said Leshea, resting her hand on Uroboros's head. Then she looked up toward Fay, finally noticing him. "Oh, Fay, you're here!"

"G'morning. Uh, you want to fill me in on why Uroboros...?"

"I'm going to be keeping this *rookie* in my room from now on. To see to her education." She gave the handcuffed Uroboros a pat on the head.

Pearl and Nel were snoozing on the sofa behind her. Apparently, they'd all spent the night in Leshea's room.

"We were just having a girls' night," Leshea told Fay.

"And she's handcuffed why?"

"Fay," Leshea said with a smile. "It was a *girls' night*."

".....Got it." He nodded; his instincts told him it would be dangerous to pursue this line of questioning any further. "I hear you. Looks like you had a lot of, uh, fun."

"That's right. We sure did." Leshea smiled again.

At that moment, the communications device at Nel's hip rang loudly enough to compete with the sound of her snoozing.

"Ack!"

"Eek?!"

Nel leapt up, her shout causing Pearl, who had been dozing next to her, to

jump to her feet as well.

“Wh-wh-what’s going on, Nel?!”

“It’s a communication... Oh? It’s from Chief Secretary Miranda. She’s calling me? That’s unusual.”

“Hmm? Oh, how silly of me. I meant to call Fay, and I got Nel,” said the Chief Secretary, sounding not the least bit bothered.

“Good morning, Chief Secretary. Shall I transfer you to Master Fay?”

“Oh, it doesn’t really matter. I’m sure you’re all together, right? Just put me on speaker so everyone can hear. This is official business.” After a beat, she said, *“Nel, you saw the message I sent your team this morning?”*

“You mean the one at four ^{AM}?”

“Yep. A little over ten hours after you got back, three more of the rescue teams returned. Which is great, as far as it goes, but from the opposite perspective, it means only four of your groups have come back to the real world. Most of the rescue teams—teams supposed to be staffed with the best apostles we had available—are still struggling out there in that labyrinth.”

Dives through the Divine Gates anywhere in the world were currently forbidden.

This situation was unheard of. The gods’ games, the foremost entertainment in the entire world, had been suspended for more than a week. And even some civilians were starting to view the situation with suspicion.

When would all the apostles come home?

Could the gods’ games ever officially restart?

“Anyway, headquarters has come to a decision. They want you to go back in there. They’re naturally giving a lot of attention to the four teams that managed to find a save point, and especially yours—the first to defeat a raid boss. Hell, they’re practically begging. You should know, though, that this is a request. We can’t force you to go.”

They could hear her sigh on the other end of the line.

“Now that you’ve slept on it, Fay, are you still convinced this labyrinth can’t be cleared?”

“For now, yes. But I’m willing to try.” Fay nodded slightly toward the communication device in Nel’s hand. “I think I’ve got an idea.”

“It would be really reassuring if you told me what it is.”

“I’d love to, really, I would, but maybe we could leave it until I actually reach the depths of the labyrinth. There are too many things I’m just not sure about yet.”

That was the truth, as far as Fay was concerned. He had a prediction that bordered on certainty, but there was still the chance it would prove completely wrong.

“Most of all, I don’t want to become fixated. If I start thinking, ‘This is the way out!’ it blocks everything else out of my head and I don’t notice other possibilities. That worries me—so I’d like to keep my idea to myself for now.”

“Haah... That sounds like you, all right. Through and through.”

This time, they could almost hear her wry smile. It was the opposite of her sigh earlier, an exhalation that had sounded almost resigned.

“Fine, I read you. Get going. But...when you’re sure about what you’re going to do, come back and report in. It kills me to just sit around waiting!”

Intermission

(This Conversation May Not Be Recorded)

Gods' Games We Play

Elements, the superior spiritual realm: a “land of different rules” where the gods resided. For a human to enter this place, they needed to use one of the doors called Divine Gates.

This was one of those places—but it had never yet been a stage for the gods' games.

As such, no human knew of it. No one had yet set foot in *this* Elements.

Therefore, no one overheard the voices that spoke here.

—————(This conversation may not be recorded.) *“The interference with the Divine Gates proved successful, no?”*

The words were all spirit and power, reverberating.

Someone, somewhere, spoke to someone else.

The voice contained limitless compassion, love, and even a pinch of sorrow.

“Thank you, Nibelung, O Great Beast. The Elements to which the Divine Gates connect has been fixed as the Lucemia labyrinth. Thanks to you, the connection has been established with all Divine Gates around the world. With this, all humans will be gathered in a game that is impossible to complete. The humans will soon surrender. They'll give up. The gods' games are finally over.”

Silence.

A long time passed, so long that a human would have found it agonizing.

“Heckt-Maria.”

Someone with a manly voice spoke to another person.

“Lucemia has been invaded. The snake has arrived.”

At those words:

".....Uroboros?!" the female voice asked. It was a rhetorical question. *"A god has intervened in the game of another god?"*

"Affirmative."

"...Why?"

Another profound silence.

The reality was that even the supposedly all-powerful gods had no way of knowing. Uroboros was one of them. Even the almighty gods could not read the mind of another almighty god.

"The snake... The snake could take over the game master privileges of Lucemia. And as game master, it would be possible to change the labyrinth's rules."

The labyrinth's game master—its creator—was, naturally, the very god who had built the maze.

But that god had disappeared, and so the game master's seat stood empty.

If Uroboros, the snake, were to sit in that empty seat, it could *remake* the maze on a whim into something that could be cleared.

That was not desirable.

"I will chase the snake out before it can threaten Lucemia," said the female voice, now frighteningly cold. *"The labyrinth must remain unconquerable for all eternity."*

Player.2

Lucemia, Labyrinth of Death and Rebirth

Gods' Games We Play

1

The gods on high invited humans to play in the gods' games. The chosen humans became apostles, and they could enter the superior spiritual realm known as Elements.

By jumping through a Divine Gate.

When Fay and his companions did just that, they found themselves in a space with a vast collection of monitors flashing all kinds of colors. So many monitors, in fact, there were screens shaping the entire space.

"Oh, I remember this!" Pearl said, looking around. "This is where they asked us to pick our dungeon difficulty. I think it was right over there..." She pointed.

In that very spot, a golden sword floated alongside some explanatory text.

Save item: Lionheart.

Brave adventurers. Welcome back to the field of battle.

The Lionheart—that was the dropped item they'd gotten from the raid boss, the Sleeping Lion.

As Fay and the others watched, the golden sword drifted slowly into a stone base.

Everything went fuzzy for a second, and then—

They were standing in a large, round room.

The floor was as hard as concrete. The wall was ringed with candleholders,

hundreds of them.

“This is where we fought the Sleeping Lion. I guess this is our new respawn point,” Nel said, but she sounded like she didn’t like the sound of that. She looked around at the wall of the Execution Grounds, studying it. “Does the color of the wall look *funny* to you?”

The color did seem to have changed. The wall had taken on an unpleasant speckled appearance, like something rotten or corroded. It was the same effect on the floor and ceiling. The wall itself looked almost as if it was covered with mold.

“Master Fay... Did the Execution Grounds always look like this?”

“Sure didn’t. The wall used to be just an ashen gray. I’m worried about whether this is an intentional part of the game or not,” Fay said.

It was clear to everyone that the look of the room had changed.

If this is an intentional thing, what activated it? Is it because we went back to reality? Or because we defeated the raid boss?

Creak...

The door began to open. Behind Fay, Leshea was pushing the door of the Execution Grounds open from the inside.

“Hey, Fay... Whatever this is, I think it affected the entire labyrinth. It’s not just the Execution Grounds.”

The hallway on the far side of the door had the same sickly appearance. It wasn’t just the hallway, either. The sky visible through the windows was a vivid red, like fresh blood.

“Wh-why did it do this?! It’s like... Don’t the colors sort of make you think the difficulty level went up?” Pearl asked.

“Yeah, they do,” Nel said with a nod. “If this change really has affected the entire labyrinth, then I think Master Fay is right—I think it’s part of the game. It would make sense if the difficulty increased.”

They found themselves faced with a harsh reality: They understood almost nothing about this game.

“Great! Well, come on, Tiny Human!” Uroboros clapped her hands, exuding innocent cheerfulness. She was still wearing her trademark *Undefeated* T-shirt. She pointed at the door. “Let’s get going!”

“.....” Fay, however, didn’t say anything.

“Hmm? Tiny Human? Hello?”

“Oh. Yeah. I’m just sort of surprised. I thought you’d probably be all, ‘I myself shall take the fore!’”

He hadn’t expected her to let him be the leader. After all, the whole reason Uroboros had joined them was so they could “smash this maze” and go play her game instead.

Uroboros is like a walking cheat code. Since the labyrinth is fatally bugged anyway, I thought she might just try to force her way through. But she showed no sign of that. That’s what had surprised Fay.

“Hmm? Well, I *am* undefeated, after all!”

Uh-huh. As if that was remotely relevant at this moment.

That’s what everyone must have been thinking, but Uroboros showed no sign of noticing as she puffed out her chest confidently.

“There are no special rules to speak of. Not even when a god horns in on another god’s game!”

“Oh. Really?”

“However! The gods think up these games and excitedly wait for humans to come play them. So it sort of takes the fun out of it if another god interferes, right?” Uroboros bent down and picked up a pebble from the ground, then flung it at the wall. She aimed straight for the blotchy pattern.

“Are you pantomiming playing darts?”

“Imagine if the game master, a god—imagine if they invited some humans to play darts. They’re all excited. But then some other god shows up uninvited and blows the target to smithereens with a hand grenade and is all, ‘You don’t even have a target to throw at anymore—I win!’ Where’s the fun in that?”

Gods *breaking* other gods' games.

Uroboros had a power like the god in her analogy—she'd come from outside the rules framework of this game and could claim victory by effectively “blowing up the target.”

However...

“But what would be the point of winning like *that*? Boring. Right?” Uroboros grinned. She looked downright mischievous. “So gods make it their business to interfere in other gods' games as little as possible. I'm gonna play this game, sure, but I'm not going to break the rules, okay?”

“Magnificent!” Nel cried, overwhelmed. “Mistress Undefeated, I'm so moved by what you've just said. This is the true spirit of one who loves games!”

“Hee-hee! I mean, I guess.”

“In other words, when you defeated that boss, the Sleeping Lion, you didn't use your godly powers then, either! You somehow managed that eighty quadrillion damage within the rules of the game!” Nel continued.

“.....” There was a very long silence from Uroboros.

“Hrm? Why do you turn your face away, Mistress Undefeated?”

“That was... Well, that mutt interrupted me, and I just kind of...”

“Mistress Undefeated?!”

Then...

Before the conversation could go any further, there was a fluttering of wings overhead.

“Many welcomes! So good to have you back.”

A small, light-pink sprite floated down from overhead.

“I have been entrusted with giving the explanation of this game by our divine master. I am—”

“A li'l pink bug sprite!” Pearl exclaimed.

“—a meep,” the meep continued. *“I am not a bug.”*

The meep clapped its hands, smoothly dismissing Pearl's chosen designation.

"Now, let's dive right in. Things are bad! While you were away, pow! Presto! The dungeon went into Mausoleum Mode!"

Ahh.

Nobody standing there was surprised to hear this. It had been obvious something had happened to the Execution Grounds, as well as the rest of the dungeon.

"Now, you may be wondering what sort of transformation this is..."

"Oh! You don't have to tell us—we already know," Pearl interrupted. "The unsettling color of the walls! The blood red sky! Such a disturbing direction in dungeon design can only mean one thing. The difficulty has just taken a huge jump, and we know it!"

"Oh, the fresh décor is just for a change of pace."

"What?! That's all?!"

"You'll notice some minor differences in the monsters that appear, but you're going to be slaughtered hundreds of times anyway. Just consider them to be within the margins of error."

"You think you can brush this away with margins of error?!"

"All right, then!" The meep pointed to the empty air, which promptly filled with a board displaying familiar text. *"Allow me to offer our returnees a review of the rules."*

Divine Lucemia labyrinth

1. Your objective is to defeat the final boss in the innermost chamber. (When the final door opens and you escape the labyrinth, you win.)

2. The maze is full of monsters, tricks, and traps that you'll have to navigate to advance.

3. Items throughout the labyrinth will help you on your journey.

4. Two or more items can be combined to craft a better item. Additionally, only one item may be carried in the right hand and one in the left (for a total maximum of two items).

5. Your initial game stats are based on each individual's real abilities. (Note: There are limits for those who selected PMD mode.)

6. The respawn system allows you to retry any number of times. Respawn occurs when any team member is deemed dead. Be careful! Upon respawning, you lose any acquired items, while defeated bosses and cleared traps are reset to their original state.

Exactly the same as it had been before. The dungeon might be in Mausoleum Mode, but this didn't seem to have affected the tutorial text.

"By the way, I'm curious about your unlock percentages. You're at... Let's see, here..."

The meep pointed just above the head of the nearest player, Pearl. A number appeared, down to a single decimal point: 6.5.

"Ooh, not bad, not bad. You can drive that number up by clearing the labyrinth's tricks and traps, so one way to enjoy the game is by shooting for that elusive hundred percent. This number could be called a measure of your passion for this labyrinth!"

"Yeah, so we've heard," Pearl said, staring at the number over her head. "But you said this is just for our own satisfaction, right?"

"Yes!"

"It really doesn't matter at all, right?!"

"That's why the number doesn't reset even if you respawn." Pearl's unlock percentage vanished, whereupon the meep turned to address them all once more. "Best of luck on your journey to one hundred percent completion! Incidentally, you may choose your respawn point at any time—either the Execution Grounds here or the dungeon antechamber. If you wish to make a

change, just shout for me."

"Sure. We will," Fay said, nodding at the sprite.

Something still felt the slightest bit off. *Why?* Why was this meep so forthright in urging them to completely clear the labyrinth?

It shouldn't be possible to do that. The final boss is dead. This game is broken!

"Ahh well. Only one way to be sure."

"Ready to set out? Then step through this newly opened door!" The meep pointed at a door that had opened upon the defeat of the Sleeping Lion, on the far side of the Execution Grounds. *"See you next time!"*

"You mean when we die and respawn, don't you?!" Pearl shouted.

Leaving the meep and its portentous farewell behind, they went through the far door.

And there they found...

...a hallway that seemed to pulsate, extending onward for what seemed like forever.

The floor was a mosaic of red and black. The red lines throbbed like blood vessels, spidering up onto the walls. The pillars dotting the hallway looked like they were covered in black mold.

"This is *sooooo grossss!*" said Pearl, jumping back when she saw the pulsating floor. "It's like we're inside some gigantic living creature! What happened to the *pretty* dungeon?! It never looked anything like this!"

"Yeah. Not a big fan of the design aesthetics here," Nel said, taking a cautious step into the hallway. The blood-vessel-like things might pump and throb, but it didn't seem to matter if anyone stepped on them. "I guess it's safe. I was ready for blood to spray everywhere and kill us all when I stepped on this thing."

"That's an *awful* thing to be ready for!"

"The point is, we have to keep moving. Master Fay, I'll take point."

"You're sure?"

"My Arise makes me extremely good at evading. Just let me handle any traps

that pop up.”

So Nel went in front, with Fay and Leshea behind her. Pearl came behind them, and Uroboros brought up the rear as they walked down the hallway.

However...

Uroboros could hardly be expected to just put up with that order and walk quietly along.

“Hoh! So this is how it feels to play a game as a human. Ooh, what’s this?”

It hadn’t taken her long to find something. She skipped over (adorable!), breaking away from the line to investigate something on the wall.

“What are you doing, Miss Undefeated?” Pearl asked.

“There’s a golden button on this wall, Chesty.”

“A button... Very suspicious. Don’t go pressing it, okay? First we have to make very, very sure there aren’t any traps around.”

“*Poke!*”

“You pressed it! You didn’t even hesitaaaaaate!”

There was an unmissable *whoosh*, and the walls split open, spraying red mist at them.

“Oops!” Uroboros managed to dodge the mist even at point-blank range. Instead, it drifted through the air, straight for the girl behind her. “Look out, Chesty!”

“Huh? Yaaaaaaaarrrrghhhh!” The mist scored a direct hit on Pearl, settling around her head. She pressed her hands to her eyes and collapsed. “My eyeeeee! Argh, it hurts! What is this, pepper spray?!”

Just getting the stuff near her eyes was enough to blind her, apparently. The silver lining, such as it was, was that this apparently didn’t induce a respawn, but if Pearl continued to suffer like this, she was going to wish it had.

“I knew it! This is something new!” Leshea said, her eyes widening. “They plan to whittle down the players’ sanity with cruel little tricks like this and the whole creepy-vibe thing. And that’s before we even get to the *real* traps and

monsters. We better be careful, Fay.”

“Yeah. I’m betting there’s going to be more traps than before.”

“Enough philosophizing, do something about my eyes! Argh...” Pearl continued to rub her eyes vigorously. “No more pressing suspicious buttons, you understand, Miss Undefeated?”

“I daresay I didn’t do anything.”

“You pressed the stupid button! I was *watching* you!”

“...Shh! Everyone be quiet!” Nel hissed.

There it was: *ka-clink*. It was coming from down the hall, from the direction of an intersection farther down the seemingly infinite hallway. A sound like a bell, the kind of thing you might hear in a horror movie.

“Welp. Already got a bad feeling about this,” Fay said, smiling dryly in spite of himself. Whatever that bell was, he didn’t think it was another player. Most likely, it was some kind of monster. Furthermore, it struck him as unlikely that some minor enemy would announce itself with a noise like that, almost as if it was saying, *I’m coming...*

Were they already facing an area boss like the Golden Puffball?

“Nel! I th-think you’d b-better drop back,” Pearl said, taking her own advice and edging away.

“You’re right. Discretion might be the better part of valor here.” Nel joined her, putting some distance between herself and the sound.

They watched the intersection, fixated on the corner, the *ka-clink, ka-clink* drawing ever closer until it was nearly right in front of them...

“*Pui!*”

A small figure wearing a pointy, broad-brimmed hat appeared. It was so cute! It was probably about half Fay’s height, with long eyelashes and long, rabbitlike ears. It had a flat nose like a cat’s. It somehow exuded youthfulness; it was like a sprite out of a child’s story.

“Oh my gosh, it’s adorable!” Pearl exclaimed. “L-look at that precious face—

it's like a toy! I can't believe an enemy would be so cute! If it *is* our enemy, it can do anything it wants to us! I've already forgiven it!"

"*Pui?*" The little creature turned to face Pearl, who was bearing down on it, breathing hard.

"*Haah... haah...* Maybe I can just touch its little ears..."

"*Puiiiiii?!*" the little figure exclaimed and jumped up.

Ka-clink! Ka-clink!

It swung its staff, which had a bell on it, and raced off.

"Aww! The Pui-Pui Spirit ran away," Pearl said.

"I'm not sure which of you is the monster... Hrm? Wait, Pearl!" Nel said.

A new foe stood before them. It was a small thing; it didn't even come up to Pearl's knees. It had a fluffy, round body—it was one of those creatures they knew was among the weakest enemies in the dungeon.

"A puffball?" Pearl said, rubbing her eyes. Not because the pepper spray was still bothering her—she was simply surprised to see it there.

"*Puuuufff!*"

The normally brownish fur was a moldy greenish-blue. Its voice sounded parched, and most notably of all, it reeked like rotten trash.

You could almost call it a Zombie Puffball.

"Oh no! A poor, adorable puffball reduced to this awful state?" Nel exclaimed. Even she couldn't hide her shock.

That was when the Zombie Puffball jumped at them.

"*Puuuufff!*"

"Hrk?! Wait... It doesn't hurt?" Nel discovered she was unbothered by the Zombie Puffball's attack. The change was purely cosmetic. It turned out to be no more dangerous than the average puffball. "Hrm. So only its look changed. It may stink, but it's no threat to our adventure. What a sorry sight it is, though. I wonder if we could change it back somehow... Hmm? What's wrong, Puffball?"

The Zombie Puffball had started shaking. Nel bent down to give it a hug...

“Bleeeggghhh!”

It vomited all over her, expelling a stream of filthy, thick stomach juice that smelled like garbage.

“Eeeyaaahhhh! My clothes are covered in zombie spew!” Nel cried, leaping backward—but it was too late. The entire top half of her was covered in green goo.

“Nel, you stink!” Pearl said.

“No! It’s not me, it’s these stomach juices!”

“Bleeeggghhh!”

“It threw up again! On the floor this time?”

This time, the bile landed on the floor. It didn’t appear to harm anything, but it stank to high heaven. Plus, it looked awful. So Fay made an executive decision to run past the thing.

“Don’t bother with it. Let’s go!”

The Pui-Pui Spirit (name by Pearl) had already fled, and the Zombie Puffball didn’t move quickly. It didn’t appear to have any impact except for its stench and the filth it spewed out, so they just had to leave it behind.

“Puuufff!”

“Oh no, it’s coming after us!” Pearl sighed as they set off down the hallway as fast as they could.

“Nel, turn right at the next intersection!”

“Do you have a plan, Master Fay?!”

“That’s where the Pui-Pui Spirit went! There might be something there!”

“Got it!” Nel said, speeding along at the head of their formation. They no longer sensed the Zombie Puffball behind them; maybe it had gotten tired and given up.

“Huff... huff... I think we lost it, somehow,” Pearl said, her shoulders heaving.

Then, however, she coughed violently. “Urk... I can’t take a deep breath. You smell too bad, Nel.”

“I told you, it’s not me, it’s the stench of the puffball’s vomit!”

“Which is all over you, which means eventually you’re going to start smelling like it!”

“Don’t say that, Pearl! Ugh, let’s just get going!” Nel pointed ahead, almost desperate.

She took a big step, ready to speed off down the hall, when Leshea said, “Hey, what’s that door?” She was pointing down the hall to the left.

There was an ornate silver door with gold along the edges, the entire thing sparkling like a work of art in its own right. Flowing letters on the door said TREASURE HALL.

“Look at this! If this room isn’t designed for a special event, nothing is!” Pearl said, running up to it. It did feel similar to the Execution Grounds, the room that had contained the Sleeping Lion. An event was waiting on the other side of that door, no doubt about it.

When Pearl grabbed the handle, though, there was only a *thunk* and a scraping of metal.

“Huh?! This door won’t open—it’s locked!”

“So I guess we need a key,” Fay said. They shouldn’t have been surprised the door was locked. This dungeon didn’t just *give* progress away. If it had just been sitting there open, Fay would have suspected a trap. “My guess is the key to the Treasure Hall is somewhere back the way we came. I’m curious about that Pui-Pui Spirit—maybe it drops the key.”

“You don’t think that Zombie Puffball might be waiting for us, Master Fay?”

“It probably is. We’ll have to explore everywhere we can.”

It was time to fall back.

Just as they were about to set off again, a dazzling light appeared above their heads.

“Ah! Little lost sheep?”

The light spread across the ceiling, forming a circle much like one of Pearl’s warp portals. From the circle descended a humanoid monster with wings on its back.

“I am the angel Pizarisdet Prinkethyumeriquelbrilliant III, the most loving and compassionate being in this labyrinth. I am known for bringing salvation to those who wander.”

“Ho-hoh!” Pearl said, her eyes gleaming. “Your name is so long! May I call you Angel Pizaprin?!”

“But of course.” The angel smiled radiantly; at the sight, everyone but Pearl felt a distinct shock.

“It actually agreed to Pearl’s nickname?!” Fay said.

“What a terrible name... This isn’t just any angel!” Leshea added.

“It said it’s the most compassionate angel in the labyrinth, and it looks like it was telling the truth,” said Nel.

“O! Truly, fate has smiled upon you all,” Angel Pizaprin said, spreading its hands. *“For I am a messenger of good fortune. I shall grant you one wish that shall be to your rescue. What do you desire? Only speak, and it shall be yours.”*

“Y-you really mean it, Angel Pizaprin?! Then give us the key to this door that won’t open!”

“It is done. For to me, nothing is impossible.”

The angel waved its staff—but then it froze. It stared intently down at them, and then its expression began to shift even as they watched, growing hard and dangerous.

“Wh-what’s going on, Angel Pizaprin?”

“Such impurity...”

“Sorry?”

“You! Yes, you two, right there!”

The angel pointed to Nel and Pearl.

Nel was still covered in the filth and stink from the Zombie Puffball, while Pearl's face was stained red from the pepper spray.

"I shall grant your true wish. That is, purification!"

"What? But we haven't—"

"Be you reborn with pure souls!"

There was a flash of light from the angel's staff, whipping up to a whirlwind of brightness before they could blink.

The angel used Purify.

The two polluted ones were eliminated.

Their vision went black. Then they respawned. When they came to, the five of them were back at the Execution Grounds.

""""....."""" Everyone was quiet for a moment. Finally, Nel said, "So that's how it works. If you've got Zombie Puffball vomit all over you, the angel gets mad at you and wipes your party."

After another long pause, Pearl muttered, "You really did stink, Nel."

"Hey, I wasn't the only problem! The angel said it was the two of us! The two of us!"

It wasn't just Fay and his party who were experiencing the Mausoleum Mode of the Lucemia labyrinth.

"What the hell is going on here?!" bellowed a team leader at the head of a group of a dozen or so apostles. She was looking down a hallway that pulsed with what appeared to be veins, and the sky outside was as red as if the end of the world were at hand.

The young woman was Camilla, leader of Archangel (motto: The great angels). She had wavy brown hair, and her glasses gave her an intellectual vibe—but at that moment, Camilla had been all but robbed of her wits by the sound that crept nearer and nearer.

Ka-clink...

They could hear it, somewhere down the hallway, but it echoed so crazily that

they didn't know if it was coming from in front or behind them. They didn't know which way to run.

"Leader!" one of the other apostles called.

"It's right on top of us—keep up your guard!" said another.

Swallowing hard, Camilla and her subordinates stared at the intersection—and then an adorable little figure in a pointy hat appeared.

"*Pui?*" it said.

Then it turned toward them.

Oh, *shoot*.

"W-wait! We're not scary, I promise! We're not your enemies. Look! See? We're not scary at all!"

"*Puiiiiii?!*" The creature screamed when it saw the humans.

That's right: Just like humans were terrified of monsters, some monsters were terrified of humans. So what did this horrified dungeon-dweller do?

Ka-clink! Ka-clink!

It started running, shaking its staff at them as if to say, *Take this! And this!*

"Crap, watch out! *They're* coming right for us!"

"Everybody, run!" Camilla instructed.

They had to get out of there, fast. No sooner had she had the thought, though, than Camilla felt a rumbling and countless presences coming up behind her.

Down the hallway, an immeasurable swarm of furballs that were a bluish-greenish, mossy color came like an avalanche, crashing toward them. Dozens and dozens of Zombie Puffballs.

""*Puuufff!*""

"I'm so sick of thiiiiiiis!"

Camilla fled the Zombie Puffballs at top speed.

The Pui-Pui Spirit might not look like much, but it possessed a terrible power:

When it saw humans, it waved its Staff of Summoning to call forth up to fifty random monsters.

“Puuufff!”

“Hyah! Time for you to freeze!” Camilla said, using Frostbite. A bullet of ice went flying at the Zombie Puffballs as they bounced down the hallway, slamming straight into one. It was driven to the ground, but it popped right back up. It was a *zombie*—so it could come back to life.

It wasn’t just Camilla’s magic—her teammates with Superhuman Arises had tried everything they could, beating and kicking the creatures, but they just couldn’t defeat them.

This was Mausoleum Mode. It *wasn’t* just the appearance of the dungeon that had changed. *Every* monster in the labyrinth had evolved into newer, more dangerous forms.

“The Zombie Puffballs come back no matter how many times you knock them down! How are we supposed to make any progress like this?!”

“We’re supposed to be the rescue team, ma’am, but it looks like we’re stuck here with everyone else now,” one of the apostles said.

“Did I ask you for analysis and commentary?! Argh! Dammit, Dax, you said you were busy, so I came here instead! If I never get to go home again, I’m gonna *really* hate you!”

Camilla was cursing out the foremost apostle in the Mal-ra branch office. This wasn’t really Dax’s fault, mostly, but she needed some way to blow off steam or she was going to go insane.

“I can’t spend the rest of my life down here!” Camilla wailed. “This was the year I was going to have a date at the beach with my darling boyfriend, and we were going to have an awesome barbecue and everything!”

“I think you need to find a boyfriend first for that to work.”

“...*What* did you just say?”

“Nothing, ma’am!”

“Arrrgh! Somebody help us! Let them be a passerby, let it be my destined

one, let it be a miracle, I don't care! ...Fay! Where the hell is Fay?!" she exclaimed; the next person to come into her head after Dax was that boy from another city. Ever since the Sunsteal Scramble with the Sun God Mahtma II, he had been one of the people she trusted most to help her in a jam.

Wasn't Fay supposed to be somewhere in this labyrinth with one of the rescue teams?

"All right, forget about Dax! Where are you, Fay, and what are you doing?!"

"Great question!"

Clack. There was a sharp sound of a shoe scraping against the floor, and a young man in a black coat appeared from down the hallway. He had dull silver hair, sharply defined features, and eyes that conveyed strong willpower.

Camilla doubted her eyes when she saw him.

"Wait... Dax?! So you *are* here!"

"So I am. I arrived with the second wave of rescue teams."

Dax Gear Scimitar: an apostle of the Mal-ra branch office of the Arcane Court, his dashing good looks and powerful gameplay made him deeply charismatic and had earned him the nickname "the Prince of Games."

"And I'm afraid he's as meddlesome as ever," said a young woman who emerged from behind him—Kelritch, a brunette. "We just dove in a little while ago. We were wandering the maze when we heard a scream, so we followed it."

"And whose fault is it that someone was screaming?" Camilla asked. By all rights, Dax should have been leading the original rescue team, but he'd claimed to have other business, so Camilla had been sent in his place. On some level, it was Dax's fault that she was here suffering now. "All right, whatever. I'm just glad we were able to link up."

She breathed a sigh of relief. Finding friends in this massive labyrinth was beyond good fortune.

Except then Dax said, "Camilla. I have something to talk with you about."

"Gee, look who sounds all official."

She couldn't resist a dig at his unexpectedly formal tone. Dax had about as much confidence—and about as high an opinion of himself—as anyone in the world, so it was unusual to hear him take such a deferential tone.

“Don't worry, I know all about it,” Camilla said. “You were like a poor, lost child in this maze, and just when you were despairing of ever finding human connection again, you came across a redoubtable teammate in the form of yours truly, and you're so relieved! Now, together, we can—”

“Have you seen Fay?” he asked abruptly.

“Huh? No, not to speak of. If I had, you think I'd be futzing around in some random corridor?”

“Ah. Sorry to interrupt, then.” Dax promptly did an about-face. “Let's go, Kelritch. I can feel it... The crossroad where I'm destined to meet Fay is just before me.”

“You've been saying that for the last five hours. We're lost,” Kelritch remarked.

“...Hold it right there, you!” Camilla yelled at the young man as he began to stride away. “This is the part where you're supposed to tell me how relieved you are to have finally found me and suggest we work together! ...Okay, fine! Help *me* clear this damn maze!”

“That's exactly what I intend to do. I shall turn all my powers upon the rescue of the trapped apostles. However...” Dax turned back around, and Camilla could see his expression was resolute, that of a man possessed of absolute conviction. “Fay and I are the perfect rivals, guided by the destiny of games. We will find each other, no matter where in the world we may be. But I believe destiny is something we carve out for ourselves.”

“Meaning...what, exactly?”

“Even if destiny does not draw us together, I shall find Fay myself. This is the way—*my* way! Let us go, Kelritch—onward to our glorious Victory Road!”

“But *where* are you going? Seriously, help us out, here!” Camilla shouted, but with a flourish of his black coat, the Prince of Games proceeded into the labyrinth, toward his “Victory Road.”

Back at the Execution Grounds...

"Hmm?"

"What is it, Fay?"

"I thought I just heard someone call my name. Someone familiar. Maybe I'm just imagining things..."

This was their new respawn point, but when they looked around, it was only the five of them.

"Well, looks like Uroboros is part of the same *system*," Fay remarked.

"...?" The silver-haired girl gave them a quizzical look at the mention of her name. "What about me, Tiny Human?"

"I mean this game. The rule is that if even one member of your team dies, the entire group respawns. Er... I guess what I'm saying is, don't get too mad if someone screws up."

"Ho-hoh. Very well, very well," Uroboros said, sounding noticeably enthused. "I see there's no way around it. You and I are teammates now, Tiny Human, so... yes, no other choice indeed. I am, in general, the rarest of rare gods, the last to be joining anyone's party. If that's how the game system works, then I may see fit to simply grin and bear it. Goodness gracious me! You just love me far too much, Tiny Human!"

For some reason, she was grinning madly. Fay didn't really know why, but she seemed to be in excellent spirits.

"Hello, and welcome back!" The meep made its appearance. *"Oh ho! I see you've cleared something else new. You found the pepper spray button down the hall—another of this labyrinth's wonderful little traps. Because you pressed that button, your unlock percentages have all gone up from 6.5 percent to 6.6!"*

"This number really, really doesn't matter at all, right?!" Pearl exclaimed.

"Keep reaching for that hundred-percent clear! Do you have any questions?"

"That's very *kind* of you," Fay said, and even the meep probably didn't realize

that was sarcasm. “Each time we get wiped, you show up to greet us, encourage us, and even entertain our questions.”

“But of course! Such is the duty assigned to me by my divine master.”

“You mean the already-dead game master?”

“Yes!”

“All right, I get it. I don’t have any questions for now. Let’s get on with take two.”

They started out from the Execution Grounds, making sure there didn’t seem to be any monsters coming down the hall.

“I don’t think we have to worry too much about the way the labyrinth’s look has changed,” Fay said, glancing around at the pulsating walls and ceiling. Then he stared down the hallway again. “But the way the monsters have been updated for Mausoleum Mode—that could be dangerous.”

They’d already encountered three different enemy types. The Zombie Puffballs, the Pui-Pui Spirit, and the Angel Pizaprin. All creatures they hadn’t run into before.

The tough part is that the monsters have gotten more challenging, Fay thought. They’re connected now.

Like, if you had a Zombie Puffball vomit all over you, then Angel Pizaprin got mad. The ties between enemies were growing stronger.

“If that Treasure Hall is our next destination, then we’re going to need a key to open the door. And there’s that angel with the really long name to deal with.”

“You mean Pizaprin!” Pearl chirped.

“Uh... Well, I guess it did say that nickname was okay. Angel Pizaprin works like this: If you get caught in any of the traps on your way to the Treasure Hall, you end up with an event where it gets mad.”

For example, if you pressed the pepper spray release button.

Or if a Zombie Puffball retched all over you.

Those traps didn't seem to do much besides make you dirty—but they were an indirect one-hit KO.

Pearl raised her hand. “Then all we have to do is avoid those Zombie Puffballs and their stomach juices!”

Fay shot her a sidelong glance. “That’s one right answer. Okay, Pearl, what else?”

“We ignore the pepper spray button. In fact, we ignore anything that looks like it could be an environmental hazard!”

“Two right answers. There’s one more.”

“Huh? Uh, the... The last one is... Let’s see...”

“It must be the Pui-Pui Spirit!” Nel said before Pearl could answer, her eyes going wide. “The bells they carry are so inordinately loud. If we assume those bells are for calling their friends, then we have to avoid being spotted by them!”

“Exactly. I think that’s going to be the most important thing, actually.”

Ka-clink.

No sooner had Fay said this than they heard *that very sound* from down the hall behind them.

“Oh, shoot!” Pearl exclaimed.

“Run! Take that corner to the right!” Fay said, and they flung themselves around the nearest intersection, hiding on the right side.

It was time for a change of *strategy*. They would no longer try to defeat the enemies, but sneak past them. Until this point, a brute-force approach had been a possibility, but the game had evolved into something that required wits to survive.

“*Huff... Huff...* I think it’s an awfully high hurdle, not being spotted by anyone!”

“I don’t think I hear the Pui-Pui Spirit’s footsteps anymore,” Nel said, peeking around the corner. “I really think I should be in front. Everyone stay one step behind me.”

With that, she set off, one careful step at a time. They worked their way forward, sticking to the shadows so they would be hidden from any powerful monsters and wouldn't repeat the mistakes of last time.

"H-how's it look to you, Nel? You'll tell us right away if there are any monsters, won't you?"

"It's not a monster, but...I do hear some kind of strange sound." Nel stopped for a moment to listen. "It's a waterfall."

"A waterfall?! Why would you hear a waterfall in the middle of a dungeon?!" Pearl said.

The sound of water spraying was coming from the hallway to the left at the intersection. They'd rushed through this spot so fast last time that they must not have noticed.

"Master Fay, how should we handle this?"

"I think we should see all the environmental gimmicks if we can. If it turns out to be a trap, we can always try again."

You couldn't be afraid of messing up. Was the waterfall a trap or not? Like the meep had said, even if they died, they would be left with their "experience points," and that would help them get closer to completing the game.

Fwwssh...

The sound grew louder and more defined as they proceeded down the hallway. Soon enough, they could even feel the spray on their faces. Nel followed the sound down the halls and around corners until she stopped and looked up.

"It's a real waterfall!"

There it was, cascading down. A massive, almost picturesque column of water falling from a hole in the ceiling, collecting at the bottom—just like the real thing.

"That looks about as natural as waterfalls come," Fay said. "And the water looks clear and clean..."

"Look, Fay! Over there!" Leshea pointed to the waterfall basin.

On the far side of the tremendous spray, they could just spot what appeared to be a golden chest.

“Think it’s some kind of treasure chest?” Fay asked.

“Maybe it’s got the key to the Treasure Hall in it. I’m gonna go grab it,” said Leshea.

“You sure that’s all right?”

“Sure I’m sure! I’ve been wanting to try one of these weird environmental things anyway.”

Then Leshea dove into the spray. Her feet disappeared underwater with a splash, but thankfully, the lake was no deeper than her knees.

I must admit, I’m surprised. I thought for sure some aquatic monster would jump out at us.

Even Leshea had to be careful. By choosing the PMD (Player Must Die) difficulty at the beginning of the game, Leshea’s power had been decreased to that of an ordinary human. They had to be awfully careful about whatever might be living in that pool...but it seemed like nothing was.

“You think it’s one of those things where they totally freak you out, but it turns out there’s nothing there?” Pearl asked.

“Looks that way, doesn’t it? I guess if you spot the chest hidden by the waterfall, that’s all it takes to clear the area,” Nel said.

As the two of them looked on, Leshea arrived at the basin. Hair wet with spray, she held up the treasure chest. “I got it!”

“Perfect, Leshea! Now bring it back!” Pearl waved to her.

The golden treasure chest gleamed as if to telegraph what an important item lay within it. Oh-so-carefully, Leshea carried it back and set it down in front of them.

“I sure hope we find the key to the Treasure Hall in here!” Pearl said.

“I don’t know. It might be a super-rare crafted item, or a crafting component,” said Nel.

“There are so many things we can dream of! C’mon, Leshea, open the box!” said Pearl.

Leshea brushed the lid of the chest with her hand. She lifted it, and they all waited with bated breath...

And then, at the exact same moment, they deflated.

“Uh, excuse me? What is this? Pieces of cloth?” Pearl looked into the treasure chest, slowly, fearfully. There wasn’t a key to the Treasure Hall inside. But these things didn’t look like some sort of critical crafting component, either.

Inside were scraps of cloth—one with a flower pattern, another a dark navy.

“Are these handkerchiefs?” Nel asked. “They seem a bit too...three-dimensional for that.”

“.....No way!” Leshea exclaimed.

“You know what they are, Leshea?” asked Pearl.

“Yeah! I’m sure of it!” She plunged a hand into the box, then grabbed one of the cloths and showed it to all of them.

It had two round, water-resistant bulges on it.

“It’s a swimsuit!” she said.

“...I’m sorry?”

“There’s five of them in here! A game system that can get swimsuits ready for all of us—that’s something else! Oh, this one with the extra-large chest must be for Pearl!”

“That’s not a thing! That can’t be a *thing*!” Pearl wailed, her face flushing furiously. She snatched the swimsuit Leshea held out to her and flung it to the ground. “Why would there be swimsuits in a treasure chest?!”

“It’s a clear message: You can enjoy a little bath here!”

“Is this supposed to be a joke?!” Pearl’s breath came hard. “First we find an in-your-face environmental detail like a waterfall in a darn dungeon! Where there’s clearly supposed to be some terrifying aquatic monster, but then there isn’t, and then there’s a treasure chest that should obviously contain a key, but

instead it's *swimsuits*?! How many rugs does this dumb god have to pull out from under us before they'll be happy?!"

"Swimsuits are water-repellent, right? Maybe they could repel the vomit from the Zombie Puffball!"

"No, Leshea, definitely not! Just look at the item description," Pearl said.

The item name was "Swimsuit," and the description said, "Cannot be used in crafting. Can be used when going in the waterfall, but you don't have to wear it."

Not a very impressive effect. Not very impressive at all.

"Let's go back. Come on, Nel. This area is only here to be mean to us."

"It does look that way... Let's get our heads back in the game and keep going," Nel agreed.

This direction ended at the waterfall, so they went back to the last turn they had taken and went to the right instead.

There were three choices: left, right, and straight ahead. Straight goes to the Treasure Hall, and the left branch brings us to this waterfall, so that leaves us here...the right branch.

If there was a key to the Treasure Hall, this was where it would have to be.

But something bothered Fay. Yes, process of elimination suggested the key had to be here—but this wasn't the kind of game that would yield up its secrets by something as simple as process of elimination.

"Huh?! Everyone stop!" Nel said, signaling them to halt. Her gaze was fixed on a series of paintings neatly lining the wall. But they weren't just any paintings—each one showed a bright red apple.

"Are those—?!" Pearl said, her face going pale.

Any player who had visited this dungeon would recognize them. The apples in this labyrinth were more than just fruit. They were Killer Apples, bathed in the blood of countless human victims.

And paintings of them absolutely crammed this dungeon hallway.

“I see what’s going on here! Everyone, steer clear of those paintings!” Pearl howled.

They moved toward the window side of the hallway, staying away from the left side, which was lined with the paintings.

“Those can’t just be pretty pictures! I just know that if you get anywhere near them, a real apple will burst through the canvas and kill you!”

“You’re right—Pearl, that’s a good instinct! That’s just the sort of trap they would have in here!”

“Right, Leshea?!” Pearl puffed out her chest, full of confidence.

Then she herself started walking toward the corridor full of canvases, one slow, vigilant step at a time, working her way down the hallway.

“Careful, Pearl. I’m sure you’re right. You never know when an apple might come flying...”

Pearl turned toward Nel. “Just leave it to me, N—”

The instant she took her eyes off the paintings, there was a *riiip*, and bright red apples came flying through the canvases, aiming directly at her undefended back.

“Pearl, behind you!”

“I said, just leave it to me, Fay. Yah!”

Pearl dodged neatly, crouching to avoid the first apple. She let her momentum carry her into a roll along the floor, away from the second one.

“*Huff... Huff!* I knew it! I knew this would happen!” She got to her feet, her fist raised in triumph.

“Don’t let your guard down. You aren’t even halfway down the hallway yet.”

“Right, Fay! Look at that, though. I’ve already figured out the trick here. You can’t use the same gimmick twice on a top-notch gamer like me!” Pearl spread her arms wide and started forward. She stuck to her strategy—the apple paintings lined the left side of the hallway, so she kept to the right side, by the windows.

“It doesn’t matter where or when those apples pop out of those canvases! I’ll be more than ready to dodge them!”

Riiip.

The second attack. Another apple came flying through a piece of canvas at Pearl as she sneaked along. But of course, she’d seen this one coming, too.

“You’ll have to do better than that!” she said with a graceful leap. She tossed herself toward the windows with room to spare; she’d seen this trick before. “Heh! You ought to know when you’re beat, Killer Apples.” She didn’t even bother to look contemptuously down at the fruit on the floor.

She had no interest in losers.

With a gleam of overwhelming victory in her eye, Pearl gazed upon the dozens of paintings.

“I’ve seen through your attacks. There’s no point in fighting any further. Go back to your homes. You must have families.”

Crash.

A sound of breaking glass came from behind Pearl—specifically, from the glass of the window set in the wall Pearl was currently pressed up against.

“Look out!” Fay cried.

“Huh?”

Bonk!

With unerring accuracy, a Killer Apple *from outside* came flying through the window and nailed Pearl in the back of the head.

“Gagh?!” she exclaimed and pitched forward. Fay and the others held their breath—were they going to respawn now?—but even as they watched, Pearl got unsteadily to her feet. “Owww, ow, ow, ow... I thought my head was going to split open!”

“Pearl, you’re all right?! I thought for sure we were in for a respawn,” said Nel.

“N-no... I guess Mausoleum Mode did something to these apples, too.” Pearl

rubbed the back of her head, then started picking bits of exploded apple out of her hair. “They’re so ripe, they’re starting to rot. They became Killer Rotten Apples, just like the puffballs became zombies. I guess I should be grateful.”

“There’s still some in your hair, Pearl,” Nel said; bits of overripe fruit still clung to Pearl’s head. As she helped pick it out, Nel said, “So the pictures were just to distract us from the real core of the flying-apple trick—the ones from outside. I’ve got to admit, this labyrinth lives up to expectations.”

“Don’t expect that!” Pearl yelped, still rubbing her head. Would another apple come flying through the window? Or maybe from one of the pictures? She was on her guard.

“Phew... A fine strategy on the part of my enemy, I admit, but it wasn’t quite powerful enough to bring me down. Have those Killer Apples *truly* rotted within—until they’re no longer killers at all?”

She was obviously feeling better. She started walking—and just at that moment, she was bathed in light from the ceiling overhead.

“Ah! Little lost sheep?”

An angel-type monster descended from above. Fay and his party took a step back; they knew this one.

“Angel Pizaprin?!” Pearl said.

This didn’t make sense. This was an event monster who should show up by the Treasure Hall. What was it doing here?

“I am the most loving and compassionate being in this labyrinth, known for bringing salvation to those who wander.” The angel smiled. *“I am a messenger of good fortune. I shall grant you one wish that shall be to your rescue. What do you desire? Only speak, and it shall be yours.”*

Fay could almost hear his entire group getting ready to fight—after all, the last time they’d heard those words, the angel had immediately destroyed them.

“S-say, uh, Pizaprin?” Pearl asked hesitantly, looking up at the angel. “Do you really mean it? Last time you said that, but then you annihilated us. This time, you’ll really grant our wish, won’t you?”

“But of course.”

“Th-then please tell us where the key to the Treasure Hall is!”

“Ha-ha-ha! What a very simple wish. Right away, then.”

The angel raised its staff.

But then it stopped. It gave them a long look, and its eyes grew hard.

“Such impurity...”

They were getting déjà vu—they had definitely heard that before.

“I don’t like where this is going,” Fay muttered.

“No way! But... But we made sure the Pui-Pui Spirit never saw us, and we didn’t get covered in Zombie Puffball juices!”

“You! Yes, you, right there!”

Pizaprin pointed at the blond girl.

“Me?! What about me is impure?!”

“Behold the back of your head.”

“Wha? Oh... Oh noooo!” Pearl went pale. The back of her head was drenched in *rotten apple juice*. All the relief of having survived the apples’ attack vanished in an instant. Just like the Zombie Puffballs’ vomit, this rotten apple juice was another target of the angel’s cleansing impulse. “W-wait a second, Pizaprin! This isn’t—”

“Be you reborn with pure souls!”

The staff flashed with light.

The angel used Purify.

Pearl with the polluted back of her head was eliminated.

Their vision went black. Then they respawned. When they came to, the five of them were back at the Execution Grounds.

“Hello, and welcome back!”

“.....” Fay didn’t say anything.

“.....” No one else said anything.

Except Pearl, who cried, “Who’s *polluted Pearl*?! That stupid, stupid angel!” She stomped her feet. “I use a very expensive, special shampoo with extract of apricot peel. The back of my head smells amazing!”

“I wonder if there’s some kind of condition that makes that angel show up,” Nel said, almost to herself, frowning. “Last time it was outside the Treasure Hall; this time it was in the corridor. Maybe that first appearance in front of the Treasure Hall was just *happenstance*, and it can show up anywhere in the labyrinth?”

“There are other possibilities, too. Like, maybe it appears after a set amount of time. Or maybe it goes back and forth between the Treasure Hall and hallway. We’ll definitely gain something from getting past it,” Leshea said, taking the lead of the group.

At least, that’s what it looked like she was doing—but then she seemed to have a thought. She stopped and folded her arms.

“Or maybe it really was angry the back of Pearl’s head was so filthy.”

“My head is perfectly clean, I swear! Are we seriously considering this possibility?!”

Take three.

Now they knew they would have to get through the Flying Killer Apple Picture Zone *completely* unscathed.

“Want me to take point this time, Pearl?”

“No, Nel, that’s all right. If I run away now, I’ll be a loser for the rest of my life...” Pearl gritted her teeth and shook her head. “Give me another chance to clear this trap!”

They went back toward the hallway full of apple art, steering clear of where the Pui-Pui Spirit had appeared. So far, so good.

“Their little trick is to get you to focus on the paintings while the real threat comes through the window,” Pearl said.

“Pearl, your legs are trembling.”

“I’m just proceeding very, very carefully! If memory serves, it was the eighth and eleventh canvases that the apples came flying through. And the window was the fourth one ahead of us!”

“Ooh. Nice work, Pearl! You really remembered.”

She was showing she hadn’t claimed the vanguard for no reason. Still, there were no guarantees the apples would come from the same places as before.

“Don’t let your guard down, Pearl.”

“Right. You’re suggesting the apples might show up at random. But I’m prepared for the possibility they’ll come flying from somewhere else this time!”

Pearl took a step forward, then stopped, checking both right and left. She worked her way down the hallway, paying utmost attention to anywhere an apple might emerge from.

She took several dozen more steps this way, and then, rather abruptly, she found herself safely at the far end of the hall—which was long enough to contain some fifty paintings.

“Yes! I did it! Now, where is that Treasure Hall key?.....Huh?”

There was no key.

There, at the far end of the apple painting zone, was a bend in the hallway. And around the corner was a familiar silver door.

The Treasure Hall.

They were back, and they still didn’t have the key.

“But why?! I worked so hard to clear the painting zone—how can I be back at the Treasure Hall without even having found the Treasure Hall key?!”

It was then that light showered down from the ceiling for a third time.

“Ah! Little lost sheep?”

“Angel Pizaprin?! No, wait! I know how this must work!” Pearl had taken a step back at the appearance of the angelic monster descending from the circle of light, but she quickly regained her composure. “None of us is covered in any rotten juices. Therefore, my dear Angel Pizaprin... You said you’re a messenger

of good fortune, didn't you? That you would grant us any one wish?"

"Indeed I am, and indeed I shall. But only to those who are pure and undefiled." The angel smiled. *"I see that none of your number is impure. To show my esteem for your commitment to hygiene, I shall grant any wish you may request."*

Finally!

Fay and the others clenched their fists, triumphant. They'd hidden from the puffballs, then gotten successfully through the picture zone, and it had all been worth it.

"Then I make my wish! Give us the key to the... No, I mean, open the door to the Treasure Hall!"

"Very well. As you command!"

The angel raised its staff.

But then it paused. It paused for a long time.

"....."

Something wasn't right here.

The angel, who had been smiling until that moment, froze with its staff raised. And worse, its expression grew stern.

"Wh-what's wrong, Angel Pizaprin? We're pure, you saw it yourself. Behold! There is no spot of filth on our outfits!"

"This smell..."

"Huh?"

"You speak truth, there is no spot of filth on your garments or your skin. But I detect a rotten odor... I know! You were befouled by the digestive juices of a Zombie Puffball in a past life! And a rotten apple as well!"

"Whaaaaaaaat?!"

"Hold on—you can't be talking about when we got wiped out the last two times, can you?!"

This was an entirely new pattern. Respawning was supposed to be a complete do-over. But just like the human side got to take their experience with them, now they were faced with a *monster* that retained its experiences as well.

“The smell! You reek! First you were bathed in the vomit of a Zombie Puffball, and the second time soaked in the juice of a rotten apple! Respawn as you might, you can never erase the stench!”

“That’s ridiculous!”

“Purify your bodies and try again!”

The angel used Purify.

The two polluted ones were eliminated.

Their vision went black. When they came to, the five of them were back at the Execution Grounds.

“Hello, and welcome back!”

“.....” Fay didn’t say anything.

“.....”

Nobody said a single word.

One of them frowned, one stared at the ceiling in silent thought, and still another stood with her arms crossed.

This wasn’t like their other respawns. They felt like they had hit something resembling *a dead end*.

“All right. I see we need to stop and think about this,” Fay said. To be perfectly truthful, he’d been virtually certain the last strategy would work. They’d fled the Zombie Puffball and avoided the apples in the painting zone—their run had been perfect. He had never expected the angel to continue to consider them polluted even after they’d respawned.

Is it impossible to clear this if you make even a single mistake? That’s a kill-on-sight approach. Does the game master not actually want us to get through this game?

He certainly hoped that wasn’t the case. But then again, given the labyrinth

itself had a fatal bug that made it impossible to finish, they couldn't rule out the possibility there was some dead end along the way.

Was this a dead end? Or was there some way to get past it?

"Huh... I'm starting to think this might be a pretty tough spot," said Leshea, arms folded. She seemed to have come to the same conclusion as Fay. "If the Treasure Hall really is our next destination, then we've got two choices: one, find the key, or two, ask the angel to open the door for us. But we haven't found the key, and we can't ask the angel because the Zombie Puffball got us that one time. So have we overlooked the key somewhere? What do you think, Fay?"

"I was just wondering the same thing."

He hadn't managed to narrow it down yet. There were plenty of things he wanted to try—especially the following three possibilities.

Idea 1: The possibility that they had overlooked the key to the Treasure Hall somewhere.

Idea 2: The possibility that the key was a reward for defeating a specific monster (probably the Pui-Pui Spirit, the Zombie Puffball, or the Angel Pizaprin itself).

Idea 3: The possibility that the key didn't actually exist but had to be crafted.

"By the way, what about you, Uroboros? Notice anything in particular?"

"You are asking this of me?" the silver-haired girl said, turning toward him. She acted as if she were thinking for a brief second, but then she gave a portentous smile. "Heh-heh! I see you are in trouble, unable to open this door of yours."

"You have an idea how to open it?!" Fay exclaimed.

"Not a clue!"

"That was very misleading of you!"

"What do you want? You know I am a god. If I sought to perceive the device by which that door operates, I could do so—but that would be boring. I have

been trying to think the matter through properly, but when I think how easily I could solve this problem, I just can't concentrate!"

"Ahh. We *could* cheat."

If we compare the situation to people taking a test, Fay and the others were studying as hard as they could, but Uroboros was allowed to cheat as much as she wanted. Even if she wanted to actually study, knowing she could always just cheat if it came down to it made it hard to really take things seriously.

"So I think I shall leave it to you, Tiny Human."

"You got it. Well, you heard the lady—shall we try take four?" Fay clapped his hands. "The name of the game is find out how to open the Treasure Hall. Nel, Pearl—you on board?"

"....."

"....."

Neither of them responded in the least.

The two young women to whom Fay had spoken were both muttering to themselves, looking at the ceiling and the floor respectively.

"Uh, hello? Did I say something wrong?"

"...Stench...can't be removed... But he said to come back, so does that mean...?" Pearl, in particular, was standing stock-still, her hand on the back of her head, which the angel had deemed stinky.

"Pearl?"

Suddenly, she gasped and exclaimed, "Euuuuureka!"

It came completely out of the blue. It was the loudest yelling she'd done since the game had started, and now she bellowed at the ceiling, "I figured it out! Fay, I know how to open the Treasure Hall!"

"...Cool."

"Why do you seem so exasperated?! Like, 'There she goes with her weird pronouncements again'?!"

"No, no, it's just—we haven't narrowed down the options yet." They were still

at the stage of articulating possible solutions. The best thing to do would be to try them one by one, everything they could think of. There was no way to be sure which one was the right answer yet. They didn't even have any hints.

"There *was* a hint!" Pearl declared with a mischievous smile on her face, the hair at the back of her head bobbing. "Fay, a woman's hair is her life."

"...?" Fay gave Pearl a look. He had no idea what she was talking about.

"*Oh! My! Gosh!*" This time, it was Nel's turn to shout. "I get it! You're right—I knew something had been bothering me. Now it makes perfect sense. Yes, Pearl, you're absolutely right! A woman's hair is her life!"

"Yes, of course, I'm sure of it!" Pearl replied. She and Nel were in complete agreement.

Agreement about what, however, completely escaped Fay and the other two.

They had never cleared a challenge quite this way: with Fay, Leshea, and even Uroboros still flummoxed while Pearl and Nel solved the riddle.

"Master Fay, let me and Pearl handle this one," Nel said, sounding unusually upbeat. "I can't blame you for not noticing. It's something you wouldn't worry about much in your daily life. And Lady Leshea and Mistress Undeclared are still new to the human world."

"That's right. But for me and Nel, this is our specialty." Pearl pointed to the far side of the Execution Grounds. This would be their fourth attempt. Despite having been annihilated on three previous occasions, Pearl's eyes glowed with joy. "All right, let's split into two groups. The rest of you go wait by the Treasure Hall. Nel and I have some *preparations* to make."

"Preparations? Hey, I'll come with you," Fay said. "If there's anything I can help with—"

"N-no, don't! I mean, you can't..."

"Huh?"

"You absolutely can't come along. Okay? This is just for me and Nel. If...if you peek, you have to take responsibility, all right?!"

Responsibility?

Responsibility for *what*?

“I can’t say I get it, but...all right. Just be careful, you two. Don’t let the Pui-Pui Spirit or the Zombie Puffballs find you.”

“No worries on that account!”

“Yeah, we’ll be all right even if they *do* spot us!”

“You will...?”

When he thought about it, Fay realized this might be as surprised as he had ever been in a game. Leshea, beside him, looked almost as shocked as he did, but Pearl and Nel just turned around and marched out into the hallway.

“They seem awfully sure of themselves. Huh... I wonder if I missed something,” Fay said.

“I like that about this labyrinth,” Leshea said with a giggle and a little smile. “I’m not looking for a game easy enough for you and me to clear on our own. Any game where those two get to say ‘Leave it to us’ is a good game.”

“Sure...but I think clearing this thing is going to take some time.” Fay nodded, but the smile on his face was strained.

Leshea was right: This was how the gods’ games were *supposed* to be. Only when everyone on the team—Fay *and* Leshea *and* Nel *and* Pearl—used their wits to the utmost did victory come into sight. That was certainly the mark of a good game.

About an hour later, Fay and the others stood in the intersection by the Treasure Hall, having avoided all the various enemies on the way. Pearl and Nel came up to them.

“Thanks for waiting!” Pearl called.

“Sorry we’re late,” said Nel. “The preparations... Well, we got so into them that it took some time.”

Despite their extensive “preparations,” the two of them looked exactly like they had before. There was no sign they had crafted any new items, either.

“But you’re ready now?” Fay asked.

“Yep! Our countermeasures are in place!” Pearl strode up to the door of the Treasure Hall, where she stopped, took a deep breath, and then said: “Come out, Angel Pizaprin!”

“Ah! There is one who summons me,” the angel said, appearing from the circle of light.

How would this go? The party had already been destroyed three separate times. Would Pearl and Nel’s “countermeasures” really work?

After a moment’s silence, Pizaprin said, *“You are very pure indeed.”* The angel smiled. *“I urge you to maintain that dedication in the future. You may proceed.”*

Pizaprin flourished its staff, and with a great *creak*, the treasure chamber’s elaborate door swung slowly open.

“It worked! Fay, we did it!” Pearl said.

“Yeah... You really did. Wow.” On the other side of the door was a blinding light. Silver and gold, perhaps? Fay turned away from the dazzling light to observe his two companions. “All right, clue me in already. What did you do to stop that angel?”

“Stink,” Pearl said.

“And filth,” Nel added.

They watched the angel disappear back into the ceiling.

“As we learned, that angel hates dirty things. Nel got spat on by that Zombie Puffball, and I took that apple to the head; they stained both of us. But the smells didn’t come off even when we respawned, right?”

“Yeah, that’s why I was trying to think of a different approach.”

“No, that’s *wrong!*” Pearl pointed a finger directly at Fay and smiled like a kid who’d had an especially mischievous idea. “I know how you feel, Fay, but us, we’re girls. Two young ladies. And as maidens of a certain age, certain things are nonnegotiable.”

“I’m sorry, what?”

“Do you really think that when someone says we *stink*, we would just sit by

silently?”

“Umm...”

Fay still wasn't sure. He didn't get what Pearl was trying to say.

“As you can see, I've got a bit of social anxiety... So I sweat a little, so I use deodorant and perfume. And I try to pick a hair treatment that smells nice. But when you just can't get rid of those nasty smells, the very best thing you can do for yourself is...”

“...a bath.”

Nel nodded, adding just those two words.

At that, Fay and Leshea finally understood the nature of the girls' “preparations.”

“You were taking a bath!” Fay said.

“Ah, that waterfall,” said Leshea.

The waterfall of obscure importance at the dead end. There had been a treasure chest containing bathing suits there.

“Pearl and I scrubbed away any smells as thoroughly as we could. Bathing has been seen as a way to purify the body since ancient times, right? And the bathing suits helped, too. Speaking of which, mine fit perfectly, but Pearl's...” Nel glanced at her. “I guess *one* part of her body was still too big, and even the bathing suit from the god was a bit tight for her. She ended up skinny-dipping, and let me tell you, the sheer power of her twin peaks—”

“Nel?!”

“It was incredible, wasn't it?” Leshea asked.

“Now I am most curious,” said Uroboros, piling on as if she might never have another chance.

“W-well, anyway!” Pearl said, clearing her throat. “What do you think, Fay? We made ourselves pretty helpful, right?”

“.....” There was only a choked silence from Fay.

“Fay?”

“Yeah... *Of course.*” It wasn’t that he had been lost for an answer. He’d just needed a moment to look within himself to find the very best words to communicate exactly how he was feeling right now. “Pearl, Nel, it’s all thanks to your hard work. I’m really glad to have you both on this team, and I can’t wait to see what you’ll do next.”

“.....!”

“.....!”

Both young ladies beamed with absolute joy.

“Hooray!” Pearl said.

“We did it!” said Nel. They high-fived with both hands.

They dashed through the door the angel had opened and into the treasure room, carried by the momentum of their own excitement, and soon they could be heard exclaiming eagerly.

“Wow! Look at all this treasure!”

“It is truly a spectacular place...”

The first thing that jumped out at them was the golden walls. The candleholders set in the walls were made of crystal, while at their feet were mountains of gold coins, piled up like snow. Buried in the heaps of gold—were those a sword and shield made of platinum?

“Huh. I wonder if this is the biggest treasure here,” said Leshea. She was looking up at a statue of a monster made of pure silver. It stood some three meters tall, a winged lion resting standing in the center of the room.

“If we brought *that* back home, we’d be rich!” Pearl said, her eyes shining. “Fay, let’s take it with us!”

“I think it’s too big to carry. Hmm... You know, I wonder if you even could bring these gold coins back to the human world if you put them in your pocket or whatever.” He picked up one of the coins at his feet. The obverse showed a girl’s face, while the reverse depicted...was that a tombstone? A strange combination of pictures if there ever was one. Fay pocketed the coin.



At that moment, Nel said, “Hmm. Looks like there’s another standout item here.” She was holding a crown.

It was made of platinum, and at the center was a huge, bright gemstone, a ruby that looked as if it were aflame.

“Look, Master Fay—look at this ruby!”

“Huh! When I think sparkles, I normally think diamonds. Who knew a ruby could shine like this? I guess you don’t see them much in the real world.”

“Hold it right there!” Uroboros said, bursting into Fay and Nel’s conversation. “Tiny Human, a piddling stone like that has nothing on me!”

“On you how?”

“Mine eye! The one I gave to you!”

In other words, the divine treasure, the Eye of Uroboros. Fay didn’t have it there with him, but it was still fresh in his memory: Destroying the ruby-colored eye had been the win condition for Uroboros’s game, The Forbidden Word. The Eye of Uroboros that Fay had received was a piece of the eye he’d shattered in that battle.

“Oh yeah... Yeah, I mean, that’s gorgeous, too.”

“Try to actually remember, Tiny Human! The little bitty rock in this crown is nothing compared with the grandeur of mine eye!” She pointed at the crown. “The way it’s shining—if you can call this a shine—I would say—”

Boom!

Behind Uroboros, the silver lion statue abruptly stood up.

It was *alive*.

“Excuse meeeeeee?!” Pearl yelled.

“Don’t tell me we’ve got another raid boss on our hands!” said Fay.

“I am Sphinx, Guardian of the Holy Sanctuary. I applaud you on making it this far, sagacious ones.”

Sphinx’s eyes glowed. It looked around eagerly at Fay and the other four

people who had entered the treasure room.

“Oh ho? I see you have defeated that damnable Sleeping Lion. But you will find I am not like him. For one thing... Behold! I stand and walk on two legs!”

“And we’re supposed to care about that?!” Pearl said.

Sphinx was, indeed, standing on its hind legs.

So this was the second raid boss. The party got ready for a fight—except for one of its members, who barely spared the scene a glance. The silver-haired girl.

“You should see the gleam of *mine* eye! It’s incredible!” Uroboros was still busy expounding on how amazing her eye was. “You see, Tiny Human, it’s not just about light! The rubies of the human world aren’t even as hard as diamonds, while mine eye is easily a hundred million times harder than any diamond! In a hardness contest, it would wipe the floor with this tiny ruby!”

“And you made it so we had to *break* something that hard to win your game?”

“What is more, mine eyes can shoot beams!”

The glare that Sphinx fixed on the silver-haired girl was almost palpable.

“You there, girl. I, the great Sphinx, am displaying my astounding and little-suspected talent, yet you dare to ignore me!”

“Hey, Tiny Human, think there are any gemstones in *this* world that can shoot beams?”

“If there were, I don’t think they would be gemstones anymore.”

“Exactly! Which is why mine eye is the bes—”

“Unforgivable!” the monster howled, shaking the treasure room. The thousands of coins on the floor jumped with the shock, and the crystal candleholders came rattling down off the wall. *“I shall crush you all like so many insects. When I enter my battle mode, all Arises are neutralized, no items have any effect, and with a single blow, I shall—”*

“Oh, *shut up.*” Without even turning around, Uroboros met the swipe of Sphinx’s paw with a casual backfist.

Sphinx takes 96,198,030,879,910,199 damage.

Sphinx is dead.

“Hrrrohhhh?!”

The giant monster’s roar shook the walls.

“Sheesh. Don’t interrupt me, kitty.” Uroboros turned around, annoyed, but by that point, the raid boss was already back to being an immobile statue. “Oops... Did I do that again?” Uroboros asked with an adorable tilt of her head. She didn’t sound very sorry.

As they watched, a gleaming silver key appeared in midair. This must be the item the raid boss gave up upon its defeat.

Item: Treasure Hall Master Key

Inventory limit is expanded from 2 items to 100. In addition, you retain your items even if you are destroyed.

“Geez, talk about OP!” Pearl said.

This game typically limited players to two items per person. Just carrying a couple of components to craft with filled up your inventory slots. But with this, they would never have to worry about that limitation again.

This means we can make far more powerful items than before and carry lots of them. We’ve suddenly got way more freedom in how we approach our strategy, Fay thought.

He felt bad for Sphinx. Given that it dropped such a potent item, it was probably supposed to be a far, far more difficult fight than that with the Sleeping Lion. Unfortunately for Sphinx, it had faced something even badder than it was.

“Did... Did you really defeat it?”

“These games lately have been so mean-spirited that I’ve been conditioned to smell a trap when something goes so easily.”

“What are you talking about, Rumpy and Chesty?” Uroboros tugged on their sleeves, urging them on. “I need you to hurry up and finish this game—we have

to go over to *mine!*”

“Yeah, I know, but...”

“Poor, departed Sphinx was really a major foe, right?”

Uroboros set off, skipping along. She was in such high spirits that when she bounced up off the floor of the Treasure Hall, she got up almost to the ceiling...

“Ooh, whazzat?”

“Huh?”

That was *strange*.

Uroboros herself, floating up to the top of the room, was the first to notice, followed by Leshea, who was watching her and happened to look up at the ceiling.

Uroboros went *up*, but she didn’t come back down.

She floated in midair, her head inches from the ceiling. It was like she was stuck at the high point of her jump.

“Um, Miss Undefeated? What are you doing?” Pearl asked.

“Mistress Undefeated?” Nel added.

After a rather long pause, the silver-haired girl sneered, “.....Hmph!” Her innocence had vanished, replaced by the unbridled anger of an enraged deity.

But she pushed that unfathomable power back and simply laughed.

“I get it. You’re afraid of me? Well, I *am* undefeated, after all. But because you’ve interfered with me, I see *you lot* as well. Plus, now I get what’s going on with the Divine Gates. You heard me, Tiny Human.” Uroboros looked down at the ground. “It’s just like you suspected. We *can* clear this labyrinth.”

“—?!” Fay gasped, not sure he’d heard right.

“I mean, just look. If that wasn’t true, there’d be no reason to try to pluck me out like this.”

Someone was trying to get rid of her? What did that mean? *Something* was obviously happening to the deity Uroboros. But Fay couldn’t discern any more

than that.

“I’m gonna head back to the human world. You just hurry up and clear this maze. I’ll be waiting.” The silver-haired girl winked at him, and then her body was surrounded by rainbow-colored bubbles. There was a dry *pop*, and the bubbles burst and vanished. Along with Uroboros.

“...Huh? I mean...wha...? Um, what...?”

“What just...happened? What happened to Mistress Undeclared?”

Pearl could barely form words, and even Nel seemed shaken to have witnessed such a bizarre phenomenon at close range. Fay knew how they must be feeling—because he was feeling the same way.

Had Uroboros vanished? Or been *made* to vanish?

Had she gone back to the human world? Or had she been *sent* back?

“Leshea? What was that?!” Fay demanded.

“I think she was forcibly ejected from the game.” Leshea’s response was immediate, but she sounded grim. “But I didn’t know that was possible. The only one who can interfere with a god is another god. Which would have to mean the game master who created this labyrinth...except we know that deity is already dead.”

A god who was already gone had plucked Uroboros out of the maze? Was that possible?

“She said something else that bugs me. She said she understood what was happening with the Divine Gates. Players from all over the world are being dragged into a single game. If she knows why, that’s something we have to hear!” said Fay.

“Exactly! Master Fay, what if we went back with her, just for a few minutes?” Nel said, clapping her hands. “If Mistress Undeclared went back to the human world, then we should be able to meet up with her there by returning from the save point at the Execution Grounds. Then we can ask her what’s going on.”

“That might be an idea. But...”

There was still something that nagged at Fay. Uroboros had told them to

“hurry up and clear this maze.” Which was another way of saying, *Don’t come back until you’ve cleared it.*

“Uroboros looked like she was okay. I admit, hearing what she has to say would be... Huh?”

“It would be a complete waste to turn back now!” The door opened with a slam. The meep from the Execution Grounds had apparently made its way to the Treasure Hall. *“I congratulate you on defeating Sphinx, Guardian of the Holy Sanctuary. Sphinx is a mighty enemy, yet you defeated it in a single blow! Wonderful!”*

“We weren’t the ones who defeated it,” Fay said honestly.

The person—or rather, the god—who had done it was no longer in the game, but the meep didn’t seem bothered.

“And you’ve covered nine percent of the maze—congratulations again!”

“Is that really a number to congratulate us on?”

“Now at last, the final boss shall appear!”

“Talk about your non sequiturs! Okay... I get it. We don’t have to explore every corner of the labyrinth—you can take the shortest route, and it works out like this.”

“If you would please proceed forward, everyone.”

The door that Sphinx had been guarding already stood open. Beyond, where the meep pointed them ahead, it was pitch-black. It certainly felt nothing like they had seen up until now. There wasn’t so much as a mote of light, only utter darkness.

“Announcing four visitors!”

Slowly and hesitantly, they stepped into the darkness.

The moment they did so, there was a *clunk*, and the floor gave way beneath their feet.

“A pit trap?!” Fay said.

“H-hey, nobody said anything about—ahhh!”

They plummeted.

All four of them fell deep beneath the maze, continually accelerating in freefall. At last, they began to see a hazy light somewhere below them.

There was light so far underneath the ground?

“If the final boss is waiting for us...then this must be the innermost depths of the maze!”

“Y-yeah, but at this speed, we’re going to get squiiiished!”

“You don’t have to worry about that, Pearl!” said Leshea, snapping her fingers and looking totally unconcerned.

Poof.

They were caught by an invisible layer of air. They began to fall more slowly, floating into the pit like a balloon drifting down from the sky.

This was Leshea’s psychokinesis, which she’d also demonstrated in Uroboros’s game.

Or so they thought...

“Oops!” Leshea said, sticking out her tongue. “Silly me! I forgot, I’m on PMD mode, so I can’t use my powers.”

“Huh? Wait...nooooooooooo!” Pearl cried.

They started dropping again, picking up speed. Just when Fay and the others had started to relax, suddenly they were once again racing downward at a ferocious rate.

There was an impact, a blow too harsh to call a landing, as they reached the deepest part of the dungeon.

“Well, here we are!” Leshea said, the only one of them to bounce right back. Behind her, Fay, Pearl, and Nel all heaved sighs of relief. If they had been falling even a little faster, no doubt the whole party would have been wiped out.

“...I think I landed on my hips...and my back,” Fay said.

“...I landed on my butt,” Pearl complained.

“...And I think I scuffed my knees, but at least we’re all right,” said Nel.

They looked up to find themselves confronted with a massive, silent space.

A gigantic, circular coliseum.

The walls, floor, and ceiling were all made of huge chunks of stone patterned like marble. Fay couldn’t guess what skill or technology made it possible, but the blocks were all perfect cubes, set so close to one another that you couldn’t fit a razor blade between them.

Defeat the final boss: this was a battlefield massive and impressive enough to fit the win condition of this labyrinth.

As long as you closed your eyes to one little problem...

The final boss was nowhere to be found.

“I SLEEPETH HERE.”

They couldn’t miss it: smack in the center of the coliseum stood a small pyramid, about two meters tall. In front of it was a wooden sign.

“NO HUMANS CLEARED MY LABYRINTH, AND I GREW TIRED OF WAITING.”

““““Don’t die on uuuuuusss!”””” Fay, Leshea, Pearl, and Nel all cried at once, their voices harmonizing in a symphony of protest.

Yes, they had known. They could have predicted this. They could have guessed the god had disappeared, despairing of ever finding anyone who could clear the labyrinth. But to have it land almost like a joke?

“This stinks! This labyrinth keeps yanking our chain every which way!” Pearl yelled. She stalked right up to the pyramid and started pounding it with her fists. “I’ve had enough! I know you’re in there, god!”

“H-hey, Pearl?!”

“Taste my fist of rage!”

Poik. With an adorable noise, Pearl’s punch smacked against the pyramid, but the structure didn’t so much as quiver.

“Eeeeeeeeyooooooooowch! Hrk... All right, Nel, your turn!”

“You want me to—?! W-well, all right!”

Nel launched a kick against the pyramid, spinning herself like a top to gain momentum before sending a vicious reverse roundhouse. It made a tremendous noise as it landed, but still the pyramid didn’t budge. The strike appeared to have been completely ineffective.

“No use, Pearl,” Nel said with a defeated shake of her head. “Do you remember how the Sleeping Lion reduced all damage done to it to 1? From the feel of this thing, I’d say the god’s tomb reduces all damage to 0. I doubt even Lady Leshea could pry this thing open, let alone humans like us.”

A god’s grave was a sacred space, utterly inviolable. No one of any kind would be permitted to enter, to invade it.

“Mistress Undefeated might have been able to do something about this, but she’s not in the game anymore. Then again, even if we busted this thing open, all we’d find is a god’s corpse. What good would that do us?”

“Urk... When...when you put it that way...” Pearl sighed heavily. “I guess there’s really no point.”

“All right, Master Fay. It’s time for you to share what you’ve been thinking,” Nel said, turning to Fay with a small nod. “The god who serves as the last boss is dead, and its tomb is completely unbreakable, as we’ve demonstrated. It looks to me like you were exactly right—it’s not possible to clear this game.”

“Yeah, I’m with you. I don’t think there’s anything we can do about this tomb.”

“But you still think we can finish the game?”

“I don’t know. I just think we aren’t out of tricks yet.”

There were no obvious clues right on the god’s grave or the sign. The same was true of the coliseum—the marble-like stones that seemed to shine with light were probably just there to provide illumination. Nothing else about them seemed notable.

“Question for you, Nel. How far do you think we should trust what the meep said?”

“Hrm? I’m not sure what you mean.”

“In the tutorial, the meep told us about the legend of this labyrinth, right?”

Once upon a time there was a god who loved building mazes. This god would wait in the innermost depths of its labyrinth, excited for humans to come and find it. But no one ever finished the maze, and eventually the god died of boredom.

“If the god is the game master, then the meep is the rule book. Absolutely neutral in all matters relating to the game. So I’d like to trust the meep as I *challenge this thing.*”

“Master Fay... Exactly which words are you referring to?”

“The meep acknowledged the final boss is dead—but then it pointedly said something else.”

“No matter how trying the trial, no matter how fearsome the foe, with your wits and courage, you will forge a path!”

They could overcome any difficulty. Maybe that *included* the dead god?

“So here’s where my strategy starts.” Fay turned toward them, putting his back to the god’s tomb, and spoke to the three young women. “If we can’t finish the game because the final boss is dead, then we just have to *revive* them and then defeat them!”

“What?!” Nel said, shocked.

“Whaaaaaat?! Are you insane?!” Pearl cried, her eyes going wide.

Between the two of them stood Leshea, who clapped her hands and said, “Oh! That almost sounds doable. This *is* the ‘Labyrinth of Death and Rebirth,’ after all. It’s right there in the name. In this labyrinth, after death comes... rebirth!”

““Huuuuuuh?!”” Pearl and Nel cried again, this time in perfect unison.

They had finally realized: Death wasn’t the end. The concept of rebirth had always been at work in this game.

“You got it. To this very moment, *no one has actually died in this labyrinth.*

Not us players, not the monsters—everyone is revived alike with the respawn.”

And if the god was the last boss, then it would be treated as a monster—which meant it should be possible to resurrect it.

So there was a game that couldn’t be cleared because the god was dead? The way to handle that was...

...respawn the last boss and then defeat it.

So how to do that? What did they need to do to respawn the final boss?

“Think maybe it’s this?” Fay asked.

Tink...

In his hand, he held a pearlescent bell that jingled with a carrying sound. When Pearl and Nel saw it, they both pointed and exclaimed in unison, ““The Resurrection Bell?!””

Yes: the very item dropped by the Sleeping Lion.

One of the Lion’s drops was the save item, Lionheart—but the other was the Resurrection Bell, whose purpose to this point had been mysterious.

The Sleeping Lion’s body gradually grew transparent.

When it was gone, the raid boss left behind loot: an item of pure pearlescent color called the Resurrection Bell.

“I’ve been wondering since we got this thing,” Fay said. “In a game where humans and monsters both respawn, what’s the point of an item that specifically resurrects things? If even one of the players dies, the entire team respawns. There’s no opportunity to resurrect anyone.”

“I see. So we can guess that you must use this item on a monster!” Pearl said.

“I sure didn’t think of that. Way to go, Master Fay,” said Nel. Both of them sighed with admiration.

Leshea nodded, too. “I’m with you. I can’t shake the feeling that there’s *one more condition* we have to fulfill—but the Resurrection Bell is definitely the way to go, I think.”

“Huh? What do you mean by that, Leshea?” Pearl asked.

“We’ll just have to try some stuff out. Pearl, catch,” Fay said, and then he tossed the bell to her. That most precious of items flew through the air, gleaming as it went, until Pearl caught it in her hand. “Give it a ring near the tomb. If we’re lucky, the final boss will come back to life.”

“Wouldn’t that mean we would have to fight it immediately?”

“Yep.”

“Terrifying much?!”

“No, no, it’s fine. I don’t think it’ll actually come to a battle,” Leshea said. She had already noticed.

Nel was giving them a skeptical squint, while Pearl, holding the bell, just looked plain flummoxed.

“O-okay, well, anyway, I’m going to try it. All right, final boss, it’s resurrection time!”

Riiiiing.

A gorgeous sound to summon the dead echoed around Lucemia, the Labyrinth of Death and Rebirth. It bounced back and forth off the walls, a note light and cool. This lovely, multilayered wavelength would be able to pass through the tomb’s outer walls and reach what was inside.

But the god’s tomb showed no change.

“Wh-why isn’t anything happening?!” Pearl asked.

“Looks like my less favorable prediction was the accurate one,” Fay said thoughtfully. “I guess maybe we’re actually going to have to get serious.”

“Fay?!”

“It’s just like Leshea said. The Resurrection Bell is probably a key item, but there’s some other condition for bringing the god back that we haven’t fulfilled yet.”

To put it another way—*the reason the god had died was still in force.*

“All right, let’s bring Nel into this conversation. Why did the god die, again?”

“I-it’s right there on the sign, isn’t it? Because there were no players who

could clear the maze!”

“Right. Which means...”

It *still* wasn’t enough.

“*This* isn’t cutting it.” Fay pointed above his own head to the floating number, 11.9 percent. “The *unlock percentage*.”

“You can’t be serious!”

It was just what the meep had said: The number was a demonstration of their passion for the labyrinth.

“You’re right, it *is* right on the sign. ‘*No humans cleared my labyrinth, and I grew tired of waiting.*’ If you ask me, it might as well say, ‘If you want something with the god, get a hundred percent clear.’”

They just had to clear everything. If someone actually got all the way through the maze, the god would *have* to acknowledge their achievement.

“One hundred percent unlock percentage, that’s the goal. We have to go through *every area of this labyrinth*, activate every gimmick, beat every boss, collect every item. Then the god will come back to life.”

“Excuse me?! Th-this is no laughing matter, Fay! You’re talking about achieving the impossible!” Pearl said.

“Hey, we’ve just got to do it.” Fay asked if they were ready to start clearing the maze in earnest—to show that he himself was prepared.

The unlock percentage was a sign of passion, necessary to free the god from its tomb.

They were aiming to get the final boss to respawn. In order to do that, they would need a 100 percent unlock percentage.

“The meep was telling the truth. It said the areas we’ve been through were just about ten percent of the labyrinth. And our current unlock percentage is 11.9 percent. The numbers just about line up.”

“This is going to take thousands of hours!”

“Maybe tens of thousands. Master Fay, is this really the only way?”

“We’ll all do it *together*.” Fay turned back toward the tomb and spread his arms wide, raising his voice. “There are a hundred fifty people who have been wandering this maze for hundreds of hours without being able to get home. There’s another fifty of us on the rescue teams. First what we do is, the two hundred of us need to link up and share everything we know with one another. Every trick for upping our completion percentage.”

“That’s...a big plan.”

“Urgh... But you’re right. It’s the only way!”

“It’ll get us a big jump, right?” Fay said, giving the two fretful young women a thumbs-up. “This game just went from ‘impossible to finish’ to ‘possible to finish if you have enough time.’ The players just have to be passionate enough.”

Player.3

Complete Game

Gods’ Games We Play

1

Lucemia, the Labyrinth of Death and Rebirth: the Execution Grounds, home of the Sleeping Lion, were set as the current respawn point for the players.

There were two kinds of respawn. One was the “do-over” you got when your party was annihilated. The other was the “restart” that occurred when players dove in again from the human world.

“Hello, and welcome back. I greet your return with gladness!”

“Great... Me, I never wanted to come back here. But I couldn’t live with myself if I let Fay do it all himself.”

Ashlan, captain of Team Blaze, heaved a great sigh to be back in this game. No sooner had he respawned in the Execution Grounds, though, than he let out a yelp of surprise. “Whoa!”

It was the sheer number of crafted items that shocked him; they all but buried the room. Rare equipment like the Mirage Axe, the False Spirit Sword Vierge, the Crown of Destruction, the King Puffball’s Beard, Angel Pizaprin’s Sacred Garment, and the Final Battle–Use Weapon, the Megalith Rocket. There were rare summon items like the Sleeping Lion 3D Model and the Sphinx 3D Model. Rare consumables like the Cheater’s Dice, the???’s Blood, and the Level III Controlled Substance, Devil Wine. There were rare crafting components like Orihalcon, Scarletite, World-Seed Feathers, and Drakenail. The list went on.

“All this stuff is rare as hell! How long did they spend finding it all?!”

Ashlan swallowed heavily. Each and every one of the items in this room was way harder than average to obtain—you would have to take down nigh-undefeatable area bosses, going in knowing you might die dozens of times in the attempt, or otherwise work your way through some of the most trap-laden parts of the maze.

“All right, where is he? Where’s Fay?”

“Over here, Captain Ashlan! Right here!” There he was—Fay had returned to the Execution Grounds clutching a massive violin. “It’s a big help to have you here. Getting one hundred percent clear was going to be tough with just us.”

“Yeah, okay. Fay, what the hell is that? You gonna put on a recital?”

“It’s a loot item from defeating one of the area bosses deeper in. Defeating area bosses boosts your unlock percentage, so I think we need to try to take down all of them at least once.”

“And what percentage are you at now?”

“All of us together have gotten up to thirty-four percent.”

The unlock percentage: Ashlan had already been briefed on what that number signified.

Several hours earlier, Fay had returned to the human world via a save point. He’d called Captain Ashlan, who had been in a conference room in the Arcane Court building, and asked him for help in his plan to completely clear the labyrinth.

“A hundred percent, huh?! When you told me, I thought you had to be joking.” Captain Ashlan took a slow look around the room. “But it looks like you meant it.”

Along with the piles and piles of rare items, a huge map had been affixed to a wall of the Execution Grounds.

Fay had made dozens and dozens of Clay Tablets, one of the craftable items, and put them together like puzzle pieces to form a map inscribed with information about Lucemia’s various zones. Which monsters appeared, what the area boss was, loot items, gimmicks and traps to be found there. All the

information a player could ever want. A young man and woman sat carving away at the mural with a knife.

“Hey, Ranios. There was a rare monster on the third floor of the northern area, right? What was it called? And what were the characteristics and loot item?”

“It was the Dancing Scimitar. It drops the rare item Orihalcon when you beat it.”

“Got it.”

“Nayuta, about this intersection on the far left of the first underground level on the south side...”

“That was a dead end.”

“Right.”

The guy was hulking and muscled, while the girl had dull red hair.

Ranios, from the Steel Wall City, and Nayuta, from the East Asia City. Both the leaders of their cities’ respective rescue teams, and two people who had eagerly volunteered to help Fay in his full-completion attempt.

And they weren’t the only ones.

“Ezrace, you’re taking forever. Have you *really* been trying to clear the eastern side?”

“I sure have, Nayuta!” The young man with the vibrant golden hair smiled, a bit embarrassed. It was Ezrace, the representative of the Ocean City of Fisshara. “There was this pit trap on the second floor over there. It turned out to be a super-complicated maze that took me eight hours to get through, but it only boosted my unlock percentage by 0.2 percent. Make sure you make a note of it. I have a separate piece of paper with the layout of the maze.”

“Second floor, east side. Got it.” Nayuta scratched Ezrace’s info into the clay tablets.

Captain Ashlan watched them for a moment, then said, “That is *serious* cooperation.” He couldn’t keep the note of admiration from his voice.

“It’s all-hands-on-deck, is what it is,” Fay said with a wry smile. “I’ve been bringing in every apostle I can find in this maze. I’ve asked Captain Kilhiedge from headquarters for help, too, and he was more than happy to agree. He’s off scouting right now.”

“Wow. Headquarters, huh? Hang on... Headquarters! That reminds me!” Captain Ashlan clapped his hands. “You’ve been in the maze all this time, so you wouldn’t know. Headquarters is on the move. Sounds like their guys finally decided to get their asses in gear—what with all the apostles still lost in here, they said.”

“Their guys?”

“You know—Mind Over Matter! The biggest-name team at headquarters!”

“Really? Wow, that’s a relief.”

The four people who constituted Mind Over Matter were the strongest team in the world today—many said they were the strongest team in all of history. They had a collective record of 7-1, including gods who, like Uroboros, had been considered unbeatable. The “Three Great Impossibles” used to be the “Five Great Impossibles,” and it was Mind Over Matter’s work that had knocked two Impossibles off that list.

Their leader was Saint Heleneia—by all accounts, a girl in her teens, not so different from Fay himself.

“If we want to completely clear this labyrinth, then I hope we can link up with them. They’d be about a hundred times more inspiring than I am,” Ashlan said.

“I find you inspiring, Captain Ashlan.”

“What, really?”

“Yeah, so on that note, let’s have a strategy meeting. Anytime you get any rare items, bring them to the Execution Grounds here. I’ll take them for you.” Fay held out a small silver key. This item was the turning point; it was what would allow them to achieve 100 percent clear. “This is called the Treasure Hall Master Key, and it allows you to hold virtually unlimited numbers of items.”

“Geez! Talk about OP!”

“Plus, even if you get wiped out, you don’t lose your items. It’s serious stuff.”

This was the loot item they’d received from Sphinx. It allowed them to tackle even the most dangerous trap zones without fear.

“Holy hell! That’s, like, a...super, ultra item! Where the hell did you get it?!”

“From a raid boss right near the end of the maze. It was all thanks to Uroboros that we were able to... Oh, right, that reminds me. Did you happen to see Uroboros while you were over there in the human world? She kind of got kicked out of the game, and I’m just hoping she’s all right...”

“Yeah, she’s lounging around on *your* bed. The Chief Secretary saw her herself.”

“My bed?!”

“Yeah, with a thing of ice cream she got from the fridge. And the air conditioner on full blast.”

“I’m glad she’s okay, but wow! I guess she’s making herself right at home...”

Turns out Fay hadn’t needed to worry. He heaved a sigh.

Just then, a young woman with an intellectual air—glasses and everything—came rushing up, out of breath.

“We just made a huge discovery!” she said. This was Camilla, captain of Team Archangel.

It had happened only moments ago: Fay and his group had rescued Camilla as she was being attacked by a horde of Zombie Puffballs, and he had recruited her as part of his maze-clearing effort. She’d already told him everything she knew about the rare items she’d crafted and the rare monsters she’d beaten.

“It’s that crumbling wall in the north passage. If you break through it, there’s a secret tunnel! It leads to a whole new area. It’s full of a new kind of monster that looks like a dinosaur!”

“Thanks, Camilla. We better hurry up and check out—”

“We’ve made the biggest, craziest discovery!” Pearl interrupted, racing up. In each hand, she had a puffball, those fuzzy monsters. They should have been

zombies, this being Mausoleum Mode—but in fact, they were ordinary puffballs.

“Hang on, aren’t those...?”

“We brought them back to life! From being zombies!” She hugged the puffballs close. “Remember how after the puffball spat on us, we were able to wash the stink off in the waterfall? So I had this thought...”

“You washed a Zombie Puffball in the waterfall?”

“Yes! And look! It went back to being a sweet little Puffle!”

They’d just gotten another major clue.

The maze was definitely designed so even monsters that appeared to be dead could be brought back to life.

“That’s not all!”

“Sorry to keep you waiting, Master Fay!”

Nel and Leshea came up, each holding a puffball.

“When we restored all the Zombie Puffballs to regular puffballs, they were so grateful that they showed us to a secret area, Puffball Village!”

“Mm! We even received an audience with the King Puffball, and it immediately upped our unlock number by an entire percent,” Nel added.

“You’ve already been and gone?!”

While Fay had been back in the real world, his three companions still in the labyrinth had been working assiduously at clearing it.

“As a sign of his gratitude, the king gave us the Puffball Crest. It means no puffballs will be hostile to us while we explore!”

“Man, I wanted to see the Puffball Village... Oh well. Anyway, Captain Ashlan, I think you see what we’re doing.” Fay turned back toward the other team captain, who was eagerly studying the rare items. “We’re exploring this dungeon one piece at a time. I was hoping you could help us.”

“Yeah, sure. Don’t mind if I do.” He gave Fay a tired smile. “Just leave it to me. I didn’t spend more than a hundred hours wandering around down here for

nothing!”

2

In the divine Lucemia labyrinth, the “unlock percentage” probably corresponded to anything from several hundred to several thousand gimmicks, as could be guessed from the way the number went up by tenths of a percent.

There were rare items to discover and craft. Rare monsters (like Angel Pizaprin) with unique events. Area bosses (like the Golden Puffball or Dark Puffball) to defeat. Raid bosses (like the Sleeping Lion and Sphinx) to overcome. Even seemingly ordinary monsters like the Zombie Puffballs could be tied to secret events, like what happened when they were all washed in the waterfall and returned to being regular puffballs.

“I think the hidden events are going to be the toughest part,” Leshea observed. Four sets of footsteps could be heard walking down the hallway, and Leshea was bringing up the rear of the group. “The area bosses can be hard to defeat, but if you just keep trying respawn after respawn, you can eventually do it. I think the biggest hurdle to getting a hundred percent unlock is going to be finding all the hidden events.”



“Yeah! I was thinking just the same thing,” said Pearl with a nod. She had a cookie in her mouth. Namely, a Puffball Cookie, which she’d received in the Puffball Village. Eating it caused your chance of encountering monsters to go down...for some reason. That would allow them to focus on actually exploring the labyrinth. “We only just happened to think of washing the Zombie Puffballs in the waterfall. I feel like you could walk right by a hidden event and never know it! I hope our ‘human wave’ tactics can get us through this...”

They currently had six separate teams working on the complete clear: Fay and his three companions. Captain Ashlan’s Team Blaze, with twenty people. Camilla and her Archangel team from Mal-ra, nine people. In addition, they had found two groups of lost apostles and one of the other rescue teams wandering the maze, and they’d recruited them to join the exploration effort.

“Hoh! Master Fay, I think this is it.”

They were in the hallway north of the Execution Grounds, and Nel was pointing at an otherwise unremarkable wall. They’d always passed by without paying it any special mind, but now it had a gaping hole in it. “This is the hidden passageway Camilla’s group found by crafting the Cheating Compass. They said it goes to some new area.”

“I see. A tunnel you can’t find without a special item.”

They ducked through the hole and found themselves no longer surrounded by eerily pulsating walls, but in a forest that spread out as far as they could see. A massive jungle that looked like a tropical rainforest.

“Are we...still inside the maze?” Pearl said.

“I don’t think we can assume anything anymore,” Fay replied. “Hey, this area isn’t in Mausoleum Mode, is it? Look at those bright, healthy leaves.”

There were rich, green trees everywhere. Birds were singing, flowers were blooming, and butterflies rested on their petals. It had been so long since they’d seen such a pleasant and relaxing scene that they had almost forgotten what it felt like.

“Ahh, this is so nice. Fragrant flowers, and trees with *ripe, bright red fruit* just hanging from the... Just hanging from...” Pearl froze in place. She was as

immobile as a still life painting, except for a single bead of sweat that trickled down her cheek.

Bright red fruit?

In this labyrinth, Killer Apples were synonymous with brutal ambush, and branches heaving with them now hung over the party's heads.

"A whole *forest* of Killer Apples?!" Pearl cried.

"Watch out! Pearl, retreat!" Fay cried.

He and the others jumped back, but Pearl, at the head of the group, said, "I will not!" She clenched her fists and glowered up at the apples hanging over their heads. "In fact, this is perfect. I've been taken by surprise from my blind spot before—but with this many apples right over my head, I'll never be silly enough to let my guard down. As long as I'm completely alert, I'll be able to dodge anything with my teleportation!"

"Wow, great call!"

"Plus, if our other experiences are anything to go by, out of all these thousands of apples, only about ten percent of them will actually try to attack me. I just have to be ready for them!"

Pearl strode bravely into the jungle. She pointed at the bright red fruit bobbing in the wind. "Come at me anytime. What are you planning? Two at a time? Three? Ha! Make it five, I don't care! I have my teleportation!"

Pearl's Teleport ability worked within a range of thirty meters. Even if apples came flying at her from every direction, she could simply zip thirty meters away and escape.

"Huh! No takers? I figured as much. You only know how to fight dirty." Pearl smiled triumphantly.

Fwwwshhh.

Just then, a great gust of wind blew through the forest of Killer Apple trees.

The fruit began to bob eagerly. Not just one or two of them—the whole forest full of ripe apples, *all at once*.

“Huh...?”

Boom!

The sound was like the roar of a cannon, but the pace was like that of a machine gun.

All the Killer Apples in the forest came down simultaneously.

They covered the thirty-meter radius of Teleport easily. In fact, if Pearl could have warped herself a hundred meters, it wouldn't have helped. Countless apples piled in.

“Pearl! This is because you antagonized them!”

“It's not my fauuuuuult!”

Fay and the others had entered a hidden area, the Forest of Red Fruit. And now, they ran right back out again as fast as they could.

Same time, different place.

Right about when Fay and the others were entering the forest of Killer Apples, a combined force consisting of Ashlan's Blaze and Camilla's Archangel—twenty-one people total—was exploring the dungeon together.

They'd backtracked from the Execution Grounds to where the hallway split off. They had opened the locked door using a craftable item called the Small Mithril Key, and beyond the door, they had found a long, straight hallway. This went beyond something you could cover in a hundred-meter dash—it was so long, it felt like you could have run a marathon down it.

“Is this it? Is this what that Angel, Pizaprin, was talking about?” Ashlan asked.

“Yeah. When we wished for him to tell us about any area bosses we hadn't fought yet, this hallway is what he revealed to us,” Camilla said with a nod.

Angel Pizaprin, who had unlocked the Treasure Hall door for Fay's group, was willing to grant one wish to each team. So Camilla had asked him for information.

“Dumb angel... When I asked him to resurrect the final boss for us, he was like, ‘That wish is beyond even my abilities.’ He flat out said no!”

“Come on. Did you think it would be that easy? Anyway, stay focused. There’s something weird about this hallway!” Camilla turned around, sliding her glasses up the bridge of her nose and looking troubled. “We came here because there was supposed to be an area boss around, but how many kilometers have we walked? How far do we have to go here?”

“Actually, Camilla...I think we’re almost there.”

They could see a dead end. The wall was perfectly white, and the hallway simply terminated there. After walking kilometer after kilometer, they hadn’t seen any boss—they’d just come to the end of the hallway.

“Aw, what’s the deal?! There’s something *extra* weird about this dead end... Huh?”

Camilla frowned. Was she seeing things? The wall, which had looked so far away a moment ago, seemed closer. Almost as if it was coming toward them...

“Captain, the wall is moving!” one of Ashlan’s people shouted at the top of their lungs. “That white wall *is* the boss!”

“You’re kidding!”

It was an enormous eraser. It filled the entire hallway from floor to ceiling, forming an oncoming wall rampaging toward them down the hallway.

“No way! *That’s* the area boss?!” Ashlan pulled out a crafted item, the Encyclopedia Specs, and put them on. They revealed information about the monster:

Area Boss: King Eraser

A powerful enemy that neutralizes all materials and all attacks. If it touches you, you’ll be erased... So you’d better run!

“Frostbite!” Camilla cried, unleashing a burst of magic. *Boosh!* The moment it struck the King Eraser, her spell was neutralized—erased.

“Okay, this boss is dangerous as hell! Everybody beat feet!” Ashlan shouted.

“It’s got a dumb name and it looks silly—where does it get off being so strong?!” Camilla added.

Everyone did an about-face and raced away as fast as they could.

From behind, they could hear a deep rumble as the King Eraser advanced toward them, eliminating the walls and ceiling and everything in its path.

“This is terrifying! It’s, like, a hundred times scarier than some silly horror thing!”

“How are we supposed to beat that monster?!”

Then the party was wiped out.

They respawned, tried again, then tried *again*...

“Captain Camilla. Doesn’t it look like it’s getting smaller as it chases us?”

“Wha...?”

“It’s an eraser, you know? Erasing the floors and walls and stuff must naturally wear it down. That’s what I thought the first time we fought it...”

“Then why did you wait until we’d been annihilated four times to bring it up?! Hrk!”

Some two hours later, Ashlan and Camilla’s combined team succeeded in running until the enemy had completely worn itself away, and so they passed that particular trial with flying colors.

3

The unlock percentage would “unlock” the god from its tomb. But just how many gimmicks were there to find in this sprawling labyrinth? There were brutal area bosses and extraordinarily cruel raid bosses. Among the items, which numbered in the thousands, there were rare objects that could only be found through crafting—and hidden tunnels that couldn’t be discovered unless you had those rare items.

How long has it been? How much time has passed in the real world? Fay wondered. Including him and his group, they had six teams with about fifty people working on the problem, everybody exploring the dungeon as fast and

as hard as they could.

Finally, they had cleared every area. Collected every item. Destroyed every boss monster.

Their unlock percentage was 99.9 percent.

“So...so tired... I can’t move another inch,” Captain Ashlan said.

“I’m at the end of my rope... What...what could possibly be left?” asked Camilla. They lay exhausted in the Execution Grounds. All around them, their teammates likewise slumped on the ground, pale and burned out.

It was then that Pearl came rushing in, short of breath. “Fay! We found the last gimmick!”

“You mean it?!”

“This way! We found it by chance when Leshea started smashing every dead end in the dungeon!”

“Just decided to brute-force it, huh?” Fay let Pearl lead him into the depths of the maze. They came to where Nel and Leshea were standing.

“Right here, Fay!” Leshea said.

“It’s this shrine,” Nel said. “It’s a weird place—apparently it’s for worshipping dice or something?”

Beyond the smashed dungeon wall was a cramped space with what appeared to be an altar. There was a shrine there, just a pile of mossy rocks.

The object of veneration seemed to be a large stone tray and six stone dice. The dice, however, weren’t the familiar six-sided kind, but had twenty-four faces, each carved with a number from 1 to 24.

“Six twenty-four-sided dice,” Fay observed. “The fact that they aren’t just normal six-sided dice seems like an obvious clue.”

“Fay—I found a stone stele over here!” Leshea said, beckoning to him from behind the shrine. About a meter in diameter, it bore a single, seemingly simple task.

ALL FOR ONE: MAKE THEM ALL ONE.

So the last test of all was one of luck.

There were six twenty-four-sided dice, and they were to make all of them show 1.

“Wait, what are the chances of that?!” Nel said as she looked down at the mossy stone dice. “These are twenty-four-sided dice, here! That means there’s about a four percent chance any given number will show up. Multiply that by six, and you get, uh...”

“About 0.0000004096 percent?” Leshea said immediately. “By a rough calculation, you’d need to roll the dice about two hundred thousand times to get that to happen. If it takes five seconds to roll them, that’d be ten million seconds.”

“Leshea...? How much time is ten million seconds?” Pearl asked.

“Thirty-two years.”

“That’s the timescale we’re talking about?! And that’s before you include time to sleep or anything... Wait, why am I even thinking about that? The entire idea is insane!”

“Oh, go for it, Pearl. Just give it a try!”

“I couldn’t!” She looked down at the dice and gulped. She didn’t move. “I don’t really want to touch dice with all this gross moss... Oh, fine! Yah!”

She grabbed the dice and flung them as hard as she could. They clattered around the stone plate and came up 8, 19, 3, 23, 24, 15.

“Not even close. I thought maybe we could get at least five of the six to show 1.”

“You’re nuts!”

“No, we *can* do it,” Leshea said.

She took the six dice in her hands, five of them in her left, just one in her right. Then she flung the one in her right hand onto the plate.

1.

The second and the third each came up 1, too.

“Huh? H-how are you doing that?!”

“I’m just rolling for what I want, obviously. It’s just a way of rolling the dice.”

Dice control: a game player as passionate and experienced as Leshea could get even a twenty-four-sided die to show the specific face she wanted.

The 1’s piled up: 1, 1, 1, 1, 1.

“Y-you make it look easy, Leshea!” Pearl said.

“One more to go,” she replied.

The sixth die tumbled across the platter and landed on 1—but then something strange happened. It should have come to rest there, but instead it tipped and rolled another half-turn. It stopped on, of all things, 4.

1, 1, 1, 1, 1, 4.

The very last die showed the wrong number, and they failed the challenge.

“N-no! Why?! It was obviously stopping on 1! Your dice control was perfect, Leshea!” said Pearl.

“A little too perfect,” Leshea said, chuckling dryly. “Deliberately manipulating the rolls is against the rules. The message seems to be, *Trust the dice.*”

“Then it’s completely down to luck, isn’t it?!”

“If that’s the case, maybe we’re allowed to change dice.” Fay reached into his item bag. There were more than a thousand craftable items in the dungeon, about the upper 10 percent of which were considered “rare,” and the purpose of some of them remained unexplained.

“There was an item, the Cheater’s Dice. I thought it was strange—none of the other tricks and traps involve pure luck. But maybe it would make sense to use them here at this shrine? Besides, the stele doesn’t say we have to use the stone dice.”

They could just change out the stone dice with a set created specifically to cheat. It was against the rules for the players to control the outcome of the rolls, but if it was the *dice themselves* doing it, there was a good chance that would be acceptable.

“Th-that’s it, Fay! Trade them all out for the Cheater’s Dice, and then they’ll all roll 1!” Pearl said.

“It’d take a while,” Fay replied.

“Sorry?”

“The components of the Cheater’s Dice include Game Equipment Blueprints 1 and Orihalcon. And Orihalcon is a very rare drop—you hardly ever see it. What we had, we got from Captain Ashlan.”

The area boss King Eraser dropped one Orihalcon when it was defeated. Sometimes, it was also dropped by the rare monster Dancing Scimitar...

“But those only show up about once every eighteen hours. And the drop rate on Orihalcon from them is about five percent, so we could be looking at two weeks just to get one piece.”

Ten weeks to collect five Orihalcon. In other words, if they wanted to make five more Cheater’s Dice, they would spend the next two months and more just collecting the components.

“We’ll never last that long!”

“That’s why I want to do this with what we’ve got on hand right now.”

Six mossy, stone dice with twenty-four sides.

First, they could trade out one of them with the Cheater’s Dice they had. That would mean they only had to roll 1’s on five dice.

“Realistically, I’d like... Let’s see. Three Cheater’s Dice, I guess. Then only three of the dice would have to come up 1 by luck. That would be a rate of about 0.0064 percent, which is manageable. I guess we can leave it to Captain Ashlan to collect the Orihalcon.”

Division of labor—that was what they needed. They would let another team handle gathering the components for the Cheater’s Dice. Meanwhile, they would keep rolling. Even though they knew, of course, that the chances of success were infinitesimally small.

“Okay, I’ll start,” Fay said.

They would trade off, one person rolling for two hours. Fay went first, but it wasn't as if he expected to get six 1's. And he didn't.

"Man, this *is* tough. Okay, Leshea, your turn."

"Just leave it to me!"

Next came Leshea, but even with the powerful good fortune of a former god on their side, it was all they could do to roll four 1's at once.

"Aw, we're just getting started," Leshea opined. "You're up next, Nel!"

"I've never been very good at contests of luck—but I'll do what I can!"

Nel threw herself into the task, but after two solid hours, she hadn't gotten anywhere near a successful roll.

"I've never been very good at contests of luck—I leave it in your hands, Pearl."

"My hands are ready!"

In the end, though, the four of them rolled for eight hours with no success at all.

"I can't believe 5,760 rolls didn't get us *anywhere!*" Pearl bawled and flung the dice down. She was breathing hard from rolling dice nonstop, and her right shoulder was so tired she could barely raise her arm more than ten centimeters off the ground. Her muscles ached.

This was going to be even rougher than they'd thought.

At least, so they believed until they heard a great whoop from behind them.

"At last I've found you—Fay!"

There was a clatter of footsteps, and a young man in a black coat emerged from the passageway. He had dull silver hair and a sharp gaze that communicated sheer force of will. Fay knew him well.

"Dax?! You're here, too?!"

"Mm! I knew destiny would always draw us to each other!"

Dax Gear Scimitar. An apostle from Mal-ra, his breezy good looks and

powerful gameplay bestowed upon him such charisma that he was sometimes called the Prince of Games.

“This reunion was fated. Fay! From the moment I set foot in this divine labyrinth, I foresaw this future!”

“Not that destiny kept him from getting plenty lost on the way,” muttered a tanned girl just behind him: Kelritch. As his partner, she accompanied him every day, and she didn’t sound very impressed. Now she said, “I must apologize for Dax.”

“Fay! I see you seek to completely clear this labyrinth. I’d expect no less from my destined rival. However!” Dax spared a glance at the shrine behind them. When he saw the six twenty-four-sided dice on the stone platter, the Mal-ra apostle grunted, almost as if he was surprised. “Fay... Don’t tell me a man of your abilities is stymied by such a simple test.”

“I guess you could call it simple. But the percentages are just too low!”

“Then allow me to enlighten you!”

“Are you listening?!”

“What *is* luck? Is it a matter of percentages? Is it fortune given from the heavens? I tell you, no! Luck is the power of destiny that a person draws to themselves with their own hand. As the ultimate fighter, this is my moment!”

“Um...you wanna try rolling them?”

“Perhaps I shall. But first!” Dax swept up the six dice. Fay thought he was going to fling them straight back down, but instead, for some reason, he took out a brand-new handkerchief. Then he began to polish each of the mossy dice.

“Dax... What are you doing?” Kelritch asked.

“Behold, Kelritch. You must understand this act.”

“I don’t. That’s why I’m asking.”

“I despise this moss and filth. Dice that I am to roll must shine!”

Squeak, squeak. He worked away at the old dice with his handkerchief. Fay and the rest of them watched him for a few minutes. Finally, he said, “It is done.

Behold the shine!”

Wow!

Everyone around him exclaimed with amazement. His careful work had polished the dice from moss-covered until they gleamed like beautiful pearls.

This was the true form of the dice, those symbols of luck, that were venerated here at this shrine.

“The moment has come! Show me your power!” Dax howled. He clutched the glimmering dice and raised his hand high. “O gathered messengers of destiny! The time is nigh! Bring forth a new age; open now the door of glory! I dub thee —Dax Dice!”

“That’s your big, impressive name?!”

The dice flew through the air. Six glimmering, twenty-four-sided objects danced across the stone platter. And they came to rest at the same moment, in beautiful harmony.

1, 1, 1, 1, 1, 1.

“No way!” Fay and his teammates exclaimed in unison.

But Kelritch, sounding almost philosophical, said, “That’s Dax for you.”

And these were Dax Dice!

Was it because of Dax’s uniquely bountiful luck? Had the dice responded with gratitude to the human player who had polished them? Or had they been inspired by his bold proclamation?

Whatever it was, the instant all six dice came to rest with 1’s showing, the stone plate beneath them began to glow. It was no longer stone, but an item in its own right, a mirror that shone with sacred light.

The Bright Mirror of Dawn: Automatically activates when an attack would kill you in one hit. Allows the party to escape destruction one time.

And that wasn’t all. The light from the mirror extended to the ceiling and to every wall, and every surface of the labyrinth it touched was returned to

normal.

Mausoleum Mode had been deactivated. The sickly pattern disappeared, and the walls, floor, and ceiling once again returned to beautiful, polished stone.



“That’s it, my friends! I knew you could do it if you tried!” Dax told the dice approvingly. He nodded in complete satisfaction, then turned on his heel, his black coat swirling. “Fay! We are lifelong rivals, so appointed and guided by the destiny known as games! But in this particular game are many who wish to return home. Let us postpone our contest for now!”

“Huh? You’re leaving already?”

“We’re prioritizing finding the lost apostles. If you’ll excuse us,” Kelritch said with a dip of her head. Then she trotted quickly to catch up with Dax, who was already proceeding out of the grotto. They heard her ask him, “Are you sure you don’t want to go with them? They’re on the cusp of completely clearing this game. You could rack up another win if you followed them.”

“I have my own manner of doing things.”

“Yes, a clumsy manner. You thank him for helping our lost apostles and then just leave? Admittedly, I don’t dislike that upstanding quality of yours.”

The two of them disappeared from view, and the grotto of the dice, so full of chatter until a moment before, fell silent.

In the stillness, it seemed all was over...but only for a second, until Pearl’s scream tore through the air. “N-no way! But why?!”

“What’s up, Pearl? You look like you’ve seen a ghost.”

“W-well, just...just look!” Pearl pointed at Nel. She seemed to be pointing at the girl’s chest—but then her finger moved up, up, until she was pointing above her head.

There hovered her unlock percentage: 99.999 percent.

“What?!” Nel doubted her own eyes. The unlock percentage had already been at 99.9 percent. Once they had cleared the grotto of the dice, it obviously should have ticked up to 100. Everyone had just assumed so. Even Fay.

Yet there was still 0.001 percent to go.

“Huh? Well, that doesn’t make any sense.” Leshea folded her arms, pondering. “Between us, we checked out every corner of every area. And I’m pretty sure we’ve seen every single monster and trap and item around here.”

“Y-yes, Leshea! Yes, we have!” Pearl said, nodding. “We’ve explored every nook and cranny! I was so sure this grotto was the last area of all—this doesn’t make sense! The unlock percentage always advanced by tenths of a percent before. So why is it going out to 99.999 percent now? How can we have 0.001 percent left? It doesn’t work that way!”

It was a fair complaint. The unlock percentage had generally increased by 0.1 percent each time they had defeated an area boss, cleared any event, and so on. No event had ever pushed the percentage out to three decimal places.

Which seems like another way of saying that it’s not that we’ve missed an item or a boss. There’s some tiny little thing we’ve overlooked, Fay thought.

The unlock percentage was telling them something. They were only steps away from clearing this game. They were just missing one thing, something that represented a mere 0.001 percent of the dungeon.

“Maybe we missed something?” Nel asked.

“But Nel, we checked every inch of this labyrinth,” Pearl insisted. “Even if we did miss something, it would be almost impossible to figure out where it was—”

“Pearl,” Fay said, calling the golden-haired girl’s name almost before he thought about it. “*That’s* it!”

“Um...what is?”

“That last 0.001 percent *isn’t in the maze*. It’s outside it. Everyone, let’s head back.”

“I’m sorry, whaaaaaat?! Wh-what are you talking about?”

Fay didn’t answer, but the way he turned around made it obvious. The message was, *Follow me*.

He strode through the endless corridors, passing through the Execution Grounds and their save point with hardly a second glance, until he arrived at the large antechamber that had been their very first respawn point.

“Goodness, welcome back. Are you looking for something?”

“No, we’re fine. I’m after something outside the castle.”

They left the large room with the entrance to Lucemia, heading toward the exit and passing through the castle gate.

There, they were confronted with a grassy plain that spread as far as the eye could see.

Verdant grasses and a profusion of colorful flowers grew there. A pleasant, springlike breeze blew past, and there wasn't a cloud in the blue sky, which stretched out until it met the horizon.

"Master Fay?! Where are you going?!"

"There's no labyrinth this way, Fay! Wait—you're leaving the castle entirely?!"

"I just remembered," Fay said, working his way across the sea of green and enjoying the sensation of the spring breeze. "When did the unlock percentage first appear for us? It wasn't when we entered the labyrinth. It showed up *before that!*"

"—?!" Pearl's breath caught.

"This field is where we arrived when we first dove into this game. We could already see the unlock percentage by that point."

"Huh? What was that?" Pearl asked.

"It went away in a hurry. Number of respawns, maybe?"

"If it were possible to reach one hundred percent unlock just based on the stuff in the labyrinth, then the number wouldn't have appeared till we got there. But it showed up here, which means..."

"There's something to explore here, too?!"

"Exactly. But when we went through here, our unlock percentage was zero."

"Y-yeah, of course. It was all we could do to escape the Killer Apples and make it through." Pearl had respawned twice being attacked by the deadly fruit. That was as close to a trick or trap as they had come—but even evading the apples hadn't increased their percentage. "What else is there?! Do you have an idea, Fay?"

“Yeah. There’s something really big.”

He kept going. He seemed to be heading right back to where they had started the entire game. At last, something large and dark loomed on the horizon.

A pit.

It yawned there, alone in the open field. The moment they saw it, Pearl and Nel both burst into a run.

“Ahhhhh!” Pearl cried.

“Y-yes, that’s it! This pit was here all along!”

Both of them remembered now: They had all *avoided* this pit.

“Looks like an awfully big hole. If you jumped in there, you’d definitely die.”

“So why do you sound like you’re thinking of doing just that, Fay?! We’ve already been annihilated by two different traps! We don’t need any more dumb respawns!”

Pearl had been done in twice by the trick with the Killer Apples. She’d been so worried about dying a third time that they’d avoided jumping in the hole.

But just maybe...

If there’d been a pit this big in the dungeon proper, they absolutely would have jumped in it by now, just to make sure. Maybe there was an item down there, or maybe a boss.

But this thing was outside the labyrinth, a gimmick encountered *before* they’d known the significance of the unlock percentage, while they had still been fresh with the fear of being annihilated.

This had to be it: The very first mind game the god had played on them was also the very last.

“Wow, I really feel like we’re almost there!” Leshea said, approaching the pit. Her vermilion hair flapped in the wind as she stood on the very edge and peered in.

Inside, the pit was almost preternaturally dark. You would hardly be able to see your hand in front of your face down there. What waited after the drop?

“That looks really, really deep. Are you s-sure you want to jump in there?” Pearl asked.

“Not like we need to be afraid of getting wiped at this point. Here goes, Pearl!” Fay said.

And then they jumped.

Fay, Leshea, Pearl, and Nel all dove into the hole. The instant they did so, something glimmered above their heads.

100.00000000000000 percent

“Oh!”

“We did it!”

Pearl and Nel clapped their hands even as they plummeted in freefall. The drop carried them through the pit itself, down tens and then hundreds of meters underground.

When the fall ceased at last, they found themselves somewhere familiar.

“So that’s how it is!” Fay said.

They had fallen from the grassy plain and landed gently in a very particular place.

A gigantic, round coliseum.

In front of them was a pyramid about two meters tall.

Yes: that threatening pit right at the beginning of the game had actually been the shortest route to the deepest chamber.

“Hello, god! We did all the things to make you come back to life!” Pearl said, jogging up to the pyramid. She held the Resurrection Bell in her hand and raised it high. “Now, time for *you* to respawn!”

Riiiiing.

There was a beautiful sound that could summon the souls of the dead...but though they waited and waited, there was no change in the tomb.

“H-huh? Hey, that’s funny...” Pearl blinked, uneasy. She rang the bell again

and again, but all it did was make a nice sound there in the underground coliseum. “Don’t tell me... We *still* haven’t done everything we need to do?”

“All that’s left is passion,” Leshea said, trotting up to Pearl and placing a confident hand on her shoulder. “Take a good look at the sign. ‘No humans cleared my labyrinth, and I grew tired of waiting.’ I think I know what the game master is doing here. It’s a way of saying, ‘Huh! Guess I made my game too hard. Nobody can clear it? Nobody at all? Too bad about that.’ It’s an open taunt!”

“It doesn’t say all that!”

“Which means there’s just one thing for us to say back!”

Leshea took a big, deep breath.

“Ohhh, man! This dungeon was really super easy, huh?”

There was a shiver in the air as Leshea’s yell echoed around the coliseum.

They had solved the god’s little trial. Now it was time for the players to dispense a sneering challenge. “Doesn’t this god have any *real* challenges to offer?” Leshea said loudly. The pyramid showed no reaction—but she kept right on. “We crafted all the items and beat all the bosses. Is that really it?”

“Yeah, color me disappointed!” added Fay. “Kinda takes the wind out of my sails to find out this dungeon was so simple. I hope there’s at least a nice, powerful *final boss* we can fight! Don’t you, Pearl?”

“Y-yes! This was so boring, I’m getting sleepy. A fancy maze like this with no final boss? Fail! Right, Nel?”

“Erm, y-yes indeed! I do wish we could see who built this thing!”

Still the pyramid did nothing.

Leshea decided to give another push. “We got one hundred percent unlock percentage, so I guess we’re done playing. *Unless...* I wonder if the god is *afraid* of someone clearing their game.”

“Afraid? You mean, like, scared?”

“Yeah, shaking in their boots!”

Fay pointed at the silent tomb and called, “Come out! Don’t hide in that boring old tomb. The challengers you’ve waited for so long are finally here!”

Chak.

Chak chak chak...

At that moment, the pyramid began to shudder, small quivers passing through it, shaking the stones of its foundation, shivering away from the walls like a pile of wood blocks coming apart.

“————Wh, Wh, Wh...————”

Finally, it seemed to explode, the top of the pyramid flying clean off, clear into the sky. Out burst a god with light-brown skin.

“Who dares to call this game a boring, easy failure?!”

The god held a staff with yellow and black stripes. The deity appeared as a young girl whose hair was golden in front and purple behind; she flew into the air and came down hard atop the coliseum.

“I lay in my grave and listened—have you said your piece?!”

Her eyes glowed with vitality. Her cheeks were flush with life. It was clear at a glance: The final boss had respawned.

“Save your grumbling for when you have defeated the final boss—me!”

The very last opponent in Lucemia, the Labyrinth of Death and Rebirth, had appeared.

Vs. Anubis, God of the Underworld

Win Condition: Defeat the God of the Underworld.

However, conditions for defeat are unknown.

Lose Condition: Players are in a respawn state.

Notes: Any items obtained in the maze Lucemia may be used.

Player.4

Good Game Well Played

Gods' Games We Play

1

Lucemia, the Labyrinth of Death and Rebirth, was larger than any maze found in human story or myth.

Now that every area had been cleared, every item collected, every boss and monster defeated, and every event unlocked, all that remained was the final battle...

"I am Anubis, God of the Underworld. Game master and final boss of this game."

The girl with light-brown skin stood on the topmost level of the coliseum, excited and ready.

"Now, humans, we play!"

"We'll take her down in one hit! It wouldn't look good for us to come this far just to get smeared by a counterattack!" Fay called to the three young women with him, making his fervor match Anubis's own. "We finish this in a single turn!"

"Heh-heh-heh! I like your spunk. But I'm not the final boss for no reason." Anubis raised her staff. *"Hundred-beast Summon! Come forth, my beloved pets!"*



Rings of light shone, a full hundred of them, and from them emerged monsters of every kind, pouring into the arena. The Sleeping Lion. Sphinx. King Eraser. The Dark Puffball. And on and on. All of them were familiar—and all of them were bosses.

“Nooo! This is gonna be impossiblIIIIIIIIIIe!” Pearl wailed.

“Hold on! Summoning all of these at once?! That’s hardly fair!” Nel added.

This was some final boss! They had naturally expected the last enemy of this twisted labyrinth to put up a serious fight—but none of them had imagined a fight quite like *this*.

A hundred boss monsters? “Impossible” seemed like an understatement.

“Ha-ha-ha! Even better! I raised these myself. I call them EX versions—because they’ve got a little something extra. Let’s start with the Sleeping Lion. Show them your new, even stronger killer move!”

The Sleeping Lion howled, and bright lights began to pour from the ceiling. Fay and the others felt a shiver down their spines. “Everyone, get *those items!*” Fay shouted.

They knew how to respond to this attack in the marrow of their bones. They took the Ordinary Umbrellas from the Treasure Hall Master Key and held them over their heads.

The Sleeping Lion EX uses its Rage Arts: A light descends from heaven and destroys everything.

Everything is destroyed.

Anubis, of course, was unscathed. Fay and his team, who knew how to deal with this attack by now, immediately defended with their umbrellas (which were obliterated in their place).

And...

The ninety-nine other monsters, just as the in-game text had said...were *destroyed*.

“Ahhhhhhhhh! You fool! Why would you destroy your fellow monsters?!”

“.....” The response was only silence.

The Sleeping Lion’s Rage Arts conventionally destroyed “the players.” Anubis had made it stronger so the destruction extended to “everything.” Apparently, that included other monsters.

“Wait! Could this mean...?” Fay said. As he looked up at the deity with her head in her hands, a possibility presented itself to him. The possibility that a god who would create such a bug-riddled, off-the-wall maze had never been somebody who quite had it all together.

“Her *head* is her weak point!”

“*Are you calling me stupid? Who are you calling stupid?!*”

“That’d be you!” Something in Pearl’s hands glowed. She’d pulled another item out of the key, one that hardly seemed appropriate in this dungeon: a massive rocket launcher.

The Final Battle—Use Weapon, the Megalith Rocket. *A single-use rocket launcher that could destroy any monster.*

It was by far the most powerful item they had crafted, and they had saved it all this time specifically to use in the final battle.

“Final bosses were made to be defeated—so take your bow!”

The rocket struck home, the entire coliseum shaking with the flames and the shock wave, which enveloped not just Anubis but the Sleeping Lion as well.

“They don’t call it the Final Battle—Use Weapon for nothing!” Pearl said. “That wraps everything up in a neat little packa—”

“*Mwa-ha-ha! You thought it would be that easy, girl?*”

The billowing black smoke was swept away to reveal Anubis, unharmed.

“*Did you really believe a flea bite like that would stop me?*”

“Well, you’re the one who called it the Final Battle—Use Weapon!”

“*I don’t remember writing that!*”

“I think this god might really be an idiot!”

“Come to me, O Golden Puffball!”

A shimmering golden ball of fluff was summoned to Anubis’s feet. Their first area boss—how could they ever forget? The “God Bless” attack this puffball sneezed out dealt 9,999 damage to every player, regardless of defense.

At the same moment:

“Show them your breath!” Anubis shouted.

“Nel!” Fay called.

As the Golden Puffball exhaled its shimmering breath toward them, Nel was already out in front of the party, kicking high into the sky with her leg. “Right back at you!”

She activated her Arise, Moment Reversal. It could kick anything back the way it came, regardless of energy or mass. Nel kicked the breath, sending it straight back into the face of the Golden Puffball.

“Puuuuuuffff?!”

“Hoh! I see you’ve learned a thing or two as you worked your way through my maze. Why, you’re ready for anything.” The god-girl leered at them, as if to say she would have expected—and accepted—no less. *“I summon a hundred Golden Puffballs!”*

“You *what?*!” Nel exclaimed.

“This is all completely out of proportion! Are you even interested in giving the players a chance to win?!” Pearl protested.

Anubis, however, not only ignored them, she said, *“What’s more! As is my right as game master, I’m changing the system. I’m introducing a stamina meter. Players may only move for up to fifteen consecutive seconds. Using an Arise immediately drains the stamina meter, with a five-second regen timer!”*

“You’re not allowed to just come up with a new game system on the spot!” Pearl said.

“The game has changed—literally!” Leshea exclaimed.

“Such is my power! Nothing is impossible for the game master!” Anubis

triumphantly puffed out her chest. *“With the stamina system, you’ll only be able to beat back a single God Bless with your Arise. If you don’t want to be destroyed, I suggest you start running. Meanwhile, I’ll be intoning the spell for my ultimate technique, God Laser. Seventy seconds from now, when I’m done, you’re all going to be wiped off the map!”*

So now they had seventy seconds left.

In that span of time, they were supposed to defeat a hundred Golden Puffballs and stop Anubis. Ridiculous. Especially when the newly introduced stamina system meant they couldn’t move for more than fifteen seconds at a time.

It was beyond impossible.

“Or at least, that’s what you’d think,” Fay said, an unlikely grin spreading across his face.

“What?!” Anubis’s eyes went wide.

“You’re forgetting something, O god of the underworld! One of the events in the labyrinth involves rescuing the Zombie Puffballs. We have the Puffball Crest!”

It had been a hidden event, one that involved bathing all the Zombie Puffballs in the purifying waterfall. By completing it, they had gained access to a hidden area, Puffball Village, where the King Puffball had granted them the Puffball Crest as a sign of friendship.

“With this in hand, we can avoid battle with any puffballs!”

It was a piece of metal engraved with a picture of a puffball. The moment Fay held it up, all one hundred of the Golden Puffballs stopped in their tracks. Even the ones that had been about to attack the party froze, turned around, and bounced out of the coliseum.

Finally it was just Fay, his party...and one defenseless final boss.

“Hrgh... Curses!” Anubis stood with her staff upraised, unable to move. She clearly hadn’t expected to just lose her Golden Puffballs like that. She had seventy seconds until she finished her deadly incantation, and during that time,

she had no way to protect herself.

“Now’s our chance! She’s paralyzed!” Fay said.

“Focus fire!” ordered Pearl.

They all rushed toward the god.

Anubis looked at them, and then her pronouncement echoed around the coliseum: *“You know what, forget the incantation! I’ve decided it’s possible to fire God Laser without one!”*

“Excuse me?”

“God Laser, go!”

A rainbow-colored light lanced from Anubis’s staff. It didn’t move that fast—if you knew it was coming, it probably could have been easily avoided. But the light of the gods simply came on too suddenly.

Anubis used God Laser.

The players are destroyed. However, the Bright Mirror of Dawn resurrects them this one time.

Plink!

The mirror Fay and his party had with them shattered. If it hadn’t been for the Bright Mirror of Dawn, they would almost certainly have been respawned straight back to the Execution Grounds.

“Hoh? So you have an item that can resurrect you one time. Well, there won’t be a second!”

Even Fay couldn’t stop himself from protesting this time. “Okay, hold on! What was the deal with that?!”

Anubis had rewritten the game rules so her deadliest technique suddenly had no cast time. Not that he couldn’t understand the logic from her perspective, but to declare they had seventy seconds, then just go, “Nah, forget it,” gave a whole new meaning to *deus ex machina*.

“Yeah, even I think that was pretty low,” Leshea said.

“A cruel trick indeed,” Nel agreed.

“What’s even the point of *having* an incantation?!” Pearl demanded.

All four of them objected mightily, but Anubis actually seemed to enjoy listening to their protests. *“Bwa-ha-ha-ha! Are you surprised, humans? I told you—nothing is impossible for the game master!”*

“She admitted it!”

“If that’s how the final boss behaves, then there’s no fight, is there?!” Nel said.

“Arrrgh! All right, one good surprise attack deserves another! Sphinx 3D Model, I choose you! Go, Sphinxie!”

Pearl sent out another very rare item: a paper model that immediately transformed itself into the spitting image of Sphinx. It was only about a third the size of the real thing, but it could head-butt just as hard as the original.

“Head-butt, now!”

“Hngh?!”

Sphinx head-butted Anubis, who went flying backward and slammed into the coliseum wall.

It was working! The rocket launcher had been a flop, but Sphinx was Anubis’s pet. A divine-element pet ought to work on a god, right? It was only logical.

“Grr... I felt that.” Anubis sent the paper model sprawling away with a single blow from her staff. *“So you’re using your heads. I see you’ve figured out which items will work on me.”*

“Hmm? Well yeah, of course. If you want to surrender, now’s your chance. There’s a whole line of paper models—next is the Sleeping Lion!”

“Laughable!” Anubis yelled. *“I am the final boss. I use my automatic healing ability to heal all damage in a single second!”*

“Seriously, are you interested in giving us a chance?!”

“Also, I just came up with another new rule. No items can damage me! At all!”

.....Long pause.

...No use debating with her, Fay thought. Some people just don’t listen.

It wasn't just him—the realization struck all of them as they looked at the crowing deity. Some gods didn't listen, either.

Maybe the case of dimwittedness had something to do with it. But there was a bigger factor...

"Oh boy, am I having fun!"

The god was laughing. Her cheeks were flushed like a child having the time of her life. This deity, who had lived hundreds or thousands of times longer than any human, looked as innocent as a little girl, her eyes sparkling. She was having such a good time, absorbed in her game, that she wasn't listening to Fay and the others.

"I'm glad I was revived. Games really are the best!"

"Even the unfair ones?" Fay said, unable to suppress a pained smile. This god was truly cruel—the most crooked of any god Fay had ever met. "You look like you're having so much fun, it almost makes me want to join you, even for a broken game like this."

"Three minutes of battle have passed! I think maybe I'll give myself triple health!"

"What? Don't do that!"

He took it all back. This game was a lost cause. And this god was dumb as rocks.

"Allow me to demonstrate my great magic for you. Instant death to everyone on the ground!"

"Everybody jump!"

"Great magic, round two: instant death to everybody in the air!"

"Hrk?! Everybody, get down!"

"Wow! I'm impressed you survived that!" Anubis sounded more and more thrilled.

This was turning into a test of endurance on death's very doorstep. Again and again, Fay and his group evaded annihilation by razor-thin margins: with the

Bright Mirror of Dawn lost to them, they were burning through every item in their inventory trying to keep themselves alive.

Meanwhile, the final boss was darn near invincible.

The rocket launcher specifically described as a weapon for the final battle hadn't worked, and even the damage dealt by the Sphinx Model had been automatically healed in an instant. So what were the conditions for defeating this enemy? Was there any way to damage her? Or was this about surviving for a set period of time?

"All right, I'm doing God Laser again. Cast time zero, of course!"

"Hngh! We'll just have to find an item that can—"

"Items sealed!"

There was a great crash, and the Treasure Hall Master key Fay was holding shattered. At the same moment, the word *Sealed* appeared above each of their heads. By the game master's fiat, the game system no longer allowed the use of items.

"Hold on a second! Are you serious?!" Fay demanded.

"Yeah, there's arbitrary and then there's *arbitrary*!" Leshea added.

"I don't *like* this game masterrrrrr!" Pearl cried.

"You have to learn how to hold back a little!" Nel said.

Even as the words left their mouths, it was already too late. Anubis bounded high into the sky, a sacred glow enveloping the end of her staff.

"I present to you: God Laser!"

"Grr! See if I let you change the rules on us like that!"

Nel's leg rose through the air. Just as with the God Bless attack, she met the beam of light head on, attempting to kick it back the way it came. She crashed to the ground with a cry.

Stamina, zero: players could only move for up to fifteen consecutive seconds without exhausting their stamina, and she had bumped up against that limit.

"Nel, stretch out your hand!" Pearl shouted. A golden warp portal appeared in

front of her, and Pearl half jumped, half fell through to grab the immobilized Nel an instant before the god's beam scoured the spot.

Both of them dodged it, barely. But by using her Arise, Pearl's stamina went to zero, too. She fell to her knees beside Nel.

"Awesome! Way to go, you two!" they heard Anubis cheer from above them. Her cheeks were red, her eyes sparkling like a child's—she almost sounded like she had forgotten she was supposed to be the final boss. *"Now for my biggest attack ever! I'm going to blow away the entire coliseum!"*

"This is getting ridiculous!"

The hint was, "the entire coliseum."

The idea hit Fay in an instant, like a flash of inspiration, and he chose to trust it. Without a word to each other, he and Leshea both started racing for the exit.

Fay grabbed Nel.

Leshea picked up Pearl.

The two who could move carried the two who couldn't on their backs as they lunged for a place outside the coliseum.

Behind them, they could hear Anubis bellow, *"Fire in the hooooole!"*

There wasn't so much as a second to look back. Light filled the arena, so bright they could *feel* it behind them—by which point the blast wind had already swept up everything in its path.

The god's attack blew up the coliseum and the very depths of the earth.

The noise and violence of it were so immense, Fay thought they would knock him unconscious. The blast lifted the stones off the ground, tossing them around as easily as leaves. A blinding dust storm kicked up.

"Cough! Hack!"

"Ow?!"

Fay and Leshea were flung to the ground without so much as a chance to catch themselves. For a second, Fay's brain went fuzzy with the pain.

As he collected himself, he grunted, then said, "Everyone all right?" He could

taste sand in his mouth. He spat out sandy saliva but at least managed to sit up.

“I’m feeling fine,” Leshea said.

“I’m...alive, I guess?” Pearl said.

“Yeah, me too. Somehow,” reported Nel. The three of them sat up, too. They had escaped the coliseum by a hairbreadth and avoided taking a direct hit from the explosion.

A bright light shone above the four survivors’ heads. *Another* God Laser?

No...

That enveloping brightness was the light of the sun, shining down from a blue sky high overhead.

The actual sun!

The very bedrock of the coliseum had been blown upward by the blast, straight out of the yawning hole, so that now the depths were open to the cloudless blue sky. It was so beautiful, they could have just sunk into it, gazing at the sky and forgetting everything else.

But the savoring would have to wait.

This fight wasn’t over. For one thing, they still hadn’t figured out a way to do actual damage to the god. They’d been spending all their time desperately trying to survive attack after attack.

“Where’s the god?! What’s she doing?!” Pearl asked.

“Yeah, anyone have eyes on her?!” Nel said.

There was a distinct *creak* from the direction Fay and the others were looking, like the sound of something opening.

There, right where the coliseum had been, a girl with light-brown skin sat on the ground.

“.....”

Not a girl, in fact: a god in the form of a girl. Without a word, she looked up at them.

Even though they were ragged and flagging, Fay and the others got ready to fight. But the god let out a deep breath and said...

"I am satisfied."

Then Anubis smiled. Her face was covered in mud and dirt, but her smile was as bright and pure as could be.

Creeeeak...

The sound came again.

It was the sound of a great golden door opening behind Anubis. The door that exited Lucemia, the Labyrinth of Death and Rebirth.

"That was fun. Congratulations on playing my game to the very finish."

As it echoed around the labyrinth, Anubis's voice was calm, powerful, majestic.

"All items, all areas, all events. An extraordinary adventure, was it not? And you took the time, effort, and passion to discover it all."

Anubis looked up at the light that poured down, light that by all rights should never have shone so deep beneath the surface.

"As final boss, I saw those things clearly in our battle together. That, in the end, was all I truly wanted: to be certain of that dedication. All I needed was to see it. All I wanted was to know...to know that finally, somewhere, there is someone who could and did play my game all the way through."

Yes: the god had merely wanted confirmation. Was there anyone who was kind enough to play this game? Anyone who would devote themselves to it?

The last boss, in essence, administers the final test of a game. They are the judge of whether the players are worthy to go on to the finale.

Strength need not be the criterion.

They had cleared the maze—were they players whom the god could gladly acknowledge for their achievements? Passion was the true final test here.

Those who challenged the game-loving gods always held one final trump card: their own love of games, and nothing else.

Anubis had been making sure they possessed that very quality. The ones for whom she had waited so long were here at last.

“As you have accomplished that objective, there is no longer any need for me to be the final boss.”

“—!” All of them gasped, their eyes going wide.

The true condition for clearing Anubis, God of the Underworld, a completely invincible final boss? Get her to relinquish the title of final boss entirely.

“This is great... Games are really so much fun!” Anubis said, almost as if she were talking to herself. Then she looked at them and grinned.

“I am satisfied. Victory is yours!”

There was a moment of silence as they absorbed those words, then chewed over their meaning, until finally...

“Awwwwwwwww yes!”

“We did iiiiiiiit!”

“Huh! That was some game.”

Nel, Pearl, and Leshea in turn each clapped their hands.

As for Fay...

He reached up with both hands and took the Treasure Hall Master Key, which had reappeared in the air. The God’s Diadem: a special gift from the gods, bestowed upon the first human to clear one of their games.

“I grant you a reward,” Anubis said. She pointed at the key without moving from where she sat. *“What use is it if I alone enjoy this game? I give you that key.”*



“You mean...for the human world?”

“Yes. But only for one item—and only once.” Anubis held up a single finger and grinned mischievously. *“Via that key, you may bring to yourself any one item that you wish from this labyrinth, no matter the time or place. Use it wisely.”*

“I’ll try.”

Fay took the key, then nodded to the god who sat looking up at him.

“All right,” Anubis said, nodding back in satisfaction. Her body began getting thinner and thinner, as if she were melting away in the sun. *“I am satisfied. Revive me! I’d love to play again.”*

“Nooo! Don’t die on us!”

Vs. Anubis: Death and Rebirth, Two Sides of the Coin

Maze escape game

Clear Time: TBD (official elapsed time currently being calculated by the Arcane Court)—Win

Win Condition: Defeat the final boss in the innermost depths of the labyrinth

Lose Condition: None

Dropped Item: God's Diadem: Treasure Hall Master Key (dropped on Mythical difficulty)

Allows an item from the Lucemia labyrinth to be summoned

Player.5

Only the Snake Noticed

Gods' Games We Play

1

As dawn broke, the Arcane Court was finally able to announce that all the apostles who had been trapped in the labyrinth were now safely home.

“Amazing work, Fay!”

As he walked into her office, Fay found Chief Secretary Miranda in the best mood he'd ever seen. She came flying toward him. “You did a great job! You took care of everything!”

“Hrf?!” Pearl exclaimed as the Chief Secretary caught her up in a hug. Miranda was taller than Pearl, leaving the girl's face buried in her chest, where she struggled to breathe.

“Hfff... Y-you're suffocating me!” Pearl scrambled to escape. “What are you doing, Chief Secretary?!”

“What do you mean? I'm giving you a hug to show my excitement and to celebrate.”

“No—I mean, why would you say ‘Amazing work, Fay!’ and then grab *me*?!”

“Because you looked like you would be the most pleasant to hug. It was an instinctive thing.”

“Pleasant?!”

“Anyway, consider it a sign of how thrilled I am.” Then Miranda clapped her hands as if to indicate the so-called opening pleasantries were now over. “Have

a seat, have a seat. I'll make the coffee myself. Fay, you take two sugars, yes?"

"Three, please. You really are in high spirits, Chief Secretary."

Miranda quickly put out a cup for Fay where he sat on the sofa. She was even humming while she did it. "Heh-heh! Can you blame me? Why, today, I think I could let an underling who got drunk at the New Year's party and spilled wine on me and ruined my favorite suit off with just a glare."

"It sounds like you're, uh, speaking from experience."

Fay's interest was piqued by this hint, but he was even more curious about the calendar on the table. It showed a date more than two weeks later than the last date he'd seen.

They'd spent *two weeks* in that maze.

It was a terrible fact to contemplate—exceeded only by the realization that he had no sense at all that so much time had passed.

The sense of time is different in Elements. It's a spiritual world where you don't need food or sleep, so you can focus exclusively on the game.

His body felt like it had been two or three days at most. It was just that easy for a human to lose touch with their ordinary perceptions while in Elements. With the gears of temporal perception turning so differently, many of the returnees would probably fall sick.

"Oh yeah, Chief Secretary—our people who finally got back, how are they feeling? Are they in good health?"

"Mm-hmm. No worrying reports." Miranda started the coffee maker. "A lot of mental and emotional exhaustion, but the overwhelming reaction is just relief at being home. It's pretty much an ideal outcome for us. I guess... If I could have *everything* I wanted, it would have been great if all the returnees got a win mark." She gave a little smile. "This...Anbuis, God of the Underworld, was it? It seems she only judged you four to have achieved victory. Not everyone who participated in the game was considered to have won it."

"What? Really?" Fay hadn't heard that. It made sense, though. Such a distinction seemed very characteristic of this deity. "So Leshea, Pearl, Nel, and I

were the only ones who were counted as winners. Only players who directly confronted Anubis got win marks, huh?”

The gods’ games consisted of one god versus many humans. This labyrinth had been the most extreme example of that, but it was of course up to the discretion of the game master who received a win mark. Titan and Uroboros, and all the other gods they had faced up to this time, had always given a win to each of the participating players. Anubis, however, was different.

“Congratulations on playing my game to the very finish.”

“All items, all areas, all events. An extraordinary adventure, was it not?”

Glory and honor went to those who had achieved the 100 percent unlock percentage. Since that was one of the conditions for reviving the God of the Underworld, only Fay and his three companions were winners. Everyone else was allowed to come home—but at the price of receiving no victory credit.

“Huh. How very *like* that god,” Nel said with a wry smile. “But we couldn’t have achieved full unlock percentage without a lot of help from a lot of people. I feel a little bad thinking we’re keeping the win marks to ourselves and everyone who helped us walks away with nothing.”

“Aw, no, it’s fine,” said Leshea, who was leaning against the backrest on the far edge of the sofa. “You hear this again and again, right? The gods smile only on those who make their own miracles. The gods reward opponents they happen to be pleased with. This time, that just happened to be us. Everyone else will have another chance—they just need to try harder.”

“W-well, okay... It does have a certain persuasiveness coming from you, Mistress Leshea.”

“Here you are, Nel.” Miranda passed a cup of coffee to her. “Lady Leoleshea is exactly right. The four of you defeated a god. You should be proud of that, not self-effacing! You could brag about it your whole life long.”

“B-brag?! No, I couldn’t...”

“Your old haunt, the Mal-ra branch office, sure hasn’t been shy about using you for PR. ‘Nel Reckless, from Mal-ra! Making good on a brilliant comeback!’ they say.”

“What?!”

“Oh, hadn’t you heard? So do you know that the Mal-ra branch office Regional Promotion Section has been selling Nel Bean Buns and Nel Cookies with your face on them?”

“They can’t sell my face!” Nel groaned, going red up to her ears. Chief Secretary Miranda seemed to be enjoying her reaction.

Then she clapped her hands and said, “Oh! There’s something else I should tell you. There’s another city that’s had exactly the opposite reaction from Mal-ra. Arcane Court headquarters sent their congratulations...but I’m pretty sure it was through *gritted teeth*.”

“Headquarters did that?” Pearl blinked in surprise. She continually added more sugar cubes to her coffee as she talked. “But headquarters really took charge of this situation. Kilhiedge was the one who organized the rescue effort. Plus...well, we didn’t see them, but I heard Mind Over Matter went into the labyrinth as well.”

“That’s exactly it.”

“Huh?”

“Mind Over Matter is supposed to be the world’s strongest team. Headquarters says so themselves. They didn’t hesitate to trumpet when that group went in as a rescue squad. But what’s your take?”

“M...my take?”

Miranda shrugged. “Did they *pull their weight* in the labyrinth?”

Pearl looked into space, struggling for an answer, but finally, reluctantly, she shook her head. “A-as far as I know, they... Well, but I mean, we never saw them, so I can’t really say! They’re the world’s strongest team, so maybe they helped lots of trapped apostles and we just never saw them!”

“The possibility exists.”

“R-right, see?”

“But it was still you who defeated the god, and only you got win marks.” The Chief Secretary picked up her coffee cup and brought it to her lips. “I suspect

headquarters had every intention that it should be Mind Over Matter who cleared the labyrinth game. You stole a march on them, and I don't think they like it."

"W-well, headquarters *is* very important and all..."

This time, it was Miranda's turn to be surprised. She tilted her head. "Hmm? Pearl, I'm guessing from your reaction that you don't know?"

"Know what?"

"Mind Over Matter is a four-person team, and their leader is a young woman—about your age. Saint Heleneia is her name."

"Yes, I know that..."

"She's the only daughter of the Chief Secretary of Arcane Court headquarters."

"Whaaaaaaaaaaaat?!" Pearl slid clean off the sofa. The Chief Secretary of headquarters—that would make him the most powerful person in the Arcane Court, the leader of the entire organization. And his only daughter was the leader of the most powerful team out there today? Even Fay hadn't heard that before.

No one has ever mentioned that here in Ruin, not even as a rumor. I guess anyone who knows about a connection like that between two extremely important people keeps their mouth shut.

He'd never heard so much as a whisper of this fact. Maybe it wasn't even public knowledge.

"Chief Secretary Miranda, I don't think anyone told us apostles about that," Fay said.

"Huh? Oh, crap!" Miranda clapped her hands over her mouth. Then she said, "Look, it's not anything, you know, shady. When I say the Chief Secretary at headquarters and the leader of the world's strongest team are related by blood, maybe you think daddy is working behind the scenes to make things easier for his precious little girl—but you have to do more than pull a few strings to get seven victories in the gods' games."

Mind Over Matter stood at seven wins. Three to go until they reached ten, something that had never been achieved in human history. Miranda was right—all the power of the Chief Secretary of headquarters would count for nothing in the gods' games.

So really, it was just coincidence. The young woman who led the world's strongest team just happened to be the daughter of the most influential man in the Arcane Court. That was all.

"Heleneia's the real deal. I assume that's why her relationship to the Chief Secretary has been kept under wraps—they don't want people assuming it's just nepotism. Granted, it's an open secret to the rest of us administrators."

"Mind Over Matter..." Fay mumbled.

"Hmm? What's the matter, Fay? Are you really bothered by them being father and daughter?"

"Oh, no, it's not that." A question nagged in a corner of his mind—not about Heleneia's relationship with the Chief Secretary, but about the fact Pearl had mentioned. "I was thinking about how we never ran into them in the labyrinth. In fact, I don't think any of the rescue teams did. No one's mentioned seeing them."

Among themselves, they had cleared every area and found every monster—the *one* thing they hadn't found was Mind Over Matter.

Is it just coincidence that we never saw them? That seems a bit too convenient. There has to be an explanation, like that they were hiding so we wouldn't find them...or something.

Was there some reason they *hadn't* wanted to be found?

They hadn't fought any monsters. They hadn't rescued any trapped apostles.

When you look at it from that side, it raises the question—what was Mind Over Matter doing in that labyrinth?

That was what really bothered him.

"Well, it's all over now. No need to stress yourself out about it, Fay," Miranda said. She opened a drawer of her desk and took out a box of expensive-looking

cookies. “I get what you’re saying—I’ve seen the statistics from our administrators. But anyone has strengths and weaknesses as a game player. Maybe Mind Over Matter just doesn’t get along with maze games.”

“.....” Fay didn’t say anything.

“What, still thinking?”

“Yeah. It’s not just about Mind Over Matter.” Fay gazed down at his coffee. Steam drifted back up at him. He spent a moment stirring the dark surface of the liquid, then said, “Too many *impossible* things happened in that maze. And after all this, we still don’t know how or why apostles from all over the world were being forced into that game. I’m not sure Anubis had anything to do with it.”

“Hmm? Well, that would be news to me.” Miranda hopped up and sat on her desk, as if she didn’t have a chair right there. “Headquarters just released a statement. And I quote: ‘The gathering of players from all over the world in the labyrinth is believed to be attributable to Anubis’s interference.’”

Fay paused. “I’ve been thinking about it all night, and I don’t believe that. I don’t think it’s that simple.”

Anubis was downright obsessed with the game system underpinning her labyrinth, but she hadn’t said a word about the Divine Gates. Which suggested something to Fay...

The infinite respawns and inability to escape the game and finish it were part of the game structure.

But the way players all over the world were forcibly drawn into the game? That was *not*.

So what could possibly have caused it? Had something spontaneously gone wrong with all the Divine Gates in the world at once? Or had somebody messed with them?

“This is just a guess, but I think somebody has already solved that riddle. And I think it’s—”

“Mine undefeated self has come to play!”

There was a *crash* as the office door was slammed aside on its runners and a silver-haired girl came tumbling through.

“Oh, Uroboros. Perfect timing,” Fay said.

“Ah-ah! Hold it right there, Tiny Human!” Uroboros held out a hand to interrupt Fay. “I know what you want to say. You *heave* with gratitude that you have at last completed the labyrinth and can now enjoy my game with a clear heart!”

“No, sorry, that’s not what I was going to say.”

“It wasn’t?!”

“Hey, it’s okay. Let’s take things one at a time. You remember how after you annihilated Sphinx in the labyrinth, you were forcibly ‘logged out’? I want to talk about that.”

Yes: that moment had clearly involved what might be called a supernatural phenomenon, something originating from outside the game system.

We saw every nook and cranny of that labyrinth, and there was nothing else in there that seemed like it could or would have forced Uroboros out of the game.

Had Anubis been behind it?

“That wasn’t Anubis’s doing, was it?” Fay said.

“Nope, not at all,” Uroboros said immediately. “I think mayhap I’ll give you a hint. Wanna know something, Tiny Human?”

“Sure!”

“There were six gods in that labyrinth.”

.....

.....?

The office froze, silent. No one present could immediately apprehend the significance of what Uroboros had said—probably no one in the entire world could have. Nel, Pearl, and Chief Secretary Miranda all sat stunned, their faces pale. They could never have seen this coming; it was beyond any conception of normalcy. They just didn’t know how to react.

When people are given information that simply, vastly exceeds their understanding, they tend to be struck dumb.

Fay was no exception.

Six gods? Wait, what does that even mean? There was Anubis and Uroboros... and four more?

It sounded like some sort of joke—it almost had to be—but Uroboros said it as if it were utterly simple.

“Leshea?” Fay asked the girl sitting next to him, trying desperately to find something, anything for his blank mind to grab onto. “Did you notice them?”

“Uh-uh. Not at all.” The vermilion-haired girl shook her head casually. She looked serious, too, but unlike the rest of them, her expression was more a sort of, “Huh! Is that right?”

“Hoh? Well, I can’t blame you for not noticing.” Uroboros crossed her arms, full of confidence. “They *were* hiding themselves, after all. But then I stuck mine nose into that game, which was when I realized they were there.”

“...! Hold on just a second! I think you just dropped a huge bombshell on us like it was nothing!” Pearl had finally snapped back to reality. “Miss Undefeated! You’re saying the reason you were logged out of the game wasn’t because of Anubis or any of the labyrinth’s systems!”

“Well, yeah. It was the gods hiding in the labyrinth that did it.”

“Tell us more about that, please!”

“You wanna know? Well! I *guess* I could be had. In that case—oop?” Uroboros abruptly stopped talking. She thought carefully for a moment, and then a very mischievous smile spread across her face. “You know what? I think I’ll keep it to myself.”

“Whaaaaaaaat?! But why?!” Pearl said.

“Let’s make it a reward! If you can win my game, I’ll tell you!” Uroboros bounced up and tossed herself onto Miranda’s desk, which she stood on like a podium, arms spread wide, as if to say, *Look at me!* “How about it, Tiny Human?”

“I thought it might come to that. Yeah, I get it.” Fay met Uroboros’s naughty grin with a wry smile of his own—and a sigh. “So there *was* something funny going on in that maze game. You’re the only one who knows the whole truth, and you want a rematch before you’ll tell us anything.”

“Heh-heh! But this time, I won’t lose. I *am* undefeated, after all!”

“I think that line is a contradiction in terms, isn’t it?”

“So it’s settled!” The silver-haired god’s eyes shone eagerly. “Then let’s not waste any time. Everyone to the basement, and the Divine Gates!”

“Ah!” Chief Secretary Miranda held up a trembling hand. “Ahem...*Lady* Uroboros... If I might be so bold as to say something?”

“Hrm? What is it, human?” Uroboros’s face darkened; she wasn’t very pleased to be interrupted when she was so excited. “I permit you to speak. For *exactly* three seconds.”

“Three seconds?!”

“You heard me. Go! Ooone! Twoooo...”

“You can’t use the Divine Gates!”

“Huh?” The silver-haired girl froze. “Why not?”

“Well, you see...” Miranda was hiding behind Leshea, presumably to protect herself from Uroboros’s wrath. “We’ve just had a major incident. Yes, everyone got back from the labyrinth in one piece, but there could still be a problem with the gates. As a safety measure, headquarters has forbidden anyone from diving until they can be sure it’s safe.”

“Forbidden?!”

“Please, just wait a little longer. You can use Fay however you like during that time.”

“Sounds like I don’t have a choice...”

“Were you not going to ask my opinion on this deal?!” Fay exclaimed, but it was already too late. Miranda had picked up a pile of paperwork from the desk and clutched it close, while Uroboros had pulled out a key to Fay’s room.

(Where had she gotten that?)

“All right, I’ve got a meeting. You kids have fun,” Miranda said.

“Let’s go, Tiny Human! We can continue our games in your room!”

“Seriously, does nobody care what I think?!”

Chief Secretary Miranda veritably fled the office. That left Fay with Uroboros, tugging on his sleeve. All Fay could do was put his head in his hands.

Intermission

(This Conversation May Not Be Recorded) 02

Gods' Games We Play

Let us go back in time about eighteen hours.

The Lucemia labyrinth was empty, as it were.

With the defeat of the final boss, Anubis, all the trapped apostles had returned home.

With the humans gone, the various monsters that wandered the maze also fell asleep. Silence descended upon Lucemia, until the next time the game began...

“Liar.”

Just the one word.

The girl's crisp voice echoed around the very deepest depths of the labyrinth.

“Anubis. Would you care to explain this?”

The girl was staring at a god's grave. It had been destroyed in spectacular fashion when Anubis had been respawned, but now the god was asleep again, and the tomb was restored as if nothing had ever happened to it.

“.....” The girl regarded the tomb, cold and expressionless. “You agreed with my belief, Anubis—you accepted the proposition that the gods' games must no longer exist in this world. So why *did you let them clear yours?*”

The tomb gave no answer.

Anubis, the incarnation of the two sides of the coin, of life and death, had returned to the sleep of death. Until another challenger, another player, awakened her once again, no one could interfere with her.

Not even a god.

“The labyrinth of Lucemia was supposed to be an impenetrable fortress. You’re the last boss, Anubis. All you needed to do was keep sleeping in your grave. With the god gone, it would have been impossible to clear the labyrinth. This game was supposed to be a dead end...”

The girl let out a small sigh, *hoo*.

“Do you realize how hard it was to set this up? I pushed for the World Games Tour, ginned up the perfect excuse to visit every Arcane Court office in the world. We were able to gain access to every Divine Gate, tamper with them so they would lead here. All for this day.”

The girl clenched her fist feebly.

“The plan succeeded; we were able to trap hundreds of apostles from around the world in your maze. All you needed to do was *stay dead*. Then the humans, terrified of losing any more apostles, would have outlawed the gods’ games. That’s how it was supposed to work...”

Another sigh, heavier than the first and tinged with regret. “Why would you have come back to I—”

“Oh ho? Fancy meeting you here!”

Tak.

The underground cavern where there had once been a coliseum echoed with a young man’s clear voice.

Sunlight poured down, gleaming off his golden hair, which made him look older than he was.

“Whatever might you be doing in this place? Eh, Miss Heleneia Jonah Benedictine?”

“.....” The girl simply didn’t say anything at all.

“Saint Heleneia” wore a black vestment with gold embroidery, the indisputable proof that she was the leader of headquarters’s most important team. The strongest team in the world, Mind Over Matter.

The leader of that team turned and, without a hint of emotion in her eyes, said, “Who are you?”

“Oh! Forgive me. I’m Ezrace, representative of the Ocean City of Fisshara. You remember how Fay was rookie of the year last year? I was what people called ‘The Second.’ I dared to think I had a certain measure of fame, but I see you don’t know me. Well, I hope you’ll remember me after today.”

The boy’s tone was casual, but behind his jocular presentation, the girl detected a hostile light in his eyes.

“Huh! So this is the innermost depths of the labyrinth,” he said, turning around and taking it all in, every detail of the coliseum that had been ruined by Anubis’s power. “They tell me our man Fay beat a god here. I couldn’t help being curious about where it had happened, so I decided to come have a look. I mean, we went to enough trouble in this maze. It’s the proper gamer’s attitude to wonder what happened in the end, don’t you think?”

“.....” The girl still didn’t respond.

“Talk about unprecedented, am I right? Hundreds and hundreds of apostles from all over the world, all trapped here. Until even headquarters felt obliged to send your Mind Over Matter as part of the rescue operation...”

Ezrace abruptly stopped. The girl maintained her silence, but he smiled at her.

“And? What percentage did you get to?”

“...?” She gave him a questioning look.

“Come on. The clear percentage! The one that goes up as you figure out all the little tricks and traps in this maze? It goes out to two decimal places. Fay went well beyond me, but I’m betting you didn’t do half bad yourself, Miss Heleneia. I got up to 53.44 percent before it was all over, if you’re curious.”

“.....” Heleneia didn’t say anything.

“What’s the matter? The game’s over. Why hide it now?”

“49.99 percent.”

“Hoh! I knew you’d have done a good job.” The young man, Ezrace, nodded vigorously. The motion tossed his bangs into his eyes; he brushed them away.

“Now, I have a question. What have you and your team *really* been up to until just this moment?”

“Whatever do you mean?”

“Oh, please. If you’d seriously been working to clear this maze, you would never have misunderstood my question just now.” Ezrace pointed to the number floating above his head—the one that showed the unlock percentage he had achieved. “For one thing, this game doesn’t have a ‘clear percentage.’ It’s called the unlock percentage. The meep never once referred to a clear percentage. I just made that up.”

“.....” Heleneia was studiously silent.

“Also, the unlock percentage typically only goes out to one decimal place. The fact that you could say 49.99 percent with a straight face tells me you don’t know the first thing about this labyrinth.”

“.....” More silence.

“You know, it’s funny. Us rescue teams all came out and helped when Fay asked. The one team we didn’t see hide or hair of was headquarters’s own. The one that’s supposed to be the strongest team in the world.”

“.....” Heleneia didn’t say a word.

“And I just wondered, you know? So I came looking. This seemed like the place to start.”

Ezrace, representative of the Ocean City of Fisshara, glanced up—looking at the small tomb behind the girl where a god lay.

“Is that the god’s grave? Huh! Guess it went back to being dead after Fay beat it.”

“.....” One more time, Heleneia held her peace.

“So tell, tell. I heard you taking an awfully authoritative tone with that pyramid. Almost like you *knew* the person you were talking to.”

“Huh. So you’re just an *ordinary human*.”

The girl sighed. There was a hint of annoyance but also a distinct note of relief.

“I was almost afraid Uroboros had changed into yet another persona to stick

her nose in. But you're human to the bone—just a human overcome by curiosity."

"Hmm? I don't quite know what you mean, Miss Heleneia."

The way she used that word, *human*—almost as if she was saying that she wasn't.

"A most unfortunate human indeed."

There was a *hiss*.

The girl's, Heleneia's, hair leapt up, and her vestments expanded from the inside, as if something within were trying to get out.

"You have found me, to your woe. For you, human, your curiosity has proved deeply unfortunate."

"Wha—?!"

Instantly, instinctively, and purely reflexively, Ezrace jumped back, urged to move by an *aura* more powerful than any ordinary force.

"Miss Heleneia?! What's going on?!"

"Let me put it in terms of this labyrinth: It's like a rookie adventurer has entered a forbidden area and stumbled upon a secret boss. That would not be good news for him but would instead be deeply unfortunate."

The *thing* in a girl's body raised its right hand, pointing straight at Ezrace...

"You will sleep now. Until my plans are realized."

There was an uncanny *shlrp*—the sound of Ezrace's arms being sucked into the black vortex that appeared in midair.

He couldn't move his arms. Try as he might to resist, next his legs were pulled into the floating vortex.

"Wh-whoa, hey! What is this, Miss Heleneia, some kind of joke? Is this your Arise...?!"

"Heleneia?" The thing in a girl's body paused briefly, perplexed. *"Ahh, you refer to my human name. That is not what I am now."*

“Huh?!”

“I am sorry. And I pity your curiosity. Endure—ten years, perhaps. That should be enough for you to be free.”

So the young man, Ezrace, began to sink into thin air.

At that exact moment, though...

“Ez? Ez, where are you?”

“Hmph! How could you leave us and go exploring on your own? If there are still traps around here, you’ll be sorry!”

It was the bright voices of two young women, accompanied by their footsteps. They soon arrived in the coliseum area, a couple of girls trotting easily along. They wore the same vestments as Ezrace. Two more apostles of Fisshara.

Two apostles who had been trapped down here until Ezrace had rescued them.

“Ez?”

“Hey, are you all right? Why are you curled up there?”

When the two of them arrived, Ezrace was finally able to get up off his knees. “Aw, sorry,” he said. His face was drenched with sweat, his bangs stuck fast to his forehead, but he brushed the golden hair aside like nothing had happened and smiled at them. “It’s nothing, Rencha, Mariage. I was just so eager to go exploring.”

Both of the girls puffed out their cheeks angrily.

“Oh, boo!”

“I should have known! You’re always so quick to go off on your own. We’re ready to get out of this game already!”

Ezrace gave a small smile for his adorable junior apostles, then let out a long sigh. He felt a cold sweat trickle down his back. He had managed to hide it behind his sunny tone, but his body temperature was near freezing.

“Sounds good. Let’s get home. Man, your timing was perfect. I think the

sudden appearance of my two adorable junior apostles might have just saved my life.”

“...?” Rencha gave him a questioning look.

“What do you mean?” Mariage asked.

“Aw, nothing. Forget it. C’mon, let’s get going.”

He put a hand on each of their backs to urge them along.

Ezrace was careful to keep smiling, but he stole a glance back at the god’s tomb.

The thing in the form of a girl was nowhere to be seen.

“Now, the question is...if I report this to the Arcane Court, will anyone believe me?”

An hour later, Ezrace Gear Scimitar, second in the rookie ranks to Fay the year before, had safely exited the Lucemia labyrinth.

The innermost depths of the maze were once again silent, devoid of human presence. The monsters lay sleeping, and there where Anubis rested beneath the ground...

“I seem to have made a miscalculation.”

There was no longer anyone there to hear the sound waves, what passed for a voice, make something resembling a sigh.

The speaker was talking to themselves, not intending that anyone should overhear.

“I knew the snake would be a source of trouble. But Uroboros was not the real threat... It was that human, Fay.”

There was a whisper of rock scuttling over rock as the echoing waves of the god’s voice knocked loose some exposed stone.

“He must be stopped. Because if the gods’ games are cleared... This time, I will finally no longer be able to protect humanity...”

The labyrinth had seen its battle through to the end, and now all that was left

were words, words full of grief—and even more, resolve.

“I shall never allow you to clear the gods’ games, Fay.”

Player.6

The Divine Love of a God

Gods' Games We Play

1

The morning sun glinted off the buildings comprising the Sacrament City of Ruin. It was six AM, and the Arcane Court dormitory was still quiet. Today was a day off. Many people were still dozing in bed.

That included Fay.

After he'd come back from the Lucemia labyrinth, Chief Secretary Miranda had interrogated him long into the night. Finally, he could get some rest... Or so he thought.

"Hello! A very fine morning to you!" A young woman shattered the silence with a greeting so hearty, they could probably hear her next door, but she didn't seem to care. "I hope you're well, Fay!"

"Who do I know who could sound that energetic this early in the morning...?"

"Yes, it's me! Anita! Founder and leader of Team Empress, a blossoming garden composed of chosen maidens, and she who intends to make herself the most notable rookie of the year!"

Anita Manhattan's voice came from the far side of the door. Just as she'd said, her goal was to have a team full of perfect maidens. She'd attempted to entice Pearl, Nel, and Leshea to her team, but the memory of her miserable failure was still fresh.

What was she doing here so early?

"Okay, hold on a second. I've got to change," Fay said, getting out of his

pajamas and into his day clothes. Normally, that would mean his Arcane Court uniform, but since there was no Court business today, it was just a simple shirt.

“A very, very fine morning to you, Fay!” Anita said when he opened the door, her unmissable pink hair bobbing as she bowed.

She was fifteen years old, one of the youngest apostles at the Arcane Court. Unlike Fay, she *was* dressed in her uniform.

“Yeah, morning. Seriously, what’s going on?”

“Before I answer that,” Anita said, looking wide-eyed around the room, “think you could let me inside? I mean, this is the boys’ dormitory... If word got out that a sweet, pure maiden like me visited this barbaric, filthy building, my reputation would be in tatters!”

“Thanks. See you.”

“Ahhhhh?! I get it! I get it! Just let me in your room! It’s freezing in the mornings and I’m going to catch a cold standing out here forever!” Anita ducked into Fay’s room.

He showed her to the living room, then sighed again. She didn’t actually seem to have any business with him.

“So you were, what? Waiting for somebody?” he asked.

“Oh? How’d you know I was waiting for Young Lady Uroboros?”

“You’re the one who said you’d been ‘standing here forever.’ I figured you were waiting outside my room to, uh, meet someone.”

“Heh-heh-heh! I’m impressed by your intuition.” Anita plopped down on the sofa, bouncing once or twice—maybe to see if the cushion was still in good condition. “My investigations have revealed that for the past several days, Young Lady Uroboros herself has been coming to your room to play games.”

“Uroboros. You mean, like...*the* Uroboros?”

“I mean the god with the silver hair, huge eyes, and *total* adorability!”

“And what do you want with her?”

“Isn’t it obvious? I want her to join my team!” As soon as she said this,

though, Anita adopted a less-enthused expression. She looked like she was chewing over each word carefully. “My plans met with failure the other day. I intended to gain three young maidens for my team in a single swoop, but I was roundly disappointed. The source of my troubles is that these young ladies were all members of *your* team.”

“Leshea, treasured sister! Pearl, treasured sister! Nel, treasured sister!”

“I have a special place prepared for you as honorary members of Empress!”

Her invitation had fallen flat, to say the least.

It might seem obvious to say, but as Anita had correctly observed, the three of them had already formed a team with Fay. They weren’t about to just go running off with her.

“I, however, realized something! If I couldn’t pry the others away from your team, I could go for a treasured sister who isn’t part of your team at all!”

“Huh? Oh, is that why you’re after Uroboros?”

True, Uroboros wasn’t a member of his team. She wasn’t an apostle at all, so naturally she wasn’t on the Arcane Court’s membership list, which did indeed make her a viable target for recruitment. All very logical.

“I think I should warn you, trying to get her to join your team could be pretty risky. I saw her one-hit monsters in that labyrinth without breaking a sweat.”



“I’m fully aware my mission could be dangerous.” Anita puffed out her chest, full of self-confidence. “I’ve already been buried twenty centimeters into the concrete after angering my treasured sister Uroboros!”

“Wow, you don’t give up, do you?!”

“The harder a sister’s route is to clear, the brighter she shall shine on my team!”

No sooner had Anita spoken than three voices crackled across the intercom. “Good morning, Fay!”

“Fay! It’s morning!”

“You must forgive us for being here first thing, Master Fay. We made breakfast. Do you want some?”

They could hear three girls on the other side of the door. There was a beat, and then another, very clear voice exclaimed, “Tiny Human! My undefeated self has come to play!”

“Treasured sister Uroboros?! And my treasured sisters Pearl, Leshea, and Nel!” Anita burst up from the sofa and made a beeline for the door, flinging it open. “Thank you all so much for coming! Please, please, come in... Huh?”

It was then that Anita noticed something. Each of her sweet, lovable “sisters” wore a look of profound intensity.

“T...treasured sisters?”

Nel was the first to speak. “Well, well. What brings *you* to Master Fay’s room?”

“Funny, you being here even before the rest of us. I wonder *why*.”

“We’d better pluck this intruder out of our midst,” Pearl agreed.

“Did you think you could make a move on Tiny Human without a word to me?”

Anita backed away quickly, all flustered.

“—?! N-no, no, you’ve got it all wrong!” Perhaps sensing her life was in danger, she hid behind Fay. “I don’t have any interest in this...this *man*! I’m here

for one reason—to see my treasured sister Uroboros.”

“Hmm? Mineself?” The silver-haired girl looked at her blankly. “Who’re you?”

“You don’t remember me?! Er, ahem. No. When I consider that this means you and I, treasured sister, may start our capitalY Youth from scratch all over again, that’s not such a terrible thing! Treasured sister Uroboros, my name is Anita. It’s my utmost pleasure to meet you.”

It makes sense. She is a god. She’s only interested in people who are good at games—I guess she doesn’t bother with anything else.

Very godlike behavior. In fact, Fay had to have a certain amount of admiration for Anita’s willingness to approach not just any human, but even a god, and ask them to join her team.

“Huh... Then again, I guess it could be the other way. Maybe it’s not that Anita is inviting Uroboros to join her team—it’s that Uroboros has attracted Anita. Like that would happen, I guess.”

“That’s it exactly,” Uroboros replied immediately.

“Wait, it is?!” Fay said before he could stop himself. “Hey, no, I was just spitballing. Wait... Do you really have that power?”

“Mm! I am a god, after all. Hmm... But it is strange.” The silver-haired girl tilted her head. She gave Fay a pointed look, then trotted right up to him and rubbed her shoulder against him, almost like a cat nuzzling a person.

“May I, uh, ask what you’re doing?”

“Just trying it. Funny... It works on *her*.” Uroboros pulled on Fay’s sleeve, looking from him to Anita and back. “Do I not make your heart race, Tiny Human?”

“Um...in what sense?”

“I must inform you, I smell very good. I came here to play games with you, did I not? I was prepared to drag you away if it came to that, so I have been exuding an aroma from close range that should cause you to be attracted and become my captive.”

“Hey, don’t go spraying that stuff just anywhere!”

“You really don’t feel it?”

“Not a bit. Not even now that you’ve explained it to me.”

Uroboros tilted her head again, making an adorable face of perplexity. It sounded like the kind of almost comical display of brute force only a god could employ—but if Uroboros hadn’t said something, Fay would never have realized anything was going on.

“Is this all a joke?” he asked.

“By no means. For though it may not work on you, Tiny Human, it is working on this other human who was near me.”

“You mean Anita?”

“Hmm? Tiny Human, what is *this* thing?” Her eyes lit up and, still looking at him, she tugged on his sleeve and brought it up to her nose. “Tiny Human,” she said.

“What? What’s gotten into you?”

“You are *quite beloved of the gods*, aren’t you? Though I don’t know which god put it upon you or when.”

“Huh?”

“Is your Arise the kind of thing that puts up a barrier that protects you? Maybe a blessing from the gods that activates automatically?”

“Oh... Kind of, I guess. I don’t completely understand it myself.”

Fay possessed a Superhuman Arise called May Your God, meaning, one who had received the divine love of the gods. It gave him the power of regeneration and revival, neutralizing the effects of everything from a scratch to a fatal wound, as well as spiritual malice, curses, destiny, and every kind of divine intervention. To put it in Uroboros’s terms, it might well be described as “a blessing from the gods that activates automatically.”

“This is it!” Uroboros gave a great clap of her hands. “Your Arise is what’s getting in the way of my power. The reason your heart doesn’t flutter at me, the reason you don’t become my captive, it’s all—”

“Hmm?” came a voice from behind Uroboros. It was Leshea, and while Uroboros was discoursing eagerly, the former god’s eyes glinted. “So our newcomer admits to quietly emanating the sweet aroma in a continual attempt to attract Fay. That’s a naughty little trick.”

“Hngh?!” Uroboros trembled. She whipped her head around to look at Leshea, her silver hair getting disheveled in the process—but her sweet face was already tense beyond her ability to hide it. “N-no, nothing of the sort! This is my factory setting... It is the way of gods to cherish humans, to become friends with them! Of course one emanates a pleasant aroma or two!”

“Yet this aroma has been in effect only around Fay, and only at point-blank range. Am I getting that right?”

“W-well, that...” Uroboros found herself backed into a corner of the room. Indeed, she was trapped, for Nel had moved in from one side and Pearl from the other.

Which was precisely when Fay’s communications device, which had been sitting on the desk, began to ring.

“H’lo!” said a voice on the other end. *“Sorry to bother you so early in the morning, Fay.”*

“Good morning, Chief Secretary. I don’t usually hear from you on a day off. Or does the admin staff have to work today?”

“Both. I’m working on my day off. Well, technically, I’m still doing overtime from last night...” There was a dramatic sigh on the other end of the line, as if to say, *Listen to how loudly I’m sighing!* “So I’m sorry to bother you first thing on a day off, but do you think I could ask you to share my pain today? Just a bit? I’ll get right to the point.”

“You heard the Chief Secretary. You all okay with this?” Fay said with a glance at his teammates. They all nodded. He turned back to the communications device and said, “Fine by us. Perfect timing, too. Everyone just got here.”

“There’s been an inquiry from headquarters,” Miranda said.

“That sounds ominous. What kind of inquiry?”

"A request. The Divine Gates have been closed since the labyrinth game. Headquarters has confirmed they're safe again, and they want someone to do a test dive. Specifically, you."

"Huh? Why do a test if they've already confirmed it's safe?"

"Fair question. Basically, headquarters has only been able to confirm their own gates are safe. That thing with the labyrinth affected everyone in the world, and they want to check the other gates, too."

So they'd been personally chosen for this job. And it wasn't like Fay couldn't imagine why.

"If it turns out the gates aren't fixed and they still go to the labyrinth, we've already cleared it anyway, so there's no problem."

"I love a quick learner."

"Not that I'd be eager to have to clear that maze all over again," Fay said. He could almost hear Miranda's pained smile. "By the way, is it going to be just us involved in this test run? If we go through there and end up in one of the gods' games the way we're supposed to, I'm not sure the four of us alone are going to be enough."

"Yes, right. That's why they've drawn on other teams with experience in the labyrinth as well."

"You mean Captain Ashlan?"

"You got it. Admittedly, he went, 'Who, me?!' and wasn't very eager about it, but he did agree in the end. They're also putting out a call for volunteers, but I wouldn't hold my breath on that score."

"All right, I hear you. Get in touch again later and you can give me the details."

Fay was just about to end the call when Anita screamed at the top of her lungs, "Hold it right there! Don't move a muscle, Fay! Don't end that call!"

"Oops. The, uh, Chief Secretary already hung up. Sorry."

"Chief Secretary?! Er... Well, that's fine. I don't mind. I'll just throw my name in the hat when they put out the call for volunteers." Anita coughed delicately.

“If my treasured sisters are going to participate in a game, then I absolutely must be part of it! Once you see my skills, I *know* you’ll want to join my team!”

“““Whaaat?””” the others all responded at once.

“Why do you sound so unhappy?! J-just a second! Treasured sisters?! Please, let me join you! I’m begging! I’ll carry your stuff! I’ll do anything!”

Anita’s participation in the game was confirmed, but only after she begged, pleaded, and kowtowed for a solid hour.

2

Several days later, nearly twenty apostles stood in the Arcane Court building’s underground Dive Center, the Divine Gates looming before them.

There were the twelve members of Captain Ashlan’s team, Blaze. Then there were Fay, Leshea, Pearl, and Nel. Headquarters had asked for these sixteen by name, but in addition, Anita, leader of Empress, had volunteered as a test player. And she wasn’t the only one...

“Be joyful, Tiny Human, for my undefeated self joins you!”

Uroboros came bounding out of the elevator. She had followed Fay all the way down here.

“Good morning, Lady Leshea,” said Chief Secretary Miranda, who was already standing in the room. She gave the former god a bow. Then she pointed to the Divine Gates, which gave off a glow. “As you can see, everything is ready. The point of this test is to determine whether the Divine Gates’ connections are functioning normally, and to do that, we’re going to have you dive in like a normal game. If one of the gods’ games begins, then it’s working. If you drop back into that labyrinth, then there’s still a problem. Pretty simple distinction.”

Miranda reached into a bag and plucked out a tiny video recording device. “By headquarters’s request, since this is a test session, there will be no worldwide stream. Therefore, I’m informed, the Godeye lens will not be necessary.”

“I never wear one anyway!”

“And believe me, I wish you would. But anyway, Fay. Captain Ashlan.” Miranda half turned to them. “There’s no cameras, there’s no broadcast, so you can get started when you’re good and ready.”

“Yeah, I hear you. You got it.” Captain Ashlan took a deep breath. “Still, we usually get a couple of weeks between gods’ games. Diving back in just a few days after getting out of that maze? Who ever heard of a schedule so packed?”

“Still feeling tired, Captain?” Fay asked.

“No, no. I slept like the dead for the last two days!” Captain Ashlan exclaimed, giving himself a good smack on the cheeks. “All right! Let’s do this, Fay!”

He let the momentum carry him forward, toward the Divine Gate. The statue’s dragon jaws opened wide, a doorway of light glimmering beyond them.

“Come on, guys! In we go!”

Then they were diving—first Captain Ashlan, then the members of Team Blaze. They flung themselves into the statue and disappeared.

“All right! Let’s go!”

“Wah?! D-d-don’t push me, Leshea!”

“P-Pearl?! Let go of my hand! You think you can take me down with you?!”

Leshea was next, along with Pearl (whom she was shoving) and Nel (whom *she* was clinging to). They all went tumbling through the statue gate and disappeared.

“Oh! Treasured sisters?! Wait for me!” Anita called, jumping through after them.

That left Fay, Uroboros pulling him along by the sleeve. “That reminds me, Uroboros,” Fay said. “It’s like I told you yesterday—this is a test run, so we’ll have to put off your game until next time.”

“I heard you, Tiny Human! So let’s hurry up and clear this game!” Uroboros pointed to the statue. She was practically skipping as she ran along, and then they were diving into the dragon’s jaws...

Shwmmmm.

At that moment, bluish-white sparks flew from the gate.

Uroboros was thrown bodily backward.

“Awww, *again?!?*”

“Uroboros?!”

Fay continued to fly through the gate even as Uroboros was blown backward. Their hands nearly touched, their fingers missing each other by a matter of centimeters.

Uroboros was tossed out again?! Wait... Then this isn't what we signed up for!

This was supposed to be a test play to see if the statue was working—but if the Divine Gate was in normal functioning order, then Uroboros would never have been pushed back. It had been the same in the maze—Uroboros had been booted out only after something irregular had occurred.

All of which meant...

“The Divine Gates were *never fixed* to begin with?!”

This was bad. A most unexpected malfunction was occurring—again.

Even as the thought went through his mind, though, Fay was already slipping through the gate. There was nothing Uroboros and the Chief Secretary could do but watch.

Intermission.0

The Girl and the Boy

Gods' Games We Play

Long, long ago, more than ten years in the past...

The boy called Fay Theo Philus had been recognized as a gaming prodigy from a young age. But it was not the case that the boy, Fay, had simply come into the world as a game-playing genius.

He'd had a partner to play with.

"I was playing with Sis again. But I still couldn't beat her, not even once!"

The person who made the perfect opponent for him also happened to be the greatest teacher of games in the world.

Only the boy knew about this older girl, this "Sis."

He didn't know where she'd come from or where she would go.

She was a beautiful young lady with bright red hair.

They played card games, chess, billiards—she challenged him to every kind of game, and over thousands and thousands of losses, the boy began to improve.

"That's great, Fay! You're getting stronger and stronger." Praise from Sis was all the reward Fay could ever want. *"You couldn't beat me at first, but you persevered and got better. That makes me very happy."*

Those days were like a dream. It was, one might say, as if they had a world all their own, enclosed in a shimmering soap bubble. A time for games that belonged only to them.

But it didn't last long.

One day, with no warning, the girl vanished, and he never saw her again.

That was why Fay was searching, even now. So he could tell her that he was

who he was because of her. So he could say “thank you” to the red-haired young woman. He wanted to see her one more time.

“The girl I’m looking for has bright red hair.”

.....

.....

...A dream...?

What...what brought those memories on? I remember being asked to do a test run of the gods’ games... Then I jumped through the Divine Gate...

The game would be starting soon. Everyone was waiting for him on the other side of the dive. In the Elements.

That was what he’d thought anyway.

“—?!” Fay gasped as his eyes snapped open. He’d jumped through the glowing gate, and yet he found no Elements on the other side.

He found nothing at all.

It was pitch-black; he couldn’t see a centimeter in front of his face. He couldn’t feel the ground under his feet, and when he thrust out his arms, his hands found only emptiness.

He felt like he was surrounded by something warm and viscous, a substance somewhere between air and liquid. He was floating in the middle of this absolute darkness. If this was an Elements, he’d never seen anything like it. Was this where the next game was to take place? If so, his friends couldn’t be far.



“Leshea?” he called. “Leshea!”

There was no answer.

No mote of light penetrated the blackness; his voice seemed to vanish as if it had been sucked away.

“Pearl! Nel! Captain Ashlan?!”

There was no response from any of them, nor could he see them anywhere. All he heard was the faint sound of his own breathing. No other voices, no footsteps.

What kind of world is this?! Am I the only one here? Where did everyone else go?!

After a moment’s thought, a single possibility bubbled up in his brain.

Could it be that he had it backward? Maybe everyone else hadn’t *gone* anywhere.

“Maybe I’m the *only one* who was sent here...”

“This is my Elements.”

Words, all spirit and power, sounded forth. The voice seemed to echo everywhere at once as it spoke. It was full of compassion that reached to the marrow of Fay’s bones, and love, and a pinch of sorrow.

“I tampered with the Divine Gate. I caused it to draw you, and you alone, into this place at the moment you passed through it.”

“—?!” Fay’s breath caught. This whisper of a voice—was it a god? He felt the voice, a comfort in this world of darkness, but he saw no one.

“Who are you? Are you the god of this Elements?” Fay asked.

“.....” The voice did not answer.

“You said you tampered with the Divine Gate. Does that mean you’re the one who messed around in Anubis’s maze, too?”

Still there was no response. But that cold silence was more eloquent than any answer.

The voice said I'm the only one it pulled in here. So is everyone else in another place? Okay, but why just me?

There was one thing about which Fay felt certain, surely by intuition. The god who had been whispering to him had no intention of starting a game.

Suddenly, the voice returned. *"I was wrong,"* it said. *"You were never supposed to be able to clear that labyrinth game. The only thing that could have allowed you to do so by brute force was the snake, Uroboros. So I ejected them from the game, even while knowing that to do so would be to alert them to my presence."*

"That was you?!"

"As I said, it was a misjudgment. Uroboros was not the threat."

There in the lightless world, the god whose name Fay didn't know and whose body he could not see spoke calmly.

"You. You were the true danger all along."

Shudder.

Fay felt his blood run cold, a chill that went down his spine to the tip of every finger and toe.

It was not a feeling of intimidation or oppression. No, the voice was as comforting and mild as could be. That was what was so frightening about it.

It was capable of planting a seed of terror beyond human understanding; the power in it was impossible to miss. And then the voice said:

"You will sleep here awhile."

"—?!" Fay's breath caught again as he was assaulted by a terrible dizziness. He felt his head swirling, as if he'd been hit with a hammer. By the time he realized it was a magical, irresistible sleep called forth by the god, his consciousness had already half slipped away.

His consciousness...

He tried to hold on to it, but it was going, drifting out of reach like a slip of paper...flying away.

S...sleep? Me? What are they...planning to do with me?

"In all the world—no, in all Elements—this is the safest place of all. A place where you can rest and be well," said the sweet voice, lulling him to sleep. *"I want you to go to sleep."*

"You...what?!"

"There are no cares, no discomfort. Because me, I love games more than anyone at all. You, your friends, all humans, this very world, and the gods: I cherish them all. Because I cherish them, I wish to protect them. And that is why the gods' games cannot exist."

"...?!" Fay made a half-voiced sound of shock. What did that mean? Why shouldn't the gods' games exist?

He tried to ask, but his mouth wouldn't move. The god's sleep enchantment left him unable to twitch a finger; all he could do was float there in the viscous dark.

"When you awake, nothing at all will have changed in the human world. Only, the gods' games will be gone. That will be the one, single difference."

"....." This was *no joke*. Even in the grip of an enchantment that threatened to sap his waking mind away, even as a haze intruded on his vision, Fay glowered as hard as he could at the *void* that was speaking to him.

You drag people into a place they never wanted to go and then try to force them to sleep? Yeah, I don't think so!

Worst of all, though, was knowing how desperately the others must be searching for him. How desperately they must be waiting, not knowing he had been shunted into this alternate dimension. He didn't even want to think about it.

"You may feel free to hate me; I don't mind. But I do what I must..."

The god's voice got farther away—not because the god was growing more distant, but because Fay's consciousness had nearly been snuffed out. He was rapidly sinking into the sleep to which the god had invited him.

"Fare thee well. May you be happy in the world you find in the future."

At that moment, as Fay slipped into the very lowest depths of a dream from which he would not wake, he thought he heard a voice.

No... It was a memory.

"I've never given a human an Arise before."

"Sis...?"

"My name is—..... Until you—.....—once more, my blood will protect you from every catastrophe that might befall you."

"So this power, this Arise, is called May Your God: meaning, you have the divine love of the gods."

The darkness bounded backward. Fay was surrounded by extraordinary vermilion flames, burning away the sleep enchantment that threatened to rob him of his consciousness.

A Superhuman Arise, of the type "May Your God."

It repelled everything that tried to harm Fay, even malice, curses, fate, and the interference of the gods themselves. A blessing of *temporary invulnerability* granted by one god in particular.

"Impossible!" the god shouted from the void before him.

A god's power, leveled at a human, pushed back by the blessing of another god.

There was an audible *crack* from behind Fay as the lightless Elements shattered.

"Ahh! Don't go!"

A hand—a hand reached for him through the darkness. A god reaching out to grab Fay's hand before he could escape this Elements.

The arm was that of a girl wearing the uniform of the Arcane Court. Fay just caught a glimpse of elaborate gold embroidery on a black field.

"You mustn't leave this—"

The hand grasped empty air.

Even as he heard the voice cry out from the shrouded world...

...Fay was freed from the Elements of this unknown god.

Player.7

The Forest of the God-Tree, Yggdrasil

Gods' Games We Play

1

The gods on high invited players to be part of the gods' games, though by what standards they were chosen, that special handful from around the world, only the gods knew. The chosen ones were given powers and became apostles, and they became able to travel to the superior spiritual realm known as Elements.

They never knew what they would find there—what kind of place it would be, what kind of game they would play. That all depended on the gods.

“Master Fay?!”

“Fay! Leshea, over here! We found him!”

“Geez! Fay?! Stay with me, man!”

He felt something hit him on the shoulder, hard. The impact and the pain slowly brought him around, dragging his consciousness out of what felt like a dream.

Where...where am I?

He could hear someone talking. Someone was hitting him on the shoulder.

Fay's eyes drifted open, and although his vision was still fuzzy, he recognized the faces he saw.

“He opened his eyes! Master Fay, do you recognize me?! Stay right there, I'm going to go get Mistress Leshea!”

No sooner had the black-haired girl stopped shouting than she turned and ran off. In her place, a golden-haired girl and a young man with brown hair moved in and peered at Fay.

“Fay!” the golden-haired girl said.

“Hey! Fay! Get up already!”

“...Ugh...” Fay made a noise and rubbed his eyes. He registered the faces staring down at him, then finally began to absorb his surroundings. He was lying on the ground in a place full of green.

“Pearl? Captain Ashlan? Wait... So am I...?”

He looked around. His still slightly foggy brain conjured a memory, a distant recollection of a place without light.

Not here. This was somewhere different.

When Fay got to his feet, he found he was in a forest of trees so massive they seemed to reach up to the heavens. The ground was covered in a riot of colorful flowers, while from overhead, sunlight came dappled and lovely through the leaves.

“Well, you sure know how to make a scene. Lying on the ground alone in the middle of a forest like this.”

Fay turned and saw a young woman with very pink hair; she had her arms crossed and looked annoyed.

“Me and Captain Ashlan and my treasured sisters spent a whole hour looking for you. I thought you were supposed to be the world’s greatest rookie! You’d think you’d be paying a little more attention to what you were—”

She was interrupted by a voice shouting Fay’s name from among the massive trees, echoing around the woods.

“Faaaaay!”

A trace of vermilion.

Hair that shone like fire fluttered in the wind, and almost before he knew what he was doing, Fay followed it.

His *big sister* with the red hair.

“Oh...”

“Fay, you’re all right!”

The dragon god Leoleshea stood there looking as grave and serious as he’d ever seen her. And for the second time, she looked to him like his “big sister,” the girl who had taught him to play games when he’d been so young.

“Gosh! We looked *everywhere* for you, you know. This forest is gigantic. I must have jogged five hundred kilometers over that way all by myself, and I couldn’t even find you!” Indeed, she’d come running up full-tilt, only to screech to a halt. “I’m sure I know what happened. You were late diving through the Divine Gate, so it must have landed you at different coordinates. Silly Miranda. She said the Divine Gate was fixed, but it looks to me like it’s still got a few bugs. Hey, Fay, are you listening?”

“Huh? Uh, oh, yeah. Sure.”

“Are you feeling all right?”

“Y-yeah! I’m fine now... I think.” He gave a vigorous shake of his head. He was too embarrassed to admit he’d had another hallucination.

“...?” Leshea looked at him, questioning. But only for a moment—then the former god with the bright red hair smiled at him. “Well, don’t worry. The point is, you’re safe.”

“Sorry to worry you,” Fay said. “I’m a little shaken myself. I never thought a whole different—” He broke off abruptly and looked around the gigantic forest. It was beautiful, sunlight pouring amid the leaves.

Is this a different world? It seems totally different from the pitch-black Elements where I was imprisoned.

Had he escaped? No matter how hard he looked around or how closely he listened, he didn’t hear the voice of the god from before. Which had to mean this was...

“At least we’re not still stuck in that maze! This is definitely a different Elements from that,” Captain Ashlan sighed. He had gone over by his

teammates and was looking up at one of the huge trees. “Man, that’s big! And this forest is sized to match. We spent a good hour looking for you, Fay, but we never found the edge of the woods. I think for sheer scale, this forest might be on par with that labyrinth.”

“Oh yeah?” Fay felt unconsciously relieved.

In that case, who was the god of this world? If it wasn’t the mysterious deity from that subdimension, then maybe this place was at least safe, as far as it went.

“Captain Ashlan, who’s the god around here?”

“Haven’t met ’em yet. Since we found you, I’m hoping for some sort of event to trigger.” Ashlan looked around, and at just that moment...

“Welcome to the forest of the God-Tree, Yggdrasil!”

A cheerful voice spoke. Fay looked into the branches of one of the immense trees and saw a sprite of a light green color descending.

“I am the meep who lives in these woods. Are you all first-time visitors?”

“Well, yeah!” Anita replied instantly, seizing the initiative. “I don’t remember seeing anything about a forest like this in the Arcane Court’s data banks. So, Mister Meep, this big old tree here is Yggdrasil, is it?”



“Yes. This is one of Yggdrasil’s buds, and this forest is the field of play!”

“...?” Anita blinked. Buds? What did that mean? This tree in front of them had to be centuries old.

“What you are all observing right now is a young leaf sprouted from one of the God-Tree’s seeds.”

“Young?!”

“Indeed. Yggdrasil’s own body is far from here, very far. This forest is where the buds of Yggdrasil’s next generation grow.”

“Geez, really? The gods do know something about scale, don’t they?” Captain Ashlan said. “So now what? Don’t tell me this Yggdrasil is an actual god?”

“The gods you will be facing are over here!”

Gods? Plural?

Before Fay could ask any questions, something—in fact, many somethings—began to descend one after another from the ancient tree.

There were nine of them in all, three each of three different kinds of beings:

Faeries no larger than the meep, with emerald wings.

Human-sized, humanoid tree-people with long limbs.

Spirits almost two meters tall, looking much like trees themselves.

They all came down and lined up neatly behind the meep.

“Allow me to introduce you. These faeries, treefolk, and tree spirits are nymphs, dryads, and treants, respectively!”

“Wh-whoa, hold on! There’s nine of them!” Nel said, her eyes going wide. “I thought the gods’ games were supposed to be one god versus several humans! But this is almost like...”

“A god(s) team versus a human team!”

“Say what?!” Nel could hardly get the words out. She was used to games against absolutely ludicrous gods—but never more than one of them at once. No matter how far back you went in the Arcane Court data banks, there was no

record of a game against multiple gods.

The nymphs were cheering. *“Huzzah! Humans are here! Real, live humans!”* They floated right about the height of Fay’s head, their voices loud out of all proportion to their tiny bodies. *“You’re very lucky. We were just looking for someone to play with, so we made up a game we can play. You’re not gonna beat us, though.”*

“Nymph, it’s not nice to taunt those who have been kind enough to come and play with us,” said the dryads. They had a feminine voice, more mature and reserved than that of the nymph. *“Gods show no favor and make no threats. They open human hearts gradually and care for them gently.”*

“Yikes! You have got weird tastes, Dry!” All three of the nymphs started laughing.

In fact, to Fay’s surprise, the nymphs and dryads each spoke in unison, the three bodies uttering the same words simultaneously.

“Tell them, treant! You say something to them!” the nymphs urged, but they were greeted with a long silence.

“.....”

“Oh, right. You don’t speak a human language. Well, don’t worry, I talk enough for all of us!”

The three nymphs fluttered up through the air to a height of about three meters, from which they proceeded to study the human players.

“Okay, let’s get four balls ready to go!”

The nymphs snapped their fingers, and a great gale sprang up in the forest, like a storm, rushing upward toward the top of Yggdrasil’s woods. It brought four fruits tumbling down from above:

A green one about the size of a palm fruit that bounced like it was made of rubber when it hit the ground.

A blue one about the size of a palm fruit that bounced once when it hit the ground and then came to rest.

A red one about the size of a palm fruit that hit the ground with an audible

thwack.

Another red one larger than a human that slammed into the earth with the force of a meteor, leaving a crater.

They were *different weights*—as anyone could tell by the way they landed. Especially that last one. It was clearly of a different size and much heavier.

“These four fruits are the balls,” the meep announced.

“The court is Yggdrasil’s forest, and the game is God-Tree-Fruit Basketball! Let’s get started!”

Vs. the Guardians of the God-Tree’s Wood

Game: God-Tree-Fruit Basketball

Win Condition 1: First team to fifty points wins

Win Condition 2: If time expires, the team with the higher score wins

However, in the case of time expiring, points scored will be used to _____

Other: All four fruits are used at once.

Green fruit (1 kilogram). Blue fruit (5 kilograms). Yellow fruit (50 kilograms).

Each scores different points.

And the red fruit _____

A gods’ game humanity had never experienced was about to begin.

Afterword

“There’s no greater trump card in the games against the gods than your own passion for games.”

Thank you for reading *Gods’ Games We Play*, Vol. 4!

Humans and gods have at least one thing in common: they both get totally into their games. I think Volume 4 here in particular is a good demonstration of how not just the humans but even the gods get excited about these games. And it’s not just “Miss Undeclared” getting featured on the cover—even the game master of the Labyrinth arc made the front of the book! Toiro Tomose’s character designs are the best, and personally, I absolutely love them!

There’s a little secret detail here: In my mind, this volume’s cover star is siblings with the Sun God Mahtma II from Volume 2. I wonder if I’ll ever get the chance to bring them together in the main story...hee-hee!

All right, then!

Speaking of *Gods’ Games We Play*, I’ve got great news!

First of all, the light novel info mag *This Light Novel is Amazing! 2022* ranked this series number nine overall among new series. That’s on their list of top ten light novel series from the entire year, so I’m really thrilled. Thank you for all your generous encouragement!

And there’s more...!

As announced on social media:

Gods’ Games has an anime in the works!

Thank you, thank you so much!

I dreamed of it. I was sure this story would really shine in animation. That dream started to come true with the manga version (by Kapiko Toriume), and

now it's realized in full with an actual anime! I couldn't be happier!

I can't give you any more details now, but just wait until you see what we have in store!

Let's conclude with a couple other upcoming things.

Volume 13 of *Our Last Crusade* is coming in March, and a continuation of the anime has been confirmed!

Furthermore, I'll be working hard to be able to bring you news of *Gods' Games*, Vol. 5!

Get ready for a team game of historic scale, gods versus humans!

Kei Sazane

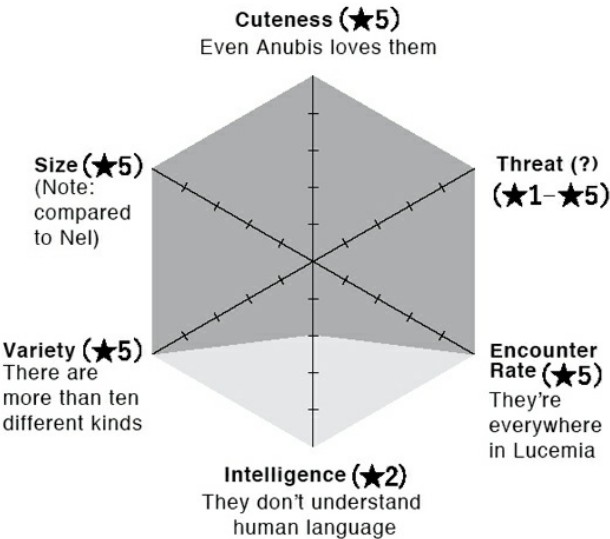
End of 2021

NAME **Puffball**

PROFILE

Lucemia's most beloved and most iconic monsters, they're known for their fluffy fur and their cries of "Puuufff!" Also favorites of the god Anubis. They're very small and easily scared. They get frightened whenever humans approach and will try to attack them, but there are several ways humans can get the Puffballs to like them.

SPEC



Variety, Threat, Encounter Rate ★5

Puffballs, the most numerous and varied monster in the labyrinth. Ordinary brown-furred Puffballs pose no threat, but area bosses like the Golden Puffball or Dark Puffball have driven countless players to their wit's end. By satisfying specific conditions, players can go to the hidden Puffball Village, where they can meet the King Puffball.

Size ★5 About as tall as a person's knee?

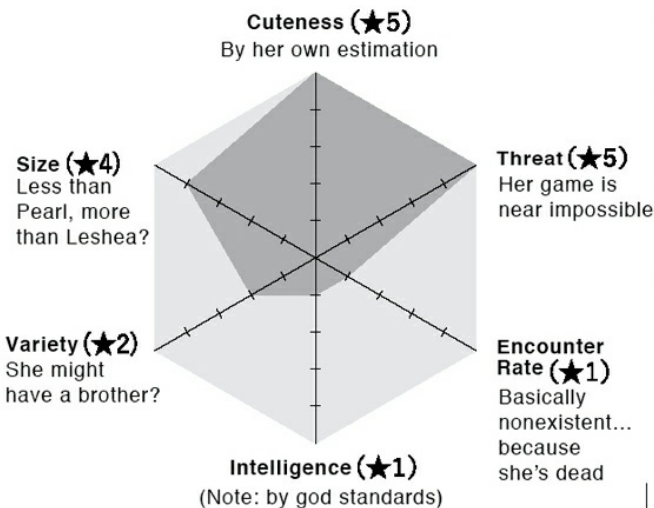
Nel: "If I tucked a couple of these under my clothes, my chest might look almost as large as Pearl's!"
Pearl: "Why would you ever try that?!"

NAME **Anubis, God of the Underworld**

PROFILE

The game master and final boss of the Lucemia labyrinth. This god has a problem: It was all well and good to create a massive, sprawling maze, but she sort of borked the difficulty, and no one has ever been able to clear it, so she said “Forget it,” got all pouty, and disappeared into her tomb. Anubis might be a little emotional, but she is generally pleasant and sociable.

SPEC



Encounter Rate ★1

A god who represents death and rebirth. From the beginning, her game seemed to have a fatal bug, namely that she's not there anymore—she's dead. Players can't even meet her until they resurrect her via a special event. She's also the younger sister of the Sun God Mahtma II, the deity Fay faced off with in the Sunsteal Scramble. There are even rumors that the whole reason she locked herself up in that tomb beneath the maze was because she “had a fight with her brother and ran away from home.” Maybe the way the sunlight poured down on Anubis's head when she sat there after her defeat was a message from her sibling.

Intelligence ★1

Her claim? “I'd just woken up (been resurrected) and I wasn't thinking straight.”

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