
APPARENTLY, DISILLUSIONED ADVENTURERS WILL SAVE THE WORLD
The Dream's End
Shinta Fuji
Illustrated by
Susumu Kuroi
6
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“NEVER LEAVE ME AGAIN.”
Nick felt Karan’s breath and body heat. He was too tired to push her away, nor did he want to. Instead, he yielded to the warmth and softness of her body, neither of which he had ever been conscious of before.
He had been afraid of the sinking feeling in his body and his heart. He felt that acknowledging it would mean the end of his adventure.

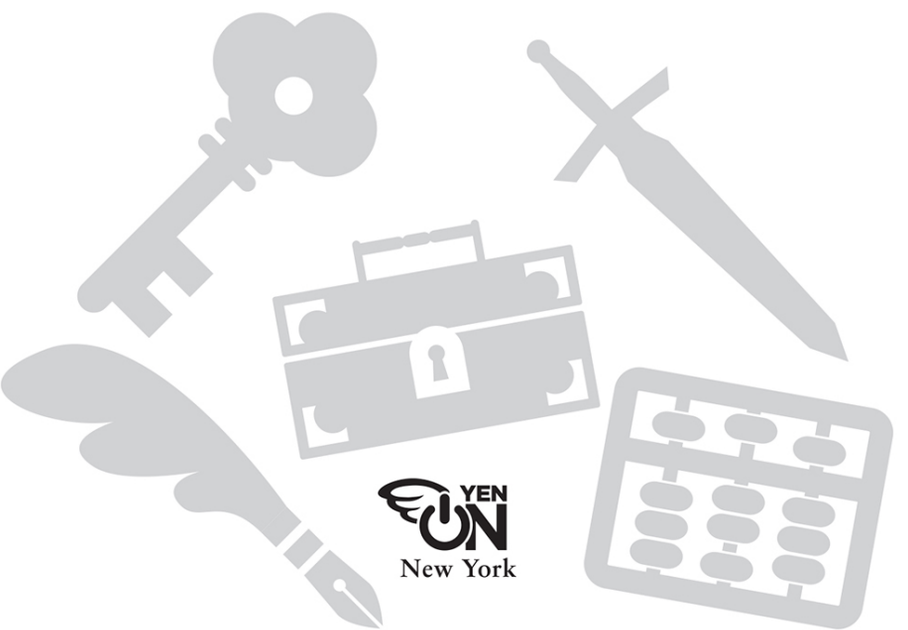
APPARENTLY, DISILLUSIONED ADVENTURERS WILL SAVE THE WORLD

The Dream's End

6

Shinta Fuji

Illustrated by *Susumu Kuroi*



YEN ON
New York

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Shinta Fuji

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A Moment More Precious than Gold



Within the deep darkness of the Colosseum of Carnage, a holy sword revealed itself.

Its appearance lacked the elegance and vitality of the Sword of Evolution or the complexity of the Sword of Resonance. It most closely resembled the Sword of Bonds.

The blade changed from pure white to pitch-black along its length. It had no tip but was instead cut off in a flat line as if to symbolize nothingness. A jewel was embedded in the hilt, just like every holy sword, and peering into its ocean-like depths allowed one to sense a strong life force.

A faintly shining hand held the sword.

“”Is that holy armor? …No, it can’t be. What the heck is that?”” Nick/Zem said, shuddering.

A knight with pure white flames emanating from their body stood before them. Nothing about the figure revealed its gender. Its elegant, supple frame could have belonged to a man or a woman, and its face was hidden by a mask that resembled those worn by the White Masks, except it wasn’t a helmet. It covered only the face, leaving the knight’s hair, which resembled bluish-white flames, to flow freely behind.

Its body was composed of the same flame-like substance. It was impossible to tell whether it was flesh, nonbiological matter, flames, or mana. One thing was certain: It projected an

overwhelming divinity.

"It is indeed holy armor. It's been jammed with so many souls, however, that it can barely maintain its shape… Those shining white flames are the souls of heroes. Hundreds—no, over a thousand—of them have been compressed to the size of one person, making the souls visible and turning them into power itself," the Sword of Bonds said.

Nick/Zem reacted to those words with a sense of doom. How could they defeat such an opponent?

"Pull yourself together, dumbass. Don't chicken out before the fight even begins!" Leon scolded them, even though he was breaking into a cold sweat himself.

""Tch. I know, but still…""

The Survivors had defeated many powerful foes. They'd lost to Argus and the White Masks but had at least put up a decent fight. Nick/Zem could feel in their bones this time was different. This was an opponent that could kill them with the tip of a finger or even a look. Fear overcame them at the thought.

"…Hmph. He is certainly achieving his maximum potential as a holy sword. I won't deny that we are at a disadvantage…but we have a monster of our own to unleash. We can pit them against each other," the Sword of Evolution said, clearly frustrated.

They all turned to look at the titan. It wasn't a species of monster called a titan; there was simply no better word to describe its demonic presence, gaze, form, and soul. Its dark red skin looked like heated steel. Its armor had melded with its flesh, turning it into a brutally hard shell. It had burning gold eyes, and two horns grew from its forehead.

It wasn't quite as grotesque as a monster, but its bloodthirsty spirit was the total opposite of the burning knight's divinity.

The most surreal thing of all was how calmly it stood there.

""…So that's what remains of Argus,"" Nick/Zem muttered.

" *That* is the best your evolution could do? Is this a joke? He could have been so much more. That body is unsightly… I'll destroy him without a trace and put an end to his miserable existence," the Sword of Tasuki said. The burning knight readied its sword.

The battle began with a *whoosh* of wind as the titan rushed at the burning knight. Without making a sound, it thrust the heel of its palm deep into the knight's chest, causing its body to crumble.

“A master practitioner of Stepping sends mystic waves through anything they touch. Anything he comes into contact with will completely shatter,” the Sword of Bonds said.

“”If only it were that easy,”” Nick/Zem said, just before the shattered pieces re-formed into the knight’s body. To make matters worse, a few remaining fragments didn’t rejoin the knight’s body and instead fused together to form new knights.

Five burning knights lifted their swords. Unlike the White Masks that Nick/Tiana had fought, they moved with perfect coordination.

The battle began anew. The scene unfolded like a mural depicting an ancient myth, but one that carried real flesh, smell, and weight. However, there was no time to be captivated by the sight.

“”Damn…! Leon! Avoid any direct blows!”” Nick/Zem shouted as another tiny fragment transformed into a burning knight, who charged fiercely at them.

Each one of the knights held a copy of the Sword of Tasuki. There was no telling if they were replicas like the Sword of Bonds could produce or if the Sword of Tasuki had genuinely multiplied himself. Regardless, they were all strong enough to erase Nick/Zem or Leon with a single touch.

“I know! We need to put some distance between us and them!” Leon shouted.

He took up the Sword of Evolution once again and changed his form. Large wings sprouted from his back, and he grabbed Nick/Zem and flew into the air.

“Ngh… This room is spacious, but it’s still underground! Be careful!” the Sword of Evolution warned.

“”That’s not a problem! Cognition Corridor!”” Nick/Zem shouted, scattering white particles of light from the Sword of Bonds. They were fixed firmly in midair despite being small enough that the wind should have pushed them around.

“”Here we go!””

Nick/Zem stepped on a particle, and it produced a strong propulsive force. They jumped from one to the next, dancing through the air unpredictably.

“”Take that!””

They kicked the burning knight that was pursuing them as hard as they could, causing its neck to bend limply. That would have broken its neck…if it had had bones.

“”The hell is this thing made of?!”” Nick/Zem shouted. They felt a vast, unrecognizable sensation in their leg when they made contact with the knight, as if they’d been repelled by a magnetic force. “”It used Stepping defensively to absorb the impact… It’s significantly more skilled than me.””

They tried to pull their leg back, but the knight grabbed it.

“”Crap!””

The knight crushed their leg, which flared with an intense pain. Healing magic immediately mended the injury, but that did nothing to prevent the hell that followed as the knight violently swung them around like a child playing with a toy. The knight slammed them into the ceiling and floor, then threw them toward Leon and fired multiple cursed stakes at them.

“”Cognition Barrier!”” Nick/Zem yelled, just barely blocking the stakes.

They quickly readied themselves for another blow, but none came. The demonic Argus had chopped off the burning knight’s head with a hand.

“”Argh, I can’t keep up with them! And why do *they* get to fling around magic like that?! It’s not fair!”” Nick/Zem said.

It had taken only a few seconds for the burning knight to inflict a number of heavy wounds on them. They had no chance in this state.

“Most likely because the contract with Mr. Argus was severed. This labyrinth’s purpose was to Awaken him, but now that its purpose has been lost, they’ve cut off the mana supply being used to obstruct magic,” the Sword of Might said.

“”Damn it, can’t they show a little more respect for the rules? What can we do here?”” Nick/Zem asked, frustrated.

“We should give up on the idea of fighting them. They are out of our league,” the Sword of Might said.

“”They’re that much stronger than us?””

“Yes. Please prioritize survival. You don’t have to run—just attack as little as possible.”

“”…What would that do? I don’t wanna die in here.””

“We’re not alone. That titan is fighting with us. Let’s focus on healing, obstruction, and survival. We want to drag this out as long as possible.”

Nick/Zem looked dubious, but the Sword of Might continued seriously.

“Every moment the burning knight—or rather, the Sword of Tasuki—is down here fighting with all of his power, it’s a golden opportunity we can’t waste. He is a schemer, even if his contract with Mr. Argus just forced him to operate that way. We have been on the back foot this entire time because we’ve had to be constantly wary of his interference. But right now, that is not a concern.”

“”…You’re saying that holding fast here will help everyone fighting aboveground?”” Nick/Zem asked.

“His opponents have always had to work carefully and out of sight to keep him from learning of their activities, just like Olivia did. That’s why she never told me who she was working with. Whoever they are, they’re taking advantage of this opportunity and executing their plans. I’m sure of it,” the Sword of Might said. It sounded like she was doing her best to cling to hope.

Leon objected, unsurprisingly. “I’d rather scram than bet on an unknown. We can rework our plan. Feel free to wait around and believe in your friends, but you ain’t involvin’ me.”

“I agree. I am skeptical that anyone who is not here now can accomplish anything. We should let Argus buy us time so we can escape,” the Sword of Evolution said.

Nick/Zem’s first instinct was to agree with them, but they pushed that aside.

“”…Leon. Sword of Evolution.””

“What now?” Leon asked.

“”We’re gonna hold our ground. We’ll buy as much time as we can, whether that’s a minute, a day, or a month.””

“You really expect me to stick around for that? Gimme a break, man. That’s a death sentence.”

“”Your presence here means you’re an ally. You agreed to live and die with us. You wouldn’t have come if this was only a business arrangement to you. Am I wrong?””

“…Believe whatever you want. Just watch your back.”

“”I know you won’t run.””

“Why not?”

“”Because you’re an adventurer.””

Leon groaned. He was ready with more logical arguments, but he couldn’t deny that simple fact.

“”I’m not telling you to trust us. But how many people do you think trust that Sword of Tasuki creep? And how do you think that compares to the number of people who want to kill him?”” Nick/Zem asked.

“But they can’t do anything. I can’t trust anyone who ain’t standin’ here right now,” Leon said.

“”Then do you trust the Sword of Evolution?””

Leon snorted. “’Course not. He’s just waitin’ for society to collapse so he can swoop in and profit off it. He wants to defeat the demon god to prove he’s the strongest holy sword, then complete his mission. That about right?”

“Precisely,” the Sword of Evolution said.

“He wants to make a new world that expands on the ancient civilization,” Leon explained. “To accomplish that, he plans to create a new generation of people mentally and physically strong enough to use ancient spells and magic items. His goal’s not that different from the Sword of Tasuki; he’s just got a different approach. They both want a revolution.”

“You understand me well, my wielder,” the Sword of Evolution said, his jewel shining mockingly.

“What sets you apart is that you’re not as obsessed with Awakening, like the Sword of Tasuki is. You even seem skeptical of it,” Leon said.

“...The purpose of Awakening is to strengthen a person’s soul and spirit and remake them into a spiritual being that no longer relies on the body. That differs greatly from my evolutionary abilities. Very few people have the aptitude for Awakening. It is hardly something humanity should desire. The Sword of Tasuki is an immature germaphobe who wants to abandon the flesh. Pain and emotion should not be discarded; they are to be intensified and relied upon. Why can’t he see that?”

“”W-well said...,”” Nick/Zem said.

“The ancient civilization was rich with bodily pleasures. The people gorged themselves on food and enjoyed themselves to no end. However,

many were conscious of their own sins and questioned whether they were leading proper lives. Eventually, they rose in revolt against the garbage artificial intelligences that had been labeled as gods… I will complete the chaotic world they birthed. I care not for the Originators who abandoned physical matter and attained enlightenment. There is even the possibility that all Awakened are our enemies."

""I get your ideology, but right now, I just wanna know if you're the Sword of Tasuki's enemy or not. And whether you have a plan to defeat him.""

"I have a plan, yes. I obtained a template by turning Argus into that titan. I can apply that template to other types of people as well and create an army of titans to oppose the Sword of Tasuki. I know the Order of the Sun Knights and the government are hiding their mana resources; give me access to those, and I know I can manage it. If I just had half a year—"

""Half a year's too long. We'll all be wiped out by then. Good luck building a world worthy of the ancient civilization after that.""

"Grk… I—I can rebuild. It may take years, but I much prefer that plan to naively betting on the efforts of total strangers," the Sword of Evolution said indignantly.

The Sword of Bonds objected. "Your argument would hold more weight if every holy sword were down here with us. Do you really believe the Sword of Resonance—formerly the Sword of Distortion—is watching this situation idly? Can you imagine her hiding to prioritize her own survival?"

"Geh… The Sword of Distortion, huh…?" the Sword of Evolution said uneasily.

"I'm trusting in her ill character and tenacity," said the Sword of Bonds.

"Hmm… But—"

"Enough chitchat… Fine. I see your point. But I ain't gonna hesitate to run when I need to. Don't think I'm stickin' around to save your life," Leon interrupted.

""You'd better not die, then. Give this your all and survive,"" Nick/Zem said.

"You're the last person I wanna hear that from," Leon snapped back.

"I'll give you my full support, too. Good luck," the Sword of Might said, relieved to see that they had reached an agreement.

With that, the group threw themselves into what they knew to be a hopeless fight.

The battle—if it could even be called that—seemed to last forever. Neither side could inflict a decisive blow that would shift the tide in their favor. The titan destroyed one burning knight after another, but they always repaired themselves. The knights, meanwhile, used Parallel to attempt to overwhelm the titan with numbers.

The titan was perfect in every way. It blocked thrusts powerful enough to reduce an opponent to ashes, evaded as many cursed stakes as there were stars in the sky, and interrupted magic attacks with well-timed thrusts of its mana-imbued fingertips. Its physical strength and mana were about equivalent to Nick/Zem, but its body control was at the peak of human or monster potential.

Meanwhile, Nick/Zem, Leon, and the Sword of Might fought furiously to endure the burning knights' attacks and heal themselves and the titan. The knights only ever attacked Nick/Zem impulsively to cause the titan to hesitate and keep it in check, clearly not believing them to be a threat, but it still took everything they had to dodge and survive. The only chance they had of landing a blow was after withstanding one of those lethal attacks.

"They're responding perfectly to everything we do! You need to think one step ahead!" the Sword of Might urged.

""How do you expect me to do that?!"" Nick/Zem asked.

Nick/Zem could scatter particles of mana into the air that only they could see and use them as platforms to jump around faster than the speed of sound. Not even an opponent as strong as a White Mask could escape them inside that domain. Unfortunately, the burning knights could somehow perceive the precise locations of the particles and use them to chase Nick/Zem.

""Crap... Their magic makes them even harder to fight than Argus!"" Nick/Zem said.

"We need to catch the enemy off guard. Please dispel Union," the Sword of Might requested.

""Huh?! Now?!"" Nick/Zem exclaimed.

"It's risky, but if all goes well, we'll be able to keep them busy for twice as long... Also, if we don't change our plan, Zem will die," the Sword of Might said.

No, I...I can keep fighting, Zem's mind objected, but Nick could tell how strained the former priest's soul was.

"...She is right. Your healing magic is placing too heavy a burden on your mind. But if you separate now...," the Sword of Bonds said, trailing off.

""We'll be killed. We don't have a backup plan,"" Nick/Zem said.

"I have one. Leon, could you please perform Union with Nick?" the Sword of Might asked.

"Huh?! You've gotta be joking!" Leon yelled in disgust.

The Sword of Might ignored him and continued, "I will protect you in the meantime, Zem. You are suffering from mental exhaustion, rather than physical exhaustion, so you can entrust control of your body to me and rest your mind. Sword of Evolution, I want you to support Nick and Leon."

"By 'support,' I assume you mean 'act as an attachment or extension of the Sword of Bonds.' Do you truly expect me to go along with that?" the Sword of Evolution said.

"I suppose I would be opposed, too, if our positions were reversed... And performing Union without prior rehearsal can be fatal," the Sword of Bonds said.

"Wait, I changed my mind. This sounds fun," the Sword of Evolution said, to everyone's surprise. "The Sword of Might was developed after us, with the mission of understanding human ability and aptitude and helping people reach their potential. If she says it's possible, we have no choice but to listen."

"But it would involve using Union and Evolution—two ritual spells—at once. That would be unwise," the Sword of Bonds said.

"Indeed. At worst we could be destroyed, or one ritual could usurp the other," agreed the Sword of Evolution.

"That would be true under normal circumstances. However, prolonged exposure to the radiance of the burning knight's and the titan's souls is dramatically sharpening the souls of Nick, Zem, and Leon. If we do it now, it won't be so dan—"

"Quit talkin' already! We doin' this or not?! If you've found an answer, then stop goddamn hesitating!" yelled Leon, interrupting the Sword of Might.

“”…Split,”” Nick/Zem said. Their body ceased shining, and they separated into Nick and Zem. Nick fell to his knees, barely able to hold himself up, and Zem fainted.

“Sorry, Zem… We put too much of the burden on you,” Nick said.

“Do what you gotta do before you apologize!” Leon shouted.

“Okay! Here we go… Union!”

Despite breathing heavily, Nick and Leon both chanted the spell with a strong will, and light enveloped their beaten-up bodies.

Nick’s hair grew thick and rough like an animal’s, lengthening down to his back. Robust muscles and hair enveloped his arms, legs, and chest, and cognition armor formed around him to contain the vast power bursting from his body. He held the Sword of Evolution in his right hand—his arm had become so big, it made the greatsword look like a one-handed sword—and the Sword of Evolution in his left.

“”Two holy swords at once? Talk about overkill,”” Nick/Leon said.

“Hmm. You look much more imposing than before. You might be more compatible with Leon than with your fellow Survivor,” the Sword of Evolution said.

“”Ugh. Don’t ever say that again,”” Nick/Leon said with visible disgust. They quickly braced themselves, however, and turned toward the burning knight that was targeting them.

“”Watching the Sword of Tasuki fight gave me an idea. Why don’t we turn his own methods against him? Listen well! Receive this blessing from the extremity of evolution… Prosper!””

Nick/Leon ripped a few dozen hairs from their body and blew them across the room. They glowed with the Sword of Evolution’s light and morphed into copies of Nick/Leon. They were easily distinguishable from the real body because they shone with a golden light and were semitransparent, but they contained vast mana. They were nearly as strong as Nick/Leon.

“”That…looks kinda different from Parallel,”” Nick/Leon said.

“You insult me,” responded the Sword of Evolution. “Prosper is far

superior to Parallel. The latter is a foolish spell that divides the user's strength, while the former starts with a spark that quickly grows by absorbing the dense mana coming from the corpses of the burning knights and in the air. This is much more efficient."

"I see... It would normally take time for the clones' power to grow, but that process can be hastened here," observed the Sword of Bonds.

"Impressive, I know, but this is no time for admiring my prowess, Sword of Bonds. You had better not hold back, either."

"I know that! Let's go!"

The golden glowing figures attacked together, slashing at the burning knight chasing Nick/Leon. Leon's agility and reaction speed were held in check by Nick's wary nature, making them a solid combination, and they entered striking distance of one of the seemingly unbeatable burning knights for the first time.

""Now that's what I'm talkin' about!"" Nick/Leon couldn't fight dozens of the burning knights at once like the titan was, but they could handle one.

The copies created by Prosper intuitively sensed Nick/Leon's intentions, and they surrounded the burning knight with perfect coordination. One of them would block the burning knight's slashes while another struck from behind and another lunged for its ankles. They didn't relax because of their numerical advantage; instead, the fear that one mistake could mean death drove them to fight with unusual cruelty. They severed limbs to restrict the burning knight's movement, sacrificed clones to kill it, and used their obvious bloodlust to trick it with feints.

This newfound brutality allowed them to finally win a small victory.

""Hell yeah! That's how it's done!"" Nick/Leon cheered.

"Oh? Someone looks like they're having fun. I'll send a little more of my strength your way," the Sword of Tasuki said.

Unfortunately, their success ended up drawing the attention of the burning knights, who eyed them with the curiosity of a child tormenting insects. Nick/Leon gulped, fearing a fate worse than death. Each one had godlike power.

""...I'm glad we managed to make a small difference, but that might've been a bad idea,"" Nick/Leon said.

"It's too late to complain now! They're coming!" the Sword of Bonds

said.

Ten of the many knights fighting the titan headed their way. Taking down just one of them had been hard enough, and now ten were attacking in perfect formation. Nick had a flashback of nearly being killed by the five White Masks.

Pull yourself together, you wuss! You couldn't handle their organized assault earlier because you were fighting alone! We have a way to fight back now! Right?! Leon's mind yelled. Nick's mind grumbled in annoyance, but they had a fire within them, formed of animosity and energy to fight the burning knights.

"Now, Sword of Bonds!" the Sword of Evolution said.

"Ngh, I would rather not use such a vile ability, but... Annexation !" the Sword of Bonds yelled.

A strange rainbow light filled Nick/Leon's clones, which charged at the burning knights. The charge appeared reckless, unlike the skilled coordination the clones had fought with earlier, and the burning knights swung their swords and cut them down without hesitation.

"Got them!" the Sword of Bonds yelled. "Now!"

The strange light burst from the clones' bodies, growing stronger and possessing the burning knights. Their nimble movements became clumsy, as if their armor had rusted; then, they shifted their hostility from Nick/Leon toward each other.

""That felt kind of gross, doing that,"" Nick/Leon said.

"I'm not fond of this strategy... But those burning knights choose their targets using a spiritual sense that surpasses normal bodily senses. We applied a partial Union to the clones to muddy their souls and disturb the knights' senses," the Sword of Bonds explained.

The knights began to fight one another, moving like marionettes in a cheap puppet show. The sight almost made Nick/Leon feel bad for them.

"Hmph, there's no time for moral scruples. More are coming," the Sword of Evolution said.

""I know!"" Nick/Leon shouted.

More burning knights approached and eradicated their hostile comrades with explosive flames. Nick/Leon withstood the raging wind and heat and produced new clones.

"They won't fall for the same trick twice! Fight them directly until we work

out another plan!" said the Sword of Bonds.

""That's more my style… But be quick about it,"" Nick/Leon responded. They readied their two swords, and their clones imitated them. ""Moonlight Sword!""

Vast mana filled the two holy swords, making them shine with golden light. Moonlight Sword was a nightmarish attack that used the mana and transformative power of the moon to completely destroy an enemy's defensive capabilities. It inflicted irreversible damage to any opponent, even if they were an eternal higher life-form. Nick/Leon had to use such nightmarish attacks or risk being destroyed so thoroughly themselves that no trace of their existence remained.

That hunch was proved correct when the burning knights responded with an attack of equally fearsome power and neutralized Moonlight Sword.

""Shit! How long do we have to keep this up?!"" Nick/Leon yelled.

"Please hold out for another hour! That is the time Mr. Zem needs to recover!" said the Sword of Might.

""Another hour?! Cats don't actually have nine lives, you know!"" Nick/Leon yelled back.

The battle grew in ferocity and cruelty. Nick/Leon often felt like they were standing on thin ice, growing so tired they could barely think. Surviving for much longer would take a series of miracles.

The end would inevitably come. Nick/Leon were being pushed to the brink against only a tenth of the burning knights' numbers. Over a hundred of them were wearing down the titan that had once been Argus, which was now out of mana and injured beyond the Survivors' healing capabilities.

Just like Nick/Leon, the burning knights didn't hesitate to use every attack available to them. Deadly poison. Curses. Excessive healing that damaged the body. Forbidden spells that chipped away at the soul itself. Attacks that altered the target like the Sword of Evolution could. The burning knights used over a thousand different attacks in their onslaught.

"…How unfortunate. I thought you might Awaken further through fighting me, but alas, it wasn't to be," the Sword of Tasuki said.

The titan was now little better than a corpse. It had lost its left leg below the knee and had no blood left to bleed. Its right hand was broken. Broken ribs protruded from its chest, and its eyes were crushed.

"I doubt any memories from when you were Argus remain. I'm sure you were protecting them on instinct and the last vestiges of your mind... But even that's over now."

The burning knight, on the other hand, didn't look the least bit fatigued. Hundreds, probably thousands, of its clones had been destroyed, but there was no sign of even the smallest dent in its mana or stamina. It also displayed mastery of seemingly every kind of skill and spell as it ravaged the titan.

A small tinge of happiness surfaced amid the regret and powerlessness that dominated Nick's mind. The titan was fighting using Argus's techniques. Even in this horribly mutated form, his instructor exhausted his combat ability to oppose the burning knights. He had even protected Nick/Zem and accepted their support.

Nick used to dream of such a moment when he was a child. He'd wanted to help this man become an S-rank adventurer and a true hero. Now it was all coming to an end.

Nick, no… You can't lose consciousness! Zem's mind urged him.

Shut up… It's all over…, Nick's mind responded.

You fool! The battle is just beginning! Lose hope now and you'll die! Bond's mind scolded him.

Nick and Zem had rejoined when Leon ran out of strength. They didn't dare dispel Union; they knew the burning knights would target and kill them as soon as they did.

Leon and the Sword of Evolution were totally silent. The Sword of Evolution had used the last of his power to create an egg-shaped barrier to protect Leon and let him rest. The barrier was capable of protecting him only from glancing blows, however. The burning knights would easily destroy it once they defeated Nick/Zem.

""I should've eaten at the guild...one more time before I died... And spent all my savings...on concert recordings..."""

It wasn't thoughts of luxurious food that surfaced in Nick's mind, but rather the cheapest meal available at the Newbies

Guild: lukewarm ale and thin barley porridge. It was hardly appetizing at the best of times, but he missed it dearly. That meal was where everything had started.

A mage with the wild eyes of an assassin.

A depraved priest who smelled of women's makeup.

A dragonian warrior who was as wary and hostile as a wounded animal.

They had teamed up and met their fifth member in a labyrinth: a mysterious holy sword who simultaneously behaved like an old man and a young boy, and who was strangely more human than most people he'd encountered.

It hadn't been too long since they'd met, but their time together had been unbelievably full. The fact that he currently found himself near death deep in a legendary labyrinth was proof of that.

""I should've given them anything that could fetch a price at an auction...and asked them to put my affairs in order... Well, I doubt anyone would understand the value of my merchandise,"" Nick mused, but then he thought of Karan and realized that she probably would.

The first time he'd met her, Nick had found Karan to be incredibly on guard yet open-minded—a dangerous combination typical of Labyrinth City adventurers in his book. Yet she was also honest and unbiased, which made him think she could be a good adventurer. He decided he would teach her everything he knew, but he quickly realized he thought too highly of himself in comparison to her. Karan had grown a startling amount in a very short time.

That was why he'd been so shocked, saddened, and flustered when she was injured protecting Diamond. Those emotions had mixed with the pride he felt at what a fine adventurer Karan had become.

Yet he also lamented that fact. Why couldn't she have progressed at the same speed as him? Why did she have to surpass him? Couldn't he have remained her veteran leader for a little longer?

He wished she would let him save her.

And now he wished she would save him.

“Karan…”

Nick/Zem ran out of strength, causing Union to dispel and the two of them to separate.

Nick muttered Karan’s name as he succumbed to the knowledge that he was about to die. He wanted to laugh at his own hypocrisy. He was the one who’d said those harsh words to her and then kept his distance. Despite that, affection welled within him as he said her name. Those feelings surprised him, but he felt an overwhelming sadness at her absence, and he prayed that she would survive. That would have to be good enough.

As Nick resigned himself to his fate, he heard a voice singing. It was gentle and familiar, but he dismissed it as a delusion on the verge of death.

The Signal to Counterattack



There was a board game called tabby top. It was a game of strategy where each player had six types of pieces—lion, tiger, leopard, caracal, ocelot, and house cat—and was won by taking the opponent's lion. The game predated the Holy Kingdom of Dineez's founding and was played all throughout the continent. The annual worldwide tournament was very popular, to the extent that there was an illegal gambling scene for betting on the winners. Some, called tabby masters, even made a living playing the game for money.

"His best strategies were winter *kotatsu* and persimmon thief," Tiana said.

She was sitting in a fancy chair in the Starmine Hall conference room looking down at a tabby top board. She wasn't playing, simply using the game as an abstraction of the current conflict. Ancient generals and tacticians had loved tabby top above all other games, just as Tiana and Bellocchio did.

"Those names aren't exactly self-explanatory," June said. She had no interest in tabby top herself, but she had come to realize during her short time with Tiana that the sharp young woman often received inspiration from her offhand murmurings.

"Winter *kotatsu* is a formation where you protect your lion with the tiger and house cats. It's an orthodox defensive strategy meant for a prolonged battle. Persimmon thief is a strategy where you approach an enemy formation with an agile cat to

lure out an enemy piece, then take it with a different cat that was lying in wait… It's also more suited for a long battle," Tiana explained.

"So he knows how to be patient," June said, implying by her tone that Tiana didn't. The mage glared at her, and June shrugged with a faint smile.

"…Anyway, my point is that we should avoid taking his bait," Tiana said.

She continued to think in her hastily made conference room as the tight conflict dragged on outside Starmine Hall. What kind of person was Bellocchio? What would he be thinking right now?

"Tiana. No matter the state of the game, your opponent's goal is always to take the lion. Don't be misled by what is in front of you."

A comment from her tabby top instructor surfaced in Tiana's mind. No matter how much she focused on defense, her instructor would always find a weak spot and take her lion. They would see right through her thought processes and turn the match around in one move.

"I agree with your opinion," June started. "But—"

"Lady Tiana! They're on their last legs! We need to take the fight to them!"

A group of ten rough-looking adventurers barged into the conference room. They were all injured in some way, but their eyes were ablaze. They were probably drunk on victory after repelling another force of dolls.

It was then that Tiana realized what Bellocchio was doing. The man was clever.

"The dolls' numbers are shrinking, and they're worsening in quality. We're also getting used to group tactics. That's why you think now is the time to strike," she said.

"H-huh? Did someone already give you the report?" one man asked.

"I can surmise that much. The enemy is sending us lower-quality dolls on purpose. They're trying to lift our morale excessively high," Tiana explained politely.

The adventurers stepped back, but they didn't leave.

"B-but…we're running low on provisions. If we're gonna strike, it has to be now."

"I've dispatched a different squad to procure food," Tiana said.

“But they haven’t come back yet.”

“The enemy is watching us closely.”

“That’s why now is our chance! We adventurers are fine. But if this drags on much longer, we won’t be able to keep treating the wounded. We could all die if the situation doesn’t improve!”

This was the difference between tabby top and real combat. Unlike the cat pieces, people had minds of their own. They grew hungry, they became overconfident after victory, they despaired after defeat, they risked themselves to save comrades, and they grumbled about stubborn leaders.

Tiana had been doing her best to stay conscious of that. She played the fool to make people laugh, put on a brave face, fought with the adventurers on occasion, and nursed the injured to health to gain the trust of those holding the fort.

It seemed like that wasn’t going to work for much longer. The adventurers were approaching their limit, and Tiana was mentally exhausted as well.

“…Not yet. We continue to hold fast,” Tiana said.

“Why?!” the adventurer asked.

Tiana was gradually coming to realize that victory or defeat here wouldn’t have an impact on the larger picture. Shaking off the threat before them would do nothing to prevent the true crises threatening Labyrinth City: the large-scale Stampede and the Sword of Tasuki’s schemes.

But she couldn’t give voice to that thought. Telling people who were risking their lives that they weren’t the main characters would be terrible for morale.

“She’s coming. We have to protect this place until she does,” Tiana told them.

“Who’re you talkin’ about?” the adventurer asked.

“Karan, obviously,” a different man replied.

“No, actually…,” Tiana said before trailing off. She had intended to tell them she actually meant Diamond, but the adventurers were growing too excited to pay attention to her. They began to celebrate, and word spread to the staff members and idols who’d stayed behind to help defend the fortress.

“Oh yeah, I ain’t seen her around lately. I heard she was here, though.”

“So Karan’s carryin’ out some top secret mission, is she?”

“That was mean of you to keep it from us for so long, Lady Tiana.”

Tiana wanted to scream, *No! She’s been disabled! She’ll never fight again!* but she restrained herself. Their belief in this falsehood would buy her a little more time.

“That girl’s had it hard. Didn’t she drag herself out of Pot Snake Cave and make it back to the city all alone?” an adventurer asked.

“…Yeah. She’s tough,” Tiana said, more to herself than the adventurers.

Karan was actually up to something. Tiana had been too busy to see what it was, but she’d always been doubtful that Karan would listen to Nick and the rest of them and resign herself to bed. She couldn’t imagine her giving up, or doing as Diamond said and prioritizing her own safety. Hell would freeze over first.

Tiana felt relief at the thought. That perseverance was what made Karan an adventurer. She’d listened to their warnings but didn’t stop. It was why Tiana had said her piece and listened to Karan’s argument. She trusted her.

“Yeah. I know she’s out there fighting,” Tiana said.

Someone clapped at those words. The sound was muffled by gloves, and although Tiana reacted instinctively with joy, it was quickly replaced with fear. She recognized the sound and rhythm of that clapping. It was something she had so often heard as a student after a good performance on a test or a report.

“You’re enduring without moving your lion, trusting that backup will arrive. That is the correct move.”

“Grab him! That’s Bellocchio!” Tiana shouted.

The cheering adventurers went pale and grabbed their weapons. The man had walked right up to them in plain sight.

“Magnetism,” Bellocchio chanted.

The moment the adventurers slashed their swords at his neck, a magnetic force too strong to resist pulled the blades downward. Anyone wearing armor or a belt was slammed to the ground, and the room echoed with the awful sounds of bones breaking.

Experience from her time as a student and instinct drove Tiana to action. She backed out of his range and fired an ice spell to restrain him.

“Icicle Dance!” she shouted.

“Dolls, protect me,” said Bellocchio.

A number of dolls had been hiding behind Bellocchio, and they threw their bodies in front of him to take the icicles in his stead. His footsteps clicked pleasantly as he continued to walk calmly toward her.

“Those dolls moved smoother than usual… That must mean Havok is here,” Tiana said.

“Yes, and she’s not alone. We’re *all* here, hiding in this fortress,” Bellocchio told her. “Digging that underground tunnel was hard work, but it finally paid off. The planning and construction were so rushed, I was afraid we were going to get buried alive.”

Tiana wasn’t sure if her former instructor was bluffing or not, but then she heard the sounds of swords clashing and spells being fired from the floor below. Dead Man’s Balloon had struck first. They’d passed right beneath them without anyone noticing.

“Ready for this, Tiana? Overload,” Bellocchio chanted, putting his hand on a doll.

An ominous light began to overflow from the doll’s joints and eyes. Bellocchio used a special ability of his that filled a magic item with electricity and mana to dramatically increase its performance for a time. The doll would eventually explode because it couldn’t contain the mana, but that apparent drawback was lethal to any caught up in it.

“Freeze! Ice Shield!” Tiana shouted.

“Your thinking and reaction speed have gotten faster. I’m pleased to see that you have continued your studies,” Bellocchio said.

Tiana froze the quickly charging doll to slow its movement and delay the explosion, but she was only buying time. Right now, she wasn’t strong enough to defeat him.

“I have plenty more dolls,” Bellocchio said.

“Then go ahead and use them. I didn’t think you were the type to toy with his prey,” Tiana said.

“Oh, Tiana. You’re better off not assuming your opponent is a good person. Especially if you are fighting the Sword of Tasuki. His forces will not operate like adventurers.”

“I’m past that. It’s your intellect I fear. You must have a

proposal or deal to offer me now that you have me backed into a corner."

Bellocchio cut off the mana he had been supplying to the doll.

"…What do you think I want?" he asked.

"If I had to guess… Bodies. Lives. Or souls."

Bellocchio's mouth twisted into a grin, and his eyes shone. The mood in the room seemed to shift.

"I've heard that the Sword of Tasuki uses his power to imbue suits of holy armor with souls and turn them into his soldiers. I don't know how many souls he stores in one suit, but he must've burned through a lot of them. That's why he's activated longtime sleeper agents like you."

"Go on."

"Bellocchio. Are you in charge of replenishing his stock of souls? He's going to use you all, too. Everyone here is a White Mask candidate."

"You're slightly off. You shouldn't underestimate yourself."

"Huh?"

"You are right that he is always collecting souls. But whether or not the souls please him is another matter. Fortunately, I knew someone I could recommend with confidence."

Bellocchio pointed at Tiana.

"Me…?"

"Life as one of his underlings isn't so bad. He is certainly cruel in the way those in positions of power can be, but he gives you commensurate strength. He expects your all once you begin working for him, but he rewards you handsomely. He even allows you to work side jobs."

"Looking at you now, that might not be so bad."

"Regardless, there is no way out for you. You don't have a choice in the matter. Do you disagree, Tiana?"

"…I did have a choice, actually," Tiana said, smiling and shaking her head. "A part of me realized you would come to take the tiger. I should have made the decision to strike or run. But I pretended not to notice."

"Oh?"

Tiana had chosen to let herself be deceived. It was a dangerous decision that could have meant not only total destruction for Starmine Hall but also defeat for Labyrinth City, and she had kept

it to herself so her plan could succeed.

Until right now.

“If you’re here, that means our reinforcements have arrived. It’s good to know the rats I’ve been hearing above us weren’t you,” Tiana said.

There was something both sides of this conflict had forgotten: Starmine Hall was an idol concert venue. Its structure and audio equipment were designed to carry sound efficiently.

This wasn’t an adventurers’ fortress—it was a musical paradise designed to welcome and entertain guests.

“Harmonize.”

A beautiful woman in a white suit jumped down from the ceiling, and she was holding a strange staff-like object that was emitting music. The sound encroached calmly yet certainly on the hearts of all who heard it, conveying bravery, security, and hope. After love, those were the themes that idols sang about most.

The sound felt so natural here that Tiana barely acknowledged it. She felt like she was watching a stage show, and nobody questioned music during such a performance.

“Hello, everyone! Sorry for the wait! Thank you for coming to my concert!”

The voice wasn’t coming from the beautiful woman, but from some kind of instrument that was floating around her. Tiana strained her eyes and saw a figure steadily materializing.

“Diamond!” one adventurer yelled.

“Huh? I can move?” another said.

The collapsed adventurers slowly got up. They had been freed from Bellocchio’s Magnetism.

“Hmm-hmm. This place is my fortress. Disabling crude spells within its walls is a cinch for me. Ladies and gentlemen, sit back and enjoy the show.”

“Samurialie and I put up the barrier, though,” the woman protested.

“Oh, come on, I’m trying to sound cool here!”

Tiana knew the woman in the white suit well. They hadn’t known each other for long, but she had become an irreplaceable friend.

“Karan!”

“Sorry for taking so long,” Karan said.

“About time you showed up!” Tiana yelled angrily, tears in her eyes.

Few things felt better than a companion arriving to save you in a time of need. That, however, was not the source of the joy filling Tiana’s heart. That came from seeing the curse-ravaged Karan back on her feet and looking strong.

Karan happily accepted both Tiana’s anger and joy.

“Well… It’s been a while, Bellocchio. I haven’t seen you since you founded the Thunderbolt Corporation. I guess I shouldn’t be surprised by your success in life,” Diamond said.

“Thank you very much for your support at that time,” Bellocchio replied.

“Attacking my fortress is some way to thank me.”

“Ha-ha. Do you need an explanation?”

“No, I’m good. This is a sound barrier. It will allow no interference from outside. It also prohibits recording, so no conversations or thoughts inside will make it out. The one hundred and thirty-five people down below are also within the barrier. Have them throw down their weapons, now.”

Someone gulped. The tension of the situation was palpable.

“Can you please project my voice to everyone?” Bellocchio asked.

“Of course.”

“Thank you… Attention, members of Dead Man’s Balloon. Please give up your weapons and surrender. I am disbanding our secret society effective immediately. Thank you for all your hard work.”

Bellocchio threw his staff aside and raised his hands, surrendering with surprising speed.

The adventurers stared despondently at Bellocchio, who had his hands tied behind his back. You wouldn’t have known from their expressions that they had won this conflict, nor would you have known from Bellocchio’s that he had lost. There was even relief on his face—a strange sight from a hated foe who’d been staging a fierce assault against them until just moments ago. The other Dead Man’s Balloon members looked resigned, but they seemed to bear no ill will toward their captors.

“You mean to tell me that was all a performance?” Tiana

asked.

Bellocchio nodded. “Everyone in Dead Man’s Balloon was trapped under the Sword of Tasuki’s spell. Most of us were forced into a contract.”

“‘You were forced?’”

“The Sword of Tasuki has been pursuing the holy sword mission of exploring humanity’s potential for centuries now. His main plan is to Awaken an adventurer named Argus and use him as a mold for the next generation of humans.”

Awakening was a term used to describe when a person’s soul level rose to a state equivalent to the Survivors’ Union transformation and stabilized there, transforming them into a superhuman being. Achieving that was the mission given to all holy swords, including the Sword of Tasuki.

“I hate it when people only think of humans in terms of their fighting capabilities. The Sword of Tasuki needs to relax,” Diamond interrupted, now back in her human form.

But Bellocchio shook his head. “His goals actually have nothing to do with combat strength. It would be more accurate to say he wants to return humanity to its original state.”

“Original state… You mean like the Originators?” Diamond asked.

Bellocchio nodded. “Precisely. As a matter of fact, Argus is quite similar to the original mages.”

“Umm, Instructor. What do you mean by that?” Tiana asked with a scowl. It was confusing to think about; the original mages were being described as burly martial artists like Argus.

“First of all, it is important to note the Originators did not have mana. They gained it after losing their homeland to their enemy and being forced to wander the vast sea of stars. Do you know what that mana was?” Bellocchio asked.

Tiana needed no time to think. “The power to survive in the sea of stars.”

“More specifically?” Bellocchio pressed.

The sea of stars lacked air. It was a world with literally no end. Nothing could survive it, including air and heat, which would dissipate unless they were on a special body of land.

“…It’s a power that strengthens the body’s homeostasis,” Tiana went on. “It also gives communication abilities that overcome

physical distance and penetrate obstacles. It creates heat, momentum, and physical matter."

"A gold star for you!" Bellocchio said.

He laughed heartily, unsettling everyone in the room. He was acting like a teacher who'd started giving a class and was delighted by his student's answer. His behavior was remarkably casual, given the circumstances.

"That is right," Bellocchio continued. "The Originators' bodies were not strong enough to survive the sea of stars. They produced the power of a sun and built a steel ark that could travel it, but they were too fragile to survive exposure to the unimaginably vast world or their enemy's power. After enduring those cruel circumstances, humans produced the power to survive in space and eventually created this world—the Land of Sacred Flame. Oh, you should know this is just my hypothesis. It differs slightly from established theory, but you needn't concern yourself with that."

"The homeostasis is the important part, right?" Tiana said.

"Yes. There is a possibility the Originators used the art of Stepping."

Tiana grimaced, and her instructor laughed.

"Ha-ha-ha, I am not suggesting they were all expert martial artists. The original purpose of that magic was to center oneself in a place without land or weight," he said.

"What does that mean?" Tiana asked.

"The world of stars lacks land, gravity, and air. Bones and muscles weaken without the burden of gravity, and once force is applied to an object, its momentum will last forever. If you spin a board game piece, it will continue revolving until an outside force interrupts it. Stepping is a magic created to resist that and regain the feeling of being on land while in the sea of stars."

Tiana understood the theory behind a place with no gravity or land, but it was still difficult to wrap her head around. It was undeniable, however, that Nick and Olivia's movements couldn't be explained unless they had an impossible sense of balance.

"…So they avoided losing themselves in the dark expanse, found land, and achieved total freedom. I guess that's the bare minimum of what an Awakened person can do… But if the Originators were so powerful, why did they disappear?" Tiana

asked.

“They did not disappear. They just became unobservable to us,” Bellocchio explained. The Originators and their enemy shifted to a higher dimension at the end of their fight. Whether they are still fighting or have been defeated, we in the normal space-time continuum cannot know. You could say that we are the people from before the ancient civilization who failed to become the Originators… The descendants of those who were left behind.”

“W-we were left behind…?”

Tiana shuddered, as did many others. Someone gulped.

“Precisely. We are truly fragile in this world of stars. If the enemy of the Originators reappears, or if a catastrophe robs us of this Land of Sacred Flame, we will lack the power to survive as our ancestors did. The lack of Awakened people is a pressing concern for the gods and this world. That is why the gods grant authority to any who have a chance of nurturing or discovering Awakened. The better chance a person has, the more authority they receive.”

“Then…the Sword of Tasuki is trying to save humanity?” Tiana asked.

Bellocchio didn’t refute her. “Hmm… It is true that if his plan succeeds, the Land of Sacred Flame will avoid destruction and the demon god will cease to be a threat. Only the Sword of Tasuki and the person he Awakened will survive, however. Everyone else will be sacrificed for the Awakening or killed by the demon god. The world will be saved, but… Do you consider that a desirable outcome, Tiana?”

“Not in a million years,” Tiana said, shaking her head in irritation, and Bellocchio looked pleased. “I couldn’t care less about what humanity would achieve upon an Awakening or what the gods desire. Our lives and deaths may seem insignificant to the gods, and our joys and pains even more so, but the world is good enough for me as it is. To be perfectly honest, I’m more concerned with this all getting in the way of the prize race during the Estivation Festival.”

“It sounds like my beloved apprentice has picked up a rather unsavory hobby,” Bellocchio remarked.

“It’s not as immoral as what I learned from you. More

importantly… Instructor, I know you did more than just follow orders. You made it look like you agreed with his ideals and were cooperating willingly."

Bellocchio smiled. There was no malice in his expression, but everyone could tell he was dangerous.

"I was not involved with his main plan in the least," he told her. "However, the Sword of Tasuki was always searching for backup plans in case Argus failed or betrayed him. I was in charge of one of those efforts."

"You were?" Tiana asked. This was exactly what she found frightening about her instructor. He wouldn't take part in any truly cruel projects, but he was absolutely willing to cross lines many others would not.

"I was something of a scout. I was supposed to search for a person other than Argus who could wield the Sword of Tasuki. Following his orders exactly would have been dull, however, and I find it hard to believe the world is teeming with people as gifted as Argus. So I decided to try to make one," Bellocchio explained.

"Huh? You tried to *make* a person?"

"I was only pretending to fulfill the Sword of Tasuki's request, of course. My plan is to have Havok make an artificial body for me to pack with synthesized souls so I can create a temporarily Awakened person."

The fear at his words was palpable. No one in the room understood his plan, but one thing they all knew was that it was *wrong*.

"I-is that even possible…?" Tiana said.

"What do you find dubious about it?" asked Bellocchio.

"Well, um…"

Tiana was at a loss for words. Karan was confused, too, and even Diamond couldn't keep up with the absurdity of what he was saying. Only one person in the room understood what he was talking about.

"It is possible to create a fake physical body. I am sure that Animator Havok could graft skin over an elaborate doll to perfectly reproduce the texture. As for whether you can synthesize a soul and fool even a holy sword, though, I do not know."

Alice the holy knight had just walked into the room. It wasn't she who spoke, however; the voice came from a mirror she was

holding reverently. The glass displayed Marde, the president of the Dineez Adventurers Credit Union.

"Is that a magic item? Or a phantasm…?" Tiana asked.

"Nice eye, friend of Nick," Marde said.

"You clearly know who I am," Tiana responded warily.

Marde smiled with no sign of offense.

"So you are Ms. Marde. I have heard many rumors about you… It is an honor to meet you," Bellocchio said politely.

"Same to you. Well? Is it possible?"

"Synthesizing a soul is technologically possible," Bellocchio replied. "We have reached a partial understanding of how the spell 'Union' works."

"Do you mean performing Union without a holy sword…?" asked Tiana. "Oh, I suppose that makes sense. It's a known ritual spell, so if you had the skill and the resources…"

Bellocchio nodded. "Then yes, we would be able to perform it. The Sword of Bonds' cooperation would grant us greater effects and safety, of course. Next is the issue of finding a benefactor willing to grant us sufficient funds and mana resources. We would need a vast amount of both, I am afraid."

"You believe it is feasible. But it is not," Marde said, looking somewhat discontented. "Friend of Nick and apprentice of Bellocchio, do you see the problem here?"

Tiana answered without hesitation. "…We have to choose the subjects for this Union."

"That would be me, of course, as this was my suggestion," Bellocchio said, playfully pointing at himself.

"Who are you going to combine with?" Tiana asked. "Me? Havok?"

"Only a piece of you. All I need is an arm. That will give me a tiny part of your soul."

"…You want to perform Union with an *arm*?!"

Tiana was astounded. Bellocchio, however, shook his head.

"Not just an arm. I will have Havok create a figure consisting of parts from people living and dead, and perform Union with that. I will then use Overload on myself, and…"

Bellocchio made an explosion sound with his mouth. Tiana—and even Marde—gasped at his plan.

"The Sword of Tasuki desires a soul blessed with potential and

base strength without relying on special abilities or magic," he continued. "Argus is exceedingly close to the Sword of Tasuki's ideal; however, I doubt he has much potential left… That is why a being that has been smoothed over artificially and appears as if it has potential remaining could please the Sword of Tasuki. That is Dead Man Balloon's true mission. We're going to create a balloon bomb made of corpses that can annihilate the person holding it without a trace."

"You're planning on dying?" Tiana asked.

"That is certainly a possibility. The issue here is not my life or the morality of this experiment. My only concern is finding and convincing a backer with enough funds and mana resources."

"…I'm impressed," Marde said.

"Can I take that to mean you will support my plan?" asked Bellocchio.

"I don't want to fund a plan that requires a human death."

"You do not appear to have any other choice."

Marde grimaced and fell silent. She knew he was right.

Just when it seemed like that matter was settled, Karan spoke up.

"Wait. What about our plan?"

"We can do both," said Marde.

"Oh, do you have an idea, too?" interjected Bellocchio.

"Our plan is for Karan to use my ability to wake up the souls trapped inside the Sword of Tasuki and persuade them to rebel," explained Diamond.

"…Is that possible?" Bellocchio asked.

"Yes. I'll explain the complicated magical logic later, but my voice can pass through any barrier—magical or physical—and appeal to human souls. You all just experienced this yourselves," Diamond said.

"Incredible. That greatly increases our chance of success. Now then, everyone. We have a new goal to work tow—"

"Wait," Tiana said, interrupting her instructor.

"…I should have known asking for an arm would be too much," conceded Bellocchio. "I won't force you, Tiana."

"That's not what I was going to say. I see right through you, Instructor," Tiana said with a knowing expression.

"What do you mean?" Bellocchio asked, confused. Tiana could

tell he was only feigning ignorance.

"…I think you're being truthful that you formed Dead Man's Balloon to save the people trapped by the Sword of Tasuki and that you intended to let me live after taking an arm. That explains why you gave up so easily after spending so long sieging this fortress. You probably baffled some with the lack of hesitation of your decision."

Bellocchio smiled, unbothered by her cynical tone. "Thank you, Tiana."

"However." She glared at Bellocchio. "You're only in this for the experiment. It's written all over your face."

The room fell silent. Reactions were varied; some people didn't understand what she meant, some understood but weren't convinced, while others understood and agreed.

"…Pfft. Ah-ha-ha! You're exactly right! I very much want to try this! This is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity, and I don't want to pass it up! You truly understand me, Tiana!" Bellocchio laughed.

"I'm your pupil. I know how selfish and vulgar you are, and also how noble."

"I find that quite reassuring."

"That means I can also tell when you're lying. You've thought of a plan with a higher chance of success, but you're pretending not to see it."

Bellocchio's laughter cut off.

"That is enough, Tiana. Do you know what saying that here will do?"

"You wanted my arm because you know I'm a much better fit for this job than you," Tiana said. She meant those words for Marde as much as for Bellocchio. "I've performed Union many times now. I never imagined I would perform it without a holy sword, but I have far more experience than you, Instructor. I cannot speak for my potential, but…your fixation on me is proof that it is sufficient."

"Do not torment him," Marde responded. "I should not have to explain to you why he did not present this option."

"Yeah, Tiana. I think you should drop it, too," Karan agreed.

"Think about your instructor's feelings," Diamond said.

They all urged her to back down. Sensing that Tiana was saying she should be the guinea pig for the experiment, the

adventurers who'd been fighting to defend the fortress also spoke up to persuade her otherwise.

"I ain't gonna lie, I don't got much of an idea of what's goin' on here, but a young'un like you shouldn't have to risk your life for this. That's the job for your seniors."

"Yeah, that's right! I'm totally lost, though."

But they only incurred Tiana's wrath.

"Oh, shut up! You all don't have any idea what you're talking about!"

"If we did, we'd be tryin' even harder to stop you!" one adventurer said.

"Don't *admit* that you're clueless!" Tiana scolded him.

The man backed down reluctantly. Tiana's anger dominated the room, and everyone waited for her next words.

"Diamond! How can you criticize me for this when you're letting Karan put herself at risk?! We entrusted her to you!" she shouted.

"Uhh… I was afraid you'd ask that…," Diamond said.

"Of course I was going to! And Karan! What the *hell* have you been doing?! You didn't contact me once!"

"S-sorry. There was just so much going on…," Karan said.

"That doesn't mean you had to sneak off without explaining anything! That goes for you all, too, Sun Knight, Instructor, and mirror woman! You all conspired together, didn't you?!"

Not even the Sun Knight and the strange woman in the mirror escaped Tiana's wrath.

"I get that you acted in secret because you wanted to avoid detection by the enemy! But there must have been *something* you could do to prevent us from spending weeks fighting an ally until we were almost completely out of resources! Do you have any idea how hard it was cleaning up your mess?!"

Tiana slammed her fist on the table in front of her. She had everyone's attention. Some listened with amusement and some felt guilty as she raged at them. Meanwhile, the adventurers standing guard on the other side of the door guffawed.

Tiana's anger wasn't just a result of bottled-up frustration. She was angry on behalf of all the adventurers who'd been forced to hole up and fight, and she felt bad for the members of Dead Man's Balloon forced to take part in this plot. She felt they had

been wronged, and she directed her anger at four people who stood much higher than her: a Sun Knight, the most popular idol in the city, the leader of the group of ruffians called Dead Man's Balloon, and a mysterious figure inside a mirror. The audacity of her behavior impressed many.

"…Yeah. That's a logical response," Diamond said. "You all never should have had to involve yourselves in this. This entire disturbance was caused by mistakes from when the holy swords were developed. Modern people shouldn't have to suffer for them." She gave Marde a jaded look that said Tiana was right, despite her forwardness.

"…I will admit that I have been outmaneuvered. I also bear some responsibility for this situation. That is why I am promising to help with Bellocchio's plan," Marde said.

"Thank you very much. As for the remaining piece… Tiana, I hate to ask this of you, but…" Bellocchio looked at Tiana. She had never seen him look so pained.

"What? You want my arm?" she asked.

"I will concede the arm. Would you mind giving me some of your hair instead?"

"Huh? My…hair?"

"Hair is a very effective magical catalyst. However, it pains me to ask a woman to cut her hair for my personal use…"

"And asking for an arm doesn't?"

Tiana was dumbfounded. Her instructor's eccentricity never ceased to amaze her.

"You can regrow an arm," Bellocchio said.

"You know hair regrows naturally, right?" Tiana chided.

"Ah, yes. That is a good point. Your hair, then, please."

Anger and exhaustion washed over Tiana. He was completely missing the point.

"No, listen to me! I don't want to give you a single strand of hair if you're gonna use it to perform this Dead Man's Balloon spell and kill yourself! Why do you all seem to think I'm okay with this?!"

"Tiana. You should let him do it," Diamond said, trying to calm Tiana down.

"Do you actually agree with this buffoon?" Tiana asked.

"Tiana, that is hardly an appropriate thing to call your

instructor," Bellocchio protested.

Diamond ignored him. "…If we can be serious for a moment, Bellocchio is the only person who has formed a plan to oppose the Sword of Tasuki while under his grasp. You may have an aptitude for Union, but we have no time to rework Bellocchio's plan."

"But he intends to blow himself up! That's suicide!" Tiana shouted. "I have a lot of experience with Union, so maybe I won't have to go that far!"

"You think too highly of me if you believe I am the kind of person willing to sacrifice myself for justice," Bellocchio chided her. "I will do everything I can to ensure my own survival."

"…Hear that?" Diamond said.

Tiana closed her eyes and let out a long sigh. She understood they didn't have much in the way of choice. She also knew a genius like Bellocchio being willing to risk his life for this plan meant that it had at least a chance of success.

Tiana couldn't do anything to oppose the great evil threatening Labyrinth City without her party members and the Sword of Bonds. Their absence meant all she could do now was trust and support her allies.

She clenched her fists tightly to avoid being overcome by a feeling of helplessness. There were a few faces she wanted to punch. One belonged to the evil Sword of Tasuki. The others belonged to the insensitive jerks who'd left her behind to fight that evil sword.

"…Okay. Someone give me a blade," Tiana said.

"Sure," responded Karan. She morphed part of the Sword of Resonance into the shape of a dagger and gave it to Tiana.

"I'm just loaning this to you, okay?" Tiana said as she grabbed her hair and cut it without hesitation. The others stared at her, surprised by her graciousness.

"…Thank you. I'll use it well," Bellocchio said, respectfully accepting the hair.

"Hmm… I have a strong desire to recruit you right now," Diamond told her.

"Don't even try," Tiana snapped, glaring so intensely that Diamond hid behind Karan's back. Handing back the dagger, she said, "Thanks, Karan. I…have something to say to you, too."

“O-okay…,” Karan said, timidly waiting for Tiana to continue.

“…You’ve done great on your own. Thank you.”

Karan stiffened. She tried to say something but couldn’t, and a tear streaked down her face.

“Huh? It’s not something to cry about!” Tiana said.

“But…” A second tear leaked from her eyes, then another, and then the dam broke.

“She just went on an adventure without the help of her fellow Survivors. Your praise has to mean a lot to her,” Diamond said.

“Don’t talk about her like she’s not here! Show some tact!” Tiana scolded her. “Anyway, are there any other problems or concerns? If so, share them now.”

“We probably should’ve discussed this earlier, but…there is one more problem,” Diamond said, weakly raising her hand.

“Really? What is it now…?” Tiana asked with an exasperated look.

“Karan and Bellocchio’s plans are both for defeating the Sword of Tasuki, *not* for conquering the Colosseum of Carnage. I’m not sure we can reach the depths of that labyrinth without physical fighters we can trust.”

“Urgh…”

“The best frontline fighters were already sent in to investigate or dispatched to contain the Stampedes coming from the other labyrinths. The best fighters here mainly fight from the rear with magic. We have a personnel shortage… Karan and I could make it, but direct combat would take a lot out of us. If only we had a handsome, burly bodyguard…”

Despite her ditzy tone, Diamond was earnest about their need for a physical fighter. They couldn’t put either plan into action until they got through the Colosseum of Carnage. The Survivors’ frontline members who didn’t rely on magic had left Tiana and Karan behind. Tiana lamented the poor timing, but just then, Marde spoke up and gave them reason for hope.

“We know someone who can help. Don’t we, Alice?”

“Yes, we do,” Alice said.

“Are you sure we’ll be able to count on them?” Diamond asked.

“I’ll get you the best person I can,” Marde assured them. “They’ll be more than sufficient to escort an idol such as yourself.”

Neither Marde nor Alice seemed to have a shred of doubt

about that. Diamond and Bellocchio appeared to know who they had in mind.

“All right, then… Let’s get to work! There’s no time to waste!” Tiana said, finding her resolve.

Upon her order, the operation to defeat the Sword of Tasuki began.

An angel descended from above.

She looked a lot like Karan. Nick thought sluggishly that the sight was oddly gaudy for a pre-death hallucination, but he quickly returned to his senses.

A dazzling spotlight shone around the angel, and her arrival was accompanied by a distinct, upbeat pop rhythm. Descending through a hole in the Colosseum of Carnage deep underground, did she really need to put on a performance to capture any idol fan’s heart?

Of course not.

“Listen up, everyone! The show’s just getting started! Teran is the city that never sleeps, not even when there’s a Stampede!”

The angel held up a strange sword that had no blade and emitted sound. She had a sunny, haughty disposition that suggested she thought anywhere she graced with her presence could be a concert venue, even if she was deep underground with no audience.

“Diamond? Now you show yourself? What could you possibly hope to do here?” the Sword of Tasuki said.



"You want to know why I'm here? To listen to your voices! And to respond with my own!"

An image of Diamond appeared before them, projected by the white-suited woman's strange item.

Nick immediately realized the item was Diamond in her holy sword form and that the woman was her wielder. The identity of the angel-like woman also finally dawned on him; a visor hid her eyes and her clothes were completely different from normal, but there was no mistaking a companion he'd gone on many adventures with.

"You're speaking nonsense. Begone."

A clone of the burning white knight moved to attack Diamond and her wielder.

"Damn it. Ugh…!" Nick groaned.

"It's okay. We came prepared," Diamond's wielder said, delivering the words directly into Nick's mind. She didn't use Telepathy; the words seemed to gently seep into his emotions.

"Wait…! Karan!"

Nick wanted to blame her for coming. He was angry with himself for forcing her to come here to save him. But most of all, he was happy to see her standing tall in front of him one last time before his death.

Karan sensed these emotions swirling inside him and smiled.

"This isn't Parallel. He created clones and filled them with preserved souls to make them fight. It's stronger than Parallel, but all we've gotta do to stop it is break through their security," Karan said. She readied her strange sword and pointed it at the burning knight clone. "…I hear your soul crying out. You're being used to fuel this white knight and fight against your will. Your true name is…"

""Barzelle Adoleed.""

Karan and Diamond said the name together. The burning knight stopped moving as if paralyzed.

"You're from an adventurers' party called Rainbow Mine. You barely survived a cave-in while collecting minerals in a labyrinth… Is that how he got you? You, over there—your name is Farrah Davis. You worked for the Sun Knights and took out a massive loan to treat your husband's illness. Benjamin Yugo. Zava Lodge. Kenjiro Kishu."

Karan detected the names of the burning knights one after

another despite their identical appearances, and she used that to determine their backgrounds. The burning knights fell silent as she spoke. Diamond played an alluring melody, which came from the sword Karan was holding.

“Is that your power, Diamond…?” asked Nick. “I thought you said you couldn’t turn into a sword.”

“I decided it was time for a new look,” Diamond said.

“Whoa!” Nick gasped as an image of Diamond appeared right next to him.

“Hee-hee. I’m Diamond, formerly the Sword of Distortion and now the Sword of Resonance. I’m looking forward to working with you.”

“She is using her disassembled parts to form an instrument and make a sound barrier... And Karan is the center of that barrier,” Bond explained, astonished. He was in his sword form, being held by Nick.

Diamond shrugged. “Well spotted... Though this is hardly the time to talk about that. You need to heal up first. You look like a zombie.”

“I’m out of mana, and I’m physically spent. Zem and Leon are unconscious…if they’re even still alive,” said Nick.

“Fine, fine. I’ll share some mana with you. I’ll even include the kitty sleeping behind you.”

Diamond snapped her fingers, and Nick’s body shone. He could feel mana seeping into him. He also heard groans from Zem, Leon, and the Sword of Evolution. They were being given mana, too, which seemed to have woken them up.

“Well, that’s handy… You should’ve mentioned you had that kinda power earlier,” Nick complained.

Spells that transferred or recovered mana were significantly more difficult than normal healing magic. Diamond had used her sound and light to skip the complicated incantations and rituals those spells usually required, instantly filling Nick, Zem, and Leon with a large amount of mana.

“I see you’ve been fighting, too, Karan,” Nick said.

“Sorry. We’ve had a lot going on in secret,” Diamond answered for her.

“…Huh,” Nick said, his voice mixed with a wide range of emotions. He had tried to keep Karan from fighting, and then forced her into the battle anyway; he was left with reluctance, regret, and guilt.

Karan sensed all those feelings but didn’t look back at him.

“I know this is rich of me to say,” Nick continued. “I said I was gonna save you, after all. I even ignored what you wanted and yelled at you. I didn’t believe you could recover like this.”

“Mm-hmm,” Karan said.

“But when I saw your face in what I thought were my final moments…it made me happy.”

The joy in his voice made Karan shiver.

“…I missed you,” she said.

“I missed you, too… I kept thinking about how I wished you were here.”

Nick’s words were filled with kindness, but they ignited a flare of anger within Karan.

“It was really hard without you! I was so lonely! I had to make every decision by myself! I had to figure out how to persuade people to work with me, and I had to take responsibility for all of them! So many people depended on me, but I had to suspect every one of them! I had to think so hard about what was true, what wasn’t, how to solve a whole bunch of problems… It was so stressful!”

“…I don’t know what you went through, but I can tell you worked really hard,” Nick said.

“You have no idea how much of a slave driver Diamond is! But does she hold herself to the same standard? No! That goes double for Hector! And I couldn’t trust anything Samurialie, Alice, or Marde said because of all their lies! I had to talk to them again and again to get them to tell the truth. And…and…”

Tears formed in Karan’s eyes as she yelled. Nick smiled awkwardly and drew close to her.

“I know. So…let’s do this next part together.”

“Okay,” Karan said meekly.

“I’ll always be here for you. I’ll be by your side in good times and bad.”

“I’ll be really angry if you’re lying.”

“I’m done lying to you.”

“If you’re lying about that, too, I don’t know what I’ll do to you.”

“Being killed by your hands would be an honor. I actually thought you were an angel here to take me to heaven.”

“…You’re an idiot!” Karan yelled, red-faced. She wiped away

her tears.

Diamond interrupted by clapping her hands. "You can catch up later. This battle's far from over. And I'm not a slave driver!"

"Why do you think people call you Sergeant Demon...?" Nick asked. "Anyway, can we do this?"

Diamond smiled. "The Sword of Tasuki has collected a boatload of souls. No one should be able to stop him...except for the one little fact that souls aren't an energy source you can use however you please."

She spoke with her usual cheerful tone, but her eyes were stern as she watched the burning knight.

"He's bound each of the souls into a contract that forces them to serve him. They aren't fighting for him willingly, which means it's possible to speak to them and urge them to escape the spell... We had no way to practice this beforehand, though, so it was a gamble."

"You came down here on a gamble? Really?" Nick said.

"What else could it have been? We didn't know if their names would be on our lists until we got here. I loaded myself up with data on tens of thousands of names from a missing persons list we borrowed from the Sun Knights, a list of Marde's debtors, a list of people who are suspected to be demon-god worshippers, and more so I could pull up their profiles on the spot. Once I find their name, I just have to persuade them to stop fighting."

"That's amazing...but we've got a problem," Nick said, looking toward what he thought was the main burning knight. It was looking at Karan and Diamond as if astonished.

"What's wrong, Sword of Tasuki? Are you still in shock over what we just did? You got the better of me last time, but oh man, does it feel great to get my revenge! Who's laughing now, loser?!" Diamond yelled.

"No, don't provoke him! Are you stupid?! He's still way stronger than us!" Nick said with a shudder.

He knew Karan and Diamond had hindered the burning knights with their surprise attack, but that had only robbed it of a hundredth—no, a thousandth—of its power. They hadn't done anything to overcome the hopeless difference in strength.

"You stole...souls from me...?" the burning knight asked.

Nick braced himself for another merciless assault, but surprisingly, the burning knight just stared at Karan in shock.

"We didn't steal them; we freed them from their prisons. They get to decide whether they want to leave," Karan said.

"That's the same thing!"

“…You can’t own a person’s soul in the first place. It’s not something you can add to your personal collection and consume for your own use. You can’t possibly forge a better future if you don’t understand that.”

A flame-like aura suddenly erupted from the burning knight, seemingly matching the Sword of Tasuki’s emotions.

“You…Karan…Karan Tsubaki… How did you become able to do such a thing? How did you end up like this?”

“You wanna know how? It’s your own fault. You tried to kill me, so I worked hard to get stronger. You tied the noose around your own neck.”

“I can tell you haven’t overcome the curse. You’re feigning strength with the help of a holy sword that doesn’t possess much mana herself. You’re puny compared to me. So how…?”

“Oh, shut up. I just told you—*it’s your fault*,” Karan said with a look of exaggerated disbelief.

That earned the burning knight’s wrath. “…Careful how you speak to me, little girl. Hero or not, I refuse to believe that a fragile person like you, who relies on a clever tongue to survive, should be the one to live on and establish the next generation of humans.”

The burning knight’s clones rushed at Karan simultaneously. Nick realized the Sword of Tasuki was trying to send knights at her faster than she and Diamond could persuade them to stop fighting.

“I’m not fully healed yet, but… Damn it! Zem! Leon! Get up now! This is no time for napping!” Nick yelled.

“Ngh… You really know how to work a person to the bone,” Zem grumbled.

“Shit, man… Do you realize how long we’ve been holdin’ out? Lemme rest…!” Leon complained.

They both staggered to their feet. Karan watched them happily.

“Nick. Zem. And Leon, I guess. Thank you… But you’ve done enough.”

“What do you mean…?” Nick asked.

The burning knight was gathering mana for a long-range attack, too far away to hear their voices. Its flames burned bright like the sun. The mana alone felt like it would tear through Nick’s skin.

Nick wondered fearfully if the Sword of Tasuki had ceased

holding back. The titan that was once Argus hadn't given him a chance to perform such a powerful attack against it, quickly squashing any sign of powerful spells or ritual magic. No one remaining could perform such a superhuman feat, however. They would only get overwhelmed by the burning knight's great power.

"What're you talking about? We have to do something!" Nick protested.

"Don't worry. We brought the most powerful help there is," Karan said.

Nick had no idea what she meant, but then he realized she was looking at someone. The person's presence was hardly reassuring; whoever it was looked minuscule next to the blinding light of the burning knight.

"He was crazy strong on the way here. He can handle this. Probably."

"Did you really just throw a 'probably' in there?" Nick exclaimed, but Karan ignored him.

"Oh, gimme a break…," grumbled Leon. "D'you really think this guy can do anything? I heard he was almost killed by Stampede monsters."

"Will you quit complaining so much?" Nick said.

"It's okay, really!" Karan insisted.

The man had an air of aloofness about him. He wore a katana at his waist in the style of southern adventurers. He was also a bona fide celebrity in Labyrinth City.

"That's…Fifs…!" Nick exclaimed.

The man who'd appeared was the S-rank adventurer Fifs—otherwise known as the Solo Diner.

"I can only manage this one time. The rest is up to you!" Fifs called out, his voice echoing clearly across the space.

The man's unease was visible even at a distance; he knew how reckless a fight this was. Nick was grateful he'd come this far belowground to help, but he couldn't help feeling disappointed. What could one man do against such an absurdly strong opponent?

"…To my main body sleeping far away at the end of the Monster Belt—heed my call and awaken from your doze."

Nick's assumption was wrong. Fifs's unease wasn't because of

the burning knight—he was afraid of a terrifying being that wasn't even there.

"What's happening?" Nick asked.

Fifs lifted his sword high in the air and slashed at nothing. The sight gave Nick déjà vu; he'd sliced a rift in the air that looked similar to the hole the Sword of Tasuki had opened in Argus's body.

Something began to emerge from the rift. It took a moment for Nick to realize what it was. The object had a familiar shape, but his mind rejected that as a possibility. He wanted to say it was a building, or a monument, or a strangely shaped rock. But of course, it was none of those things.

Part of it shone with silver light: a blade.

The next part was thicker than a person or even the average monster: the handle.

A giant katana emerged from the rift, held by a giant hand twice as wide as the average person was tall. It looked like a cicada shedding its skin as it forced its way through the too-small hole. The wrist squeezed out first, then the forearm, then the elbow and upper arm, and finally the shoulder. The absurdly large right arm was holding an appropriately massive katana.

"I see," said the Sword of Bonds. "It's a multidimensional body."



“Multi…what now?” Nick asked.

“Fifs is similar to White Mask’s sword in that we can only see part of him from this dimension. He exists in multiple dimensions at once. That giant arm is from the original Fifs. The form that manifests in this dimension is nothing more than a reflection, like the moon on a lake’s surface,” the Sword of Bonds explained.

“That’s his real body…? What are you on about? I thought he was just some normal old dude who’s obsessed with eating out!” Nick said.

“I cannot speak for his hobbies, but judging by the incantation he just performed, the soul and consciousness of his main body must be asleep most of the time. The Fifs in this world does not have much idea of what his true form thinks and feels… At least, that is my guess. It might be more accurate to call him an underling that can act separately. The ‘old dude who’s obsessed with eating out,’ as you put it, is also Fifs.”

As he listened, Nick couldn’t pull his eyes away from the giant arm above Fifs’s head. The overwhelming sense of power it conveyed didn’t just come from its size. The mana it projected didn’t surpass that of the Sword of Tasuki, but there was a certain grace to it. It carried the sword with such ease that the blade might as well have been an extension of its arm. The creature the hand belonged to had clearly trained tirelessly with the sword, which was proof it was no monster that relied on brute strength alone. It was clearly a human.

“Secret Technique: Meteor Shower,” Fifs said.

The giant arm moved with an agility that belied to its size. Nick felt like a fly observing a true master of combat; that was how quick, calm, and natural its swordplay was.

The arm swung its sword violently, erasing the mana the burning knights had been gathering.

“Whoa…!” Nick gasped.

He had dreamed of S-rank adventurers ever since he was a kid. They were heroes who protected Labyrinth City in times of need. He admired them and had committed to the life of an adventurer out of the desire to help Argus reach that status.

This man was everything he envisioned S-rank adventurers to be.

“…Huh. You’re not bad for a fool like Argus who failed to Awaken. But you’re hardly strong enough to stop me,” the burning knight said, not

seeming to care that Fifs had interrupted its attack. It even sounded amused.

“Shut your mouth!” Fifs shouted.

The giant arm nimbly slashed at the burning knight, but Fifs, who was controlling it, was sweating profusely, his face pale. He was losing mana fast, and he was clearly growing exhausted.

“Ha-ha-ha! Is that all you’ve got? I expected more from an S-rank adventurer! You’re not even as strong as Argus!”

The arm’s swordsmanship was the picture of grace as it relentlessly slashed at the supremely skilled burning knight. Yet even that wasn’t enough to turn the tide of the battle. The burning knight countered with magic spells as well as sword and bow, inflicting wound after wound to the arm.

“Karan…you lack the strength to oppose me yourself. All you can do is rely on others. You haven’t grown at all,” the burning knight said, ignoring Fifs.

Karan, however, looked unbothered by its taunting. She responded by silently pointing at the ceiling.

There was nothing there. However, for some reason, Nick’s eyes were drawn in that direction. He was filled with an indescribable feeling—something close to a premonition, or just a sense of unease—which eventually began to take on physical form and power.

“One of the essences of magic is communication. I’m surprised to hear a rational person like you deny that, Sword of Tasuki,” said a cool voice.

The burning knight and its clones looked toward the speaker, almost as if they were being pulled in that direction like magnets.

“Is that…Tiana…?” Nick asked. “Wait, no…”

The voice came from a mage with flowing blond hair. Their short height made them look like a young noble making their debut in high society, and although their face resembled Tiana’s, it was more masculine. What stood out most was their inhuman blue-tinged dark skin and their fearsome presence. They were just standing there calmly, but everyone could tell they were stronger than the burning knight.

“That body’s soul is apparently so powerful that it forcibly draws the attention of all around it,” Karan said.

“Okay, but who is it? It’s not Tiana, right?”

Nick's question was soon answered by the burning knight, who faced the mysterious mage.

"Is that you, Bellocchio? Why are you here? And what is that body?"

Nick had heard that name before.

"That's my instructor… I'm impressed you two are still alive, Nick and Zem. You have no idea how worried I was…"

Tiana walked up behind Nick. He and Zem stared at her with surprise.

"…Tiana, did you cut your hair?" Zem asked.

Tiana's beloved blond hair was significantly shorter than the last time they'd seen her. It had been cut to her shoulders.

"That's a long story! I went through a lot after you abandoned me to fight in this labyrinth!" Tiana snapped.

"…S-sorry about that," Nick responded.

"My apologies," echoed Zem.

"You two are hopeless… But the lecture will have to wait," Tiana said, looking toward Bellocchio. She looked determined not to miss what was coming next.






Bellocchio spoke to the Sword of Tasuki as his pupil watched from behind.

"Do you really need an explanation? I have brought the thing you have been searching for so desperately… A soul bursting with potential. There is only one thing for you to do. Make me your official wielder."

"Don't lie to me… There's no way that cobbled-together body is stable!" the burning knight protested.

Nick thought that was a good way to describe the body. It resembled the Survivors in their Union state; however it wasn't just two or three, but over ten souls that had been packed inside it. The combination differed from the Sword of Tasuki, who subjected souls to his control, or the Sword of Bonds, who combined them equally; Bellocchio had control over the souls to an extent, but he didn't seem to dominate them.

"'Cobbled-together'... I see. This Union did not combine souls and their bodies simultaneously. A vessel was prepared beforehand to bypass the need for a ritual tool like me that aligns their minds in perfect harmony... However, the body won't last a day before it collapses," explained Bond.

The Sword of Tasuki saw the same thing and looked at Bellocchio with hostility.

"It appears you realize this is a trap," said Bellocchio. "I can see that you are trying to resist, but that resistance directly opposes your mission to collect people with superior souls. That is why you can't take your eyes off me. You desire this radiant soul more than anything. Am I right, Sword of Tasuki?"

"Grk... You bastard!" the burning knight cursed, flustered. Bellocchio must have been right on the mark. The burning knight's flame-like mana faded to nothing, and its holy armor began to fall apart, revealing Callios's face.

"This body is a hastily constructed doll that uses corpses with strong vestiges of souls to mimic a godlike body and soul. However, it is, unfortunately, useless. Its vast number of skill slots and lack of a level cap give it endless possibilities, yet it only has about…seven hours left to live." Bellocchio smiled alluringly and hugged Callios like a lover.

"What are you…? Stop accessing me…!" Callios shouted.

"Transfer your ownership. Release the shackles on all of the souls," Bellocchio commanded, and the burning knight clones stopped moving.

Karan once again held up the Sword of Resonance, and Diamond's image began to sing a solemn tune. In stark contrast to her usual bright pop songs, this one was quiet and heartrending.

Anyone who heard it thought it sounded like a requiem.

Diamond and Karan were sending their hearts out to the dying souls and guiding them upward so they wouldn't be trapped by the Sword of Tasuki's spell again.

The beautiful sight resembled fireworks, yet it was also terribly sad.

"No! Stop! Don't run away from me! What about our contracts?!" Callios yelled.

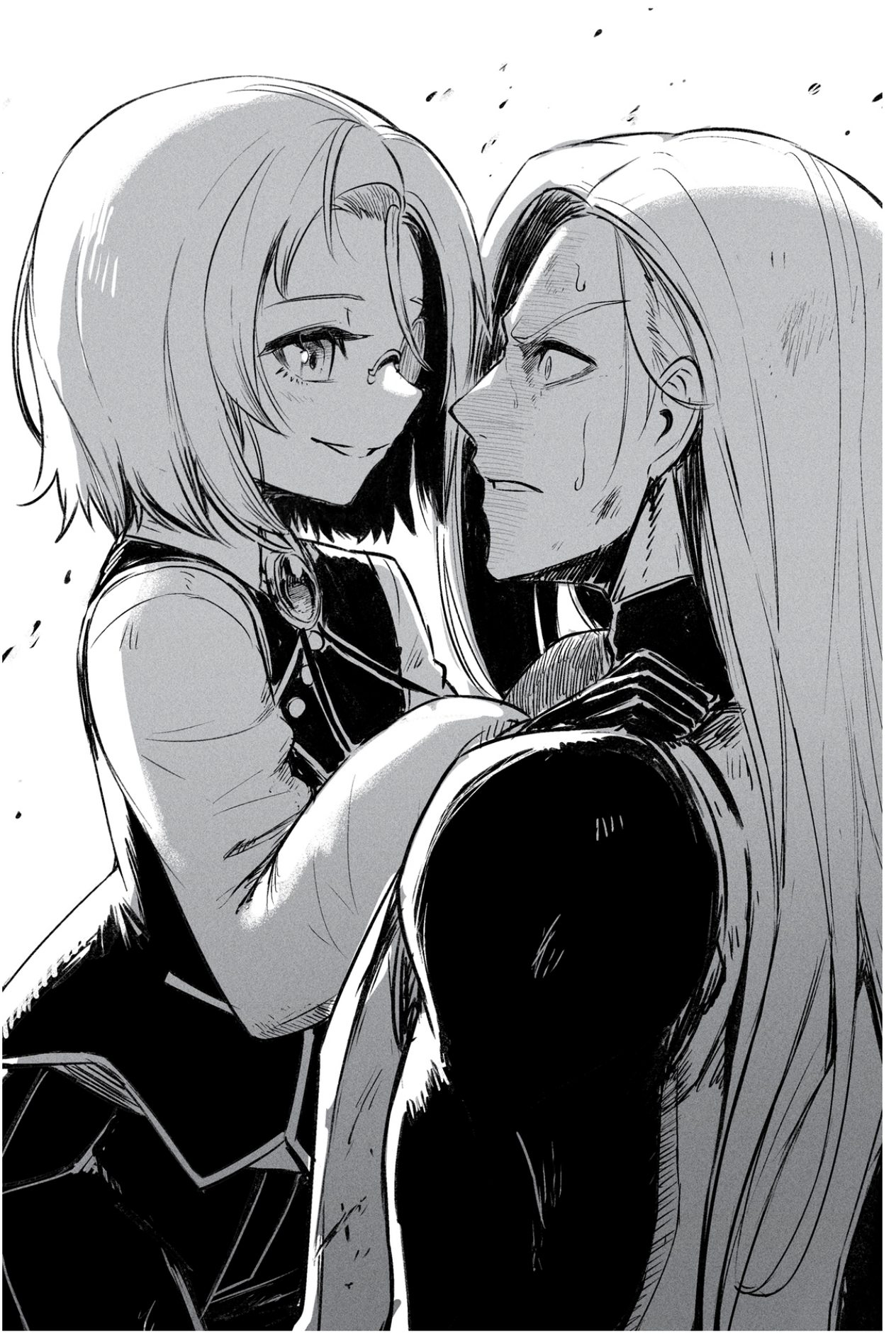
"Those have been voided. We only gave them the right of refusal and showed them the way in case they chose to run. We didn't forbid any of them from remaining with you if they

wanted to, nor could we have," Karan declared matter-of-factly.

Callios glared at her with tremendous hatred, but Bellocchio spoke before he could do anything.

"Dead Man's Balloon."

As the souls rose toward the sky, Bellocchio pulled Callios tight and exploded.



Nick awoke to silence.

“Is it…over?” he mumbled.

Zem and Bond were next to him, both pale faced. They had barely managed to sit up and didn’t have the energy to lift another finger. They, like Nick, were more exhausted than they’d ever been. Adrenaline and fear had kept them going during the fight, but now that the enemy was defeated, they wondered despondently if they were going to die. Nick was afraid he’d shortened his lifespan or damaged his soul.

“Don’t sleep, Nick! You’ll die!”

“You pushed yourself too hard, Nick. Honestly, it’s a miracle you’re still alive.”

Nick looked up to see Karan beside him. Alice was there, too, holding a mirror with an odd reverence. Nick could see his own reflection in it.

“I’m not gonna die. I think. Diamond just healed me… But I *am* dead tired,” Nick said.

“You were too reckless,” Karan told him.

“Geez… You really are lucky to be alive,” Alice said.

Nick looked across the room and saw devastation. The corpses of nameless adventurers and monsters that had been slaughtered by Argus were strewn across the room. The monstrous titan that Argus had become stared off into space with the same empty eyes as Nick. The flame of its soul had burned out.

The ruins of the Sword of Tasuki were on the floor. The only people left alive in the room were all familiar faces.

Surprisingly, Bellocchio was alive and having a friendly chat with Tiana. They looked so much alike, they could have been sisters.

“I always imagined Tiana’s instructor as an old man, not a woman about her age,” Nick said.

“Oh, well… It’s difficult to explain,” replied Karan.

Tiana noticed Nick watching them. Joy flashed across her face, but it was quickly replaced by a troubled expression. She walked

briskly toward him, her expression shifting with each step, and stood before him with her hands on her hips.

"…You *imbecile*!" she yelled, grabbing him by his collar.

"Sorry," Nick said.

"Sorry's not gonna cut it! You have no *idea* how worried I was about you… Haah… I've been angry all the time lately. Why do adventurers all have to be such foolhardy idiots?" Tiana ranted.

"Yeah. You'd better listen to her," Karan chimed in.

"Karan! That goes for you, too! You put yourself in serious danger!" Tiana yelled.

"Whuh?!" Karan said, surprised to be getting a scolding, too. Her reaction made Nick and Tiana laugh.

"…Oh, whatever. Apologize to Karan, Nick. And Karan, make sure to give him a piece of your mind when he deserves it. Okay?" Tiana turned and walked back to her instructor.

Nick chuckled to himself. The woman was like a force of nature. He sat up and faced Karan.

"…Hey, Kar—"

She cut him off with a hug.

"Wh-what?" Nick said, blushing at the feel of her breath and body heat. He was too tired to push her away, nor did he want to. Instead, he yielded to the warmth and softness of her body, neither of which he had ever been conscious of before.

"Never leave me again," Karan said.

Nick had been afraid of the sinking feeling in his body and his heart. He felt that acknowledging it would mean the end of his adventure. That he would become incapable of getting his revenge or finding the answers he wanted from the people who'd upended his life.

"Don't worry. I'm not going anywhere," Nick said.

"Don't die, either," Karan told him.

That he would lose the ability to put his body on the line for his injured comrades. That he wouldn't be able to say he'd throw his life away if it meant bringing down the enemy.

"I'm not gonna die," he replied.

"You'd better not be lying," Karan said.

That he would no longer be able to tell himself he was acting for his friends while averting his eyes from the truth of the matter, and trick himself into thinking he'd accomplished

something with a series of easy fights.

“I realize now. I don’t want you to go anywhere, either. Stay by my side. It seems I’m hopeless without you.”

He realized that all those things wore him down in battle and distracted him from his true feelings. The truth was, he’d sought solitude in his adventures only because he lacked the courage to join hands with like-minded people.

Karan wasn’t criticizing him by telling him not to lie, nor was she placing shackles on him. She was being kind and telling him he didn’t have to hide his feelings anymore.

Nick hugged her back to thank her for that kindness. This time Karan blushed, and she squeezed him harder.

“Ow.”

“Oh, sorry.” Karan let go just before Nick’s joints started crying out in pain.

Nick smiled wryly; it seemed she’d gotten her strength back.

“Anyway…,” he began. “If that person is with Alice, I assume that means she’s on our side. She’s been staring at me, and it’s making me uncomfortable.”

He’d been conscious of a strange woman watching him from the mirror Alice was holding. He didn’t know if she was literally inside the mirror or if the mirror was connected to another location.

“You don’t remember her?” Karan asked.

Nick cocked his head. “Do I know her? When would I have met someone who lives in a mirror…? Well, I might’ve dreamed of someone like that as a kid… Or was that an imaginary friend…?”

Marde chuckled as Nick struggled to sort through his memories. His innocent behavior made Alice smile, too.

“Well played, Nick. I see right through you, you flirt,” Alice teased.

“It takes true skill to woo a lady while comforting her. I didn’t know you had that in you, Nick,” Marde piled on.

Nick glared at them. “You have it wrong. Have we…met before?”

“My name is Marde. I’m Alice’s boss. I have been closely observing this case and giving support where I can. My form may be unusual, but I am an artifact similar to a holy sword.”

“You don’t look like a Sun Knight… Well, it doesn’t matter what

you are as long as you're on our side," replied Nick.

"Wow. You're quite broad-minded, leader of the Survivors."

"There's no point in wondering now… We've got some cleanup to take care of first."

"…You mean him?" Marde asked.

Nick was looking at the titan that had once been Argus. It was standing unsettlingly still and staring into space. Its injuries hadn't healed, and it showed no sign it was going to say anything.

"He appears to have been forcibly reborn. His body, organs, nerves… even his brain have been completely transformed. There is no chance that his memories remain. All this monster shares with Argus is his soul. It is a miracle that it fought for us…or rather, for you, Nick," remarked Marde.

"You don't say. Hey, could you heal me a little more?"

"I could, but… Why?"

"I wanna put that thing out of its misery," Nick said.

Marde was speechless. Karan and Alice were equally flabbergasted.

"Hey, Sword of Might. Do I have a chance of beating it in a fight?" Nick asked.

"Oh, Nick. The possibility is practically zero. It would likely break your arms or legs with its first blow, smash your cranial nerves or spine with its second blow, and use a magical vibration to inflict irreversible damage to your soul with its third blow. You might last five blows, but that would be a miracle," the Sword of Might said.

"Damn, you sure don't hold back," Nick responded.

"Flattery would be pointless. Why are you asking for your chances of victory anyway? I determined that you would want to do this regardless of my answer," the Sword of Might said.

"You're right."

Nick staggered to his feet. He took one step forward with grim resolve, but a man stopped him.

"…Wait, Survivor."

Fifs looked like he'd been healed since fighting the burning knight. His breathing was still heavy, but he was steady on his feet.

"Oh, Fifs. Thank you. I'm honored that someone of your standing came to help us…but don't get in my way," Nick told him.

"It wasn't long ago that you and your party members were

naive newcomers in Labyrinth City, but you've just achieved something greater than any S-rank adventurer has. I should be thanking you," Fifs said, tapping Nick's chest with his elbow.

It was a surreal moment; this man exemplified the perfect ideal of what an adventurer should be. Nick felt both honored and embarrassed.

"Huh? You know who we are?" he asked.

"I don't know everything about you, but I have heard a little. I would like to stick around and deepen our friendship, but…"

"The look you're giving me says you don't have time," Nick said.

"That's right. I have other business to take care of. So I don't want to get in your way. I just want to talk," Fifs said with a shrug. "This may be surprising to hear…but I'm not here for the Sword of Tasuki."

"…Huh?" Nick was confused. He sensed that something was off, and he instinctively gripped his dagger.

Fifs saw this and quickly shook his head. "Oh, don't get me wrong. I'm not about to reveal myself as the secret mastermind or anything like that. I'm the leader of the team working to contain the large-scale Stampede, after all. Speaking of which, if we fail to stop the Stampede and the miasma spreads, it could end up resurrecting the demon god."

"What? The demon god…?"

"You were only paying attention to the Sword of Tasuki, weren't you? He was certainly the ringleader behind this whole mess, but our goal here needs to be bringing an end to this incident, not just defeating him."

Nick looked away. Fifs was exactly right. The others looked awkward, too; they were probably feeling the same way.

"He did accelerate the large-scale Stampede, so you weren't mistaken in going after him… But it's not time to celebrate yet. I need all the help I can get," Fifs said.

"For what?" Nick asked.

"The demon god is being resurrected. The ritual is likely progressing as we speak, and we need to stop it as fast as possible. This isn't the bottom floor of the labyrinth; I'm guessing there's something farther down."

"But the labyrinth's creator—the Sword of Tasuki—is gone."

“That doesn’t mean he’s completely destroyed or dead. Either way, we can’t expect him to have been kind enough to set up a ritual that halts upon his death.”

Nick felt the intoxication from their victory fade, and the air seemed to grow damp. Unfortunately, it seemed like this wasn’t even close to being over.

“…I remember hearing that holy swords are basically immortal unless they’ve mutated,” he said.

“Yes, that’s right. But that must mean…,” the Sword of Might trailed off timidly, imagining the worst.

The worst answered.

“Correct. Unlike you all, I have not mutated.”

Footsteps echoed from below as a man slowly emerged from the staircase leading to the bottom floor. He looked as if he was out on a leisurely stroll. To everyone’s disbelief, it was Callios—the Sword of Tasuki. He had lost his burning knight form and powerful mana from earlier, so he looked like an ordinary adventurer.

“What the…? How the hell’re you still alive?!” Nick yelled angrily.

“…I know I’m not one to talk, but you’re as unkillable as a cockroach, Sword of Tasuki. It’s past time you gave up,” Diamond’s image said with an exasperated shrug.

Everyone quickly looked around. Alice and Karan quietly drew their swords, preparing to respond to any type of attack. However, Nick and the others soon realized something was off; they didn’t sense the intense ambition or animosity he’d shown during their fight. It even looked like he had accepted defeat.

“I externally removed my limiters, but my essence has not changed at all… Though, unfortunately, centuries of hard work just went up in smoke. You all got the best of me, much as I hate to admit it. Do you have any idea how hard it was to find such brilliantly talented people who would accept my rule?” Callios asked.

“…You were following your own ideals. But your methods were wicked and deceitful,” Karan said. “You tested people while being unable to put yourself in their shoes. That’s why they all left you.”

“…That almost sounded intelligent. You’re far more eloquent

than when we fought together, country bumpkin."

"You got that right."

Callios looked surprised to see Karan agree, but then he chuckled. "Well, seeing that you beat me, you're probably right. I wasn't able to think of the souls that way, nor did I intend to. I'm a thief by nature, after all. It hurt me to realize that, but I had a lot of fun once I accepted it."

Karan found his blunt words unpleasant, but she didn't let it show on her face. She understood there was a sadness to them.

"A *tasuki*—a type of sash—to preserve souls for future generations… That is the concept under which I was forged. I can store souls as a resource and use them even without their consent. My potential increased significantly when I realized that, and I would not have done so without Callios. I am grateful to him for that."

"Who was Callios?" Karan asked.

"A run-of-the-mill bandit from a gang called Viper. He was from the dregs of society, earning his keep deceiving people like I did you…though, yes, I suppose he was a friend. He was the only one you were unable to persuade earlier," Callios said, surprising everyone with his honesty. But that was as far as his explanation went. "Well, that hardly matters now. Callios is the only one who stayed in the end. That's the truth. He implanted my memories into a copy of the Sword of Tasuki."

"Then why are you here? Do you both want to die?" Karan asked.

"Hold off on that; I'm already going to die," Callios said. "This body is a sham. I lost, and nothing will change that. The Stampede and the demon god resurrection ritual are out of my hands. You'll see once you reach the bottom floor that the ritual cannot be stopped."

"Haaah… That's what I expected," Fifs said, looking troubled.

"I—by which I mean, the reproduction of the Sword of Tasuki I am inhabiting—was just tossed into the furnace as a sacrifice. My consciousness and memories will soon disappear."

"What furnace?"

"For burning sacrifices to the demon god."

The titan reacted to Callios's words first, dashing down the staircase to the lower floors with astounding speed.

“Whoa there… He never did listen to me. We were like oil and water, him and I… Well, that hardly matters now; our fates are severed. This next part is up to you all,” Callios said, studying the Survivors.

“What’re you planning?” Nick demanded.

“Defeat the demon god and become heroes. I’m sure you can do it. You bested me, after all.”

His words were hopeful but also a curse. With that, Callios, the Sword of Tasuki, disappeared like smoke, leaving them all behind in the slightly cold room.

“Geh… To the lower floors, everyone!” Fifs ordered, and the others obeyed.

Following the titan was a cinch. The Colosseum of Carnage was a difficult labyrinth, but not when you had an ally of its strength charging ahead and clearing a path by tearing the monsters limb from limb and disabling the traps with brute force. All they had to do was run behind it.

“S-sorry about this…,” Nick said.

“Don’t worry about it,” Fifs replied. “Honestly, I wanted to let you all rest, but I need you to hang with me for a little longer.”

However, many of them were in no state to walk, let alone run. Nick, Zem, and Bond were beyond exhausted, and Leon and the Sword of Evolution were still unconscious, so Fifs had cloned himself to carry them all.

“Instructor, you need to go ahead and use Split… That body’s lifespan is really short, isn’t it?” Tiana urged with concern.

“The danger is not yet past,” Bellocchio replied, looking unbothered.

Karan and Diamond ran behind Fifs in silence.

The group continued to race through the Colosseum of Carnage, unease building in their hearts, until they found a hellscape of a room. It was boiling hot and smelled rotten. The room was strewn with the corpses of the monsters that had likely been guarding it.

The source of the heat and stench was a mysterious egg-shaped object enshrined in the center of the room. It was immediately obvious that this was the furnace the Sword of

Tasuki had mentioned.

The egg felt as hot as the sun; there was clearly a massive heat source inside it. The purpose of the eggshell was likely to keep that heat inside. The hot air that did escape was still strong enough to make everyone squint against it. The egg was close to a kilometer away, but it was so big that it appeared closer.

“Instructor, is that…?” Tiana trailed off.

“It is quite crude, but it is likely a tool to extract mana. It melts down and homogenizes magical energy from things such as corpses, artifact cores, and mana crystals, using them as sacrifices,” Bellocchio said.

“Sacrifices? Does that mean what I think it means?” Tiana asked.

“Yes. They are offerings for the demon god’s resurrection,” her instructor confirmed. “…This is quite concerning. Diamond, what do you think?”

“…I’d give it a week,” Diamond said, her expression uncharacteristically grim.

Her reaction scared Nick; she hadn’t looked nearly as bothered when fighting the Sword of Tasuki. The situation here must have been significantly worse.

“Oh dear. With this, we will be destroyed in earnest,” Bellocchio said, going pale.

“Hold on. We need to think,” Fifs chimed in. “The Sword of Tasuki was an evil bastard, but he was always testing people. There must be a way to save the day at the last second.”

“The issue is what he considered ‘saving the day.’ Worst case, he could have decided that avoiding extinction with a handful of survivors was enough for humanity to pass the test,” Marde said.

“Sure, but we have to think of something!” insisted Diamond.

“What do you think we’re trying to do?!” Fifs said. He, Marde, and Diamond continued to argue heatedly.

“Tiana, can we go home? I’m pooped. I wanna sleep,” Nick complained.

“…Don’t say that. I’m trying my best to hold out, too,” responded Tiana.

“Yeah, I know,” said Nick.

Diamond and the others realized they were leaving the Survivors out of the conversation and turned around to face

them with embarrassed expressions.

“I’ve got bad news, and I’ve got *really* bad news. Which do you want to hear first?” Diamond asked.

“I wanna hear an idol give me a white lie that makes me feel better about this whole mess,” Nick said.

“The bad news it is, then. The Sword of Tasuki is completely gone, but he sacrificed himself to the demon god. You could say he quit while he was ahead. His plan is still in motion.”

“…Wasn’t his plan to Awaken Argus?” Nick asked.

“It doesn’t necessarily need to be Argus; he was just one candidate. The Sword of Tasuki’s goal will be achieved if *someone*, no matter who, fights the demon god and Awakens in the process,” Diamond explained.

“So you’re saying he chose us as his next candidates? You’ve gotta be kidding me… Hey, hang on,” Nick said, realizing something.

“What?”

“…You said you have even worse news?” he asked.

Diamond and the others continued their explanation without answering Nick’s question. That in itself was their answer.

“The demon god’s resurrection will occur when the Stampede reaches its peak. A body will manifest in this world created from sacrifices born from the fight between monsters and people, and monsters and monsters. But…”

Bellocchio picked up where Diamond left off.

“Significantly more unpleasant mana than that of a typical Stampede is gathering in the ground. It feels like something with highly dense mana is about to be born into this world… That can only mean one thing.”

“The demon god is resurrecting with a physical form,” Fifs said. “And we only have one week before it happens.”

“…If it comes to that, this’ll be way too much for us to handle alone. This is gonna turn into an all-out war. Shouldn’t we prioritize returning to the city to share what we know with the knights and the army?” Nick asked.

“We won’t make it back in time. The angels will descend once the Awakening reaches a high-enough level. They’ll burn the land to ashes,” said Diamond.

Everyone fell silent; they knew that would be a death sentence

for the world.

Nick couldn't even bring himself to object. Everyone there believed Diamond was telling the truth. He fought against the urge to drift off to sleep and grew jealous of Leon, who was still unconscious on Fifs's back.

But as Nick dreamed of escaping reality, he realized something.

"Hey, where'd Argus go? He came into this room, didn't he?"

"Huh? Oh yeah…," Diamond said. She put a hand to her ear and cautiously looked around. The titan was nowhere to be seen, despite likely being responsible for the monster corpses throughout the room.

Marde realized the answer first. "Did he…go inside?"

"You mean inside the shell? That's crazy! He's way too injured to try something like that!" Nick protested.

"That shell is an impenetrable barrier made by a god. I highly doubt breaking through it is possible," Bellocchio said.

"It is possible," said the holy sword that Fifs was carrying.

"Oh, Sword of Evolution, you're awake," said Fifs.

"Somehow. I thought I was going to die… Anyway, Argus is capable of destroying it. He desired the ability to inflict irreversible damage on artifacts, so I gave it to him when I evolved him. He can destroy any artifact, and a god is no exception… The Sword of Tasuki was able to avoid this by producing an innumerable number of clones, but this egg is just sitting there. Argus should be able to damage it."

"He can really damage artifacts?" Nick asked.

"Holy swords and other higher artifacts are semi-immortal. Gods are close to truly immortal, but the logic behind their immortality is essentially the same. As such—"

"Stop. I don't need a detailed explanation," Nick said, interrupting the Sword of Evolution. "So you're saying…he can defeat the demon god? Right now, before the ritual is complete?"

"…The Sword of Tasuki inflicted him with a number of curses. It is a miracle that he is still alive and fighting. I do not think he will be able to completely destroy the demon god," the Sword of Evolution conceded.

"Huh…"

They all fell quiet, feeling helpless. The silence was soon interrupted by an explosive sound that was accompanied by a blast of hot wind.

“What was *that*?” Nick exclaimed. “Don’t tell me the resurrection is complete.”

The group’s despair was palpable. As fatigue threatened to overwhelm them, one person glared at the demon god’s shell.

“…No, that was not a sign of the resurrection. That was sabotage from the inside.”

It was Bellocchio. He had an excited smile on his face.

“Instructor?” Tiana asked, worried that he was getting dangerous ideas again.

Bellocchio ignored her concern and turned to Fifs.

“Mr. Fifs, would you be willing to assist me? I would like you to be a human shield and help me reach the shell.”

“…I can’t say I like the sound of that,” Fifs said, grimacing.

“Ha-ha-ha, I am not asking you to die for me. I would like you to last as long as you can but retreat before you expire.”

“That’s not what I’m worried about. I know what you’re thinking. You want to reach the demon god’s shell as unscathed as you can, then get inside and destroy it. Just like Argus is doing now.”

“…Well, yes, essentially,” admitted Bellocchio.

“Argus’s death is inevitable, but that’s not true for you,” argued Fifs. “You’re here because you took every measure to ensure your own survival.”

“H-he’s right! That body already doesn’t have long left! You’re going to die if you don’t quickly dispel it and return to your original form!” Tiana added.

Bellocchio just shook his head. “Dead Man’s Balloon worked, as did my defensive measures. But something unexpected happened.”

“What?” asked Tiana.

“The Sword of Tasuki had a high soul level from capturing and equalizing a great many souls. Fighting him was a spiritual experience impossible under normal circumstances, and as a result, my soul level rose until I stabilized in this state.”

“…You ‘stabilized’?”

“That means I can’t dispel Union. Unfortunately, that also means I cannot do anything to fix this body’s short lifespan.”

“Oh…”

Tiana and the others were speechless.

“B-but I’ve used Union many times and fought the Sword of Tasuki, and that hasn’t happened to me!” protested Tiana.

“What is the advantage of using a magic item or holy sword as a catalyst to perform advanced magic?” Bellocchio asked, tapping the floor with his staff as if to announce this was a lesson.

“…You’re able to use a spell even if you haven’t learned it,” Tiana answered.

“And why is that?”

“Carving the magic words onto the core simplifies the ritual and incantation and prevents the caster from losing control of their mana or casting in a mana-deficient state. That enables the spell to be used stably.”

“Yes, that is correct.”

Bellocchio smiled with his distinct mixture of tenderness and madness. It was unsettling on his new young woman’s face, which resembled Tiana’s.

“Using Union in this manner is forbidden,” he continued. “Gathering body parts from living people and combining them is not far from necromancy. If I do happen to survive and extend my life, I will be exiled from the academy and learned society. I will likely also be given the death penalty—or worse, sentenced to be frozen.”

Tiana glared at Alice and Marde. They’d probably known about that and kept quiet.

“…The world hasn’t fallen so low as to behead a person who distinguished themselves when humanity was on the brink of destruction. The Order of the Sun Knights is in shambles anyway. I’m sure we can figure something out,” Alice said.

“It is not the Order of the Sun Knights that punishes people for forbidden magic. The sanctuary—or rather, a secret assassination division within the sanctuary—takes care of that. Regardless, I know that I have dirtied my hands with heresy.” Bellocchio chuckled as he continued. “But this is not all bad. When I embraced the Sword of Tasuki, I stole a significant amount of mana from him. It may not be enough to defeat the demon god, but in my current state, I am likely as strong as any mage in Labyrinth City. Besides, there is no guarantee I will perish. Don’t you want to have some fun after coming this far? Does this not excite you?”

“There’s no other way, huh…? Guess I’m putting my life on the line, too,” Fifs said.

“Yes, there is! Figuring out how to extend that body’s lifespan would be much more constructive!” Tiana insisted. She knew, however, that her instructor wouldn’t lie about this, nor would he make an error of judgment in such a high-stakes situation.

“Doppelgänger,” Fifs chanted, performing a different spell from the one he’d used during the fight earlier.

“You made copies of yourself… Oh wait, they’re all wearing different equipment,” Nick said.

A number of Fifs clones appeared, each wearing a different outfit. One Fifs had a large shield, one wore light armor, and one wore a mage’s robe.

Nick recognized this as Fifs’s signature spell. He was famous for being an S-rank adventurer who used Doppelgänger to create copies of himself and use them as a perfectly coordinated party.

“The previous spell I used summons my main body…a higher existence to which my soul is linked. It’s not something I can cast repeatedly. I actually couldn’t have used it all without a ritual catalyst I borrowed from Marde, which I’ve already exhausted,” Fifs explained.

“I see… I always doubted that you could actually use an advanced spell like Doppelgänger on a daily basis, but it must be easy for you. You are a persona of your main body, and you are simply borrowing personas from it that exist in other dimensions,” said Bond.

“It may be my main body, but I don’t have much of an idea what it’s thinking. Anyway, this is hardly the time to be having such a complicated conversation. We need to move.”

Fifs and his other selves formed a perfectly coordinated squad with Bellocchio standing at their rear.

“Shall we be off?” the mage asked.

“W-wait!” Tiana exclaimed. “Nick, Bond! Use Union with me! We can do something about this instead!”

“Be reasonable, Tiana,” her instructor chastised her.

“How can you say that?! You’re about to kill yourself!” shouted Tiana.

Fifs and Bellocchio ignored her cries and ran toward the demon god’s shell. Their figures grew smaller until they were visible only as pinpricks of coppery light in the intense heat, like

a pair of tiny, faraway stars. The others could only gulp and watch as the two of them risked their lives.

Eventually, a brilliant light surged from the egg.

Once it faded, Tiana spoke up.

“What happened?” she asked timidly.

“That’s a good sign,” Alice said, pointing toward the demon god’s shell. A giant crack had formed in it.

The heat spilling from the shell intensified. There was another small explosion, making the crack grow larger. Dense heat and mana gushed out, and a figure emerged. It raced toward Nick and the others with giant leaps and stood before them.

“Argus…,” Nick said.

“Instructor!” Tiana shouted.

Argus’s wounds had worsened significantly. He was so beaten up, he looked like a corpse. Nick didn’t know what to say to him; however, one thing spoke loudly of his intentions: He was holding Fifs and Bellocchio in his right hand. He laid them gently on the ground.

“He’s still breathing! I think Fifs will make it!” Diamond said.

Fifs was severely burned but breathing, and Diamond hurriedly chanted healing magic. But she just glanced at Bellocchio and ignored him. It was clear he was beyond saving.

“Instructor… Why?” Tiana whimpered.

Bellocchio’s current body was an artificial construct made out of corpses and doll parts. Some of the skin on his limbs had burned away to reveal metal bones underneath, blurring the line between human and object. Anyone who found his corpse would have assumed he was an unfinished doll.

“…Please don’t be too angry with me. Actually, being the target of your anger isn’t so bad. It has been rare for such emotion to be shown for me in my old age,” Bellocchio said.

His arm moved as if searching for something. Tiana immediately understood what he wanted. She embraced Bellocchio, took out her own tobacco pipe, and put it in his mouth.

“I never liked having other people light my pipe… No matter how elegantly they did it… But…this isn’t so bad…”

“Instructor?”

Bellocchio calmly breathed his last. Tiana began to sob, and

Karan approached her quietly, giving Nick a look that told him to let her handle this.

Nick apologized to Karan in his mind and turned toward Argus.

"…I like the new look. It suits you. You've finally got a face that reveals you for the failed adventurer you are," he said.

His provocative words shocked Tiana and Karan, but neither girl intervened.

"You said I don't behave like an adventurer. That we have conflicting principles. But Combat Masters is done for. You killed them all and stole their souls, and now those are gone, too. Even the venerated Sword of Tasuki you spent so much time with was nothing but a common thief. You never *had* any principles. Everything you cared about is gone. Are you satisfied?"

The monstrous Argus watched Nick in silence. He seemed both human and not. No one would have argued if you called him a monster, but his eyes were as calm as could be.

"Damn it! Are you just gonna stand there?! Say something, Argus! Why don't you ever say the things that really matter?!" Nick yelled.

"You're wasting your breath. He cannot speak because I left out his vocal organs when I evolved him. He is now naught but a being designed specifically to destroy artifacts," the Sword of Evolution said coolly.

"Shut up, you worthless piece of junk! I wasn't talking to you!" Nick snapped.

"…Hmph, fine. But look and you will see what he accomplished."

As if in response to the sword's words, Argus showed what he was holding in his left hand. He threw it violently to the floor, unlike when he'd laid down Bellocchio and Fifs.

"Are those…magic items?" Nick asked.

Marde answered. "That is the remains of the Sword of Tasuki…a magic item…and some kind of orb… I see. These are sacrifices to the demon god. Not only did he ravage the shell, he stole some of its mana source."

"Those are all first-class artifacts. He probably destroyed other sacrifices, too. The shell's mana has been greatly decreased… That should buy us time!" Diamond said.

"We might be able to work with the agents to delay the angels' descent and the final battle… This could save us!" exclaimed Alice.



Their relief spread to the others. All but Nick, who continued to glare at Argus.

Argus calmly moved his lips. He made no sound, but Nick could tell what he was saying.

Good job.

You've become a fine adventurer.

"I can't now...! I wanted to help you become an S-rank adventurer!" Nick shouted. He reached out to grab Argus, but it was too late. Unable to keep it together any longer, Argus's body crumbled.

"He probably couldn't maintain his body physically or spiritually. He gave everything he had to buy us this time," Marde said mournfully.

Nick snapped at her, not bothering to hide his irritation. "Since you seem to know everything, why don't you tell us what's going on?"

"...Of course. I'll share everything I know. But first, we need to survive," Marde said.

"It sounds like you think we're gonna die if we don't get out of here."

"You will. Heat and mana are erupting out of that crack. The shell is about to explode."

"You're kidding... Actually, you're not, are you?" Nick was surprised at first, but then he realized that the hot wind was growing stronger. He was already having difficulty breathing. It was obvious that the shell could explode at any time.

"Fortunately, this will likely delay the demon god's resurrection by a few months to a year. It would be a waste for you all to die here after being given this chance at survival."

"...So it's not over yet," Nick said.

"The demon god's body has already manifested enough that it will automatically heal. We delayed the resurrection as much as possible, but the process cannot be stopped. The demon god's manifestation in this world is inevitable... Alice."

"Yes, ma'am," Alice said, picking up Nick and Zem and tossing them over her shoulders.

Tiana wiped away her tears and gathered Bellocchio's corpse in her robe. Fifs staggered to his feet and used Doppelgänger to carry himself and Leon.

"I'll guard the rear. You all watch the front," Karan said.

“All right, everyone! Retreat!” Diamond commanded, and they all raced back up the labyrinth.

Shortly afterward, an explosion rocked Labyrinth City.

A Glass of Wine Before the End of the World



The return to Labyrinth City was too quiet to call triumphant yet too full of relief to call defeated.

The adventurers who were defending Starmine Hall gave Nick's group a grand welcome when they arrived and were floored when they heard what had happened. The Sword of Tasuki, who'd plunged Labyrinth City into chaos, had been defeated. Yet even so, the threat of the demon god still hung over them. They now had to begin preparing for the resurrection.

Some were discouraged by this news and escaped from reality by drowning themselves in pleasure. Some grew jealous of the team that had gone into the Colosseum of Carnage and left to distinguish themselves by boldly fighting in the Stampeding labyrinths. Some spent their own money to help Labyrinth City recover. Some returned to their normal lives, getting up before the crack of dawn to open their shops and cooking bread and donuts to serve to customers with their coffee.

The Survivors, meanwhile, rested.

Bond was underneath Starmine Hall being healed—or repaired, rather—from the strain of using Union for so long. His life wasn't at risk, but he hadn't yet recovered enough to speak.

Tiana spent her time with the Thunderbolt Corporation. She

sorted through Bellocchio's personal belongings with the employees and swapped stories with them as they shared in their grief.

Karan remained hopelessly busy. Nick was initially shocked to see her working as a high state official of Teran, but it felt right. Her ability to speak frankly with anyone made her perfect for the job. Nick was proud of her but also a little lonely.

Zem had heavily exhausted himself and spent a while bedridden in Starmine Hall's hospital, but as soon as he got back on his feet, he headed to the nightlife district for some fun… Or that was what everyone assumed at first anyway. He actually spent his time counseling the people who lived there. He petitioned Karan for support with foodstuffs and other daily necessities and even visited the Garbage Heap, where he was becoming a person of influence.

As his party members went about their business, Nick went to a bar. It was located in an ordinary back alley, but it wasn't seedy or unsafe, and the fancy wooden door even gave it an air of luxury. The bar appeared to be closed like the other restaurants around it, but a sign hanging from the door said it was reserved for the day.

"Is it really okay for me to eat here?" Nick asked.

"What are you waiting for? Come in, come in. You're the guest of honor."

The door opened as if in response to Nick's question, revealing a familiar face on the other side.

"Oh, mistress. Long time no see… Do you own this restaurant, too?"

"My main profession is that of a consultant. Though I suppose I don't mind playing at being a chef, either," the mistress said, chuckling as she led Nick through the restaurant.

Unlike her last place, which had been a restaurant and an inn, this was just a bar. The wood of the floor and walls was luxurious, and it appeared to have been built to entertain wealthy and powerful guests.

"Put yourself at ease," the mistress told him. "This restaurant isn't nearly as expensive as the one where I nursed you back to health."

"R-really?" Nick asked.

“Do you remember how comfortable that place was? This restaurant has its own cozy charm, too, of course, but I want you to relax. You’re the hero of this turmoil, so they’re footing the bill. Go ahead and drink all the fine alcohol you want.”

“…You seem different from before. You dyed your hair, too.”

“Hmm-hmm, I did indeed.”

Nick thought he remembered the mistress being more polite and timid the last time they met, but he was relieved to see she was safe. He owed her his life.

He told her as much and asked if her apprentice was doing well. She answered by saying she’d sent him to a soup kitchen. The small talk made Nick strangely happy; he knew there would be few opportunities to experience quiet moments like this with the world in its current state.

There was a small room at the end of the hallway the mistress was leading Nick through. The thick window curtains were closed, and old-fashioned oil lamps warmly lit the room. Some of that light spilled out into the hallway, revealing that someone was inside.

That someone was Alice, who was already seated and enjoying a drink.

“Really? You didn’t even wait for me?” Nick said.

“It’s rude to begin drinking before your guest arrives,” the mistress admonished.

“This wine is from Samurialie’s private collection. You can’t buy it with money, so make sure you enjoy it,” Alice said, acting as if she owned the place. She poured Nick a glass and offered it to him without a care in the world.

There were three seats at the table. Nick sat diagonally from Alice and across from Marde, who, unable to sit, was set on the table instead.



"Please, scold her more. This child has always had sticky fingers," Marde said.

"Apparently," Nick said.

"Sun Knights have a right to collect evidence. I'm sure you've taken measures to prevent anyone from finding out you manage this place, Samurialie," Alice said.

"Are you implying that wine is a bribe? Well, I'm going to get the food. You can get whatever mischief you want out of your system in the meantime," the mistress said, leaving for the kitchen with a shrug.

"Do you two know her?" Nick asked.

"Her name is Samurialie. She's an expert at barrier magic who helped us strategize against the Sword of Tasuki without detection from his eyes and ears. She helped with Karan's work, too," Alice said.

"Really?" said Nick, surprised. "She just looks like a successful proprietress to me…"

Alice smiled with relief. "You look good, Nick. I'm glad to see you've recovered."

"…Yeah, I'm fine," Nick said with a troubled expression.

"Are you not feeling well?" Alice asked.

"No, I feel perfectly normal. That's what scares me."

"Huh? Why?" Alice cocked her head at his vague answer.

"I should be way more tired after using Union for that long. Honestly, I think I should've died or been bedridden for weeks."

"I think that has something to do with the Colosseum of Carnage," Marde said.

"What do you mean?" asked Nick.

"That place was originally built to serve as a trial to guide people toward Awakening. If fighting within it trained your soul to withstand advanced magic, that would explain why you didn't suffer the usual repercussions. The reason Union exhausts you in the first place is because of the friction from being forcibly raised to a higher soul level," Marde explained.

"You sure are knowledgeable, Teach," Nick said.

"…You remember calling me that?" Marde asked, joy on her face.

"Yeah. You were searching for me, weren't you? You…and Alice…protected me. I'm sorry for forgetting you."

"Don't worry. As a knight, I'd much rather victims forget such traumatic incidents," Alice said.

Nick had slept for days after returning from the Colosseum of Carnage. His physical exhaustion and depleted mana weren't the only reasons for that; he'd also had to process Argus's death. He had resolved his business with Combat Masters but suffered a massive loss in the process and needed a long break to mentally recover.

He'd gained something during that break.

"I remembered some things as I spent time in bed," Nick said.

That something was his memories.

"...Is that so?" Marde asked.

"But I don't know if these memories are true or not. My mom and dad never told me exactly who you were. I definitely never knew you had a grand nickname like the Credit Queen."

He remembered Marde and the fact that his parents had worked for her. Nick had spoken to her many times himself, as well.

"You must have had a vague idea. I'm sure you overheard some of our conversations," Marde said.

Nick nodded. "The Dineez Adventurers Credit Union. My parents' job as traveling merchants was a front... Or I guess they just happened to sell loans and insurance in addition to goods like cloth and oil."

"They also worked as resignation agents," Marde said.

"What? Why would they...? Oh, the Sword of Tasuki."

"Exactly. They also occasionally helped members of long-lived species who were forced into ancient slave-like contracts to work as vassals or guards for nobles and royals. They did so by either checking ancient law or using spells to release people from their curse or contract."

"So...did they approach Argus because they wanted to help him?" Nick asked.

"Their goal was to weaken the Sword of Tasuki. But Richard and Robin were persistent with their negotiations, and I think they eventually formed a friendship," Marde said.

"...I think I remember pieces of those conversations. My parents would make it sound like small talk—they'd mention the economy, the weather, and other things—and give him life advice, while they were actually exchanging information and negotiating."

"Oh?"

“Argus would say things like, ‘My boss has been a real tyrant lately.’ My dad would act like he was talking about dragon racing and go, ‘You need to time your spurt carefully.’ Or he’d bring up tales of great adventurers and heroes and say, ‘That’s what makes a true man,’ ‘It’s not winning or losing that makes an adventurer; it’s having the courage to face your true foe,’ and ‘A man speaks with actions, not words.’ Oh, I wonder if Argus was so obsessed with being an adventurer because of my dad.”

“Richard was the type of man to tell a joke with a straight face. He seemed like an easygoing and refined traveling man, but he could be a real smooth talker. There were times when it was hard to tell if he was being serious or not,” Marde said with a wistful smile.

“…Argus was looking for a way to cut ties with the Sword of Tasuki, but he wavered, too. I remember some of his conversations with my parents. Yeah, it…it felt like my parents were advising him.”

Nick closed his eyes and pictured his parents as he remembered them. He put himself in this seat in the past and delved deep into his memories for pieces of the conversation they’d had here in this restaurant.

“I think…Argus said he was unsure if he should continue working for his current employer or find a new job. My dad pushed him to leave, saying that starting a new job was one of life’s great adventures. But Argus’s expression grew gradually darker as they spoke. He realized that parting ways with the Sword of Tasuki might not be for the best.”

“…Yes.”

“The contract didn’t just bind Argus to the Sword of Tasuki; it also bound the Sword of Tasuki to Argus. They kept a close eye on each other to make sure they didn’t break the rules. Argus was right to worry; when the contract was severed, it unleashed the Sword of Tasuki’s full power.”

“If Richard and Robin had returned with that information, we would have been able to form a plan to thwart the Sword of Tasuki’s underground operations. But alas, it was not to be. Why were they killed? Did Argus think your parents would betray him?”

Nick frowned and put a hand on his chin.

“…I think it was just a coincidence,” he said.

“…Oh?”

“Our carriage was attacked by a band of thieves. They were all failed adventures with clumsy group tactics, but they weren’t unskilled fighters. They were typical of adventurers: dumb and strong. If the Sword of Tasuki hadn’t lent them a hand, they probably would’ve been arrested by the Sun Knights or ended up in the Garbage Heap before long.”

“Did you look into them?” Alice asked.

“Yeah. But you probably know more than me.”

Alice’s expression darkened. She was the one who’d investigated the scene of Nick’s parents’ deaths. Since it had occurred within her jurisdiction as a Sun Knight, she should have been able to reach the scene before anyone else and arrest the bandits, but she held an elite position among the Sun Knights. Much of her time was taken up by meeting with superiors and Teran nobles for meetings or social gatherings, and she’d missed a clumsy thief attack she would have been able to prevent if she had been on the street.

“…Yeah, I remember them well,” Alice said.

“I’m not criticizing you. You saved my life, after all. I…feel bad for forgetting you, too,” Nick said, looking away in embarrassment.

“Hmm-hmm, it’s okay. Would you like me to pamper you like I did then?” Alice asked.

“Hell no. I’m not a kid. Anyway, back to the incident.”

“Why do you think it was a coincidence?”

“There were some adventurers and thugs who Argus had warned us not to mess with. He said they had the backing of gangsters, or something like that, but some of them showed no such signs, so it was unclear why he was cautious of them. I think they were strong, but they didn’t look noteworthy in any way.”

“Did they have a boss who stayed behind the scenes? Like the Sword of Tasuki?” Alice asked.

“Yeah. I think he told us to stay out of trouble so he could avoid killing fellow demon-god worshippers… But he also told us that things happen. He said that if someone picks a fight with us, or if there’s a reason we can’t avoid it, then…” Nick’s voice grew quiet. “We should kill them without hesitation.”

His tone was dark, and Alice and Marde hung on every word.

“He definitely said that to us. He also told us to leave the

cleanup to him. Fortunately, that never happened, but he was serious about it."

"So let me get this straight. Argus told your parents to kill any demon-god worshippers they came into conflict with so they couldn't cause any more trouble, and that he would handle the cleanup, like when he killed the bandits who attacked your parents. Is that right?" Alice asked.

Nick nodded.

But Marde raised an objection. "Does that not seem strange? Wouldn't the Sword of Tasuki find out about it if one demon-god worshipper killed another? It would make much more sense for him to want them to reconcile."

"No… I don't think he cared, actually. It probably wasn't uncommon for demon-god worshippers who resorted to thievery to get killed before the Sword of Tasuki gave them any orders. He probably factored some loss into his calculations. It's also possible Argus killed followers as an example to maintain order," Nick said.

Alice nodded her agreement.

"That's my take on it," continued Nick. "That was also the only time he ever slaughtered an entire band of thieves. We encountered many thieves during my time in Combat Masters, but he always just incapacitated them and left them to the Sun Knights. So…I think the thieves who attacked us might have been demon-god worshippers."

Marde looked convinced. "I see."

"Karan and Diamond should be able to confirm that for you. They performed extensive research to identify demon-god worshippers while working to defeat the Sword of Tasuki," Alice told him.

"I'll leave that to you; I don't really care," Nick said with an annoyed shrug. "Anyway, Argus killed them all under the pretext of preventing future trouble…but I think he actually did it to cover up the truth that he was negotiating with the Dineez Adventurers Credit Union. The carelessness of the robbery attempt allowed him to give the Sword of Tasuki the excuse that he was purging troublemakers. The Sword of Tasuki was probably grateful."

"So he used that to increase his standing with the Sword of

Tasuki," Alice said.

"Yeah. And even if he'd spared my mom and dad, someone would have discovered their identities through their interactions with Argus. They had no way out; if Argus hadn't killed them then, the Sword of Tasuki would have discovered them and subjected them to a much worse fate." Nick let out a sigh of resignation.

"But in the end, those circumstances had nothing to do with you," said Alice. "You have every right to be angry at Argus for killing your parents and at everyone else who put you in that situation."

"Trust me, I know. I do resent them, now as much as ever… But it does make me think."

"About what?" Alice asked.

"What was that old bastard thinking? What did he want?"

"Nick…"

"I wanted an answer that would satisfy me. Why the hell did he raise me after killing my parents? I wanna know why he killed Olivia, too. She was his martial arts master. And why did she die to protect me? Not being able to ask him those questions pisses me off. How dare he die on me like that?" Nick spat angrily. He then realized how dark the mood had gotten, and he changed the topic. "Oh, it's not that serious. Forget about it. It's not like my life depends on knowing."

"That pain is important, Nick," Marde said.

"It might be. But I'm truly happy to have met you again, Teach. That's important to me, too… I can tell you're still worried about me. Thank you," Nick said, making Marde blush.

"B-but I went years without doing anything to help you," she protested.

"You continued negotiating with Argus and watched over me to make sure I was safe. I have no reason to be bitter toward you."

"Yes, but—"

"I'm sure my parents were well aware of the risks they were taking working for you, too. That's no different from an adventurer knowing they could be killed by a monster at any time. If they died protecting me…then I'm proud of the way they went out. What about you?"

"I've hired many people over the centuries. However, traveling with the

two of them, and with you, was particularly fun. This victory we just achieved would not have been possible if they had not taken every measure to ensure both my and your survival. I, too, think of them with pride."

"Glad to hear it."

Nick's lighthearted words made Marde smile. "Finding satisfying answers to life's questions is not easy. Many die without ever obtaining them... That's true of most people, actually. Now that the battle is over, you have all the time in the world to think."

"Yeah... Wait, hold on. We can't start thinking like this is all over."

"Really? And why is that?"

"The demon god is resurrecting. This war's only getting started."

Nick felt a flare of anxiety as he said that. He could feel a new—and final—battle coming.

"Oh, you want to help fight the demon god? That would be greatly appreciated," Alice said happily.

"We would welcome your help. Discuss with your party about whether you want to fight on the front lines or join the rear guard. I have connections who can place you wherever you want," Marde said, also smiling.

"Wait, President," Alice interjected. "Nick was one of the biggest contributors to the Sword of Tasuki's defeat, and he's a temporary employee of the Sun Knights. We need him stationed here."

"I don't know about that."

Nick's confusion deepened as he watched the two of them amicably argue over where he should be placed.

"Hold on. You're...making it sound as if you don't care whether or not I fight the demon god. Why?"

"You were the one who said you don't care about the demon god, remember?" Alice said.

"...I did say that, didn't I?" Nick said, grimacing.

"Defeating the demon god will require a full-scale war anyway. An army will be composed of people from many different countries, not just the Holy Kingdom of Dineez. This will not be a conflict that can be solved with individual heroics," Marde said.

"Really?"

"You can volunteer to enlist in the army, of course. Your

accomplishments—as well as those of your fellow Survivors and the Solo Diner—speak for themselves. More importantly, you all are among the strongest fighters in the holy kingdom, even in comparison to its knights and S-rank adventurers. Making it through the Colosseum of Carnage, withstanding the Sword of Tasuki's vicious assault, and defeating him prove your tremendous growth. However, the risk of death will still be high. Even more so than in the Colosseum of Carnage."

"...Well, that's ominous," Nick said, frowning.

"It will be a battle—no, a war—so intense that the surrounding land and its many labyrinths will be scorched black. That alone is inevitable. I wonder just how high the number of casualties will climb."

"Will the angels cause that destruction?" Nick asked.

"The angels' arrival would mean the possibility of the continent being destroyed without a trace. This won't be nearly so bad," Marde said.

"...And you're telling me it's okay to withdraw from the fighting and consider myself lucky?" Nick responded clear annoyance.

Marde and Alice nodded, their expressions serious.

"You have that right," Marde told him.

"Yeah. That's a holy right that no one will take from you. You've already contributed greatly to the Demon God War by delivering the first blow," Alice said.

"I 'contributed to the war'...? I was just fighting for myself," Nick said bitterly.

He opened the curtain and looked out the window. The world was returning to normal. Street vendors hawked their wares, and adventurers and merchants passed by. The peaceful sight made it hard to imagine this could all be scorched earth in a few short months.

"Those words will do nothing to diminish the value of your fight and your victory," Marde told him. "You should not be so quick to give up that right. I want you to make your decision after giving it serious thought and discussing it with your friends."

"Hey," Nick said.

“Good morning,” Tiana said.

“Long time no see,” Zem said.

“Fwah… I’m tired.” Karan yawned.

“Come on, why the long faces? You all saved Labyrinth City—you should carry yourselves with pride!” Bond told them.

The five Survivors had just gathered for the first time after their extended break. They were sitting at a table at the edge of the Fishermen Adventurers Guild. This was a frequent meeting place for them and one they felt a strange nostalgia for. They’d shared many idle conversations, chatted about their hobbies, split up rewards, and discussed their adventures here.

“This feels…kind of awkward,” Nick said.

The others stared at him for a moment and then unleashed on him.

“That’s your fault!” Tiana snapped.

“You brought this on yourself, Nick,” Zem chastised him.

“Yeah. You ran off and dragged Zem and Bond along with you,” Karan piled on.

“I thought I was going to die a hundred different times, you fool!” Bond shouted.

They continued to complain, getting increasingly worked up in the process. They told him about the difficulty of what they’d gone through and all the times they’d thought they were going to die, their frustration toward their leader boiling like a pot of Labyrinth Chicken.

“A-all right, all right! I messed up! I apologized, didn’t I?!” Nick said.

“Do you *actually* feel sorry?” Tiana asked.

“…I won’t do it again. Sorry,” Nick apologized, bowing meekly.

“Geez. You’d better not. I don’t know if we’d make it through another experience like that,” Tiana said.

“Yeah. It’s a miracle we survived…,” Nick admitted. “Actually, I probably shouldn’t use that word. People died to save us.”

“…Yeah,” Tiana said.

“Are you okay, Tiana?” Nick asked, concerned.

Tiana looked surprised. “Huh? Oh, you don’t have to worry about me. I kinda broke down in the labyrinth…but I just got irritated when I thought about it more.”

“What do you mean?” Nick stared at her with a confused look.

Tiana clenched her trembling fists as she continued. “Instructor Bellocchio was waiting eagerly for a chance to use Dead Man’s Balloon. Do you know why?”

“To defeat the Sword of Tasuki, no?” Bond said.

“That’s just the way it worked out. He wanted to use it out of pure curiosity. He had a bad habit of putting the cart before the horse. So you don’t have to be overly grateful to him. He left a heck of a lot of work for me to take care of, too. There’s still so much left to do… Oh, is it all right if I smoke?” Tiana asked.

Karan nodded, and Tiana stuffed a leaf into her pipe and lit it. The purple smoke she puffed out seemed like a manifestation of her fatigue.

“You look exhausted,” Nick said.

“I’ve been spending a lot of time with Havok and some of Instructor Bellocchio’s other apprentices at the Thunderbolt Corporation. They’ve told me a lot about him that I didn’t know, and let me tell you, he was more messed up than I thought. It’s felt like…going to a class reunion and complaining about a terrible teacher, even though none of us went to the same school,” Tiana said with a chuckle.

She was currently something of a temporary employee at the Thunderbolt Corporation. Havok, the company president, had been Bellocchio’s first ally and, apparently, also an apprentice.

“Instructor Bellocchio was an eccentric and daring man, and Havok was the person who always cleaned up his messes. Things were awkward between me and her at first because of the siege… but we hit it off once we started talking. Then, while sorting through Instructor Bellocchio’s belongings and meeting with the Sun Knights to figure out what to do with the Dead Man’s Balloon members, we…uncovered a lot of unresolved tasks and magic items that need to be sealed away,” Tiana explained.

“What do you mean by that?” asked Nick.

“He tried to make a magic sword for destroying holy swords, but it didn’t work because it drained a lethal amount of mana from the user… We also found a bomb he made to destroy souls trapped within a holy sword, but the blast range was way too wide and powerful and would kill everything within range. That’s only the tip of the iceberg. We were able to dispose of about a third of the dangerous items we found.”

“A weapon that can destroy a holy sword is an invention on the level of the ancient civilization. The man’s genius is undeniable,” Bond said, sounding astonished.

“Exactly. Looking at it gave me a headache. Still…”

“Yeah?” Nick pressed.

Tiana smiled. “It’s been kinda fun, too.”

“You’re an adventurer to the core,” Nick said with a smile.

“Oh, shut up.”

Tiana was able to look ahead despite her grief. Nick admired her strength.

“Anyway…you seem busy, Zem,” Nick said.

“There are still many people who are displaced from their homes. It’s a difficult situation,” Zem said with a shrug. His eyes were tired, but he seemed fulfilled.

“Sounds fun.”

“This might be inappropriate of me to say, but I am actually kind of enjoying myself. I helped the people of the Garbage Heap build an emergency shelter and distribute food. I know I won’t have time for such activities once the Demon God War begins in earnest, however.”

Zem had become a leader for an ad hoc neighborhood council made up of people who had lost their homes, couldn’t evacuate Labyrinth City, or lived in the Garbage Heap. He’d come to the position naturally as he healed people in the hostess clubs he frequented and helped prepare food. Now, defeating the Sword of Tasuki and bringing about a temporary peace had elevated him to something of a figurehead for the neighborhood council. Many people listened to Zem not just because of his good looks, but for his indiscriminate compassion and undeniable bravery.

“I enjoy working as an adventurer, too, but it feels nice to be doing priestly work again. It may be more than I deserve, though, considering I was excommunicated.”

“You’re putting official priests to shame, man. Most of them would never touch the places where you’re working. You’re a wonderful priest.”

“I have become…quite popular at bars recently as a result. I cannot call myself a ‘wonderful priest’ when I know of my own depravity,” Zem said with a malicious smile, and Nick laughed. The others chuckled, more than familiar with Zem’s bad habits.

“…Zem, I have something for you,” Karan said, cryptically changing the topic once their laughter had died down.

“Really? What is it?” Zem asked.

“Umm, you don’t have to accept this, but…” Karan put something on the table.

It was a medal. A pen was carved into it to represent Medora, the god that valued knowledge. This was proof of identification allowed only to priests of the Medora sect.

“Oh my… This is a high priest medal,” Zem said, his expression darkening.

Nick and the other Survivors knew Zem’s history well. During his days as an official priest, his imminent promotion to high priesthood had earned him the jealousy of his colleagues. He’d then been falsely accused by a little girl, and although she was the direct cause of his suffering, Zem guessed his fellow priests had encouraged her.

“Karan, what are you thinking?” Nick admonished her.

“I—I know. I wasn’t sure if this was something I could turn down by myself, though,” Karan said dejectedly, feeling Nick’s anger.

“It’s okay. I have mixed feelings about this, but I understand why it’s happening,” Zem said.

“They said they want to make you a high priest for this area in recognition of your accomplishments, but…I doubt that’s their true motivation,” said Karan.

“The sanctuary cannot allow an excommunicated priest to sully its honor by stealing the work of its official priests… However, they also know that it would be hard to find a priest who can do the job I am performing here with the city in this state. A number of priests fled Labyrinth City to save themselves, so it will be difficult for the sanctuary to regain trust. It likely saw promoting me to high priesthood as its only option.”

“I think you’re right, honestly,” agreed Karan.

“I still have doubts, though. There must be criticism of this decision, considering the circumstances that led to my dismissal.”

“About that…,” began Karan. “I was told that the leaders of the Sanctuary of Medora reached out to Rhodian, but they said they had some trouble.”

“Rhodian?” Nick repeated.

“That’s the town where I worked as a priest,” Zem said.

“Hmm… So what happened?” Nick asked.

“They wouldn’t hand over Zem’s records when asked for them,” explained Karan. “The sanctuary’s leaders pressed multiple times, and they eventually received a communication saying Rhodian’s chief priest was sick and that his response would be delayed. They suspect the trial was so sloppy that there’s no proper documentation.”

“…Huh.”

“They said the Rhodian chief priest’s lack of a response meant they could push through the issuance of your medal without a problem. I’m sure you can hear a more detailed explanation at the Sanctuary of Medora.”

“…This is getting interesting,” Zem said. His dangerous smile gave the others chills.

“Are you really okay with this, Zem?” Nick asked. His concern was clear in his voice.

“Don’t worry. I am not going to do anything rash for the sake of revenge. I value my current life too much. But I would rather have answers than live in ignorance,” Zem said.

“Then you’ll accept it?” Karan asked.

“I may as well. What’s the harm? If accepting this medal makes things difficult for me, I can just get excommunicated again.”

The others laughed, surprised by his mischievous attitude.

“We could all learn from your boldness,” Bond said.

“You can say that again. I’m no match for you.” Nick laughed, raising his hands in surrender.

“You’re amazing, Zem,” Karan said.

“Not as amazing as you, Karan,” Nick replied, unable to hide his surprise as he looked at her. She wasn’t wearing her sunglasses, but she was still in the white suit that made her look like a skilled saleswoman or an entertainment producer. It looked perfectly natural on her.

“Y-you think so?” Karan asked. “Oh, Diamond picked out these clothes. I’m not sure if they suit me.”

“You look great. You carry yourself with more confidence, too,” Nick said.

“Th-thanks.” Karan looked away and shyly fiddled with her hair.

Nick continued without noticing. “People who wear those kinds of clothes on the regular tend to overwork themselves, though… Are you taking time to rest?”

“I can’t tell if that was a compliment or not,” Karan said.

“…It was.”

“You’re lying. I can tell.”

“Th-that’s not the point. I wouldn’t have had to word it that way if I could tell you were resting. You’re not taking any time for yourself, are you?”

Karan’s grimace spoke volumes. “It’s not my fault. I have way too much on my plate right now. My boss ordered me to rent horses and dragons because he wants to move Labyrinth City’s civic facilities within half a year, and Diamond suddenly wants to hold an outdoor charity concert. I’m convinced they think there are three me’s to do all this work.”

“I’m confused. Are you a bureaucrat or an idol producer? And how did you end up working for Diamond in the first place? I’ve only heard bits and pieces,” Nick said.

“Oh, well…”

Karan nodded and began talking. They all listened with great interest. Tiana had heard some of it, but she had been too busy to ask for the whole story and ended up listening with the same rapture as the others.

“It all started when I woke up after being cursed, and Diamond asked me if I wanted to be her wielder.”

Karan explained everything in order. How she took up Diamond—the Sword of Resonance—to conquer her curse and get back on her feet. How Hector had taught her the basics of detective work. How she’d received an official government post, giving her a high social standing in Labyrinth City. And finally, how she’d found the Dineez Adventurers Credit Union while searching for clues to oppose Dead Man’s Balloon and the Sword of Tasuki, and saved Tiana in the nick of time.

Her story was very atypical of adventurers, but it was an adventure all the same. Anyone who heard it would have been touched by her bravery and pride as she fought to recover what was stolen from her, and they would even found parts of it humorous. They would struggle to believe that anyone could actually be that heroic.

But Nick and the others knew better. That hero was right in front of them.

“Wh-why are you crying? There’s no reason for that,” Karan said, noticing the tears streaking down Nick’s face.

“Oh, uh… Sorry. I’m really sorry,” he said.

“If you say this was all your fault, I’ll punch you.”

Karan crossed her arms and snorted with displeasure.

“I know. Sorry… I mean, good job. You’re amazing, Karan.”

Those words caused something to crack within Karan—both her armor and her shackles.

Karan had grown to trust Nick after joining the Survivors.

She sometimes doubted his decision-making. It was also her job to safeguard their money and make sure no one stole or embezzled from them. But even so, she only ever spoke her mind as a party member and friend, and she had almost never doubted Nick’s aptitude for being their leader. Nick urged her to think for herself so she could become independent and avoid being deceived again. She had listened to that advice, and she’d become a good adventurer.

However, it wasn’t until she had been split up from the Survivors, willingly taken up the Sword of Resonance, and obtained the bombastic title of Chief Karan Tsubaki of the Teran Lord Manor Ancient Culture Preservation Department’s Disaster Investigation Office that she felt the overwhelming loneliness of great responsibility.

She didn’t know who she should doubt and who she should believe; what to learn from and what to watch; who she should listen to and who to ignore; what goals to lead her subordinates toward. Her holy sword’s kind words and her subordinates’ sympathy did nothing to cure her of that loneliness.

So Karan had armored herself with everything she’d learned since joining the Survivors. She asked herself: What would Nick think in this situation? What would Tiana say? How would Zem listen? What would Bond observe?

She wasn’t always able to imitate them. After all, she was influenced not just by the fundamental training she had received from her party members but also by the specialized training she’d been given by Diamond and Hector. Her honest nature affected her decision-making as well, and she surpassed her

party members when it came to listening to people, determining whether someone was being authentic, and persuading them to do something.

Even so, Karan relied on her armor and wished for the presence of her party members. She constantly wondered if they would have handled things better than her, and if they would have been able to navigate the lies and mysteries of the world to solve the problems that weighed on her so heavily.

Those doubts tormented her even after they'd defeated the Sword of Tasuki, but Nick's words had finally left her feeling satisfied. She didn't know if she'd done the best that anyone could have. But she'd absolutely done the best that *she* could have.

"Yeah… I did work hard, didn't I? I missed you all so much, but…I really did my best!"

Karan cried for a little while, and the other Survivors kindly watched over her.

When Karan calmed down, Tiana timidly spoke up.

"By the way, has the curse been cured?" she asked.

"Yeah. My strength has been returning. I'm wearing this suit as a uniform, but I don't really need it anymore," Karan said.

"Really? Good… I'm so glad."

"Wait, if you're wearing those clothes…does that mean Diamond's here?" asked Nick.

"Of course not. Do you really think she could go this long without talking?" said Karan said.

"Good point."

Karan's white suit was half cognition armor created from the wearer's imagination and mana—just like the armor that was created when the Survivors used Union—and half fabric that existed in this world. The threads were extracted from mystic moth cocoons and imbued with the Sword of Resonance's mana to give them a variety of magical properties. The support feature that compensated for Karan's physical weakness worked even when she was separated from Diamond.

"Diamond's still working super hard. She's a real workaholic. She needs a rest as much as anyone, though, given how hard she fought," Karan said.

“Hmm…” Zem put a hand on his chin in thought.

“Is something bothering you, Zem?” Karan asked.

“…Have you been feeling okay since the battle, Bond?” he asked.

“Whuh? M-me? Why do you ask?” Bond said, surprised by the question.

“We used you for way too long. I’m worried about you,” Zem replied, giving Nick a somewhat critical look.

“I’m sorry about that, too,” Nick said. “How long did we use Union again? I can’t remember…”

“…One hundred and five hours, forty-three minutes, and ten seconds. That is a new record for me,” Bond said.

““O-one hundred and five hours?!”” Tiana and Karan exclaimed in shock.

“In fact, that is likely a *world* record for how long anyone has cast Union, excluding any combination accidents or deaths,” Bond said.

“Man, I can’t believe we survived…,” remarked Nick.

“I lived it, yet that is still surprising to hear,” Zem added.

Nick and Zem had truly fought for that long, but in the moment, it had felt even longer. Nick thought it was a miracle they’d survived.

“…We’re going to the hospital,” Tiana said.

“Huh? No, I’m fine, really,” Nick assured them. “Zem examined me and didn’t find anything wrong. I was also told that the Colosseum of Carnage elevates your soul level and reduces strain from using advanced magic—or something like that.”

“That experience must have changed you somehow, right? It might have been for the better, but if anything’s changed about you, we should find out what,” Tiana insisted.

Nick had no arguments. “What do you think, Bond?”

“…I doubt you fully Awakened, but you may have Awakened by ten to twenty percent. That should not have harmed your body or mind in any way. S-rank adventurers like Fifs likely always exist in that state. You’ve probably seen one or two people during your time as an adventurer who seem an obvious cut above the rest.”

“Yeah, definitely,” Nick responded. He could think of way more people than that who he couldn’t believe were human.

“You should be in perfect health… In fact, I would surmise you are stronger than before. But the logical course of action would be checking for issues just to be safe,” agreed Bond.

“Got it. Zem and I should get checked out, then… Oh, and Leon, too, I guess. What’s he up to anyway?”

“He’s in the hospital. He wore himself out evolving,” Karan said. “The Sword of Evolution needed maintenance, too. It sounds like he’ll be fixed, though.”

“Ahh… They really pushed themselves,” Nick said.

“There is no need for concern. The Sword of Evolution’s self-preservation function is far superior to that of the other holy swords. If anything, we should be on guard for any foul schemes he might be concocting,” Bond said.

“What about you?” Nick asked.

“H-how dare you! I am not a schemer!” Bond huffed.

“No, not that. I’m asking about your health. Relax, man,” Nick said.

“I-I’m perfectly fine. I have always put health and safety first! I do not have to rely on the likes of doctors,” Bond said.

“That’s true. Didn’t you say that holy swords are half immortal?” Nick asked, suspicious of Bond’s behavior. He didn’t remember him ever expressing a dislike for doctors.

“I see what’s happening. Bond, you’ve been ignoring Diamond’s summons. She said she wants to check to see if anything’s wrong. You should go see her,” Karan said.

“Grk!”

“It sounds like you and Diamond have a complicated history,” Karan continued. “But that battle was hard on you, too, so you should really let her examine you. She’s done a lot for you, like getting you citizenship to prevent the Adventurers Guild from treating you as property.”

“I-I’m not scared of her or anything. But I guess I should listen, if only this once.”

Nick smiled as he watched Bond behaving like a child. All the holy swords, including Bond, were eccentric, and the only ones Bond could speak openly with as allies were Diamond and the Sword of Might. He wanted them to get along.

“Anyway, now that we’ve caught up…let’s get down to business,” Nick said.

“What do you mean?” Tiana asked.

“We need to discuss our plans. It sounds like this city is gonna become a battleground for the Demon God War. The government wouldn’t be making plans to move the city facilities otherwise,” Nick said.

“That much is clear…,” Zem agreed.

“There’s no normal adventurer work right now. The days of carefree labyrinth trips and bounty hunting are over for now.”

“Yeah. The government is requisitioning adventurers and Sun Knights for a new royal order of knights that will fight in the Demon God War. The order is officially only taking volunteers, but joining is essentially mandatory,” Karan explained.

“But the Survivors are an exception,” Nick said.

“Huh? What do you mean by that?” Tiana asked.

“I was told that we don’t have to enlist for the Demon God War because of our accomplishments defeating the Sword of Tasuki.”

“What else would we do? Go hide in the countryside?” Tiana asked sarcastically.

Nick gave them a serious nod. “That’s one option. We could also ask for a position where we won’t have to fight.”

“I doubt that’s being offered to us out of generosity,” said Tiana. “This just reeks of people not wanting us to steal any more of the spotlight. I can’t believe anyone would think that way with humanity on the brink of extinction… Though I guess the greater the stakes, the greater the chance for glory.”

Nick shrugged. “There probably are a bunch of people who don’t wanna be shown up by small-time adventurers, but I bet they’d still give us hell after the war if we didn’t enlist. Well, I suppose it beats coming back to find no one left alive.”

They all knew that the demon god’s arrival could mean extinction for mankind. There was no questioning that.

“…I wonder if I’d still be able to gamble if the country and the continent are destroyed,” Tiana mused.

“Of course you would. You could draw a line in the dirt and bet on who can flick a pebble closer to it,” Nick said.

“That’s the most boring thing I’ve ever heard,” Tiana said. She took her pipe out of her mouth and exhaled smoke.

“Will there still be food?” asked Karan.

“Even if humanity wins, there’ll probably be way fewer

restaurants and bars," replied Nick. "Trade routes are gonna be ruined, making it impossible to import ingredients from distant lands."

"Aww, man… That's no fun," Karan complained.

"What about nice restaurants where beautiful women serve the guests?" Zem asked.

"Those'll probably survive…," Nick conceded. "But if civilization is destroyed, wooing women is gonna become essential for mankind's survival, not just a hobby."

"Oh dear. That is not my strong suit. I have no desire to get married," Zem said, shrugging in surrender.

The four of them laughed, astounded by how casually they were discussing the end of the world. Bond, however, didn't crack a smile.

"Anyway, let's really think about this. Should we enlist in the Demon God War or not?" Nick asked.

"I am opposed to it," Bond answered immediately.

"Huh? What?" Nick said, caught off guard.

"…I said I'm opposed. Trust me, no one wants to be the hero who fights the demon god. Put it out of your minds. You barely survived the last battle; don't throw your lives away now."

"Hold on. Haven't you always preached to me about working hard to become a hero who can defeat the demon god?" Nick asked.

"And you have only ever responded with indifference. The closest thing to a commitment you ever gave me was, 'I'll do it if it's possible.' Not once have you seriously considered fighting the demon god!"

"I never said I wouldn't do it."

"You might as well have!"

"Sure, but… Anyone would agree that defeating the demon god is the greatest honor an adventurer could achieve. Isn't that something you want?"

"It is my mission, but that does not mean I *want* it," Bond retorted, shaking his head emphatically.

Nick looked at him with surprise. Bond's eyes were completely serious.

"You all saw the Sword of Tasuki. He was devoted to his mission. That's exactly why he turned out the way he did," said

Bond.

“Didn’t you say his limiters were removed?” asked Nick.

“Even that was done to accomplish his mission. He did not mutate. And…he was trying, in his own way, to prevent humanity’s extinction.”

Nick’s expression turned troubled. He had no desire to defend the Sword of Tasuki, given the hardships he’d put them through.

“Oh, do not misunderstand me. I am not defending his methods,” said Bond. “However, it is an undeniable fact that humanity will meet its ruin within the next ten thousand years if no one Awakens.”

“Ah. Well, I think we can afford to be patient with that one,” Nick responded.

“As for the Sword of Might and the Sword of Distortion—Olivia and Diamond—I am sure you don’t need an explanation. They both gave up on their mission at some point and mutated. The Sword of Evolution could be next.”

“…Are you saying you’re giving up on your mission, too?” Nick asked hesitantly.

“I don’t know,” admitted Bond. “Whatever happens, happens.”

“Sure, but…you don’t wanna mutate by accident. That’s a matter of life and death for you. You could end up as weird as Diamond,” Nick said.

For a holy sword, abandoning one’s mission meant giving up their immortality. A destroyed holy sword could be restored with perfect accuracy based on blueprints contained within their core, but a mutation meant they had deviated from that original design.

“My father…was a sage of the Teran Magic Weapons Factory named Ines. I used to be so loyal to the mission he had given me. I dreamed of one day saving the world in the hands of a hero. I devoted my life to that purpose and thought anything else would be a waste. And then…” Bond trailed off.

“…You were sealed away by the Adventurers Guild,” Nick finished for him.

“That was a logical decision, though. The holy sword mission was based on the values of the country and civilization the factory existed in. It does not respect modern people. If I was in charge of the guild, I might have pushed for myself to be sealed

away or even destroyed."

"…I can't see you turning out like the Sword of Tasuki," Nick said.

"I'm not afraid of that. Just disappointed."

"About what?"

"The sages that gave the holy swords our mission had a grand, far-reaching view, but I now find it lacking. They cared not for the changing of times or human lives. They were innocent and frivolous to a sinful degree, and ignorant of the weight of saving the world." Bond's voice shook as he spoke, but his words resounded with dignity. "Many people have fallen in their despair, just as many have fallen protecting their apprentices and people they loved like their own children. Who can guarantee that you all won't be next?"

"…No one's gonna guarantee that. People are more likely to ask us for help and put us in harm's way, given the reputation we've made for ourselves," Nick said.

"But we did what we needed to. We delayed the demon god's resurrection by close to a year. We've done enough. You can stop now and be lauded as heroes who saved the world."

Bond's words made sense. But the others couldn't bring themselves to agree.

"Well, I won't force you to fight. What do you want to do, Bond?" Nick asked.

"Good question…," pondered the holy sword. "I would like to write a book."

"A book? You wanna be an author?" Nick asked.

"Yes. I am quite fond of adventure stories. I would like to quit being a sword who makes people fight and instead write stories in which no one dies."

"So you wanna be like Olivia?"

"Heavens no. She spreads lies and passes them off as truth, while I will clearly present my work as fiction."

Bond's dream was simple and refreshing, but something about his tone suggested he didn't think he would ever achieve it.

Hearing that, Zem came to a realization. "…Bond," he said, "I don't think you will want to hear this, but I must say it."

"Wh-what?" Bond responded.

"You believe that we are going to die or come to ruin in some

fashion. However, you are not coming to the conclusion you normally would. Either that, or you're hiding it."

"What conclusion? I—I have no idea what you mean."

"If I was in your position, I would say it clearly: 'You have no chance of defeating the demon god.' I would bring evidence to prove it, and use that as a weapon to argue us down," Zem said, and Bond grimaced.

Nick and Tiana couldn't follow what Zem was suggesting. It was too unrealistic for them, and they were both too experienced and knowledgeable—Nick from his long career as an adventurer and Tiana from her studies of magic and world affairs—to notice it.

Karan figured it out before them.

"Oh… Are you saying we *can* win? That *we* can defeat the demon god?"

"Wait, what?!" Nick exclaimed.

"You're kidding!" Tiana shouted.

They were both shocked. Bond crossed his arms and cursed.

"…You've let that witch influence you, Karan. It's truly deplorable. You cheated on me, too, by taking up another holy sword while being one of my wielders!"

"Oh, is that considered cheating? How scandalous."

"Zem, please don't treat that like it's juicy gossip…," Tiana chastised him. "So how do we win exactly?"

Bond answered grudgingly. "With Union."

"That's what we always do," Nick said.

"Yes, but you have performed Union with only two people. With *four*…we would have a real chance."

The others were shocked by his words, but they made sense. Any chance of victory Bond could provide would have to involve Union.

"Bond. You saw how strong the Sword of Tasuki, Argus, and the demon god's egg were. Are you saying you still think we can win?" Karan asked.

Bond snorted as if unimpressed. "Hypothetically speaking, you all would be more than strong enough. This was only ever just a theory, but now that you have all sharpened your soul levels in the Colosseum of Carnage…the impossible just became possible."

Bond's words filled the party with hope. His expression

remained dark, however.

"…You would lose a lot, though. It would not be surprising if you died from the strain of the four-person Union. Either that or turned into something dangerous."

"What do you mean by that?" Nick asked.

"The likeliest outcome is that I will be unable to manage all four of your minds at once, resulting in you all going crazy. That could backfire horribly if you become a threat to our side. Then everything will come down to the gods' angels and the final battle. The trumpets will sound for us in the end," Bond said, his tone suggesting that this was the future he expected to come to pass.

"…Bond, I can tell you've thought this through, but have you discussed it with anyone else?" Nick asked. "Are Diamond or Marde involved?"

"No. I made the calculations and arrived at this conclusion myself," Bond said.

"Why not bring them in? They could help make the plan safer."

"Perhaps. But the upside of my plan is too great to let safety concerns get in the way. Anyone I share it with will decide that it is worth any risk. We'll be forced into the Demon God War whether we like it or not."

"I kinda feel like we did that to ourselves."

"Oh, what does it matter?!" Bond fumed.

They were discussing a plan that would literally affect the fate of the world, and they were still behaving like carefree adventurers arguing over which labyrinth they should explore or what they should do that day. Nick wouldn't trade that for anything.

"The Sword of Tasuki is most at fault here. Marde, Argus, and Diamond are next for failing to stop him. We're victims here!" argued Bond. "That is why I am telling you that you don't have to participate in this war! You got a little stronger, and now suddenly you want to be a hero? How embarrassing. You're like a snot-nosed brat who dreams of being an adventurer!"

"You're the one who always goaded me on to become a hero," Nick said. "The same goes for you, Karan."

"You're supposed to shrug that off and say it's not realistic. You pretend to lack ambition, but I know you lust after S rank as

much as any other adventurer," Karan said bitingly.

"Geez. Way to hit me where it hurts," Nick said.

They all laughed, and Bond blushed slightly.

"…I think I know what you're afraid of losing, Bond. It's these casual conversations we have at the guild. It's the adventures we go on together and the meals we eat on the way home," Nick said.

"…Yes, I suppose it is."

"I don't wanna lose that, either. I think we make a good party. We've accomplished some damn big things for a group that wound up together by accident."

"Those accomplishments were kinda by accident, too," Tiana said cynically.

"And what is the problem with that? I spare no thought for tomorrow. Adventurers are free spirits who let life take them where it will. It is not uncommon for tomorrow to leave you feeling weather-beaten and defeated," Zem said with equal parts optimism and pessimism.

On a normal day, this was when the party would depart for a labyrinth. That was what Bond had grown accustomed to since joining the Survivors.

"…But once the demon god starts wreaking havoc, we won't be able to go on any carefree adventures," Nick said.

He leaned back in his chair and looked out the window. He saw a street brimming with quiet determination and despair. Most people knew the demon god was resurrecting; that truth wasn't hard to accept after the appearance of the Colosseum of Carnage and the onset of the Stampede.

The people who'd always intended to flee were doing so. Those who had nowhere to go or wanted to stay were mostly back to their ordinary lives. Public order had temporarily worsened due to the influx of adventurers and mercenaries, but Labyrinth City had accepted them and integrated them, and a new normal had been created.

New hostess clubs had been built, which were split into two extremes: either quiet places of despair where people gathered to wait for the end, or rowdy places for people who hadn't given up and wanted to fight.

Bright-eyed rookies had stopped showing up at the Adventurers Guild branches, resulting in them being populated

by nothing but experienced adventurers. The only newcomers were grizzled mercenaries and soldiers looking for a new job, all of whom had a dangerous look in their eyes. The city was evolving in preparation for the war.

“I understand that we have no choice…but it’s hard going into battle being wielded by someone I know could die. It makes me detest myself as a sword,” Bond said.

“Yeah. Holy swords don’t have it any better than adventurers, do they?” Nick said comfortingly.

After a short silence, Bond looked them each in the eyes, as if he’d made up his mind about something.

“…I want you to contact Marde, Diamond, and the Thunderbolt Corporation.”

Starmine Hall had undergone yet another transformation.

It had begun as a magnificent concert venue, known for possessing the best lighting, acoustics, and air-conditioning in the country, where guests were offered comfort and an escape from their daily lives.

Then it became a fortress. Tiana had taken command to withstand Dead Man Balloon’s vicious assault and had used the building materials left in the warehouses of the surrounding buildings and halls to build bulwarks, watchtowers, and falling rock traps. The adventurers who’d held the fort were proud of what they had accomplished and called Tiana the “Siege Defense Princess” and the “Lady of the Iron Wall.” When she heard this, Tiana called them all “idiots.”

And now, it had become a command center. Teran’s top minds had gathered here to use it as the strategic headquarters for the Demon God War. A wide variety of people now filled its halls—including civil officials from the Teran Lord Manor, researchers and sages from famous magic laboratories, and commanders from the Order of the Sun Knights—and debates raged throughout.

“Good lord, it’s gotten loud in here,” Tiana muttered as they

walked down a hallway, still acting as if she owned the place.

“I went back and forth on whether I should offer them Starmine Hall. I’m a holy sword, though, which means I’d regret it if I didn’t. I guess I think of it like a tax,” Diamond explained. She was using her physical human body rather than her projection.

“That was generous of you,” Nick said.

“I’m gonna make sure I’m paid for this, of course,” Diamond assured them. “I wanna build big concert venues in other towns, too.”

“You don’t miss a trick, do you…?” Nick asked, and Diamond smiled maliciously.

The group followed Diamond until they reached the same sword storage room she had led them to last time. She seemed to be using this as a private space away from the researchers and bureaucrats who were making a racket upstairs.

“Hey, guys. It’s been a while… Or it feels like it anyway,” Alice said.

“I’m relieved to see you all in good health,” Marde said.

The two of them had arrived first. The other person in the room was someone Nick had never met.

“I’ve heard about you from Tiana. She said you helped our president in his final moments,” the woman said.

“You’re Havok from the Thunderbolt Corporation? I’m Nick of the Survivors.”

Nick and Havok shook hands. She had an energetic personality, but Nick was relieved to see that Tiana’s claim that Havoc was much more normal than Bellocchio seemed to be true.

“Before we get down to business… Karan, how have you been feeling since the Sword of Tasuki’s defeat?” Diamond asked.

“Good. My strength is returning,” Karan answered.

“Oh yeah, are you not gonna use your Sword of Resonance form?” Nick asked.

Karan hadn’t carried the Sword of Resonance ever since returning from the Colosseum of Carnage. That made Nick wonder if Karan was no longer Diamond’s wielder.

“I’ll stay by your side forever if you become an idol, Karan,” Diamond said.

“No chance,” Karan said, shaking her head.

“See? She dumped me,” Diamond said with an exaggerated shrug.

“There’s no way you actually expected me to drop everything and become an idol,” Karan said.

“Yeah, I guess not.”

“I’d rather you help a girl who wants to be an idol and is working hard toward that dream. I’m sure she’d be able to achieve much greater things than me.”

“…What a shame. That humility is exactly what makes a good hero or idol. You’ve seen the evil and impurity of this world, yet you still believe there’s good and beauty in it as well,” Diamond said, sounding a little sad.

She quickly gathered herself and smiled cheerfully.

“Anyway, you said you had something to talk about? Go ahead!”

“I am the one who has something to discuss,” Bond said seriously, speaking up for the first time.

He detailed the four-person Union he’d brought up the other day. Bond talked about the quantity of mana and level of physical strength he assumed they would need to fight the demon god, the necessary rituals and preparations, and the likelihood of his plan succeeding. Diamond and Marde were initially dubious, but their expressions gradually darkened as he spoke. He answered their questions clearly, as if he’d anticipated each one.

“Hmm… I understand. You want to use what we’ve learned from the Sword of Tasuki and the Sword of Evolution to complete yourself as the Sword of Bonds,” Havok said.

Bond nodded. “Precisely. Compared to the other holy swords, I am unstable and unfinished. You could even say I was made with this concept in mind, but without full clarity on how to achieve it. I have never once been able to produce the results that my forgers envisioned.”

“You’ve only ever achieved three people once, and it was with triplets, right?” Nick remembered.

“That’s not surprising. Performing Union with two people is already very advanced magic. I’m not even sure there were people back in the ancient civilization who could manage three or four,” Diamond said.

“There were. I know it. I was forged for that purpose, after all,”

Bond said.

“You really believe in Father and the others, don’t you?”

“I have full faith in their technology. Although I have developed mixed feelings about them otherwise.”

“…Good,” Diamond said, looking relieved.

“By ‘Father,’ do you mean the sage who forged the holy swords?” Nick asked.

“Yeah,” Diamond replied. “He and the others were the smartest people in the country, but they were just bureaucrats and researchers. They loved us like their own children… Whether or not the task they gave each holy sword was just, however, is another matter.”

Each holy sword was built with a theme—or task—in mind. Diamond and Olivia had abandoned theirs, the Sword of Evolution had deviated from his, and the Sword of Tasuki had gone berserk while staying true to his.

Diamond was asking where Bond was with his theme.

“I hate it. I want nothing to do with it. I have experienced true freedom since being released from the Labyrinth of Bonds. I helped temporarily prevent the demon god’s resurrection, too. I’ve done my duty.”

“…Yeah. You’re right,” Diamond agreed. “You—as well as your party members—already saved the world.”

“But unfortunately, I thought of this plan,” Bond said.

He sighed heavily.

“…The Sword of Evolution’s ability to create a vessel of flesh. The Sword of Tasuki’s ability to preserve and control souls without degrading them. The Sword of Resonance’s ability to reach souls with her voice and help them regain their sense of self. The Sword of Might’s ability to bring about balance between the body and soul. And the adventurers who have used me countless times. If all these things come together, my plan is theoretically possible.”

“Huh? Me too?!” the Sword of Might exclaimed from within Nick’s pocket.

“Whoa, you’re awake?” Nick asked.

“I woke up yesterday. I didn’t know when would be a good time for me to speak up… It sounded like you all were having a very serious conversation…”

The Sword of Might—who'd lost their memories and abilities as Olivia—had been heavily exhausted from training Nick, Zem, and Leon, and from the battle with Argus. Exposure to the demon god's mana had then sent her into a dormant state as they'd fled the Colosseum of Carnage.

"You're surprisingly shy… You should've said something," Nick said.

"S-sorry. Anyway, this plan…"

"It's all true. However, making it a reality will require vast funds and mana, along with the cooperation of all living holy swords. I can't do it alone," Bond said.

"I won't cooperate if you intend to die for this mission," responded Diamond. "Even if it's the only way to save the world. I'm an idol first and foremost, and I've made training younger idols my mission. To me, saving the world is nothing more than a means to that end."

"I am of the same mind," agreed Bond. "All I want is to be able to go on adventures, eat delicious food, and write about my experiences. That is true happiness. I have accumulated a sizable number of pictures and videos of the Survivors, too. I would like your help in publishing them."

"Oooh, that's a great idea!" exclaimed Diamond. "I wanna make a theme song, too!"

"Well, it sounds like this matter is settled. I assume nobody else has any objections," Bond asked, glancing at Alice and Marde.

"As long as you, Nick, and everyone else came to this decision together, I've got no objections," Alice said.

"I just want you all to return home safely. That is the desire of those who have sacrificed themselves already," Marde said.

"What makes you think we intend to get ourselves killed? We're not that desperate," Bond said, offended. "What about you, Sword of Might?"

"…Umm, can I say something first?" the holy sword asked hesitantly.

"Wh-what?" Bond asked, surprised. There was a strange intensity to the Sword of Might's voice despite her timid attitude.

"Nick is my current wielder."

"Y-yes. He is."

"That means he has a duty to teach those who wish to commit themselves to martial arts. Other holy swords have no right to get in the

way of that."

An awkward silence befell the room. No one had expected her to say that.

"…I had no idea you were so possessive," Nick said.

"I'm not happy with you, either, Nick! You just used me up and kicked me to the curb! Have you had your fill of me already? Was I just some plaything to you?!" the Sword of Might said.

"Hey, did you *try* to word that as terribly as possible?!" Nick asked.

"Y-you deserve it! It's only been a month since I was activated! I don't want you to die so soon after you barely made it through that battle! That victory was nothing short of a miracle!"

"You're starting to sound like Olivia."

"There you go again, talking about someone else! You don't care about me at all!"

The Sword of Might began to sob openly. The others looked at Nick, urging him to do something.

"Y-you're right. I have been kind of cold toward you. I'm sorry."

The Sword of Might sniffled. "Will you take better care of me? Will you start talking to me?"

"Sure. I'd be happy to."

"You can't do that if you go and get yourself killed," the Sword of Might said.

"That's not gonna happen. We came here to discuss how to make sure we win and survive. Isn't that where the conversation was going?" Nick asked, looking to the others to back him up.

Diamond had been watching all of this with amusement, and she cleared her throat. "Well, I won't say there's no danger. This mission will be so difficult, you won't be able to measure it on the Adventurers Guild scale. But we've gathered all the most powerful assets we have, and you're one of them."

"Oh… Well, I never said I don't want to participate," responded the Sword of Might.

"You'll need to if you want to protect your wielder…," said Diamond. "We holy swords have it rough. We can help our wielders fight, but we can't ask them to back down for our sake. It's our job to give them strength. If you get in their way, they'll end your contract and fight without you."

“Yeah… I know. I may be a replica, but I’m still a holy sword,” the Sword of Might said, reluctantly backing down. She showed no sign of objecting further, likely realizing there was nothing she could do to stop this plan.

“Nick can be insensitive sometimes, so make sure to give him a piece of your mind every now and then,” Karan said teasingly.

“Oh, shut up,” Nick grumbled, but Karan’s comment relaxed the room. “Anyway, sounds like we’ve got a plan. We’re gonna fight the demon god, and we’re gonna win.” The others nodded resolutely. “So while you guys are working with Bond…what should we do?”

“Good question. You all can…” Diamond trailed off, her expression going rigid.

Seeing her strange reaction, Nick gulped.

“We just went to hell and back. I’m ready for anything, no matter how difficult.”

“No, that’s not it,” she said.

“Huh? Whaddaya want us to do, then?”

“…Nothing,” Diamond said.

“Huh?”

Diamond gave him a blank look.

“I don’t think we’ll need you for half a year.”

Three Homecomings



Diamond, the Dineez Adventurers Credit Union, and the Thunderbolt Corporation began work on the project to enhance the Sword of Bonds. Nick was worried about the holy sword falling into the hands of any unsavory people, but Bond laughed this off when Nick mentioned it to him.

“We already count plenty of unsavory people among our allies. Including Marde, Diamond, and the Sword of Evolution,” he said.

Nick had no choice but to agree. There probably were some people out there who would try to get in their way, but their biggest threat—the Sword of Tasuki—was gone. It was unlikely that anyone else would be able to stop them.

The four original Survivors had nothing to contribute to the enhancement project, so they were left to do as they pleased. They went to the Adventurers Guild to ask for work, but the people there didn’t know what to do with them. The Survivors had already achieved something that no one else was going to top. The Stampede had also escalated to the point where missions now consisted of organized labyrinth assaults made up of dozens or hundreds of adventurers, meaning there were no jobs for an individual party. The guild decided that adding Nick and the others to these missions would only invite confusion, and it sent them away.

Unfortunately, indulging in their hobbies proved difficult, too.

Idol concerts had temporarily been suspended. Some idols

were performing charity shows, but only on a volunteer basis and mainly to lift the morale of struggling refugees. Nick felt awkward about attending such events when he was flush with cash and wanting for nothing.

Tiana struggled as well. She had planned to devote herself to her job as an employee of the Thunderbolt Corporation, but she quickly discovered a problem: Her words carried too much weight.

She had been an excellent student, but Tiana was a rookie as a magic researcher; it would take years of experience before she could debate with the researchers of the Thunderbolt Corporation on equal footing. Yet she had defended Starmine Hall, contributed to the dissolution of Dead Man's Balloon and the destruction of the Sword of Tasuki, and been with Bellocchio during his final moments. The others couldn't ignore her input. She realized her presence could throw off the whole project.

Zem and Karan were in a similar position. They both volunteered to help restore order in the city—a job for which extra assistance was desperately needed—and distinguished themselves in the planning phase, but as plans solidified, it became increasingly difficult for them to actually do anything.

The four Survivors met again to discuss what they should do, and they arrived at a logical solution: They should take care of any personal business so they could go into battle without regrets.

"My heart feels heavy going home… But I suppose it's something I must do," Zem said. He'd left Labyrinth City and was riding in a carriage toward a certain post town.

"Wouldn't know it by lookin' at you," the coachman teased.

"I am somewhat excited as well. Though please don't tell Nick and the others," Zem said.

"What's the big deal? It only adds to your legend."

"That is exactly what I want to avoid. And don't you go picking any fights, Ada. I know your leg has healed, but you don't need to test your strength against anyone."

The coachman was Ada, a woman who had helped the Survivors hunt down the Steppingman and taught Nick the fundamentals of Stepping.

"Is your daughter well?" Zem asked.

“I left her with Redd. That makes me feel much better than having her around you,” Ada said.

“You wound me. I know how to behave myself.”

“Oh, I know. It’s Reina I’m worried about,” Ada said. Zem smiled awkwardly, unable to argue. “I haven’t decided if I should evacuate her or not. It would help a lot if I could make some money and tour the countryside… We’re stopping at that post town up ahead, right?”

“Yes. I won’t be long. I just want to say hello,” Zem said.

Their first stop was a post town on the road from Labyrinth City to Zem’s hometown of Rhodian. It had a small population, consisting only of people who provided lodging, sold food, and managed curio shops, armories, and blacksmiths. There was a guard armed with a spear at the gate, but he wasn’t a knight; regular citizens took turns serving that role, and they weren’t at all strict.

Zem walked inside one of the inns.

“Excuse me. Is Velkia here?” he called out.

It was the inn run by the proprietress who’d saved Zem’s life. She had let him stay here when he drifted to this post town after being banished from Rhodian, and she had ended up taking his virginity. Zem had been hurt and desperate after what his town had put him through, and he’d spent a lazy week with her until he recovered enough to get back on his feet.

The proprietress had actually been the one to give him his priest robes and mace. It had been only a year since then, but Zem felt a wave of nostalgia thinking of her.

“Yeah, wait a moment. My kid’s throwing a fit,” a young woman called out from another room. Her voice was followed by a baby’s crying.

Zem froze, breaking out into a sweat. His heart pounded in his chest as he quickly tried to remember exactly how long it had been since he left this inn. Could that baby be…?

“Ah,” a woman said, appearing before Zem with the baby on her back. It was Velkia.

“H-hello, Velkia.”

“Well, if it isn’t Zem! It’s been so long… I almost didn’t recognize you!” Velkia said.

Zem had a lot he’d wanted to say, but it all left his mind at the

sight of the baby. Velkia laughed and dragged him to a table, ignoring Zem's inner turmoil.

The baby looked at Zem with bemusement.

"Uh, Velkia… Is that child…?" Zem asked, sweating.

Velkia gave him a pained smile. "There's about a one-in-three chance this baby is yours."

"…One in three?"

That vague answer only deepened Zem's discomfort.

"I mean there are two other men who could be the father," she said.

Zem walked to the table expecting Velkia to be angry with him, but she actually looked guilty.

"That a customer?" a man asked as he lumbered into the room. He was a burly man who looked like he could make a living as a soldier. He must have been chopping wood, because his strong arms were filled with firewood.

"Meet Jett, one of the other potential fathers. I don't know where the third one is. Jett, this is Zem. He's a priest and the second potential father," Velkia said.

Zem and the man named Jett were both speechless. They needed a moment to process the implication of what she'd just said.

Velkia had seduced and slept with them both.

"Oh, don't worry. Zem only happened to drop by… Right?" Velkia asked.

"Y-yes. I'm just passing through. I'm on the way to Rhodian with a letter…"

"Ah, you've mentioned a priest before… S-so this is the guy?" Jett asked.

The two men sized each other up, then started to laugh at the same time.

"Sorry, Father. Or should I call you 'Brother'?" Jett asked.

"It's not every day you learn you have two brothers," Zem said.

"Wanna drink?" Jett offered.

"Oh, don't start drinking already. The sun's still high in the sky," Velkia scolded, then shrugged and gently bounced the baby.

A moment that should have resulted in someone getting angry —though it was unclear who—had ended up filled with laughter.

Once the baby had fallen asleep, the three of them sat down to talk. What was a casual catch-up for Zem quickly turned into a shocking conversation for Velkia and Jett.

"You're kidding… You're a member of the Survivors who everyone's saying saved Labyrinth City?" Velkia asked.

"*Did* we save it? We were unable to stop the resurrection itself. Oh, I have a number of items that can serve as proof," Zem said, showing them a piece of parchment. It was signed by the chief priest of each of the four sanctuary sects in Labyrinth City and the Teran Lord and was intended to clear Zem's name.

"Have you heard of the priest who was banished from Rhodian, Jett?" Zem asked.

"That's you, isn't it? I've heard you were framed. I don't got a doubt in my mind you were. Those Rhodian priests have always rubbed me the wrong way," Jett said, guffawing.

Zem chuckled in response to the man's kindness, feeling tinges of both jealousy and relief. This man was living with Velkia and raising a child who could be Zem's. Yet he was comforting Zem instead of feeling threatened by him. Fate had a strange sense of humor.

"I couldn't agree more. You can't let the priests of that town fool you. I say that as a former member of the ranks, however, so take that as you will," Zem said.

"Why are you going back?" Velkia asked. "You must be more comfortable in Labyrinth City."

"I'm innocent. They have no right to throw me in prison, and they cannot prevent me from returning to my home," Zem said coolly. There wasn't a hint of gloom in his expression, but what he said sounded unrealistic. He had already been punished for his crime and forced to become an adventurer.

"I'm not sure that's a good idea…," Velkia said, worried that Zem wasn't thinking straight.

He just smiled in response.

"…Indeed. It would be unwise to walk through the gates alone and proclaim my innocence. No one would listen."

"Oh, you were joking," Velkia said, relieved. Zem's smile didn't fade, however. He was just getting to the good part.

"This is no joke. I am now a high priest of Labyrinth City. In the process of promoting me, my sanctuary discovered some

peculiarities surrounding my arrest."

"Like what?" Velkia asked.

"When the sanctuary asked the town of Rhodian for the trial records, they received a response saying that the chief priest of my old temple was ill and would get back to them when he recovered. They have yet to share the records. The Labyrinth City sanctuary eventually grew impatient and sent a priest to investigate in secret, and he discovered that certain necessary procedures had been omitted during my trial. He also found hints of sabotage and embezzlement of donations. The sanctuary must now perform an official investigation to bring these discoveries to light. The demon god's imminent resurrection has made the world a dangerous place, hence why they chose an experienced adventurer for the job."

"You mean…"

"Yes. I am going to Rhodian to perform an investigation as a high priest of the Teran branch of the Sanctuary of Medora."

Velkia and Jett stared at him in silence, then burst out laughing.

"Damn! Way to stick it to 'em!" exclaimed Jett.

"See! What do I always say? Good luck comes to men who stay at my inn!" Velkia said.

Crying sounded from the other room; their laughter had woken the baby. Velkia and Jett got up to soothe it, knowing it wouldn't stop crying until they did.

Zem watched them with fondness.

Feeling refreshed, Zem departed for Rhodian. Velkia and Jett had told him about the state of the town, making him even warier than before as he approached it.

Rhodian was a town in disarray after a labyrinth had spawned nearby and broken out into a Stampede. At the same time, word reached the town that Zem had become an adventurer and accomplished great feats after getting banished. Monsters aggressively hounded the town's walls, and criticism of the chief priest grew louder every day. The sanctuary had been trying to quell both with violence.

Zem's visit would be like dropping a bomb in the middle of the

town. Velkia and Jett were thrilled by his success, but they suggested he abandon Rhodian and go back to Labyrinth City. Their concerns were valid; word of Zem's visit had preceded him and sent the town into a frenzy reminiscent of a kicked anthill. Priests and guards trembled with fear, and some tried to flee in the night.

Rumors had been spreading that Zem might have been banished on false charges. Children were openly avoiding Myril, his supposed victim. And now, another rumor had begun that the chief priest's thuggish son—who'd been made a high priest—had raped a young girl.

Order was breaking down among the priests. Banishing Zem had done nothing to fix the depravity of the sanctuary, and just as the citizens were starting to wonder if Zem's banishment was actually where it had all started to go wrong, the town had been distracted by a more pressing issue: the Stampede.

The area around Rhodian was safe compared to Labyrinth City, but there were still dangerous labyrinths. The citizens were unable to kill the monsters before they spilled out of their habitats, and insect-like monsters called dead crawlers devastated the highway. Some of them transformed into winged monsters called mad mothmen, which rained poisonous scales on the town from above.

Warrior priests from Rhodian and knights from the capital fought hard to protect the town, but mad mothmen were formidable monsters. Rhodian had been on the brink of falling when, all of a sudden, the mad mothmen had withdrawn. The dense mana leaking from the Stampeding labyrinths had thinned, making it difficult for the monsters to fight as a horde.

This had happened because, moments before being resurrected in Labyrinth City, the demon god had been put back to sleep. A brave young party had contributed greatly to that accomplishment.

It was called the Survivors.

The party consisted of a light warrior named Nick, a dragonian warrior named Karan, a mage named Tiana…and a priest named Zem.

To the people of Rhodian, it felt as if the guilty were being punished and the innocent were being rewarded. This only

increased their paranoia. They wondered if the chief priest had lied to them when he'd punished Zem, and whether they could have seen through it if they'd just taken a moment to think. They wondered if they had let themselves get swept up in the drama of the sensationalist lie.

The day of judgment had arrived.

"W-welcome back, Lord Zem."

"You must be tired from your long journey. I'd be happy to prepare a fine meal for you…"

"I-it's me, Zem! Do you remember how I took care of you when you were little?!"

Zem arrived in Rhodian and was immediately hounded by old coworkers and bosses hoping for a chance to speak with him. He ignored their flattery.

"I seek an audience with the sanctuary chief and have business with no one else," was all he said before acting as if he owned the place and choosing a vacant room to use as his base of operations. Then he took full advantage of his authority to force his way into libraries and offices to investigate a variety of records. The priests could only watch enviously as Zem went about his work.

Zem already knew some of Rhodian's secrets. He had worked in the sanctuary for years as a cleric, doing odd jobs and treating illnesses and injuries. There were many open secrets and practices that were technically illegal that he'd picked up on in that time.

He found dirt on any priests who tried to win him over and threatened them by saying, "If you don't want to be interrogated, either do as I say or stay out of my way."

Not everyone was so civil in their attempt to reach Zem, however. Some even resorted to violence.

"We've got guests past curfew. There are five of 'em lurking outside the door. Judging from their footsteps, I'd say they're carrying blunt weapons," Ada said.

"Someone likes getting busy at night," Zem said.

He suppressed any such visitors with Ada's help. Some of the priests were probably attacking Zem out of loyalty to the chief priest, while others likely did so to prevent him from uncovering certain secrets. Zem didn't care either way; they stood no chance

against him and Ada.

Zem had obviously grown much stronger since he'd been banished. Priests with no adventuring experience couldn't faze him in the slightest. Ada was a physical fighter with more advanced scouting abilities than Nick. She could strengthen not just her muscles but her sense of smell and hearing, which she used along with her mana to detect everything around her with pinpoint accuracy. Her Stepping ability and sharp senses also gave her martial arts skills that rivaled Nick's.

"Ada…I didn't know you were so strong," Zem said.

"Oh, come off it," she snapped back. "I'm not as strong as you guys, but I've seen my fair share of scraps."

And so Zem devoted himself to his duty of investigating the sanctuary. The chief priest used his feigned illness to ignore all inquiries regarding Zem and requests for an audience, but when he learned that his diversionary tactics and attempts to expel Zem from the sanctuary had failed, he had a mental breakdown that confined him to his room just the same as his supposed illness.

Zem could only sigh when he learned of the chief priest's shameful and self-destructive behavior. His disappointment only grew as the days stretched on.

One night, a girl visited his room.

The candlelight in Zem's room flickered and cast the shadows of two people.

Zem was writing silently at his desk. He didn't even glance at the girl who had entered his room. She didn't speak, either; just stood there, waiting for him.

"…I have nothing to say to you, Myril," Zem said, finally looking behind him once he'd reached a good stopping place.

It was the young girl who'd falsely accused him. Her appearance had changed drastically in the last year; her clothes were frayed and her hair unkempt. It looked as if she had tried to dress as stylishly as she could, but there was only so much she could do as a poor child living in a sanctuary.

What differed most of all was her expression. The bright, wild gleam in her eyes that seemed to suggest she believed anything

and everything would go her way had disappeared completely.

"U-umm… I really messed up," Myril said.

"You were used," Zem replied. He'd sensed an apology coming and stopped her.

"Huh…?"

"You're suffering a great deal. I can tell just by looking at you."

Myril said nothing. He was right.

"People blame you for ruining my life. I imagine some may even say it's your fault the monsters attacked. Has anyone been violent with you? Or have you been harmed in other, more subtle ways? Have people refused you food, stolen things from you, or neglected to give you important messages that went to everyone else?"

"Y-yes, they have!" Myril said, stunned. Zem spoke as if he'd seen it all personally.

"Those are common methods. There are people like that everywhere. They grow frustrated and seek an outlet, and it feels like they're speaking for everyone when they punish you. Anyway…"

"Yes?"

"Do you think that will all go away if I forgive you?"

"N-no! That's not what I'm here for! I don't expect forgiveness!"

"Oh?"

Zem turned around fully. Joy flashed across Myril's face, but she quickly looked away in embarrassment.

"I—I have no right to live after what I did. Please tell everyone that I deceived you."

"You want me to reveal the truth?" Zem asked.

"Yes."

"Do you know what will happen to you if I do?"

"…I do."

"Did you receive anything for accusing me? Money perhaps?"

"…Gold coins."

"You received money in exchange for making a false accusation. You would definitely be imprisoned for that. In fact, you should consider yourself lucky if that was the worst of it. If everything comes to light before you are imprisoned, you will have twice as many stones thrown at you as I did. Stones hurt,

you know.”

Myril nodded as if she’d resolved herself to her fate. She actually looked like she wanted it, probably thinking it would end her suffering. Zem sensed suicidal thoughts from the girl.

There was no trace of her old flirty, mischievous personality. She had grown old enough to lose the feeling of invincibility many children had, and she had developed too much of a conscience to be proud of her wrongdoings. She was just a weak child who lived in fear of her sins and wished for death as a way out. Had she made a different choice and her life had gone the way it should have, she wouldn’t have turned out like this.

If it had been a minor offense or an innocent prank, Zem would have swept this all under the rug and urged her to reflect. But it was too late for that.

“…That would do nothing to save the child who was the true victim in this case.”

So Zem decided to tell the truth. Giving her that burden was the only way to help her.

“The true victim?” Myril asked, looking dubious. Not being able to think of anyone else she’d hurt with her actions, she assumed Zem was going to talk about his own suffering.

“Something else happened the day that you accused me. A young girl with an unknown illness that not even the famed medicine of Rhodian could heal left the town… At least, that was the story.”

“Huh?”

“That story was an outright lie, of course.”

Myril could remember many of the girls who’d left the town. Some had left after being adopted, and others had left because they were sick. Some had died, too. When you lived in a sanctuary that doubled as an orphanage, it wasn’t uncommon to see children your age go for one reason or another.

“Finding gossip on this matter is not difficult. The truth is that a priest blackmailed the girl into sleeping with him, then banished her from the town—along with the baby in her belly—so she couldn’t cause him problems,” Zem said.

“What…?”

“That man is one of the most successful priests in this sanctuary, who also happens to be the chief priest’s son. Before

he was promoted to high priest, one man stood in the way of his success. That man had the trust of the townsfolk… Well, that is debatable, but he was certainly well-liked. Enough so that he overshadowed the chief priest's son."

Myril knew about the chief priest's son and the girl who'd left Rhodian. The two of them had often worshipped alone, which spawned rumors of misconduct. Other priests had grown angry and shut down the rumors, and because neither the girl nor the chief priest stood out at the time, Myril had quickly forgotten about it.

"There was a girl the chief priest's son liked," Zem continued. "She was about your age. I don't know if he truly loved her or if it was simply lust… But that hardly matters. Everyone knew that opposing the chief priest's son would mean losing their place in the sanctuary. I am sure there must be many children who are overly afraid of his power."

The girl hadn't had Myril's impulsive personality. She'd been meek and had difficulty refusing requests, which was all too common of girls in sanctuaries.

"The chief priest's son got the girl pregnant, and he was forced to hide it. He ended up selling her and her unborn child, without giving her a say in the matter."

"…Wh-what does this have to do with you?" Myril asked, already feeling like she had figured out the connection.

"However, the chief priest knew that it would not be easy to keep an incident like this hidden. He could sweet-talk some of the priests into keeping silent, but others—the ones who had no interest in promotions and devoted themselves entirely to their work—would not be so willing to compromise on their morals. Eliminating them would be in his best interest. Shock value is often enough to convince people of scandals surrounding serious, diligent workers, and the chief priest took advantage of that to convict me without a detailed investigation, claiming I had concealed evidence."

"I—I had no idea!"

"He also pinned me with the crimes of forging documents and selling medicine on the black market. This investigation has been quite enlightening; it turns out I was an even bigger criminal than I thought."

Zem chuckled, but Myril just listened, her face turning increasingly pale. She had to fight the impulse to cover her ears.

"You were an accomplice. You just didn't know it. You thought you had everyone dancing on your strings, while in reality, *you* were the puppet. The chief priest even prepared a trap in the documentation to make you the next sacrifice if my name was ever cleared. Next was going to be the priest who teamed up with you to get me arrested. The chief priest has multiple layers of insurance to prevent the blame from ever reaching him."

"What…?" Myril gasped.

"You are lucky. If someone else had been sent to investigate, they likely would not have seen the whole picture. The people who used you saw your true nature. They knew your guilt would prevent you from accusing the other priests."

"How…how can I atone for my crimes? I'll die if I have to. I'll jump out of that window right now." Myril pleaded for forgiveness with increasing distress.

Zem calmly shook his head. "You will do no such thing. Surely you must know that is what they want."

"B-but…"

"…This town is on the verge of destruction. That goes for the sanctuary, too."

"Because of the demon god's resurrection?"

"No. Because of me. *I* am going to destroy it."

Zem's words shocked Myril speechless.

"When I submit this report, the chief priest will quickly lose his job and be thrown into prison. The same will happen to everyone else who has committed crimes. The sanctuary will lose its role of governing the town. Under normal circumstances, the king would seize control of the town from the sanctuary and send a governor to rule. But that is not how things will turn out."

"Wh-what's going to happen?" Myril asked.

"Most likely, knights will seize the town in preparation of the demon god's full resurrection. They need people and buildings they can use without consequence. Many drastic measures will be justified in the name of defeating the demon god, and I do not expect the noble knights who will fight it to behave so nobly toward other people. Even a sage can become a monster when their life is on the line."

Myril gulped. Rhodian's public order had already crumbled. There were still many people who were yet to receive treatment from injuries they'd suffered fighting monsters.

"I have no punishment for you. You are already being punished by having to continue living in this town," Zem declared.

He had no intention of reprimanding or tormenting Myril. Zem had only just realized that himself, and he was surprised by it. Not long ago, he might have lost his composure after coming face-to-face with her, but his experience of coming back after falling to rock bottom, as well as the many adventures he had been through, had fortified his heart. He was able to remain calm and advise this girl who had sinned terribly.

"You are a weak person. You hid behind that and your youth and framed an innocent man, unknowingly playing a part in the suffering of a young girl weaker than yourself. If you want to atone, the only way is to become a strong and kind person. Do that, and one day you will be able to save a similarly weak person from making the same mistake as you."

Myril listened as intently as if Zem were giving her a divine revelation.

Zem's investigation continued for a number of days. When his work was done, he felt nothing but sadness. The chief priest and his son, who had been behind the plot to frame him, turned out to be pathetically weak. Zem had been afraid the chief priest had prepared some sort of ingenious, unpredictable trap while he was pretending to be sick, but it soon became clear that he had done nothing of the sort. He had only argued with the upper brass of the sanctuary and failed to arrive at an answer.

The chief priest's son had panicked and spent the whole time drinking and hiding from Zem. His father ordered his subordinates to destroy any incriminating documents, but they were too afraid of being labeled accomplices. They tried to pass the order on to others, but they disobeyed as well.

The sanctuary's leaders debated extensively to pick a suitable scapegoat, but they came up with no plan other than to drive Zem out of the town with violence, which obviously failed. In the end,

a number of people gave up the chief priest and offered Zem evidence in exchange for his guarantee they wouldn't be charged with anything.

"You're so kind, Father Zem," Ada said jokingly while driving the carriage back to Labyrinth City.

"Oh? You think so?" Zem asked.

"Of course. You think that town's gonna be just fine, don't you? You scared the living daylights out of 'em with all that talk about how a fearsome order of knights is gonna come in and enslave 'em all."

"Procedures are already moving ahead for the town to be seized. It might not end up coming to that, but the town's administrative system will collapse, and the people will suffer greatly. That has nothing to do with me, however," Zem said.

"That's not what I'm talkin' about. You don't think the war's even gonna reach 'em."

"Hm? Why do you say that?"

"Because a hero with a holy sword's gonna send the demon god packin' before it comes to that."

Ada barked with laughter.






"Hmm, so everything worked out?" Tiana asked, gazing out the window of her carriage at the scenery going by.

"Yes. The investigation wound up being so simple, it made me feel silly for ever being anxious about it. I actually find my mind more occupied by something that happened on the way to Rhodian."

"What's that?"

"I learned that a woman I was fond of now has a husband and child. That was quite a shock."

"R-really…? Sorry for your loss…"

This conversation was reminding Tiana why talking to Zem alone could be quite difficult.

"This is so convenient... I never would have thought we could converse over such a great distance," Zem said.

"You can say that again… I thought I was used to Telepathy by

now, but this is a whole other level," Tiana wholeheartedly agreed.

Marde had given each of the Survivors a telepathy orb in case some sort of trouble occurred, such as the demon god resurrecting early. They were powerful magic items that had a much wider range than normal Telepathy and could be used to communicate from opposite ends of the continent.

The Survivors had actually used the Sword of Bonds enough times that Bond could tell exactly where each member was at all times. He was forgoing his usual Telepathy to relay their messages using the multiple telepathy orbs, increasing their range of communication by over a hundredfold.

Tiana and Zem were currently using this incredible power for nothing more than casual conversation.

"It's hard to imagine, but magic items like this could become commonplace one day," Zem said.

"Wow. You've developed quite an imagination," Tiana said.

"Is that suggestion really so absurd?" Zem asked.

"No, not at all. This last year has been full of impossibilities, so I wouldn't be surprised by anything."

"You two are free to talk, but don't waste too much mana!" Bond scolded.

"Come on, don't you realize how boring carriage trips are? Besides, talking distracts me from the dread I'm feeling over this mission," Tiana said.

"I suppose I can't be too hard on you, then...," said Bond.

Tiana was traveling to Regulus, the capital of the Holy Kingdom of Dineez—her hometown.

"Could you consider this a triumphant return?" Zem asked.

"I'll be treated like a noble again, I guess."

Tiana had moved to Labyrinth City to support herself after being disowned by House Ernafelt and made a commoner. However, she was now a knight—a position given to commoners who entered a chivalric order or reached A-rank as an adventurer.

Knights had a unique place in the Holy Kingdom of Dineez. It was the lowest rank among the nobility, and the most achievable path to nobility for a commoner. As such, they had essentially no authority in high society or the royal palace.

But things were different during wartime, and that was especially true now, given the demon god's imminent resurrection. Not even barons or viscounts could obstruct a knight, nor could they insult one while they were away fighting on the battlefield or in a labyrinth. Trying to harm a knight's reputation while they were absent and unable to defend themselves was considered aiding the enemy by intentionally spreading misinformation, which was a much more serious crime during wartime than peacetime.

Tiana's newfound knighthood had given her, Havok, and other employees from the Thunderbolt Corporation an idea: Tiana could travel to the capital and restore Instructor Bellocchio's reputation.

The Thunderbolt Corporation employees were well aware that Tiana had never actually seduced Bellocchio, and that instead they had been victims of a struggle for power among the nobles in high society. They didn't blame her for not spending much time with the company employees, either. They just got into fake fights with her to give her a hard time about how upset she was at the low bounty that was placed on her head.

After Bellocchio sacrificed himself to delay the demon god's resurrection, Tiana and the Thunderbolt Corporation employees had been left with a strong sense of helplessness. They wanted to do something to repay the favor to their fallen instructor, and restoring his reputation was what they had decided on. They would also be able to clear Tiana's name while they were at it. That was why the Thunderbolt Company had dispatched Tiana to the capital.

"I hope this works out, too… But I know it's gonna be really hard," Tiana said.

"Hey! Monsters ahead! They're on the road!"

There was much more traffic between Labyrinth City and the capital than there was on the way to Rhodian, and riding a stagecoach was the safest and fastest method of travel. As an adventurer, Tiana was obligated to take up her staff and fight when they were attacked by monsters.

"Well, that's my cue. Conversation over! Bye!" Tiana said.

"Good luck," Zem said cheerfully as Tiana left the carriage and began an incantation.

Tiana headed right for her old aristocratic school when she arrived in Regulus. A part of her wanted to torment the school's new leaders, but the faster she finished this job and got the weight of it off her chest, the better.

She hoped she would be able to wrap things up as quickly as Zem…and was shocked to arrive and find the job already done. It was so anticlimactic, she was almost disappointed.

"I apologize that you came all this way, but in light of Lord Bellocchio's incredible achievement, we have already decided to revoke his punishment. We have also arranged for severance and condolence money to be sent to his bereaved family. Ah, we should send them your letter as well. Would you mind entrusting that to me?" said a bespectacled man who had agreed to meet with Tiana. He was a bureaucrat in every way.

"Oh, uh, thank you. Are you the current headmaster?" Tiana asked.

"Whoops, I forgot to introduce myself. I am Kepler Arnciel, and yes, I am the current headmaster. This academy has had its difficulties, as you know; I am the second headmaster since you were expelled. I was hired from outside the academy, which is why we have never met."

"Huh."

Kepler, the headmaster, already knew that Tiana and Bellocchio's banishment from the academy had been the result of a political struggle. He wouldn't have told her that unless House Delcott, the noble family who'd plotted against the two of them, had suffered some downfall. Their glory had been short-lived.

Lene Delcott was the name of the noble girl who had stolen Tiana's fiancé, Alex. She had spread rumors that destroyed Tiana's reputation and gotten the headmaster at the time and Bellocchio fired. Lene was uncommonly smart for her age; however, that did her no good when the lord of House Delcott died of an illness and a succession struggle tore the family apart.

The signs of the demon god's resurrection had also heavily impacted the source of House Delcott's wealth: their dragon-based transportation service. The army and the knights had conscripted their dragons, and the Demon God War greatly limited civilians' ability to purchase dragons.

Other powerful nobles with a presence at the academy had

seized this opportunity to rise up against House Delcott, intensifying the academy's factional strife. The political struggle had disrupted classes entirely, which resulted in leaders of the academic world sending a man to the academy to take over as the new headmaster. That man was Kepler.

"A-are you sure you should be speaking so frankly with me?" Tiana asked.

"That's the way I like it. Being anything less than direct with you would be a waste of time," Kepler said. "My job at this academy is to overhaul the irresponsible management that has been going on here so far. I belong to no faction, and I would welcome getting fired. There are many more academies that are in desperate need of my help."

Kepler was a low-ranking noble, but instead of teaching, he had made a living repairing or completely rebuilding the management of academies. He was a professional who had fixed instances of rampant bullying and violence, revamped the curricula of a school that had taken advantage of its isolated environment to brainwash its students, and solved a variety of other educational issues. He was a man who didn't mince words and could silence even high-ranking nobles due to his track record, making him a dignified yet peculiar presence.

"What are your intentions here, by the way?" Kepler asked.

"What do you mean?" Tiana asked, confused.

"Lord Bellocchio's reputation being restored means yours has been as well. You could return to school if you like."

That caught Tiana completely off guard.

"I can?" she asked.

"Absolutely. I can factor your activity in Labyrinth City into your credits and grades. I'll also do everything I can to deal with any students and teachers who insulted you."

Tiana could regain the life she had lost. She could once again apply herself to the study of magic and resume her ascent to fame in the academic world. It would mean saying good-bye to fighting and camping in humid and damp labyrinths that stank of smelly moss and beast flesh.

"…No, thank you. I'm going right back to Labyrinth City," Tiana said.

"Really? That's a shame. I thought the presence of a student

with both knowledge and practical skill would be a good stimulus for the student body," Kepler said with a quiet sigh. It made Tiana a little happy to see how disappointed he was by her refusal.

"Thank you for your efforts regarding Instructor Bellocchio," she said.

Just like that, what should have been a month-long job was already done. She was excitedly considering how she should spend her newfound free time—whether to visit her family or just return to Labyrinth City after grabbing something to eat and doing some sightseeing—when a girl aggressively approached her.

"You have some nerve coming here!" the girl said.

"Uh, what?"

"Don't play dumb with me! I know exactly what you're doing!" the girl yelled.

Tiana genuinely had no idea what she was talking about.

"Umm… Who are you, again? Sorry if you were a classmate of mine. What's your name?"

This was Jewitt Royal Academy, a prestigious school for aristocratic children from the Holy Kingdom of Dineez. It was unthinkable that anyone on campus would be rude enough to grab a stranger's collar as this girl had done to Tiana.

"I moved to Labyrinth City after being expelled from this academy for reasons I don't want to get into," she explained. "I only came back for some minor business, and I never had many friends here. You must be mistaking me for someone else. On that note…" Tiana paused, staring at the girl.

She spoke with an overly kind tone to convey that the girl was the one who was out of line. Tiana had fought monsters, intimidated ruffian adventurers, and been hunted by the instructor she trusted most. To her, a girl grabbing her collar with graceful fingers felt no more threatening than being barked at by a puppy.

"Who do you think you are, approaching a person you've never met in such a violent manner?" she finished.

The girl let out an *eep* of terror, shrinking away from the quiet ferocity in Tiana's expression. Tiana sighed internally, wondering

if she'd scared her a little too much. But the girl stuck around, timidly looking at Tiana as if she still had business with her.

"…I'm Lene. Lene Delcott. I refuse to believe you've forgotten me," the girl said.

"Nope, not ringing a bell," Tiana said, finally convinced it was actually her. This was the girl who had been with Alex the day he broke off their engagement. Tiana vaguely remembered her having long black hair and dressing maturely for her age—unlike Tiana herself in every way.

"How dare you…!" Lene seethed.

"Sorry, sorry. You've changed a lot, though. I guess I have, too," Tiana said.

For some reason, Lene had cut her long hair short and was wearing boyish pants that one might wear when riding a horse. They looked good on her, but they were rare to see at this academy.

"O-of course I have! I've been really busy… I have to help with the war preparations because we don't have enough men around!" Lene said.

Tiana sensed trouble and felt her lips curling into a smile. She cleared her throat to hide it, but the sight actually calmed Lene down.

"…Do you really know nothing about my situation?" she asked.

"No. Why would I? I just got to the capital, and I don't think about you at all. Shouldn't you apologize for the rude way you approached me?"

"…Sorry."

"Just don't do it again, okay?"

Assuming she was done here, Tiana started to turn around to go and rest at the inn where she'd made a reservation, but she stopped when Lene started to cry.

"Urgh… I'm sorry… I'm so sorry," Lene said in between sobs. People began to gather in the hallway to see what the commotion was.

"D-don't do that! That's all behind us! I forgive you," Tiana said.

She kept trying to soothe Lene, but the girl wouldn't stop crying. Seeing no other choice, Tiana grabbed her and fled to her old favorite café.

“I’m not buying you a drink. I’m just gonna drink this cup of tea and leave. Then it’s good-bye. We’ll have nothing more to do with each other. Got it?” Tiana said after placing her order.

Lene hesitantly opened her mouth to speak, ignoring Tiana’s words. Tiana thought about just walking out without listening, but her curiosity got the better of her. She also knew what would happen if she left.

“The first three months after that day were peaceful,” Lene said.

“And all it took was sacrificing me,” Tiana said, instantly darkening the mood. She spoke coldly and without sympathy for the girl’s apparent struggles. “You know, you should be grateful I’m not being meaner to you. Where’d the bully who ruined my life go? You’re boring me.”

Tiana stuffed a leaf into her pipe in annoyance and puffed out smoke. Once the smoke had reached the ceiling, Lene continued speaking.

“There was someone in our way…”

“You mean me?” Tiana asked.

“No. It was the old headmaster,” Lene said, earning a confused look from Tiana. That answer was completely unexpected. “You don’t know who I’m talking about, do you?”

“Uhhh, sorry. I kinda remember him,” Tiana said.

“I wouldn’t be surprised if you don’t. But he thought highly of you and Instructor Bellocchio. You would’ve been the first girl to graduate top of the class. The headmaster’s high opinion of you both and your success were obstacles to my father. It’s all complicated faction stuff,” Lene said.

The girl launched into an explanation of her family’s situation. House Delcott had made a meteoric rise in high society, thanks to their quick and cheap transportation service that utilized domesticated dragons. However, the nobility was generally antagonistic toward such upstart families. Some nobles tried to steal their profits, while others criticized their attitude and lineage.

House Delcott decided to fight these antagonistic nobles by getting involved in disputes between noble factions, and they didn’t hesitate to use dirty tactics. Lene had also been willing to serve as a political pawn for her family. That was the only reason

for her actions.

To Lene, Tiana had been nothing more than a pebble to kick aside on her family's path to glory.

"So I was caught up in a factional dispute that had nothing to do with me. Did you never really like Alex?" Tiana asked.

"Huh? Oh, I didn't mind him. I just thought it would be fun to steal your boyfriend, too. Everyone hated you at school, so a few girls helped me out," Lene said.

"Ever heard the phrase *just deserts*?" Tiana asked. This girl was even more despicable than she'd thought, but this was getting interesting. Tiana's curiosity to hear a little more won out over her annoyance.

"…I know, I know. I'm the worst. What I did can't be forgiven with a simple apology. I thought I had to do things like that to make it in the world," Lene said.

"You're probably not wrong. I think there are plenty of nobles worse than you."

"Yeah. I'm already sick of it."

Lene smiled weakly, but the emotion behind it wasn't despair. She had certainly given up on something, but not on life itself.

Tiana didn't mind people like that. She thought for a moment—*just* a moment—that they might have been friends had things been different.

"Why did you grab me, though?" Tiana asked.

"Oh, right. Alex is missing."

Tiana's ex-fiancé was a man named Alex Colney. House Colney was a militant noble family whose members had filled important posts in the capital army's Magic Division for generations. There was no shortage of heroic tales about Alex's father, including one about how he had charged into a labyrinth and stopped a small-scale Stampede all by himself.

According to Lene, Alex had been going to join the Magic Division—which was led by his father—and live a cushy life in the reserves while on a promotional track. However, those plans had been made during peacetime, and his family could no longer afford to be so soft with him once it became clear that the Demon God War was about to break out. It was decided he would be

trained just like all regular new recruits. Alex's father and grandfather had both inherited the talent his family was known for, so it was assumed the same would be true of him.

"I'm assuming he ran here," Tiana said after leading Lene to a bar.

"What? But…this is a bar for commoners," said Lene.

"I always had a few girls in mind I thought Alex could be cheating on me with. You were one of the leading candidates, but I was still surprised when he chose you. He always had his eyes on the singer of this bar."

"Wait, what are you talking about? I never heard that… Are you sure this place is even open?"

"It doesn't matter. He could be in there regardless. Before we go in, I want to ask you something."

"Wh-what?"

"What are you going to do if you find him? Try to get him back?"

Lene looked away uncomfortably.

"…Well, well. You're just an ordinary airhead, aren't you? I'm even more impressed now that you managed to best me," Tiana said.

Lene flared angrily. "I-it's not like that! If I don't take Alex to my father-in-law and get him to join the Magic Division, House Colney is ruined! It would be terrible for my family, too!"

"Why should you care if his family is ruined? If you just divorce and cut ties with him, your precious noble house should be just fine."

"That…might be true, but…"

"So what are you going to do? He's in there. I sense one man and one woman."

Tiana used Magic Search without an incantation or using her staff. She simply sensed their location, the number of people, and their genders from the subtle rebounding of mana waves.

"Huh… Did you just use a spell?" Lene asked.

"I asked you a question," Tiana said.

"O-okay, okay! I'm going in!" Lene said.

Having confirmed Lene's intentions, Tiana threw open the door to the bar. There was no one in sight. She stomped up the stairs and stopped in front of a private room.

“Unlock,” Tiana chanted, and the door clicked open.

Unlock wasn’t a spell that was taught at regular magic academies. Most teachers didn’t even know of its existence, and it toed the line of legality. It could open any lock as long as it wasn’t a special shape, protected by magic, or reinforced by a heavy bolt. Havok had covertly taught Tiana the spell, saying it would come in handy.

“Wh-who are… Gah!”

“What do you mean ‘gah’? Is that really the way to greet your ex-fiancée and wife?” Tiana asked.

Alex was in the room with a girl Tiana had never seen before. They were lounging together half-naked.

“Who the hell is she?!” Lene shouted.

That was the start of an ugly fight.

The fight finally ended around the time Tiana finished smoking her pipe. The girl who was with Alex quickly surrendered and backed away as Lene wailed and hit him over and over. It had taken ten minutes for her to wear herself out.

“Please go home…,” Lene begged.

“I—I refuse! I don’t want to fight in the Demon God War!” Alex said.

“Then I’ll go with you!” Lene said. “Your father is prepared to risk his life and protect you, too!”

“You’re a fellow pipe enthusiast? What leaf are you using?” the other girl asked.

“It’s Witch’s Broom from Teran,” Tiana said.

“Wanna trade? I prefer Happy, personally.”

“I’ve never tried it. Is it good?”

“I think it’s the best you can get in the capital. I love your pipe and igniter. I wish I had one like that…”

The two of them excitedly discussed pipes as Alex and Lene fought.

“I’m not strong like you and Tiana! And what are you doing getting all friendly with her?!” Alex yelled.

“Uhh, which of us are you talking to?” the other girl asked.

“Either one of you! Lene and Maurine!” Alex shouted.

The girl he was cheating with—Maurine—shrugged

exasperatedly.

“Gee, I wonder. Maybe it’s because you’re a *serial cheater*. Don’t you have anything to say to me?” Tiana asked. She puffed out smoke and sighed.

“Urgh… H-how are you?” Alex asked.

“Just peachy. Aside from when I nearly died,” Tiana replied.

“So the rumors are true… I’m sorry… I don’t know what to say.”

“Oh my, there are rumors about me now?”

“People are saying you saved the world. You were probably too good for me all along,” Alex said with a self-deprecating smile.

“The world’s not saved yet. The war hasn’t even started.”

Alex paled, and Tiana looked in his eyes with pity.

“…You always had a passion for poetry and music,” she said. “I used to wonder if you weren’t suited for magic…or fighting, rather. It’s unfortunate for you that the world is coming to war.”

“…I’ve always wanted to be a musician, actually. I was never able to tell anyone.”

Alex began to speak falteringly about his life. He’d realized one day that he wasn’t skilled enough at magic to become a mage like his father—in fact, he didn’t even have the aptitude to use magic to fight monsters. He couldn’t face a goblin without shaking in his boots.

He had cared deeply for Tiana at first but, over time, he had developed an inferiority complex. How could he live up to a girlfriend who’d earned the respect of the eccentric yet famously skilled Bellocchio? He’d never been able to be truthful with Tiana, nor tell his family that he didn’t want to take over as the head of House Colney.

Nothing he shared surprised Tiana. She thought it was all self-evident.

“Well, that just confirms what I already thought,” she said. “I was excited about having a fiancé but never actually had any interest in you. You never cared much for me, either.”

“…Yeah, you’re right,” Alex said, looking down apologetically. “I was jealous of your success, though I may as well have been jealous of the sun. You’re way out of my league.”

“Don’t get all mopey now. I’m over it.”

“Will you forgive me?” Alex asked.

“Uh, no. I’m not forgiving you or Lene, or…” Tiana looked at Maurine. “Eh, I guess I’m fine with you.”

“Really? I went out with him while you were still a student, you know,” Maurine said.

“And you’re telling me *now*?!” Tiana shouted angrily.

Maurine laughed, Lene’s face twitched, and Alex made himself as small as possible.

“Actually, I…always had a feeling he was spending money on a girl at a bar,” Tiana admitted. “I was too scared to say anything, and I had more fun focusing on my classes and research anyway.”

“Same as you, I figured music was his real passion,” said Maurine. “You know how there are a bunch of idols in Labyrinth City? He writes lyrics that fit their genre of music and sends them in. I used to help him with those lyrics, and I also sang and played acoustic guitar so he could figure out the melody.”

“…I had no idea about that,” Tiana said, surprised.

Maurine smirked. “I like how pathetically weak he is. He can’t keep himself out of trouble. Only losers like him can write the lyrics I like. But you’re different. You have a respectable life and better taste in men,” she said, looking at Tiana with admiration.

“I’m no angel. I fell on hard times, too,” Tiana told her.

“Haven’t you made a fortune gambling in addition to your success as a mage?”

“I don’t make any money gambling… Wait, there are rumors about my *gambling habits*, too?” Tiana asked, shocked.

Maurine pointed at her. “I think you were put in a hard situation and struggled financially. But you didn’t let it drag your soul down.”

Tiana frowned, unsure what to make of that.

“Most people aren’t so strong,” Maurine continued. “If you work at a bar, your soul adapts to that environment. If you flee from your life’s problems, you become a fugitive by nature. By comparison, your soul is an indestructible diamond.”

“That sounded poetic,” Tiana said.

“That’s why you have nothing to gain from interacting with people like Alex. He’s a pebble on the side of the road compared to you. Forgive him. I’ll make him apologize as many times as you need.”

“There’s no way in hell I’m forgiving him. I’m only here because I needed something to punch, and I couldn’t think of anything better than his face. What makes you think you can talk to me like this, anyway?! He cheated on me with you!”

“Good point. Well, knock yourself out,” Maurine said, giggling.

Tiana sighed deeply. “This turned out a lot more boring than I expected.”

“I’m sure,” responded Maurine.

“Honestly, your lives have nothing to do with me… But I’ll tell you one thing, Alex.”

“What, Tiana?” he asked.

“I don’t care one iota about whether you elope with this girl and become a poet or stay with Lene and succeed your father. You don’t, either, do you, Lene?”

“Uh, it wouldn’t be ideal… Well, actually, I don’t know…” Lene sounded unsure how to respond, and she let out a sigh of resignation.

“You have more in common with me than with them,” Tiana told her. “You know how to lead a guy around by the nose and take down other girls. You’ll do just fine on your own.”

“Watch it,” Lene said, glaring. But Tiana didn’t so much as flinch.

“Anyway,” Tiana continued, “don’t think you can just do whatever you want because the world’s about to fall apart. You’ll end up in an even worse spot than you’re in now.”

“You’re telling me to be an upstanding citizen? In this world without a future?” Alex said bitterly.

Tiana laughed. “Get a grip. The world’s always been cruel, and that has nothing to do with the demon god. Besides, the world’s not going to end. A certain *someone* is putting her life on the line to make sure that doesn’t happen.”

The great confidence Tiana spoke with gave her a radiance even more beautiful than she’d had as a student. She used to think her tendency to act high-handed and arrogant was a character flaw, but it was only going to serve her in the face of their impossibly powerful foe. No one stood a chance at breaking her confidence.

“…I guess I can’t argue with that,” Alex said, smiling in surrender.

In the end, Lene gave up on Alex and decided to divorce him. She realized how empty babysitting Alex for the support of House Colney made her feel. Alex decided to try to convince his parents to make his younger brother the heir.

Tiana left the bar wondering why she gave advice to people she hated, but the experience left her feeling refreshed. She decided not to visit her family, electing instead to just visit her mother's grave. After all, there wasn't much she wanted to say at her family home, where her father lived with his second wife and concubine.

Standing in front of the grave, Tiana spoke to her mother.

"I went through more than I ever could have imagined, but I made it back safely. I'll visit again if I ever get the chance."

Then she placed the flowers she'd bought in the capital on the grave and set out once again.

The way to the dragonian village was long. The village wasn't actually much farther from Labyrinth City than Regulus in terms of distance, but the poor state of the roads doubled the travel time. It could even be called more of an adventure than a trip.

"It's good we were able to rent a dragon…but they're harder to ride than horses," Nick said.

"You're just being a scaredy-cat. You have to trust it," Karan said.

"I'm not as used to this as you are," Nick protested.

Nick and Karan were traveling the rough road on dragonback. The dragonian village was in a remote location, and getting there required passing through several cities and mountains. They had rented a dragon because they were afraid the journey would be too hard for the kind of horse you could rent at a stable. It was a slow, four-legged creature, but it was herbivorous and had a calm temperament. Karan took good care of the dragon as she and Nick made their quiet journey through the countryside.

There weren't many labyrinths near the dragonian village, which meant no Stampeding monsters on the roads. It was yawn-

inducingly peaceful.

“It’s so safe out here that…,” Nick said, trailing off.

“Hm? What were you going to say?” Karan asked.

“…Never mind.”

Nick had been about to say, “You didn’t need me after all,” before he stopped. He’d come under the pretext of guarding Karan on the trip, but in reality, her strength had returned enough for her to travel alone, and he knew it. He was also tagging along because he was the only member of the party who had no home to return to, but that wasn’t the main reason, either. It simply didn’t feel right letting her travel alone after the promise he’d made her in the Colosseum of Carnage.

“…Did you used to travel like this, Nick?” Karan asked.

“I dunno. We usually had a lot of cargo, and we’d all end up in a bad mood if it got damaged or if we got in a fight. I have fond memories of those days, but it wasn’t all sunshine and rainbows.”

Karan had gladly accepted his offer, though it was unclear if she was aware of the real reason he’d come.

“That sounds kinda fun,” she said.

“I never said it wasn’t,” replied Nick.

“Even when Marde wasn’t there?”

“It’s not like I talked to her all day long… Traveling under her employ isn’t bad, but her products are way too volatile. I’m not cut out for selling insurance and loans,” Nick said.

“…I think you’d be surprisingly good at it, actually.”

“Really?”

“You can’t be too nice in that kind of job. But being cold is even worse.”

They chatted practically nonstop throughout the trip, to the point where it was a little strange. It had actually been that way ever since the Survivors reunited after Nick recovered and Karan’s work calmed down. Neither of them felt comfortable with silence when they were alone together.

Nick had promised to stay by Karan’s side forever, but he had been avoiding figuring out what that meant. If anyone had asked whether he’d meant as a boyfriend or husband, he would have said yes, but he wasn’t sure if Karan felt the same way. Whenever he tried to feel out Karan’s thoughts, however, she would panic and bring up some random topic.

Nick was annoyed at her for avoiding the topic, but their other conversations were fun, too. It was remarkable how much better Karan had gotten at talking after going through Diamond and Hector's training. Besides, he could hardly blame her when he did the exact same thing and changed the topic every time he sensed her trying to bring up something he was embarrassed to talk about. Neither of them had enough experience with romance.

"W-we're almost there, you know!" Karan said.

"G-great," Nick said.

They continued their journey with a vague sense of distance between them, drawing closer to Karan's hometown.

A red mountain range was visible in the distance, and short vegetation dotted the landscape. The land felt a little desolate but not lonely. Large land dragons drank water from a small stream. They weren't wild, though.

"Is it okay to let those dragons roam free without chaining them to a stable or something?" Nick asked.

"They'd just break free. We let them all graze. They're smart, so they don't go anywhere. They defend the village from monsters and bandits," Karan said, looking proud.

The dragon they were riding snorted with displeasure.

"Oh, sorry. You're a great dragon, too. Thanks for letting us ride you," she said, hurriedly praising the dragon. It lumbered along, looking satisfied.

The grazing land dragons gathered around as if curious about the newcomer.

"Tulip! Peony! Hydrangea! Have you all been well?" Karan said.

"What's with all the cute names?" Nick asked.

"Dragons and people are often named after flowers in my village. My name means 'fire'—*ka*—and 'orchid'—*ran*—in the ancient language."

"That's a really pretty name," Nick said.

"Whuh?!" Karan gasped, panicking.

Nick wanted to kick himself. He had not planned to be that cheesy.

“A-anyway,” Karan continued, “we should be able to see my house soon… Oh, they came to greet us.”

A middle-aged dragonian man had appeared in the distance. Many more dragonian men and women appeared behind him, and they all sprinted toward Nick and Karan. There were only a few dozen of them, but they looked like an attacking army.

“What the…? Did I do something wrong?” asked Nick.

“I don’t think so… Oh. This might be about something Daffy wrote in her letter,” Karan said.

Nick worried that Karan’s father was going to accuse him of stealing his daughter, but thankfully his fears were quickly put to rest. The dragonians stopped a short distance away and formed an orderly line.

“Huh?” he said. It was clear from their courteous behavior that they were not about to try to chase him away from Karan.

The man who appeared to be the leader approached the confused Nick. He was a middle-aged man with red hair and tanned skin. His horns were larger than Karan’s, but the scales on his arms were the same color. It was clear that he was related to her.

“Daddy!” Karan cried.

“How many times do I have to tell you not to call me that on formal occasions?” the man said with an exasperated look.

Nick nervously dismounted the dragon, and the dragonians immediately responded by kneeling to him. Karan’s father was the only one who remained on his feet.

“I am Chidori, chief of the fire dragonians,” he said.

“H-hello. I’m Nick, an adventurer. Uh… Why are they kneeling to me?” Nick asked.

“Surely you understand why. We dragonians hold great respect for heroes. If a person who fought the demon god and survived isn’t a hero, then who is?” Chidori said.

Nick thought Karan’s father seemed like a magnanimous person, and that attitude seemed to be backed up by his strength. He sensed the man had undergone considerable training himself.

“I didn’t set out to fight the demon god… Things kinda just worked out that way,” Nick admitted.

“And yet you achieved something no one else has,” responded Chidori. “That, my boy, is called fate.”

Nick felt like Chidori wasn't listening to him, but at the same time, he felt a belated sense of accomplishment sink in. None of what they'd done truly felt real until right then. That said, he still didn't think he should be treated like a hero. His gratitude at being saved outweighed the feeling that he'd done any saving himself.

"This village may seem like it is cut off from the world, but word of the war and the demon god travels quickly," explained Chidori. "I also received a letter from Daffodil, so I already have a general idea of what has happened. I am sure you must be tired from your long journey. Please, feel free to get some rest."

A large white building constructed of sun-dried bricks and mortar stood in the center of the dragonian village. The citizens used it as both an assembly hall and a banquet hall, and it was furnished with resplendent carpets, tables, and chairs. The tables were laden with large meat dishes that looked crude but required careful heating to prepare, as well as giant barrels of alcohol. Young and old alike had gathered to enjoy the feast.

"I don't feel like I'm being given any say in this…," Nick said.

He was led to what seemed like the seat of highest honor in the hall, where he was treated to food and conversation by Chidori and other important dragonian men. Everyone there looked like a relative of Karan's.

They pressed him to drink the alcohol, but Nick was afraid it would be strong enough to knock him out, and he avoided it the only way he knew how: by talking. He told the story of the Survivors, doing his best to avoid saying anything that would make Karan sound bad. Daffodil had apparently made no such effort in her letter, however, so the dragonians saw through most of his lies.

"No need to hold anything back. She always hated studying."

"I was so worried she would be deceived by a vile man. I wrote a letter to Daffodil telling her that Karan was moving to the city, but I had no way of knowing where to send it to."

"We should have at least insisted on sending someone with Karan. Thank you for saving her for us."

The dragonians thanked Nick one after the other, then began

to recount embarrassing stories from Karan's childhood. Nick knew she would be upset if she found out, but he couldn't help listening and laughing.

"Where is Karan, by the way?" Nick asked.

"Oh? Are you worried about your bride?" Chidori asked, causing Nick to choke. "Wait, did I misjudge your relationship? Why else would she have brought a man back to the village?"

Nick couldn't deny his reasoning. Given Karan's age and the fact that they had come alone, it was only natural to assume she intended to marry him.

"Come on, drink up, my new son-in-law!"

Nick thought Karan's father was a kindhearted man, but he could be startlingly frank when he was drinking. Chidori was intimidating in the exact opposite way Nick had expected, and spoke as if the marriage were a done deal. He told Nick that he didn't expect a hero to settle down there but that he better visit, mentioned how many grandchildren he wanted, and said that Karan was popular among the young men of this village so Nick would have to put them in their place. All Nick could do was smile awkwardly.

"S-sorry for the wait," came Karan's voice.

"Karan, where have you—?"

Nick's voice caught in his throat before he could finish his sentence.

"Wow, you look adorable! Doesn't she, Chidori?" a dragonian woman said.

"Yes… She looks positively radiant. It's hard to believe she's the same girl who used to chase dragonflies and fall in the river," Chidori said.

"Who would have thought the kid who nearly burned down the village practicing her fire breath would turn into such a beautiful woman?" another dragonian said.

"I remember her fighting dragons and getting covered in blood like it was yesterday," added an elderly dragonian.

"Sh-shut up!" Karan shouted. "I'm a big deal in Labyrinth City! I'm a civil official in the Teran Lord Manor!"

""""""""Yeah, right!""""""""" the dragonians responded together.

"I'm not lying! Back me up, Nick!" Karan said.

Nick gave them a tight smile. "I know it's hard to believe, but

it's true. Uh, what's her title again? She's the head of the Ancient Culture Department at the Teran Lord Manor or something like that."

"That's wrong. I'm Chief Karan Tsubaki of the Disaster Inspection Office, a division of the Ancient Culture Preservation Department of the Teran Lord Manor. I have business cards," Karan said, indignantly producing a card. Chidori and her other relatives gathered around with great interest.

"She's killing it, from what I've heard," Nick added. "She works with a detective named Hector, and she bosses him around like no one I've ever seen. He doesn't let just anyone do that. Everyone else has praised her, too."

"Heh-heh," Karan smirked.

"I swear, this is hardly the time to talk about work."

A woman walked up from behind Karan. She had red hair and horns, just like most of the dragonians there, and looked like the person you would end up with if you combined Karan and Daffodil. Yet she also had a calmness about her that both of them lacked.

"Oh, Mom," Karan said.

"What do you think of my daughter?" Karan's mom asked. "I'm sure this look differs from the fashion of the city, but don't you think she's adorable?"

Everyone looked at Nick.

"Uh, yeah… She looks pretty," he replied.

Karan looked completely different from normal. He'd never seen her wear a skirt, but she was wearing a long white one. Above it was a tight white blouse and a pink sleeveless jacket designed to be worn with a dress. Flowers were embroidered on the jacket in graceful, curling patterns.

They were red orchids.

"…Thanks," Karan said, blushing slightly. It didn't take a genius to realize the implication of her clothes—this was a bridal outfit made specially for her.

"Drink up, Mr. Hero! I won't let you gawk at my daughter without having a drop of our alcohol!" Chidori said.

"That's right, you lucky bastard!" another dragonian man yelled.

The other men were just as awestruck as Nick, but they also

urged him to drink once they'd returned to their senses. Nick thought they were an annoying bunch, but he didn't mind their behavior too much. They reminded him of adventurers.

So Nick relented and drank.

…Which turned out to be a major mistake.

When Nick woke up, he was in a totally different place.

"…Where am I?" he mumbled.

He was in a cold, lifeless room that reminded him of the Labyrinth of Bonds. It couldn't have looked any more different than the homey atmosphere from earlier. He couldn't even imagine how this place had been built.

He had a light headache, and he didn't think it was just from the alcohol. This room looked like a jail cell; he must have been drugged and locked in here.

At least his back didn't hurt. The bed was much nicer than the one in his Sun Knight prison cell. That was one small mercy.

"You're awake," someone said from the other side of the iron bars. It was Chidori, Karan's father.

"Not quite… Karan's still out," Nick said. He didn't even have to look to know that the snoring next to him belonged to her.

"…That girl's a heavy sleeper. She never had any issues falling asleep growing up," Chidori said, a hint of exasperation in his voice.

"I'm not surprised at all to hear that," Nick said. "So did you drug me?"

"It's nothing poisonous; just a herb that induces sleep and provides nourishment. Alcohol enhances the effect, though."

"Oh yeah?"

"…I can tell you've been through your fair share of tough battles. You're composed."

"So are you. I don't wanna show off, but don't assume I can't escape from here."

That wasn't a bluff. Nick had reached a high level of mastery with Stepping, so using Heavy Body to increase his weight and momentarily summon enough strength to tear down the iron bars would be a cinch. If there turned out to be a magical trap, he could ask Bond for help using Telepathy.

But Karan's father had been the one to imprison him. He didn't want to do anything rash.

"…I'm sure you can. But I want to talk first," Chidori said.

"Fine by me," replied Nick.

"Where should I start…? Well, aren't you curious as to where we are?" Chidori asked.

"Are you kidding? Of course I am," Nick said irritably.

Chidori was unfazed. "This is the basement of the assembly hall. It's also the true dragonian village."

"…The *true* village? That makes it sound like the one up above is fake."

"The village aboveground was built to conceal this one."

"Excuse me?" Nick's eyes went wide with surprise.

"Dragonians in the time of the ancient civilization lived in expansive underground facilities that resembled labyrinths. It is difficult to live as comfortably as people did back then because the mana source was severed, but we still conceal its existence to prevent thievery," Chidori explained.

"Don't ruins like this usually become labyrinths?" Nick asked.

"Only when the facility loses its administrator and is contaminated by miasma. Every clan chief inherits the role of administrator and does the minimum required to maintain this place."

Nick just stared at him. He didn't see what this grand secret had to do with him being drugged and kidnapped.

"Are you sure you should be revealing this place to me? If you wanted to dispose of me, you could've tied me up and dropped me in a river," he said.

"Would you like to live here?" Chidori asked.

"You…don't just mean that as a son-in-law, do you?"

"That's part of it."

"Seriously?"

"The mana source vanished, but we have reserves. Enough for ten households to live comfortably for ten years. You can't tell from here, but this facility is large. It can easily fit the entire village."

Nick finally saw what this was all about.

"You want me to take shelter here and protect Karan and the dragonians until the Demon God War is over. Is that it?"

“No. You are the one I want protected,” Chidori replied.

Nick was taken aback. “…Just so you know, I don’t have any special strength. I’ve only survived this long because I have a holy sword. I’m not one of the people who stopped the demon god’s resurrection, either.”

“The term *hero* doesn’t just apply to people who fight the demon god. People who guide the next generation are also heroes.”

“‘Next generation’? Where’d that come from?”

“The heroes who fight the demon god will need superhuman strength. I’m sure you become significantly stronger when you take up your holy sword, but honestly, I do not think it will be enough.”

Nick had no choice but to admit Chidori was right. He couldn’t claim to be inhumanly strong like Argus or Fifs, and although he was approaching the realm of Argus’s strength after his various trials and the battle against the Sword of Tasuki, it would take many more years to get there.

“Sure, but I’m definitely not qualified to ‘guide the next generation,’ whatever that means,” Nick said.

“I disagree,” responded Chidori.

“You have a high opinion of me for someone you’ve only drunk with once.”

“People who achieve incredible things without special powers possess something that others don’t. A kind of gravity that attracts other people.”

“Karan’s the one who has that.”

Nick had intended to hear Chidori out calmly. That said, he hadn’t expected to end up discussing grandiose topics like the future of the dragonians or the definition of the word *hero*. That was for the dragonian leaders to talk about, not him. He found himself getting annoyed; there were other topics he’d much rather discuss with Karan’s father.

“Karan’s the real deal at her job. She’s gotten people far older than her to follow her orders, worked with some truly eccentric people, and tracked down a figure who had been slyly working from the shadows of society for centuries. You can’t do all that with brute force. She succeeded with her wit and soul, not by punching and stabbing.”

Nick spoke of Karan. He told her father about the things she'd suffered and the adventures she'd been on. What she'd lost and what she'd learned. As he told her story, he thought it sounded braver and more impressive than any other adventurer's tale he knew. He felt her father should know what she had been through.

"Her pride was taken from her. But she got it back. She thought about everything she was missing, and she didn't take the easy road of stealing from others the way she'd been stolen from. People used to ridicule her for not knowing how to do simple math, but now she's doing a job that would impress even the most learned people in Labyrinth City. A job that you can't do with a sword. We all respect her, truly."

"…Then that's even more reason for you to stay here," pressed Chidori. "She can protect you, and you can protect her. Heroes will be needed for the fight against the demon god, but one or two won't make any difference."

"You're saying they'll be fine if one or two heroes sits out?"

"Precisely. Wars have nothing in common with the battles you have experienced. They are nothing more than a ruthless clash of numbers. There is no pride in war. You are better off keeping hold of the pride you have regained and living peacefully here."

Nick scratched his head and sighed. They were getting nowhere with this conversation. Chidori was just as exhausting to speak to as a certain other person he knew.

"Do you want to keep me and Karan from the battlefield that badly?" Nick asked.

"Everyone will be happiest that way," Chidori said.

"You should worry about your own happiness. Karan's not your only family; what about your wife and parents? Why worry about our happiness over your own?" Nick asked.

"I can't do that. Your achievement holds significance. I don't have your right to survive," Chidori said doubtfully.

"I understand your reasoning. I'm sure you have the big picture in mind. But you're using that as an excuse to have things your own way."

"Don't misunderstand me. We were all unfortunate to be placed in this critical situation. It is inevitable that many will die. If you think I am wrong for trying to spare those I wish to live, then so be it. The true blame lies with the one who forced me to

make that choice."

Nick stared fixedly at Chidori.

"I never said you're doing anything wrong. It's admirable that you're trying to protect your child. But you should be saying all this to the sleepyhead next to me. Why try so hard to make sure I don't die?" he asked.

"You don't need to know. I'm not doing this for your gratitude. You can resent me if you want," Chidori said.

"And you're satisfied with that?"

"Yes. Do you have a better answer?"

Nick fell silent. Then he started to laugh. It wasn't a pleasant laugh, nor was it one of helpless defiance. It sounded cynical, and it echoed in the prisonlike room.

Nick didn't think he'd find himself trying to win over a person this stubborn again. The man whose approval he'd wanted to gain so badly was already gone from this world.

"Man… I get it now. Oh, that's just priceless."

"What's funny?" Chidori asked.

"…I just realized that bastard was probably trying to do the same thing."

"Hmm."

Chidori waited for Nick to continue without showing any sign of confusion.

"He was an adventurer," Nick began, dredging up old memories. "He was brilliant with any weapon. He made it through difficult labyrinths without relying on magic, using nothing but his own strength. He never reached S-rank, but S-ranks were in awe of him. No one could beat him in a bare-handed fight. I was proud to go on adventures with him. He put me through *hellish* sword and martial arts training. One small mistake, and I could've died. I've still got the scars."

He vividly remembered getting each and every mark. He actually had more scars from that man than he did from monsters. None of them were in vital spots, however; even the deepest wounds had avoided organs and blood vessels.

"He was not talkative, but he always got all high-and-mighty whenever he did speak. He'd lecture me constantly about proper behavior for adventurers. I was probably always gonna be a little kid in his eyes, no matter how old I got. Knowing that frustrated

me, and I started to defy him. Eventually, he told me I had become a full-fledged adventurer and kicked me out of his party. He said he wouldn't stand for me criticizing his methods any longer."

"Strong people like him tend to be arrogant," Chidori remarked. "They can struggle to convince their apprentices and children to adopt their ways."

"Yeah, just like you. You remind me of him."

"I do?"

Nick ignored his question and continued, speaking from the heart.

"…I was so happy. I'd wanted him to recognize me as an adult for so long. I thought I'd become a true adventurer, someone who could help people like me who had nowhere to go, just like he did. But I was wrong. To him, I was still a naive kid. He never stopped protecting me. He never told me the truth. I didn't realize it until he died, but he was doing his best to ensure I survived while he was bound by the Sword of Tasuki."

"And thus, a hero survived. As a parent, I feel jealous of that man," Chidori said.

"Jealous? Why?"

"The demon god's appearance will lead to so much death that the natural law of parents dying before their children will be upset. Parents and children alike will die as the world comes to ruin. Can you blame me for wanting to avoid that?"

"Do you really think Karan is going to sit back happily as you and her people all die?! Just because her daddy loves her and wants her to survive? There's no chance in hell! What makes you think you have that sort of authority over her anyway?! You can't just run off to die and expect us to live quiet lives here like you want us to!" Nick shouted.

Chidori frowned at him, but Nick went on.

"I wanted Argus to survive. Karan obviously wants the same for you. She's not the kind of person to be grateful that a loved one died for her. You wouldn't be trying so hard to protect her if she was. Am I wrong?"

"…Answer me this, hero," Chidori said. "What will you do? Wage a battle that you and Karan have no chance of winning? My actions may be wrong, but I'd rather that than see both of you

die.”

“I don’t wanna fight the demon god, either. I’d rather laze my days away and let someone else take care of it. Just the thought of it pisses me off. It feels like a weight on my back. The demon god hasn’t appeared for centuries, so why didn’t some order of knights spend all that time preparing for this fight? Why are we the ones who have to put our lives on the line?”

“Exactly. You’ve already fought harder than anyone else. No one can blame you for withdrawing now,” Chidori said soothingly.

“Yeah. But I made her a promise. I said I’d stay by her side forever.”

“…Nick.”

“It’s an appealing offer. Staying here and trying to repopulate the human race with Karan would probably be a happy life. Spending time with her is always fun. I never get tired of it. She’s honest and smart, brave and compassionate. And she doesn’t know it, but she’s beautiful. I couldn’t ask for a better wife.”

“Then you can live here with her. One of you is likely to die if you return to the chaos of the battlefield. In fact, the likeliest outcome is that you’ll both die. If you promised to stay by her side forever, then you have to live. You would be breaking your promise if you were to die.”

“You’re wrong.”

“How?”

“That’s not what staying by her side means. I spent the whole journey to this village thinking about what I should do. I wondered if getting married would fulfill that promise, and if that was what we both wanted.”

“There would be nothing wrong with that.”

“Being with Karan means living proudly like her. I’m sick of fighting. I don’t want to die. But I can’t fulfill my promise by saying we should turn our backs on the world’s suffering and live happily ever after.”

It was true that Nick didn’t want to fight. He hadn’t left the Colosseum of Carnage with the satisfaction of a glorious victory. Instead, he now had a visceral fear of death and endless suffering. Even he was surprised he hadn’t retired as an adventurer.

However, he didn't want to embarrass himself in front of everyone who'd protected him or fallen in battle. He wanted to help them carry the burden that weighed them down. He wanted to remain with those who had supported him. Even if a terrible battle awaited him at the end of that road.

"I'm gonna leave this place with Karan. We're gonna fight the demon god, win, and get married," Nick declared, and Chidori closed his eyes as he listened. "I love Karan. And knowing her, she's not gonna be satisfied with a life trapped in this birdcage. She's free-spirited and wild, but she's also kind, and she shines brighter than any idol. So I'm not doing what you want. I'm taking her away from here."

"…So you're stealing my daughter after all," Chidori muttered, putting a hand to his forehead. He didn't look distressed, however; there was a hint of an amused smile on his face.

"If you don't want that, you can try and stop me," Nick said.

"Hero… Or perhaps I should call you 'son.' There is one thing you need to know."

"You sure accepted that quickly…"

"She's awake," Chidori said, smiling.

"Huh? What are you…?" Nick trailed off, realizing Chidori was looking behind him. He turned around and saw Karan blushing furiously. "Why didn't you say so earlier?!"

"Y-y-you should've noticed, idiot! I'm right behind you!" Karan yelled.

"I know, but you were sound asleep!" Nick shouted back.

Karan looked at him with eyes that shifted quickly between reproach and embarrassment, and she eventually spoke in a whisper.

"…I wanted to talk about that stuff when we were alone."

"Oh, uh, my bad," Nick apologized weakly.

Karan, however, was starting to get fired up. "How can you be totally open with an old man you've never met when you're always so guarded around me? That makes no sense."

"Yeah. Sorry," Nick said.

"'She's kind, and she shines brighter than any idol'? Where the heck did that come from? You've always said Agate shines brighter than anyone in the world," Karan said accusingly.

"I've got no excuse for that," Nick said, his earlier intensity

gone without a trace. All he could do was agree and apologize in response to everything Karan said.

"…But I forgive you," Karan said when she was finally done complaining.

She reached out and hugged Nick, although his shoulders were slouched after her barrage.

"I'll forgive you if you keep your promise. Because I…I love you, too."



“Thanks. And I do love you, Karan,” said Nick.

A single tear ran down Karan’s cheek. It wasn’t a tear of desperation like she’d shed when they reunited in the darkness underground, but one of pure happiness.

“…So yeah, Nick and I are gonna go save the world,” Karan said, pulling apart from Nick and giving her father a carefree smile.

Chidori responded quietly, with no anger or sadness in his voice.

“…Karan, forget about that and stay here. This place will always be peaceful, no matter what happens to the world. As long as you are here, the world lives on. I’ll contact Daffodil and get her to live here, too. You may invite anyone else you wish. That should be enough to satisfy you.”

“It won’t,” Karan said bluntly.

“Why not?” Chidori asked.

“It’s too small.”

“…This room is small, but there’s more to the facility. There are probably other tribes doing the same thing, too. Be reasonable.”

“That’s not what I meant! Your world is too small!” Karan spread her arms wide. “There’s more to the world than the dragonians! Is the dragonian tradition of supporting heroes really so narrow-minded?!”

“Yes. It is. It’s nothing more than a tactic to survive in this cruel world.”

“That’s ridiculous!”

“No, it’s not. I may not have that excuse, but you two absolutely do,” Chidori said defensively. Anger flashed across Karan’s face, but she calmed down.

Chidori wasn’t just thinking of saving his family. Nick and Karan could both sense the reasoning and love behind his words.

“You bought valuable time while everyone else was living idly in ignorance of the crisis the world is facing. It’s up to society to use that time well, not you. It only makes sense to safeguard the heroes who saved the world. In fact, that’s how it ought to be. It would be cruel to ask you to risk your lives in further deadly battles.”

“We only did what we had to. The rumors are making it sound much more impressive than it was,” Karan protested.

“That humility is an insult to the people you saved and who believed in you. What would Hector say if he heard you talk like that?” Chidori asked.

Nick and Karan were surprised to hear him say that name.

“Huh? How do you know about Hector?” Karan asked.

“There are agents of the gods everywhere, and that includes this village. Every time he reports to our god, the other agents become able to access that information. I know everything that has happened in Labyrinth City with near perfect accuracy.”

“Ah… That’s why you were so quick to believe us. You’re an agent, too,” Nick said, unsurprised.

“Dad…that means you’re getting paid an agent’s salary,” said Karan.

“I recommend you take me seriously. I know much more about you than even the citizens of Labyrinth City. It’s with all that knowledge in mind that I’m asking you to live here,” Chidori said gravely.

Nick felt an overwhelming kindness in his words. Although Karan did, too, she shook her head sadly.

“…Sorry, Dad. I want to try fighting for at least a little longer.”

“That’s not how this works,” argued her father. “You only have one life to lose.”

“Yeah, but I’m still gonna try.”

“Listen to me! You’ve accomplished your task already! You don’t need to do anything else! Why can’t you see that?!” Chidori yelled with frustration. He let out a deep sigh.

But Karan’s eyes were as steady as could be.

“You have it wrong. I’m not doing this because I need to.”

“…What?”

“I met so many people in Labyrinth City. Some were weak, some were strong, some were good, and some were bad. Actually, there were a *lot* of bad people. I’ve met some who are completely hopeless, too. All my friends are total losers.”

“All the more reason to stay here!”

“But I still like them,” Karan continued, somewhat embarrassed. “I like Nick. And my friends. And everyone else from Labyrinth City. I…can do amazing things with them. I can’t just stay here knowing that. I don’t care about the mission. I’m fighting for the things I want to do.”

“Karan…”

Hearing Karan’s simple dream, her father finally backed down. It seemed he had already been convinced to let them go and was only now admitting it to himself.

Nick’s heart ached at Chidori’s expression. He could sense the man’s pride and sadness at seeing how beautiful his daughter had become and realizing he couldn’t stop her.

The heartbreaking yet beautiful sight caused something to click in Nick’s mind. He forgave the man he’d killed—and forgave himself as well.

There was no way to tell exactly what Argus had been thinking anymore. But there was still so much beauty in the world. His parents had died to protect him, and Argus had done the same after killing his parents. Nick could accept it now.

“…Nick.”

“Yeah?”

“Take care of my daughter,” Chidori said, bowing his head.

Nick wanted to survive, for the sake of this man. He wanted to survive for Argus, who’d saved his life, and for Karan most of all. He had to make it back safely, no matter how hard it would be.

“You can count on me. I promise we’ll make it back,” Nick said resolutely.

He accepted the mission he had been entrusted with, as well as the love he and Karan shared.

Apparently, Disillusioned Adventurers Will Save the World



Labyrinth City was undergoing yet another transformation. While repairs continued to fix the destruction caused by the appearance of the Colosseum of Carnage, construction was going on throughout the city to turn it into a stronghold for the Demon God War.

Magical barriers were cast on the outer walls to defend against long-range attacks and spells. The major streets were commandeered by the army and government and turned into high-speed roads, forcing the street vendors who hawked their wares near guilds to move. Many buildings that had been destroyed by the Colosseum of Carnage were demolished and replaced by large magic research facilities, ammunition factories, military training facilities, hospitals, and shelters.

The Garbage Heap went under the knife as well. Conflict flared as the residents resisted the Teran Lord's desire to buy the land as quickly as possible, but Zem, having returned to Labyrinth City before the other Survivors, negotiated between both parties and helped resolve the issue without incident.

Such difficulties were frequent. Labyrinth City's rich culture disappeared piece by piece as the government forcefully requisitioned land for the war effort. This naturally led to much criticism of the Teran Lord.

Diamond invested as much money as she could to preserve that culture. She demonstrated her experience during wartime by helping commercial and recreational facilities relocate, building a reserve of near-luxury food products, and improved evacuation shelters and living conditions. She received criticism as well from people who pointed out that defeating the demon god was her mission and that she shouldn't waste time and money on such frivolities, but she continued her projects nevertheless.

Diamond and the people of Labyrinth City had pinned their hopes on a certain group of adventurers. A group who had braved the depths of labyrinths and the pits of the city and done what they were now famous for: being survivors.

"Why didn't you tell us sooner?!" Tiana yelled after hearing that Nick and Karan were engaged.

"It's not the easiest thing to just bring up. There's a time and place for that kind of announcement," Nick said.

"Aww, man. It never bodes well for a five-person party when two of its members get married. A breakup is usually inevitable," complained Tiana.

"We're not even married yet, just engaged," Nick retorted.

"Why not?!"

"Oh, come on, you can't get mad at us for that!"

Bond watched with amusement as Nick and Tiana argued.

The Survivors were in a large reception room beneath Starmine Hall, having rented it along with some nearby guest rooms. They had all intended to return to the inns they'd been living in, but the city was being reorganized in preparation for the Demon God War and the Stampede. Nick's inn had been purchased by the government and was set to be demolished in less than a month, so he and Karan had been forced to hurriedly move here after they'd returned to Labyrinth City.

"Man, I didn't expect the inn to be demolished, though," Nick grumbled.

"The donut café is gone, too," Karan said.

"That's reopening in Underground Teran," Tiana chimed in, and Nick and Karan gave her confused looks. "Oh, have you not

heard? A new giant shelter is being built even deeper underground than this."

"They're building it underground…?" Nick asked. "What about the Colosseum of Carnage? Wouldn't building a shelter down there be dangerous?"

"The Colosseum of Carnage isn't underneath Labyrinth City anymore."

"What do you…? There's no way a giant structure like that could just disappear."

"Well, it did. It wasn't always here; it invaded the city in the first place by burrowing underground."

"Huh, no kidding."

"The labyrinth went off somewhere underground, taking the demon god's egg with it," Tiana explained. "The hole's still there, though, so the city's had to dig it up and put up barriers and walls to block it."

"…That's kinda ominous. It feels like there's someone calling the shots, like the Sword of Tasuki was," Nick said, looking troubled.

"This is just a theory, but the demon god might be dreaming," said Tiana.

"Huh? Dreaming?" Nick asked.

"Yeah. It seems like some kind of animal instinct. Apparently, the demon god produces miasma, labyrinths, and monsters unconsciously while it's asleep. The dreams become clearer and more concrete as the demon god emerges from its long slumber."

"So while we're busting our asses against monsters and barely surviving, the demon god's just dreaming…? If the world's gonna end when the demon god wakes up, then maybe *we're* the dream."

"Hmm-hmm, that was poetic, Nick," commented Zem. "Unfortunately for us, this is not a poem or a song but a very real and dangerous threat."

Nick leaned back in his chair resignedly. "Gimme a break, man. The town hall and public parks are gonna be demolished, and even Starmine Hall—which is a *concert venue*—is being used as a fortress. What happened to Diamond being an idol first?"

"Hey, you've got it good compared to me! There are still charity concerts being held! No one has any idea when dragon races are

gonna resume! And the casino is closed, too!" Tiana complained.

"Most hostess clubs have closed as well. It wasn't long ago that they were still bustling, but now they have gone as quiet as a snuffed flame," Zem said.

"A lot of restaurants have closed, too. Chefs are being recruited to serve as volunteers. Which makes sense, I guess," Karan said.

The three of them sighed. Nick awkwardly averted his eyes; unlike the others, he still had some opportunities to enjoy his hobby.

"…By the way, will you two have children?" Bond asked.

Nick and Karan spat out the water they were drinking.

"Don't ask that with a straight face," Nick said.

"What is the problem? It is an important question for your family."

"Oh, for the love of…" But Nick stopped before he finished his sentence. He realized Bond was being completely serious.

"I am not joking around. You should consider this carefully. Having a more concrete vision of the future will increase our chance of success. Or perhaps I should say your chance of being able to control the repercussions after our success," Bond said.

"That's what you're talking about…?"

Bond—or rather, the Sword of Bonds—was in the process of becoming complete. He had been enhanced based on information from Diamond, the Sword of Might, and what Diamond had learned of the Sword of Tasuki during combat, and he was now capable of achieving what had been envisioned upon his forging. It was now theoretically possible for him to perform a four-person Union. There was still one major unknown, however: what kind of repercussions a four-person Union would have on the wielders.

"We have no way of knowing if you will survive the battle, or what you might lose if you do," Bond said.

"It sounds like we'll be lucky to lose just an arm or a leg," Tiana said, looking worried.

"That is right. You must decide what to give up when you perform the four-person Union. Do not even think of sacrificing yourself. I want you all to imagine a future for yourselves and wish strongly for your survival. Am I understood?"

"…Sure, but you're being way too serious. This would be easier

to talk about if you'd eased into the topic more naturally and asked the question sort of like a joke," Nick said.

"Stop being so irresponsible!" Bond yelled angrily.

Nick smiled awkwardly and apologized.

"I'm just kidding. You need to think of the future, too, you know."

"Hmm?"

"You said you don't care about your mission and that you want to become an author, remember? Don't forget that," Nick said.

"Ah, Nick was just trying to change the subject," Tiana teased.

"Shut up," Nick snapped.

Zem smiled, and Karan blushed.

"Anyway…I'm happy for you two," Tiana said. "You're getting married. I want to celebrate now."

"As do I. My sincerest congratulations," Zem said.

There were hints of loneliness and kindness in their voices as they teased Nick and Karan. Their location, their situation, and even their mindsets were all different from normal. They shared a moment of affection, knowing that things between them might never be the same again.

"Ladies and gentlemen! The greatest idol in all the world, Agate, has arrived to grace you with her presence!"

But that all ended when the door slammed open.

"Whoa! What're you doing here?!" Nick yelled.

"I knew you all would be standing around doing nothing!" Agate said.

"We're not doing nothing. We're having an important meeting," Nick said, shooing her away with his hands.

Agate just ignored him. "I'm here to rescue you from your boredom and give you a job. I have a charity concert coming up, and I'd like you to handle setting up the venue and security."

"We're busy. We were just discussing important war and strategy stuff," Nick said.

"Yeah, right. I heard you all laughing from outside. I got permission from Sergeant Demon to give you this job. She said since you all weren't doing anything, I could put you to work."

"I swear… It's one headache after another with her…," Nick grumbled.

"The Hundredth Anniversary Concert was a total disaster.

Could you please try to do a proper job this time?"

"She's got a point," Karan said.

She and the others looked willing, which surprised Nick.

"You guys actually wanna do this?" he asked.

"I'm surprised you don't," Tiana said.

"Yeah. That's unlike you," Bond said.

"Well, think about it… You know what her signature song is."

"Oh," Tiana said, realizing the reason for Nick's reluctance. He was talking about Agate's solo song, "The Lovely Paladin."

"Do you really think it's a good idea to perform 'The Lovely Paladin' while we're on your staff at the venue, now that everyone knows the song's about us?" Nick asked. "That's just asking for trouble."

Agate sighed loudly. "Oh, Nick. That kind of pessimism is exactly why we're performing this concert. There are way too many people in this city who are down in the dumps like you, and we need to cheer them up. Please help us do that!"

"This is crazy talk!" Nick protested.

"I want your help, too, Karan. Actually, maybe it would be better to have you onstage singing and dancing. The Hundredth Anniversary Concert left a bad taste in my mouth."

"Not happening. Singing is your job," Karan said, shaking her head.

Agate smiled, looking disappointed. "I just want you all to have some fun; you need that at a time like this. Pretty soon, I won't have as many opportunities to perform for you."

"That guilt trip's not gonna work," said Nick. "Do you really think I don't know your schedule? You're doing a charity concert today. In two weeks, you're performing at the grand opening of a new underground shelter and public hall. You visited some knights to lift their spirits, too."

Agate looked taken aback. "Yeah, but security at my other concerts is super strict. It's really hard to invite people backstage!"

"You just wanna make us help! I wanna be in the front row waving my magic glow stick! But I've felt too awkward being around other idol fans since they found out about my connection to you!"

"What's the big deal? You should forget about that and enjoy

yourself,” Tiana said.

“Yeah. Do the job properly this time when no one will bother you,” Karan said.

“We should do as she asks. We are renting rooms in Starmine Hall, after all,” Zem said.

“Quite right. It is an honor to be depended on by others,” Bond said.

After being pressured into it by his party members, Nick reluctantly left the reception room, deciding to comply with Agate’s request. Bond spoke to him as they began to follow the idol down the hall.

“Nick, I wanted to talk to you about something, but I missed my chance.”

“Where’s this coming from?” Nick asked.

“…There is something important I must tell you later. Oh, it is nothing bad, so don’t worry too much about it,” Bond said.

“Huh? Uh, okay.” He was unsettled by Bond’s ominous words but decided to trust that it was nothing to worry about.

Nick didn’t know it, but he would be less than pleased when he heard what Bond had to say.

The Sword of Bonds was fully conscious from the moment he was forged.

Normally, magic items gradually awakened to consciousness and then sharpened their minds by learning from their environment. The speed of that process varied, but it wasn’t too different from how human minds developed.

However, magic items that were developed to have consciousnesses from the beginning were different. They were created with wisdom, knowledge, and free will; all they lacked was experience.

They were designed for use in combat but lacked fighting experience.

They were born with a mind of their own yet had no friends.

“Father. When will I be able to go outside?”

“Soon.”

The man the Sword of Bonds called “Father” was his lead developer—a mage and magic item inventor brilliant enough to earn the title of sage. He had discovered the principle behind the ritual spell known as “Union” and developed a holy sword that would allow people of ordinary magical ability to use it.

When the Sword of Bonds was unveiled, his specifications were the very best among the holy swords in development at the time, and it was rumored that he would be the primary weapon used to fight the demon god. There was one problem, however: There were too few people capable of using him. Some succeeded at achieving a two-person Union, but one involving three people proved significantly more difficult.

The lead developer blamed this on the mental states of the wielders, and the Sword of Bonds believed him. It was easy for two people to align themselves, but much harder for three or four people to do so. Even a child could understand the logic, so everyone accepted it as the truth.

However, it was a lie. While it was true that part of the problem lay with the aptitude of the wielders, in his heart, the lead developer knew that putting the entirety of the blame on that wouldn’t lead to any progress. If he had simply humbled himself and coordinated with the other holy sword projects, he might have completed the Sword of Bonds, and the demon god might have truly been defeated. Instead, the Sword of Bonds’ development stalled, and he was sealed away without ever being used in combat.

The lead developer told one more lie. He said the demon god would eventually resurrect, and that someone was guaranteed to seek the Sword of Bonds when that time came. Once again, the holy sword believed him. He had no other choice. The magic item arsenal closed down after having its resources drained by the Demon God War, and although the demon god had been defeated, social order collapsed. There was no one left to guide a magic item like him that surpassed human understanding. Before long, he was seized by the Adventurers Guild and left to slumber at the bottom of the Labyrinth of Bonds.

“Now that I think about it, they really had no idea what they were doing,” Bond said with a sigh.

He was currently in a room underneath Starmine Hall. It was on a special floor with much tighter security than where he and his party members were staying, but it was shockingly messy. Valuable orbs containing mana were strewn about the floor like common marbles, magic swords had been carelessly disassembled and tossed aside, and documents and parts of magic items were scattered everywhere. It looked like either the room of a researcher in the middle of an experiment or a child struggling with their summer homework.

The room had one purpose: completing the Sword of Bonds. This was where the holy swords had come together to achieve that goal.

“Well, they were certainly careless. The research facility was so compartmentalized that none of them could see the whole picture, even if they thought they could,” Diamond said.

The project had reached a good stopping point, so Bond and the other holy swords were taking a moment to chat.

“You could actually say the same of us. We’ve never had a chance to speak openly just between us like this,” Bond said.

“Huh, is that true?” Diamond asked, acting innocent.

“Do not play dumb!” said Bond. “You were terribly cruel back when you were the Sword of Distortion!”

“He’s right. There was no one who didn’t tremble upon hearing your name,” the Sword of Evolution said.

“Come on, I had no choice!” responded Diamond. “If I hadn’t acted with an iron fist, we would’ve been treated like objects by the laboratories and arsenals that developed us, and thrown away once we’d served our purpose! It’s thanks to me that we were only sealed away and are still alive today!”

During the Demon God War, Diamond had wielded influence equal to that of any human ruler. There were even ancient documents that accused her of unsavory things such as collecting girls she liked and making them serve her, and using the demon god’s voice to torture people.

It was true that she had forged a reign of terror of sorts running the Distortion Agency, the organization she’d created to oppose the demon god. However, she’d also used her bad reputation to protect the girls who were offered to her and to prevent political interference.

"Grk... That may be true, but I detested being sealed. Do you have any idea how long I slumbered?" the Sword of Evolution asked.

"Sorry about that. But your behavior was considered problematic in more ways than one, Sword of Evolution," Diamond said.

"Hmph. You're the last person I want to hear that from. There must be a few things you want to say, too, Sword of Bonds."

Bond thought for a moment, then shook his head. "No... Considering what may have happened if I were found by anyone else, I think lying in the Labyrinth of Bonds for so long was for the best."

"...Yeah. You found a good wielder," Diamond said, smiling softly.

"Hello! He's my wielder, too, you know!" the Sword of Might complained.

"I know, I know," Bond said.

"What about you, Sword of Evolution? What do you think of the team that made you?" Diamond asked.

"Hmm... I think they were vain and competitive, as is typical of sages. I cannot say they were incredibly virtuous, and if I had to guess, I do not think their approach would have led to an Awakening. But what is so wrong with that?" the Sword of Evolution said.

"Huh? Does that not bother you?" Diamond asked.

"If nothing else, they searched earnestly for a plan that would lead to victory. They didn't let their theme for how to improve humanity overly influence their work. I see now that if the sages had all come together and shared ideas, they may have created one perfect holy sword instead of the five they did and finished off the demon god for good. But if that had happened, we would not have been created. We would lack our present diversity."

"I guess that's true. In the end, our parents were human, and we're not so different from humans ourselves. That goes for the Sword of Tasuki, too," Diamond added softly.

The Sword of Might spoke up after some thought. "Hmm, my place wasn't really like that. The atmosphere was way less brutal."

"Wait, you remember it? You're different from Olivia, right?" Bond asked.

"Oh yes. I have communication records from when the Sword of Might was developed. I would lose my fighting ability and skills if those vanished,"

replied the Sword of Might.

“I see. That means you essentially warped from the time of the ancient civilization to modern day,” said Bond.

“Yeah! Life has been really hard for me since I woke up! And Olivia is disappearing, too...,” the Sword of Might said.

Bond felt a pang of sadness at the mention of Olivia. She was the first holy sword he had befriended in Labyrinth City. She had been a free spirit but never ceased her lonely battle.

“We must fight even harder to make up for her absence,” he said.

“That’s right,” Diamond agreed earnestly. “...Anyway, Bond. You’re about to become the complete holy sword that our parents, the sages, strove for. We’ve run enough simulations for a lifetime, but you’re aware we’ll be doing this in reality without any practice, right?”

“Yes,” replied Bond.

“Multiple labyrinths have already begun to Stampede, but we’ve left it to the adventurers and knights to handle that. We’ve hired backup, too,” Diamond said.

“Forget about me. Are you all okay with this?” Bond asked. “You will be dormant until the battle is over, and if we lose, you may never wake again. You will be temporarily entrusting your power to me.”

To achieve completion, Bond needed the power of each of the remaining holy swords: the Sword of Resonance’s ability to speak to souls and help them achieve harmony, the Sword of Evolution’s ability to manifest life’s potential and produce an inexhaustible supply of tough flesh, and the Sword of Might’s ability to control a powerful body. He was also being enhanced with data obtained from analyzing the Sword of Tasuki and magic items he’d left behind, as well as magic items and mana resources supplied by Marde, but the powers of the three other holy swords were the key.

Diamond, the Sword of Evolution, and the Sword of Might were going to temporarily give their powers to Bond, placing themselves in a deep sleep until the battle with the demon god concluded. In the worst case, this could mean their deaths. They could also lose their powers for good if Bond lost to the demon god, and there was a chance they could suffer irreversible

damage during the battle. This room was a shelter to protect the three swords in their defenseless state.

Diamond had been acting as the leader of Starmine Hall, which meant her absence would be felt. She had entrusted as much work as she could to Joseph and the rest of her staff, but they would still be shorthanded.

"Labyrinth City is my backyard. I don't mind lending my power to save it from destruction. Besides, I recognized Karan as my wielder. I know she'll be mad at me if I chicken out now," Diamond said.

"I would never abandon my wielder, either!" the Sword of Might added as if it were the most obvious thing in the world.

"What about you, Sword of Evolution?" Bond asked.

"I have objections, of course," the Sword of Evolution said indignantly.

"I would have been surprised if you didn't," said Bond.

"But I have received my payment," continued the Sword of Evolution. "I'll do as I wish with him after the war."

"I am honestly a bit surprised you care about your wielder so much," remarked Bond.

"Don't get me wrong. Mortal wielders are little more than consumable goods with an expiration date. But it would harm my reputation if someone died as a result of using me."

Of all the people who'd survived the Colosseum of Carnage, Leon had suffered the most serious injuries. He was slowly regaining his strength thanks to a rehabilitation program led by Labyrinth City priests and the Sword of Might, but it would be a while before he recovered fully. Participating in the battle against the demon god was out of the question.

The Sword of Evolution had agreed to cooperate with Bond on the conditions that Leon's treatment would continue and that his and Leon's crimes would be cleared after the war.

"You may be free to do as you like, but if you cause trouble like the Sword of Tasuki's done, I'll break you in half," Diamond said.

"I'd like to see you try. And I resent being lumped together with that fastidious freak," complained the Sword of Evolution.

"As if you don't have a fastidious side as well," retorted Bond. "You've always hated people who gamble at casinos and engage in other such immoral activities."

"I dislike those who indulge overly in their desires, but I do not deny the desires themselves. In that sense, this city is not so bad. I would like to build a city that fosters evolution and growth by encouraging competition between those who hold such desires."

"You want to build a city? Hmph. If that's a challenge, I accept," Diamond said with a bold smile.

"I can't wait to wipe that smug look off your face," the Sword of Evolution said, laughing arrogantly.

"All right, that's enough. I know none of us want to go, but...it's almost time for him to leave," the Sword of Might said, sensing a fight.

"We're counting on you," said Diamond.

"I expect nothing less than victory," said the Sword of Evolution.

"Good luck!" said the Sword of Might.

Bond accepted their encouragement and calmly closed his eyes. Diamond transformed into the Sword of Resonance, leaving everyone other than Bond in their sword form. Multicolored light shone from the gems embedded in their hilts and gathered around him.

The power of each holy sword now resided within Bond.

Bond recalled the moment he had decided to leave the Labyrinth of Bonds. He'd made the decision out of duty after sensing omens of the demon god's revival.

He could have ignored the signs and gone back to sleep. The people who had developed him were long gone, and civilization had regressed to the point that there might not even be anything worth saving. He'd gone back to sleep several times like a child who needed to go to school but couldn't get out of bed, dozing for years each time, but eventually the desire to figure out why he had been created and the sense of duty to fulfill the mission bestowed upon him had driven him to act.

Still half-asleep, he'd worked to seize control of the Labyrinth of Bonds. He figured out how the living parts of the labyrinth functioned, and he falsified the knowledge orbs belonging to the Adventurers Guild above it to hint at his presence. He'd had to avoid being too obvious, lest the guild come out in force to seize him.

Bond realized as he perused the knowledge orbs that the

modern Adventurers Guild didn't have much interest in ancient relics like the Sword of Bonds and the other holy swords. Far from it; the guild was likely to treat him as dangerous and seal him away again.

He had to carefully consider the depth and accuracy of the information he planted. He wanted adventurers who were ambitious enough to search for a holy sword, yet also upstanding enough to abide by the guild's request. In short, it had been a gamble.

The first party to venture into the Labyrinth of Bonds was the Iron Tiger Troop, but they didn't suit his purposes. They were certainly strong enough, but the vulgar conversations he overheard suggested they were deceivers by nature.

Bond continued to wait for adventurers worthy of wielding a holy sword. He half expected them never to arrive.

Eventually, a party entered the labyrinth and caught his eye. Their teamwork wasn't bad, and they seemed considerate and respectful of each other as they fought in the closed environment of the labyrinth. He guessed that they had formed under difficult circumstances, but they seemed like a good party.

Bond made up his mind and manipulated the labyrinth's security to lure them to him. He was in for a nasty surprise when they found him.

"""""We're going to sell you."""""

He thought he had made a terrible blunder. He'd forgotten there would be adventurers who wouldn't want to keep a famous holy sword for themselves. That was actually something that earnest adventurers who abided seriously by their contracts were more likely to do.

But it had all worked out. Bond responded to their claim to sell him by putting on a little performance. Although the sob story he gave them was partially genuine, Nick and the others had had no idea that Bond had been the one to sic the amalgam golem on them.

The amalgam golem was meant for training purposes rather than security. It was capable of injuring people, but it couldn't kill. As a safety measure, it was designed to immediately cast healing or reviving magic if it happened to inflict a potentially lethal wound.

The trial had gone according to Bond's expectations, and he made Nick and the others his wielders. He had chosen the name *Bond* and assumed a body imitating his chief wielder.

The adventures that followed could hardly be called glorious. The Survivors had achieved their current level of popularity only after their victory in the Colosseum of Carnage. At the start, they'd only been a party of somewhat eccentric adventurers who no one in their wildest dreams would ever have expected to save the world.

Their first enemy was a wicked adventurer who'd cheated people out of money. Then they'd fought a holy sword who was using said adventurer. Next was a former priest who'd pretended to be a philanthropist as he kidnapped children. It turned out that he was being used by a demon-god worshipper, who was also being used by someone higher up the chain.

Bond wasn't particularly shocked by such encounters. He hadn't met many people back in the time of the ancient civilization, but he'd still watched them closely in an attempt to understand them. Even while locked in the labyrinth, he had continued to observe humanity by reading literature and the Adventurers Guild's information.

Still, the trials he'd gone through with his party had turned out to be invaluable experiences. He'd laughed, he'd cried, and he'd indulged himself in a hobby, spending time not as a holy sword, but as an ordinary adventurer.

Before he knew it, Bond had stopped being so fixated on his mission. It was still important to him; he didn't undergo an identity crisis great enough to abandon the reason he'd been created. That didn't change even after the battle with the Sword of Tasuki. He just no longer considered it something he needed to risk his life to achieve. He would simply do what he could as an adventurer and a member of the Survivors.

And he would survive.

Bond climbed Starmine Hall's spiral staircase step by step toward the roof.

"You…look ready," Nick said.

He found his party members admiring the scenery from the roof. They'd been expecting his arrival, and they turned around to look at Bond.

Their smiles nearly moved him to tears.

“This is a nice spot,” Bond said.

This corner of the roof had been turned into a kind of park. When Diamond had designed the building, she’d meant for this spot to be used as a small venue for weddings and other ceremonies. It offered a wonderful view of the entirety of Labyrinth City, as well as the Five-Ringed Mountains, which towered in the distance.

Unfortunately, Starmine Hall had been transformed into a stronghold, meaning that this spot wouldn’t be used for such happy occasions anytime soon. Instead, the Survivors were using it to depart for battle.

“There are already groups of adventurers and knights fighting forces of monsters,” Bond told them. “It is likely that some of them are already struggling. But we are going directly to the demon god. Its body fled from beneath Labyrinth City to within a volcanic crater in the Five-Ringed Mountains. We’re going to fly right there and strike.”

“Yeah,” Nick said.

“Before we fight the demon god, however, we must first fight the fallen angel, the most powerful monster that defends the Five-Ringed Mountains. Its physical strength is said to rival the demon god’s, but it has a weakness. We must defeat it yet also save enough energy for the demon god.”

“Yes. We understand,” Zem said.

“The demon god emits Mantras that strengthen monsters and contaminate the minds of people. Labyrinth City and the surrounding villages will be protected by Diamond’s barriers; however, the adventurers and knights fighting in the field will not. Keep the battle as contained as possible to minimize the demon god’s influence.”

“We’ve got it,” Karan said.

“The demon god doesn’t have one specific body. It adopts a new body with unique abilities in reaction to the fears of the people it is fighting. Don’t let fear overwhelm you.”

“You’ve told us this a million times already,” Tiana said.

“Once you use Union, there is no going back,” Bond warned them.

“Yep. We’re ready,” Nick said. Karan, Tiana, and Zem nodded.

Bond strengthened his resolve and nodded back. “I can see you are.”

“Was there anything else you wanted to say, Bond?” Nick asked.

Bond hesitated before answering. “…Do you remember your trip into the Labyrinth of Bonds?”

“Huh? Yeah, of course,” Nick said, confused.

“I thought I was gonna die,” Karan said.

“That was a really difficult labyrinth. There were so many monsters, and they were aggressive, too,” Tiana said.

Their voices were all filled with nostalgia as they recalled the experience.

“You fought an amalgam golem on the bottom floor,” Bond said.

“We sure did,” Nick said.

“It was so strong,” Karan said.

“God, I hated that thing. Just thinking about it pisses me off,” Tiana said.

“I saw my life flash before my eyes,” Zem said.

“That golem was my fault,” Bond said.

The others stared at him blankly. After a short silence, comprehension dawned on Nick’s face.

“Oh yeah, you said you didn’t have full control over the security, right?”

“That’s understandable,” Karan said.

“You can’t expect everything to go perfectly,” Tiana said.

“I believe we all deserve some blame for that incident,” Zem said.

“N-no, that’s not what I meant!” Bond quickly protested.

Nick cocked his head. “What’d you mean, then?”

“It was not a mistake. I played dumb and set the amalgam golem on you myself,” Bond told them.

“…”

“…”

“…”

“…”

They were all speechless.

“I *am* a holy sword, you know? It is well within my rights to give a trial to any who would try to draw me… And you would

have handed me to the Adventurers Guild if I didn't do anything. I assure you I feel bad about it," Bond said, not sounding the least bit guilty. He even sounded amused as he made his excuses.

Bond had overcome many life-threatening situations as a member of the Survivors. The amalgam golem was far from the most powerful opponent the party had faced. In fact, it was quite weak in comparison to what they had fought since.

That fact did little to curb his party members' anger.

"You *can't* be serious! I thought we were all gonna die!" Nick shouted.

"We survived, but we easily could've broken up after that!" Karan yelled.

"Why didn't you tell us this sooner, you idiotic piece of junk! You worthless beta version! I can't *believe* you!" Tiana cried.

"I'm sorry, Bond, but I can't defend you for this," Zem said.

"How dare you call me a piece of junk?! I'm now a completed holy sword! Not to mention the fact I've saved your lives many times over! Surely you can overlook this!" Bond yelled.

"You've helped us through a lot of tight spots, but still! We had no chance of a counterattack or receiving reinforcements down there!" Nick complained.

"I—I went easy on you. I could have stopped the golem as soon as I sensed one of your life signs fading," Bond said.

"I broke multiple bones fighting that thing! I nearly died!" Nick yelled.

"The amalgam golem was capable of using healing magic! You were in no real danger, I swear!" Bond insisted.

"Knowing that now doesn't make the experience any less terrifying!" Nick shouted.

They continued to argue, getting absolutely nowhere as they did. Eventually, Bond broke down crying and apologized in earnest, saying "I'm sorry" over and over again.

"Geez, you should've apologized from the beginning instead of trying to laugh it off," Nick said.

"I-I'm so sorry…," Bond cried.

Bond's party members finally relented when they saw him wiping away tears.



“What’re we gonna do with you…? Oh!” Nick said as something occurred to him.

“What is it?” Karan asked.

“I just realized I’ve been hiding something from you, too. I accidentally threw away one of the books you put in my room… then told you the innkeeper did it,” Nick confessed.

“What?!” Bond interjected with surprise.

“Nick, I once stepped on some idol merchandise in your room and hid it under the bed,” Karan said.

“I snuck into your fridge while you were drunk, Karan, and ate a rare cheesecake you got from the pastry shop on Academy Street that you were saving for a special occasion,” Tiana said.

“I once got carried away telling funny stories about Nick and Tiana to the girls at a bar. The stories turned into rumors, and a nonfiction author I met at the bar ended up publishing a book based on them without getting all of the facts straight,” Zem said.

“That’s by far the worst one!” Nick shouted.

They began to argue, competing to reveal the worst secret. They shared things that would have been better off not said, and they voiced complaints they’d kept bottled up inside, stubbornly continuing for close to an hour.

“I-I’m exhausted… You guys aren’t hiding anything else, are you?” Nick asked.

“Nope, that’s everything… How in the world did we end up having that conversation…?” Tiana said.

“It’s Bond’s fault,” Karan replied.

“You were all keeping far worse secrets than me!” Bond said.

“Ah-ha-ha… I think it’s good we were able to get all that off our chests before we left,” Zem said.

“Geez, we’re a mess,” Nick said, sighing and stretching his stiff arms. Bond imitated him.

“There is one more thing we must discuss. What name should we use for your Union state?” Bond asked.

“Huh?” Nick said, surprised. The looks they gave Bond said they hadn’t considered it at all. “Do we really need one?”

“It is essential. You have been able to coordinate without a specific name during two-person Unions by having one person seize control of the body and the other go along with it, but with four people, you will need to be on the same page. If your

coordination weakens or you have a mental disagreement for even a moment, you may freeze up,” Bond explained.

Nick and Tiana knew he was right. They had once been unable to maintain Union after sustaining heavy injuries because Nick wanted to keep fighting and Tiana wanted to retreat.

“That makes sense. You should’ve mentioned this earlier,” said Nick.

“Well, I thought it was obvious what you would choose,” said Bond.

“Good point,” said Tiana.

“Yeah, there’s only one option,” said Karan.

“I agree,” said Zem.

Bond looked at the four of them and nodded with satisfaction.

“Then let us be off… Together, we are the Survivors!” Bond declared before transforming into the Sword of Bonds.

The appearance of his sword form hadn’t changed, but the gem shone with a new light.

Nick grabbed the handle, and the others laid their hands atop his.

“”””””Union!”””””

The Five-Ringed Mountains were both a mountain range and a collection of labyrinths. The most dangerous of the labyrinths was called the Fallen Angel Mountain Fortress. Considered an S-rank labyrinth—the most difficult rank on the Adventurers Guild’s scale—it was guarded by a fallen angel that was among the most powerful monsters in the world and a survivor of the previous Demon God War.

In the intervening centuries, not one person had defeated him.

Originally an angel who had betrayed mankind by defecting to the demon god’s side, he had been stripped of his halo—the weapon angels used to burn the land to ash—and three of his six pairs of wings that supplied mana.

Even so, the fallen angel had spent the centuries after the war defending the volcanic crater in the Five-Ringed Mountains that

the demon god had once used as its stronghold. He had fought many S-rank adventurers, and although a few of those fights had ended in a draw, he soundly defeated most of them and had certainly never let a human get the best of him.

He had seen the Stampede and sensed that another Demon God War was beginning, yet he still hadn't budged from his spot.

Now that same angel saw a shooting star streak across the sky.

It came from Teran, the Labyrinth City, and flew in his direction.

He determined it to be a true threat to the demon god and left his stronghold for the first time in centuries.

"Well, now… This looks like a formidable opponent," he said to himself, seeing the identity of the shooting star.

For a moment, he wistfully thought it was an angel, one of his old brethren. They looked young and seemed to exist mysteriously between genders. Their silver hair was as bewitching as a moon. They had clear eyes and the perfectly chiseled physique of an ancient statue. Their pure white cognition armor and the halo and four bladelike wings on their back possessed the beauty and majesty of an angel and clearly contained tremendous power.

Most overwhelming of all, however, was their golden greatsword. The fallen angel was captivated by its functional beauty and divine nature.

"Is that…a human?" he murmured, trembling with excitement.

The person's mana was nearly as pure as an angel's. They were undoubtedly a hero who had come to fight the demon god, and a person of infinitely rare strength that surpassed even his own.

The hero was flying toward the volcanic crater with tremendous speed.

"It seems this is where I die. Come at me!" the fallen angel shouted, spreading his wings and taking to the sky. He flew in place above the crater and gathered strength.

His opponent was here to fight the demon god, and they would hit him with everything they had. The only chance he had was to stake everything on his first attack. He built up a vast amount of mana that rivaled even a holy sword's supply.

"Take th— Gah!"

"Not so fast!"

The fallen angel's attack was interrupted when someone flew toward him from out of nowhere. They kicked him at what felt like the speed of light, sending him tumbling down out of the air with his surprise assailant.

The Survivors—the product of Nick, Karan, Tiana, and Zem's Union—watched in surprise as the fallen angel plummeted downward.

Uh, who was that? They just helped us… Were they using Stepping? Nick's mind voiced.

The skill with which the person moved reminded him of Olivia. They didn't look like her, though, but appeared to be a young girl with golden hair streaming behind her.

The world sure is a big place… I feel like I've seen her somewhere before…, Tiana's mind said.

Whoever they are, they probably came to help. Let's press on, Karan's mind said.

The Survivors had reached the air above the volcanic crater located in the Five-Ringed Mountains. Poisonous smoke rose from it, and it boiled with mana-induced magma that would incinerate a normal person at a touch. Passing through the magma to get underneath it would be impossible even for the strongest person.

However, they couldn't fight the demon god without doing just that.

"I sense no more obstacles obstructing our battle underground. Go ahead and enter," Bond said.

The Survivors obeyed and dived down into the crater. There was an underground space beneath the magma that contained the demon god's egg. They had a basic understanding of what was down there, thanks to a survey Diamond had conducted before the battle, but that information was now a few days old.

"What is this place…? I don't feel any heat… And was it always this big?" the Survivors said, confused.

Pushing their way through the magma, they emerged into a disorientating space that looked like the night sky. The crater and

magma had vanished from above them, and there was no ground visible beneath their feet. The space extended infinitely in all directions, and all that was visible was the light of stars shining in the distance, which spun around them with dizzying speed.

“How can the inside of the crater be this large? Is this an illusion…?” the Survivors asked.

“We are inside the demon god’s egg. Its body is a universe unto itself,” Bond said.

“A universe… You mean like the sea of stars?”

They were so captivated by the view that it took them a moment to realize what was happening to them. The lack of friction in the air or sound in the environment made it difficult to tell.

“Hey…are we falling?” the Survivors asked.

“Yes. It is hard to tell because of the lack of visual markers or air resistance, but you are moving—or falling, you could say—at a rapid speed,” Bond said.

“What the hell do we do, then?!” they asked.

“Use Stepping and your flying magic together! You need to regain your sense of equilibrium!”

The Survivors hadn’t realized they were quickly moving through this world with no sky or ground until Bond told them.

“Waaaaah!” they shouted, fighting desperately to regain their balance.

They remembered something Olivia had once said: that Stepping was created to fight the demon god.

You’ve gotta be kidding… Stepping isn’t the key to defeating the demon god, it’s goddamn required for you to be able to do anything at all! Nick’s mind complained.

The Survivors looked around, panting hard. The stars had stopped moving. They had actually never been moving at all—it had only appeared that way because the Survivors had been barreling through space at such a speed. Now that they had regained their equilibrium using Stepping, they could finally see that.

“Have you settled down now?”

The Survivors didn’t have long to rest before someone spoke directly into their minds. The voice simultaneously sounded like it was coming from right in front of them and as if it had been

amplified and sent to them from far away. Whatever the case, each word resounded loudly and clearly.

An obligation to answer welled up within the Survivors. In fact, it wasn't so much an obligation as a *desire*. They felt a warmth, as if they'd just been asked by a parent or mentor. Feeling that in such an empty space was strange, to say the least.

The Survivors braced themselves and searched for the source of the voice.

"I am over here."

"What the…? The Sword of Tasuki?! You're still alive?!" the Survivors shouted, shocked.

The Sword of Tasuki—someone they thought they'd killed—had suddenly appeared right before their eyes. He was wearing holy armor that had been painted from black to white by the mana gushing from his body, indicating he was ready to fight.

The Survivors were far stronger than they had been the last time they'd faced him, but the fear at the memory of their battle in the Colosseum of Carnage still sent cold sweat down their back.

"No… Something's different," the Survivors said, observing him more closely. There was no trace of the Sword of Tasuki's former bloodlust; he simply watched them with an expression of great curiosity. The Sword of Tasuki had admitted defeat after their deadly battle, but there was no way he would act so peacefully toward them.

"I re-created this form from offerings given to me and from your fear. I automatically react to the animosity and terror of those I interact with."

"Geez, that scared me… I get it now," the Survivors said.

"My Mantra does not seem to affect you so much. I am grateful for that, as it means we will be able to converse. It is quite difficult speaking to people when your voice contaminates their mind. What is your name?"

The dots connected in the Survivors' mind upon hearing the word "Mantra." Not that they should've needed any hints to figure out who this was, given the location.

The being talking to them was the reason they'd come here. The reason the holy swords had been created. The reason that

Labyrinth City, the Holy Kingdom of Dineez, and the rest of the Land of Sacred Flame were on the verge of destruction.

The Survivors had found themselves face-to-face with the enemy.

“Are you…the demon god?” they asked.

“Yes. I am Skiaprelli, one of the five gods…not that that lofty title has any real meaning. My true title is Skiaprelli, the God-Class Anti-Otherworld Defense Mechanism. It is very nice to meet you. What is your name?” the demon god asked again.

“…The Survivors,” they replied.

“It is a pleasure, Survivors,” said the demon god. They sounded as if they were welcoming a guest and showed no sign whatsoever of attacking.

“…If a god’s here, does that make this the heavens?” the Survivors asked.

Karan remembered a conversation that made her think she might know where they were. The people of the ancient civilization had driven the gods out of the Land of Sacred Flame and into the heavens.

“You are correct. This is the heavens. However, the other gods—Medora, Baer, Virginie, and Lowell—are not here. They each exist in a world on a slightly different phase from this one. These are artificial spaces that differ from reality, where you all reside. When my egg hatches, this dimension will connect to yours.”

“I don’t really get it, but does that mean this world was made specifically for you?” the Survivors asked.

“Yes. Welcome to my world,” the demon god said.

“You’re…surprisingly friendly. Are you trying to intimidate us? Show us that mere humans like us pose no threat to you?” the Survivors asked cynically.

Yet the demon god didn’t look offended.

“…I feel wary. Speaking in this form is somewhat difficult,” the demon god said, transforming from the Sword of Tasuki into the form of a young girl. Something about the form

felt transient, but it looked entirely human. The neck-length black hair and deep purple eyes would have looked more at home in a town library than this endless space.

The demon god's clothes had changed, too. Their new outfit lacked the sharp, martial feel typical of holy armor and was skintight for ease of movement, with a hard material protecting only the chest and feet. It was a strange form that favored functionality.

The Survivors guessed this must have been what people looked like long ago.

"This clothing was the prototype for holy armor. It was once called a 'space suit,'" the demon god said.

"…That must be what the Originators wore. Is that the face of an Originator, too?" the Survivors asked.

"I am borrowing the form of one of my developers. This is similar to your magic item's Parallel ability."

The Survivors grew concerned. They had naturally felt on edge and ready to fight when the demon god looked like the Sword of Tasuki, but it was difficult to muster any sort of animosity toward this form. They were also unaffected by the magical Mantra in the demon god's voice, which automatically projected an expansive barrier that put people in a state of fear and roused monsters.

"I am not trying to torment the creatures that live upon this land. Nor do I mean to place fear in their hearts. The reason you are not afraid of me is because you are able to properly hear my words."

"You don't want to fight?" the Survivors asked.

"I see no reason to rush into things. I shall fight you if you wish it; however, let us talk first."

The Survivors had no choice but to take the demon god at their word. They would have already attacked if they'd wanted to, yet the demon god hadn't done anything while the Survivors had been tumbling helpless through space, and they still weren't projecting any aggressive mana.

"…Fine. We'll hear you out. But make it short," the Survivors said.

“Allow me to put it simply, then. Would you consider allying with me?” the demon god asked.

“You want to be our *ally*?”

“Perhaps I worded that incorrectly. What I actually wish to ask is, would you allow me to serve you?”

The demon god kneeled before the Survivors.

“…What?”

The Survivors hadn’t been surprised by the question. The demon god had shown no animosity toward them, so an appeal to win them over wasn’t unexpected. They were not prepared, however, for the sight of a being called a god kneeling before them.

“…Uh, you’re the god of all monsters. You’re kinda trying to wipe out mankind,” the Survivors said.

“I am sure I seem like a superior being to monsters and the primitive creatures that call themselves human. However, I cannot disobey a human, nor can I kill them. I was made by humans, after all.”

“You’re talking like you don’t consider us human.”

“I do not acknowledge the protists of this planet to be humans.”

“…We’re just the unworthy remnants of the Originators in your eyes, are we?”

“Humans—or as you call them, the Originators—achieved a great Awakening in the past and shifted to a higher dimension. Those who failed to Awaken worked with the other gods to create those who now live on this Land of Sacred Fire.”

“…So if the people who Awakened were still around, you’d see them as human?”

“Yes. Just as you are right now.”

The demon god smiled at them.

“Excuse us if we don’t jump for joy,” the Survivors said.

“You may disagree, but on this point, the gods all have the same stance. To be defined as human, one must Awaken to obtain superior senses and increase

their soul level. None of us consider the primitives of this land human. We only differ in the way we act on that belief," the demon god said.

"What do you mean?"

"For example, Lowell, the god of encounters, determined that you are not human but have the potential to reach that state, so we should do all we can to encourage your evolution. By contrast, Baer, the god of harvest, agrees that you are not human but argues you are precious creatures that should be protected, and that encouraging evolution is excessive interference. Virginie and Medora hold moderate positions between those two."

"And what do *you* think of the 'primitives,' as you call them?"

"I see them as an abundant resource."

"What, like wheat or rice?"

The Survivors shuddered in response to hearing the cold viewpoints of the gods. They had already known that the real gods differed from the objects of worship humans had built them up to be, but the demon god's explanation drove home just how puny humans were in their all-powerful eyes.

"My job is to prepare for the defense of this star system. Producing monsters and collecting resources are only parts of that process," the demon god said.

"From who?" the Survivors asked.

"What do you mean, 'from who'?"

"Who are you protecting the planet from?"

"Who knows?"

"You're kidding…"

"I truly have no idea. However, it has been magically proved that intelligent life that surpasses us does exist. I would not be surprised if the alien gods the Originators fought appeared tomorrow and destroyed the world."

The Survivors felt a flickering flame of passion from the demon god. They hid a fierceness within their calm persona,

which had the power to influence reality. It didn't affect the Survivors in their current state, but if they hadn't used Union, the demon god's words alone might have killed them.

"Forgive me. 'Tomorrow' might be a slight exaggeration. Regardless, I am serious about this. I am always—*always*—afraid that this world will be lost."

"Why are you protecting it?" the Survivors asked.

"Would you take issue if I told you it was because this is humanity's homeland?"

"Of course. It's our homeland, too."

"Your histories treat me as your archenemy, and it is true that I have done things to earn that title. This is a vital cause to me; however, I understand that you all see my actions as cruel."

"Then don't bother asking us to side with you. You have to know how hated you are."

"I could give you all so much. For example, if you like singing, I can make you a monster with that skill."

"Please tell me that was a joke."

Someone within the Survivors screamed that it wasn't the least bit tempting.

"If you join your power with mine, it will only require the most minuscule amount of my mana resources to grant your wishes. Your body and soul are currently extremely close to the Originators. You could easily suppress the angels and the other gods. I cannot change my stance on the primitives of this land, but we can protect them as much as possible."

"Huh. Cool. Thanks for sharing your opinion. Let's go ahead and get this started," the Survivors said, holding the Sword of Bonds at the ready.

"…What part of my offer do you object to?"

"For starters… You want us in our Union state, don't you?"

"Yes. However…I cannot overlook your current instability. You are nothing more than four creatures and one artificial intelligence who happen to have

achieved equilibrium. If you join me, I will blend your souls so that your bodies and minds adhere more firmly and stabilize."

"That ain't happening."

"…I understand why you would take issue with using the primitives as a resource or my management policies. Yet I cannot comprehend why you would want to give up your nearly perfect state."

The demon god looked bewildered. The Survivors paid that no mind.

"Well, that's my biggest objection. I'm not denying your mission, but if you're aware that what you're doing to us 'primitives' is cruel, you shouldn't be surprised when we resist you."

"That is fair. However, you will suffer irreversible damage when you Split. It's possible you will all die. Preventing that and maintaining your superior body and soul only benefits you. Regardless of whether we fight, you will have to find a way to stave off a Split. The other gods would agree with me, I am certain."

"That's none of your business. It doesn't matter anyway."

"You fail to understand your worth. If you achieve humanity, you could be the key to bringing about everlasting prosperity."

"Who cares about that? Do you really think we trust anyone?" the Survivors jeered.

"…How disappointing."

The demon god looked truly offended, and the space surrounding them distorted in response to their mood. The stars began spinning again, which wasn't an optical illusion this time. The Survivors and the demon god were perfectly still as they floated in space. The world centered around the two of them, unmoved by the skies.

"Come forth, asteroids, and eradicate these fools who oppose me."

A giant, scorching rock shot toward the Survivors at near light

speed.

The demon god spoke Mantras that inspired panic in human hearts, made monsters go berserk, and manipulated creation at will. They hadn't cast a spell to summon the asteroid but had spoken it into existence. The demon god ruled the heavens, and even inorganic substances obeyed their voice.

"Now we're talking! Let's do this, Bond!" the Survivors shouted.

"Certainly!" Bond responded.

"Fire Dragon Slash—Hundred Chain!"

The light enveloping the Survivors turned into a burning white color like the sun and settled within the Sword of Bonds. They swung the sword, and the white flames became boundary lines that tore up the space and shattered the approaching asteroid.

"You intend to tear through this very space? I won't let you do that… My vassal, take your revenge on the sword that struck you."

The asteroid the Survivors cut apart turned to starlight and melded together into the shape of a person. It was much slower than before, but significantly more intimidating, towering over the Survivors at hundreds of times their height.

"A giant of starlight… Legend has it that this is the strongest monster the gods can employ. It is now also resistant to any slashing attacks!" Bond said.

"We have plenty of ways to handle that," the Survivors said, and the Sword of Bonds transformed. It turned into the rapier that Nick/Tiana used, but it was significantly brighter.

"Lightning Bird Flock!" the Survivors chanted, shaping the light. This was Bellocchio's signature magic. Tens of thousands of birds filled the space and charged at the starlight giant, looking like a flock migrating south.

Blue light dyed the demon god's world, and it started to strain. The Survivors had surpassed the demon god's powerful spell with an even greater one of their own.

"Survivors. Do you see the ring far off in the distance?" the demon god asked suddenly in the midst of their intense fight.

“What does that have to do with anything?” the Survivors asked.

“Put simply, that ring is a remnant of the era of the Originators’ civilization.”

The Survivors strained their eyes in the direction the demon god was pointing, and sure enough, they found a ring there. It was shaped like the orbit of a planet around a sun and consisted of multiple small heavenly bodies. Looking at it closely, the Survivors realized that each heavenly body shone with the light of life. Some were terribly powerful, while others were as small as dogs and cats by comparison.

“That is the Monster Belt. The planets that make it up are not dense enough to see from the Land of the Sacred Flame with the naked eye. Each one is a heavenly body, a world, and life itself.”

“Do people live on those planets…? Or no, are the planets themselves alive?” the Survivors asked.

They sensed life from the distant ring, as well as war. They could tell it was a battle unlike any they had ever experienced. It felt like each side was bent on totally annihilating the enemy, resulting in a battle too bloody to watch.

“Do not worry; I am only showing you a vision. The Monster Belt is not connected to this dimension. Think of it as if you were looking out a window,” the demon god said.

“What are they doing? Are they fighting…?” the Survivors asked.

“Yes. That is a war.”

“A war…between the planets themselves?”

“Indeed. They are worlds ruled by behemoths born from the melding of biological weapons created by the Originators and an enemy from another world. The behemoths became planets with intelligent life and subordinate creatures living on their surfaces, and they fight for supremacy of the Monster Belt. They have been fighting for two thousand years with no

conclusion in sight… There are alliances and factions between the planets, however, which brings some order to the chaos."

One of the planets in the Monster Belt was shaped like a lion. It was slowly approaching a distant planet, clearly intending to sink its enormous fangs into it. The Survivors looked closely and saw humanlike creatures on the worlds killing each other with swords and spears.

Elsewhere, a new planet formed, and small creatures were born on it. The Monster Belt cycled rapidly between life and death, extinction and birth.

"The starlight giant I just created was in imitation of these behemoths. That attack is a godlike feat on this world, but mere child's play compared to what our true threat can do," the demon god said sadly, staring off into space. **"They have tremendous power. They currently care only for the hegemony of their closed world, yet if they ever took an interest in our world, we would be in considerable trouble."**

"So they're a sleeping giant that could strike at any moment?" the Survivors asked.

"It is not just them. Strain your ears and peer into the darkness. You should be able to sense a terrifying presence."

"That's foreboding."

"Yes. We live in a terrifying universe. We must cultivate the power necessary to eradicate our enemies and defend our world."

The demon god stuck out their right hand and filled it with mana. They then collected the remains of the starlight giant—which had been smashed to tiny pieces—and transformed them into a vortex of pure destructive power. Massive pressure weighed on the Survivors as the power became a pitch-black sphere that let no light through and repeatedly expanded and collapsed under its own weight.

The Survivors gulped as the sphere warped their vision—no, the world itself.

“Survivors. We need to talk,” the demon god said.

“How the hell is that talking?! You’re clearly trying to kill us!” the Survivors shouted.

“This is an imitation of an alien weapon. How would you combat it?”

The pitch-black sphere wrapped itself in dark red flames, which it shot toward the Survivors. The flames consumed everything in their path as they raced toward the Survivors’ feet.

“That is no simple bullet or fire spell! It’s a fake supernova…a huge explosion that occurs when a star dies! This weapon was forbidden even by the Originators!” Bond yelled.

“What can we do?! It’s gonna destroy us and then this world! How did people stop it?!” the Survivors asked.

“They would split space-time to remove the exploding star, erasing it from existence… Or at least, that is what I’ve heard,” Bond said.

“That won’t work. Splitting space-time will tear open a rift to the real world. There’s no point stopping the attack if the demon god resurrects and wipes out mankind!” the Survivors said.

“…This is a fictitious world where anything is possible. Use your imagination,” Bond said, sounding distressed.

The Survivors took a moment to digest his words. They had no choice but to stake everything they had on stopping this attack.

“You want us to stop the death of a star with our imagination…? Might as well try it. Phoenix Flock!”

They used the Sword of Bonds to produce an enormous flock of birds, just like they’d done with Lightning Bird Flock. These birds, however, were surrounded by flames—phoenixes, just as the spell’s name suggested.

The phoenixes dove at the black sphere and clung to it. Nothing happened at first, but once a few thousand of them had been absorbed by the ball, they began to have an effect. A fissure opened in the sphere, then closed, then another fissure opened. Time seemed to rewind; heat and light with nowhere to go, and compressed dust danced around the ball, which lost its density.

“Did you just…revive a star?” The demon god stared at the black sphere, dumbfounded.

“Each bird contained advanced resurrection magic. If a star explodes when it dies, we thought we could just revive it to an

earlier point in its life cycle. We've got plenty more ideas. That spell might've been too much for the Originators to handle, but you're not gonna kill us with such old-fashioned magic," the Survivors said.

"...Incredible. This is the power of humanity." The demon god praised them, sounding ecstatic.

"Why do you look so happy?"

"You prevented an inevitable end with the power of imagination. Your strength and indomitable soul are exactly what I have been seeking. I have dreamed of this moment for so long. No—*you* are my dream. Thank you, Survivors."

The demon god's intense joy sent a shiver down the Survivors' spine. Their mirth didn't signal an end to the battle, though. In fact, they could tell it meant the opposite—that the fight was about to increase to a hellish intensity.

"Show me more. I want to see your soul and your dreams," the demon god said.

"Is that the best pickup line you can manage? You have no poetic ability for someone who lives in such a beautiful world," the Survivors mocked.

"That is why I yearn so badly for your humanity. Hmm, what should I send at you next...? Yes, let's see how you handle a bubble of nothingness. It is a pocket of cosmic death that expands at the same rate as the universe itself. Now, my dream, how will you stop it?"

A transparent bubble appeared above the demon god's head. It looked even more ominous than the supernova, which filled the Survivors with fear.

"...I don't think the phoenixes are gonna do anything this time."

"This bubble negates existence itself. Even the phenomenon of death will vanish in its void. Now... prepare yourself!"

The death bubble expanded, threatening to engulf the Survivors.

"...We're not denying your strength. We're denying your

dream," they said.

"You would truly reject me after what I have shown you?" the demon god asked.

"We understand that you have grand ambitions, and that we—the people you call 'primitives'—are only drops of water in the ocean by comparison. But we came here to protect those like us who want to live. We're not your dream—we're your dream's end."

The Survivors lifted the Sword of Bonds overhead and pointed toward something with its tip: the small red star they had revived to prevent from exploding. They absorbed its power into the sword and charged at the death bubble, slashing it in a collision that produced glittering stars that died and were reborn.

Bright white light smothered the world.

* * *



Two people lay collapsed on the mountainside of the Fallen Angel Mountain Fortress in the Five-Ringed Mountains.

One of them was dead. His wings had been plucked, and there was a fist-size hole in his chest. It was the fallen angel who had spent centuries guarding this labyrinth before being taken out by a surprise assailant while preparing to fight the Survivors.

A girl with blond hair lay on the ground next to him. She was heavily wounded, but her mouth and chest were moving weakly. Although she was at death's door, she was doing everything she could to gather her breath and heal herself.

"Man, that fallen angel was a real powerhouse!"

"…Good grief, I thought I really was going to die this time. Please let that be the last time you put such a strain on these old bones."

Two voices came from her mouth. The first was the incredibly cheerful voice of a girl without a care in the world. The second was the gruff voice of a man in his middle years.

"What are you so scared of? We've both died and come back. This time now is all just a bonus, Bellocchio."

"You're as tenacious as they come, Olivia."

"I could say the same to you."

The girl was Dead Man's Balloon—the body that Bellocchio had ended up with after using Union with multiple dead bodies and undergoing an irreversible transformation.

"I really thought I was gone for good. I was positive Argus broke my core."

The other voice belonged to Olivia—a holy sword thought to have died defending Nick from Argus of Combat Masters.

"And yet you survived. Perhaps Argus ripped your core out of your blade and kept it instead of offering it to the demon god," Bellocchio theorized.

"It sure pays to have apprentices!" Olivia said.

"Then when the demon god's egg was destroyed, you partially melted along with the other magic items."

"What are the chances of that?!"

"That is what allowed you to fuse with me when I was about to die. I sure was lucky you were there, given your specialty of

optimizing a person's body and soul… I still didn't think we'd make it in time."

Bellocchio hadn't completely died on the bottom floor of the Colosseum of Carnage. Because the body containing his soul was partially made up of corpses, his life force had already been faint before charging into the demon god's egg. His soul had remained attached to his body, leaving him alive in a magical sense.

However, he would not have survived long in that state. His body and soul were not tough enough to undo the damage he had suffered in the demon god's egg, and the lifespan of his mismatched body was incredibly short.

But by some miracle, a crystal dense with mana—the holy sword core belonging to Olivia, the Sword of Might—had landed next to his corpse, and the fading soul and fading crystal had joined together.

"Your body's lifespan wasn't just lowered because of the cobbled-together nature of this body. It also happened because of the great divergence between your body and your soul. Aligning them is one way to partially fix that," Olivia said.

"I didn't expect that to entail endless physical training in a world where time has stopped. I hadn't pushed myself so hard since I was a novice adventurer," Bellocchio said.

"But you prevailed and adapted your soul to your body. Enough to gradually rebuild your confidence from your brush with death and defeat the fallen angel all by yourself," Olivia said.

"I wasn't by myself, though, was I?" Bellocchio said, and Olivia giggled.

"…Are you satisfied, though?" she asked.

"What do you mean?"

"Your apprentice is fighting right now. Don't you wish you'd given her some words of encouragement?"

Dead Man's Balloon was a living person, a corpse, and a magic item all in one. That strange combination allowed them to see things that were invisible to normal people, including the fight in the demon god's world and the raging fire of heavenly bodies being born and dying in the world of the gods.

"It took a long time to recover enough strength to even lift a finger. Our lungs didn't begin functioning for a while, either. We

couldn’t waste mana or energy on sending a message,” Bellocchio said.

“I guess that’s true,” Olivia said.

“I think they’ll be just fine without hearing from us. It sure pays to have apprentices, after all.”

“We couldn’t have asked for better students… By the way, Bellocchio.”

“What?”

“We’re gonna run out of mana and die if we don’t do something… And I mean soon. We’re in serious trouble.”

“Someone will surely notice us. Adventurers will naturally head this way once they are done fighting the Stampede at the foot of the mountain. Let’s just wait.”

Bellocchio looked up at the nearest mountain peak, unconcerned by Olivia’s panic. The volcanic crater was up there and, directly below it, the gate to the demon god’s world. What they saw there was straight out of myth.

The battle against the demon god in the other world was unfathomably intense. The mana that leaked from the battle projected the forms of the demon god and the hero, and the adventurers fighting monsters below roared, emboldened by the sight. The monsters also cried savagely and fought with renewed vigor.

“There’s nothing else we can do but believe in them, huh?” Olivia said.

“Indeed. We have front row seats, so let us sit back and watch as the fate of the world is decided,” Bellocchio said.

Sometime later, a victorious shout echoed throughout the land. The conclusion of the never-ending fight was finally in sight.

The sun sank toward the Five-Ringed Mountains.

By the time it set, the battle was over.

No Road Is Long with Good Company



It had been almost a year since the demon god was defeated.

Labyrinth City's restoration efforts had reached a peak, bringing an economic boom to the city. The monster corpses from the Stampede all contained dense mana, a fact that the city advertised to invite a variety of new industries. This made up for losing the city's core industry: adventuring.

The labyrinths around Labyrinth City all went quiet after the defeat of the demon god. It would take decades—possibly even centuries—for them to become active again. This required the city to transform from a place with dangerous labyrinths and monsters that provided endless opportunity for valuable mana crystals into a safe city of trade with few monsters.

The regular citizens of the city and surrounding farming villages who couldn't fight monsters welcomed this change, but the many adventurers were left practically unemployed. Some took the opportunity to quit as an adventurer and become a knight or a guard, while others gave up their sword or staff and started a business, but the vast majority left for new lands to continue their adventure.

One of the common destinations was Wegna, the Cavern City. Just like Labyrinth City had once been, it was a place that relied on the economy of defeating monsters and gaining mana crystals.

Unlike Labyrinth City, however, it had only one labyrinth: the Behemoth King Pit. It was a massive labyrinth where a

mysterious, powerful monster that descended from the sky called the Behemoth King resided. No one had ever seen the Behemoth King, yet the monsters it produced, behemoth soldiers, populated the labyrinth and threatened the people living aboveground.

It was said that the labyrinth had one thousand underground floors, though no one had ever made it to the bottom. The record currently stood at floor five hundred and eighty-two. Every day, competition raged to break the record and achieve great fame and rewards.

Cavern City also attracted criminals because of the ease of hiding in its disorderly society, as well as bounty hunters who tracked them down for a living. Some were even drawn to the city because of an interest in the behemoth soldiers and used them for dubious magical experiments or tried to make deals with them for profit.

Lately, a rumor had begun to spread in Cavern City that the Survivors—the heroes who had defeated the demon god—were hiding there.

The Survivors were wrapped in mystery. Some said they were an adventurers' party of four or possibly five people, but the people who witnessed the battle had seen only one overwhelmingly powerful swordsman. No one could agree on what this person had looked like; some claimed they were a red-haired dragonian, while others said they had silver or black hair, or that they were a young man. There was even a rumor they were a female priest with a fondness for women and gambling.

Whoever they were, one thing was certain: The Survivors had disappeared after the battle against the demon god. The Holy Kingdom of Dineez had been unable to reward them for their service, and the nation was determined to figure out their identity and track them down. A reward of one million dina was promised to anyone who located them and reported their whereabouts to the Holy Kingdom of Dineez, with five million dina rewarded to anyone who brought them to the capital.

The Holy Kingdom of Dineez wasn't the only nation searching for the Survivors. The Endoana Republic, where Cavern City was located, as well as Tokoku to the south and the United Cities of Eridania, were offering rewards for finding the hero as well. The nations were essentially warring to welcome the hero first and

win their favor.

There was also a rumor that the remnants of the demon-god worshippers were offering a bounty for the Survivors, and another that the agents of the gods were secretly competing to recruit them into their ranks. The underground struggle to find the hero had only intensified over time.

Cavern City used such ambition to stoke the flames of prosperity. So many people came to seek profit from the Behemoth King Pit that the arrival of any newcomers was hardly considered noteworthy. The danger and profit that accompanied it were indispensable to the lives of many.

The people in Cavern City who ventured into the Behemoth King Pit or made a living fighting people in the city weren't called adventurers.

They were called explorers.

"You should just transfer here officially as a bodyguard."

"Yeah! Or even better, what about being a bodyguard *and* an idol?"

The girl shook her head as her older sister and friends tried to keep her there.

"I already handed over my duties to a rookie, and I can't spend all my time being a bodyguard. I've let you take care of me for too long. I need to become independent."

They were in a dressing room in Moonlight Hall, a new all-purpose theater in Wegna, the Cavern City. The dragonian girl who'd just spoken was preparing to venture out on her own.

"Karan. Are you still thinking of finding and helping the hero?" Daffodil asked.

"I… No, I'm not looking for the hero…I think?" Karan said, cocking her head as if she hadn't thought about it. "Hmm. Yeah, I'm definitely not. I'm not thinking of supporting a great hero or anything like that. But I do feel like something is missing."

"Do you know who that might be?" Daffodil asked.

Karan didn't notice that she'd said "who" instead of "what."

“…I want to do something like team up with some adventurer friends and take on a labyrinth. I guess I’d be fine doing it solo… but I feel like there are people out there who I could trust to watch my back and who would have the same trust in me,” Karan said.

She stared up into the night as she spoke. Bright stars dotted the sky. Some were alone, while others shone with nearby companions. Their light was weaker than that of the stage, but they illuminated Karan and the others all the same.

“Maybe I’ve been inspired a bit by the Survivors, the hero who defeated the demon god. I wanna do something on par with them,” Karan said, laughing.

“Ah, the Survivors. That makes sense. They were truly amazing,” Diamond said with a smile. The hint of smugness in her expression made Karan jealous.

“That’s what I’ve heard. I wish I could’ve seen them. People say that they had golden winglike things and that they fought the demon god with a golden aura blade. I’ve also heard they were beautiful, but no one knows whether they were a man or a woman.”

“…You fought hard during the war, too,” Daffodil said sadly.

“Apparently. I don’t remember it, though…”

Karan had little memory of her time in Labyrinth City. She hadn’t forgotten everything; she remembered leaving the dragonian village alone, joining the party of a man named Callios, and getting deceived and left for dead. An S-rank adventurer named Fifs had helped her recover in secret, during which she had developed a love for gourmet dining and formed a party with…someone.

Everything after that was hazy. She felt like she’d gotten her revenge by defeating Callios, but a part of her also felt like she’d suffered a miserable defeat. She knew one thing for sure: She had somehow gotten involved in the decisive battle against the demon god during her time in Labyrinth City, and she had lost those memories.

There were other adventurers who had suffered similar memory loss. The reason for this was unclear. The most plausible theory was that the demon god’s near-resurrection had produced a thick miasma that had a harmful effect on the minds and bodies

of people. Some occult magazines offered more eccentric theories, such as distortions in space-time or causality, but those were laughed off.

Karan had been worried by her memory loss at first, but it soon stopped bothering her. The main reason for that was the job she'd found after being unsure about what to do with her life and asking Daffodil for help. Her cousin had gotten her a job as an idol bodyguard, which turned out to be pretty fun.

The idols treated Karan with a strange kindness. That was especially true of Agate, who treated her almost like a little sister. She frequently invited Karan to eat or hang out, and eventually invited her to accompany her on tour to Cavern City. Agate had insisted on Karan coming with her, even going so far as to say she would cancel the tour if she didn't. That was how Karan had ended up coming to this city.

And yet, the more fulfilling her days became, the more she felt that something was missing. Her job was fun. She enjoyed spending time with her friends. Yet she had a nagging feeling that she used to share that fun with someone else.

"All right, Daffodil and Agate! You two are way too overprotective of her. Karan wants to set off on her own—you should be supporting her!"

"But Diamond… It's too s—" Daffodil began before being interrupted.

"Karan came with us on this trip. Now it's our turn to hear her out," Diamond said.

Agate and Daffodil couldn't argue with that.

"Sorry… You've all already done so much to help me," Karan said.

"Geez, you've always been so headstrong," Daffodil said.

"Don't push yourself too hard," added Agate.

They both smiled, their expressions pained. They relented to their little sister's—and little sister figure's—desire with affection.

"That's right, Karan. Don't let anyone scam you," Diamond warned.

"Don't worry, I'll be just fine!" Karan said.

And so Karan took her first steps as an explorer of Cavern City.

Her goal was to find what she had lost.

She was almost immediately scammed. Though they hadn't succeeded in the end.

"Let's see, you said they tried to steal your wallet while you were sleeping?" asked the Sun Knight, who'd arrived at the scene to get Karan's account of the incident.

"Yeah," Karan replied.

"We've had a lot of trouble lately because of all the adventurers flooding in from Labyrinth City. But that's pretty impressive. Capturing the inn proprietor and his explorer accomplices and handing them over to the knights yourself is no small feat."

"They were just careless."

"Still."

The Sun Knight looked at the proprietor and explorers, who had been tied up with rope, and laughed derisively.

Karan's first destination after leaving Moonlight Hall had been the Mine Seekers Explorers Guild, which operated for the purpose of exploring the Behemoth King Pit. It was a place where many new explorers gathered, making it similar to the Newbies Guild in Labyrinth City. Karan had found a recruitment poster, spoken to the people who'd put it up, and quickly been admitted into their party.

It was a well-balanced team with a male light warrior, a priest, a swordsman, a female mage, and a priestess. They went right to an inn they used as their base to celebrate the addition of their new member.

"It's the middle of the day, but who cares! Drink up! This is a day of celebration!"

Strangely, Karan's new party members had all been drinking water; she could tell from the scent of their drinks. Her cup, meanwhile, was full of strong alcohol and had a strange herb-like smell to it.

She quickly realized what this meant: They were after her wallet and equipment.

Karan had pretended to be deceived. She'd drunk the alcohol along with an antidote she always carried around and feigned sleep, and she let them steal the money in her wallet and the idol badge she'd gotten as a souvenir. Then, when they were about to grab her most valuable possession, the Dragonbone Sword, she

pounced.

It had taken less than five minutes for her to incapacitate the proprietor of the inn and the five explorers. They insisted on their innocence, of course, claiming that Karan had suddenly attacked and tried to rob *them*.

Unfortunately for them, however, the Dragonbone Sword had retained a bit of its functionality from when it had been the Sword of Resonance and could amplify voices and record sound. The sword had recorded the criminals saying things like, “She doesn’t have much in her wallet, but that sword looks like it would fetch a great price,” and “Same plan as always, old man. Mix that into her drink so we can knock her out.” When Karan played these voice clips for the Sun Knight who came to restore order, he whistled and showered her with praise.

“Well done. My job would be a lot easier if all the adventurers who came from Labyrinth City were as careful as you.”

“I learned during my adventurer days that it’s dangerous to trust people too easily,” Karan said.

“…You’ve been through a lot, haven’t you? Well, good luck.”

The knight left, leading the proprietor and explorers tied up behind him with ropes.

Karan collected herself and went back to the Explorers Guild. Her entrance caused a stir; some of the people in the guild probably knew she’d joined a party of scammers, and seeing her come back alone frightened them.

That was when Karan realized forming a party here was going to be harder than she had thought. The wary eyes of the explorers irritated her, and she lashed out by turning to a guild employee, raising her voice loud enough for all to hear, and saying, “Those explorers who tried to trick me were pathetically weak,” and, “The con men in Labyrinth City are a million times worse.”

That only made people more antagonistic and wary toward her, though, and no one had responded when she’d asked them if they wanted to form a party.

“…Who did I get that big mouth from?” Karan said with a sigh as she sat down at the bar area of the guild. It was busy, but everyone gave her a wide berth.

She felt a strange sense of loneliness. Not because she wasn’t

with Daffodil and the others, and not because she was in a foreign land, but because she felt like she'd just imitated someone who wasn't there. She found herself irritated by his absence.



If only he and the others were with her now.

“…You liar. I knew I shouldn’t trust anyone ever again,” she muttered resentfully.

Karan didn’t know where those words had come from, but she knew they meant there was someone she’d decided to trust. She also knew that, despite her resentment, she would continue to trust and wait for him, or search for him herself.

It would be so much easier to just hate whoever it was for leaving her. But Karan was no longer the kind of person who could live a simple life fearing and resenting everything.

She couldn’t remember her love for him, nor could she erase it.

“You’re damn right. Trusting people is for chumps.”

There was a famous priest in Wegna. He was a mysterious and handsome man who had drifted there from Labyrinth City. His skill with healing was real, he treated all people equally, and he kept all confessions he heard to himself.

There were rumors he had been promoted to high priest, but no one believed them. Zem had one major flaw that overshadowed all his virtues.

“Do I have this right, chief priest? You don’t want me to return until I become a silver-rank explorer?” Zem asked.

“No, you fool! I’m telling you to quit all your philandering! I’m saying if you can’t manage that, then you should take up another profession, such as exploring!” yelled the chief priest.

“Oh, heavens. You might as well ask me to grow gills and become a fish. Becoming an explorer would be much easier than giving up my hobbies.”

“You idiot!”

They were in a room of the Sanctuary of Medora in Cavern City. The chief priest was red-faced from yelling, but Zem, the man on the other end of it, didn’t seem the least bit bothered.

“What a headache,” the chief priest continued. “I placed my confidence in you because you came from Teran, just like the

hero, and because you had the approval of the head of the Dineez Sanctuary… However, I did not expect you to be so debaucherous! This is a scam!”

“No, not in the least. I have nothing to feel ashamed of as a priest,” Zem said.

“Wha…what did you just say?!”

“Epidemics are on the rise lately, likely because of the great influx of people. Studying the red-light district is the quickest way for me to counteract that. Epidemics often spread from such locations, and the anguish those people share makes it easy to obtain information.”

“Let’s say—for the sake of argument—I do acknowledge your right to enter that district. You’re still spending all your time chasing after women!”

Zem hadn’t been sure what excuse to give the chief priest. All of the man’s accusations were flat out true, after all. So he had decided to claim he’d been spending time in the red-light district for work.

“Did you know that some explorers have begun catching an illness similar to yellow demon fever?” Zem asked.

“What does this have to do with anything?” snapped the chief priest.

“I suspect the illness spread from the vassals of the Behemoth that lives in the Behemoth King Pit. Explorers catch it in the labyrinth and spread it to women in the red-light district. Symptoms have been mild so far, but…epidemics are ever-changing. Is this truly something you think the sanctuary should ignore?”

Only half of what Zem had just said was true. He *was* concerned about an epidemic, and he *had* been visiting nighttime establishments to give medical examinations to women who wouldn’t go to a sanctuary or hospital. However, he was only guessing about how the illness was spreading.

“Could you please treat this as a temporary transfer rather than an excommunication? If I become a successful explorer and put a stop to this epidemic, the credit will go to you,” Zem said.

“Hmm…”

The chief priest was an honest man, but he wasn’t free of ambition. He also hated his priests doing extra work that was not

given to them by the sanctuary. Zem thought he was a good man, but they couldn't have been less compatible.

Fortunately, the chief priest could at least recognize Zem's skill.

"…Fine. I won't confiscate your medal, but you had better not cause a scandal," he said.

"Thank you for your understanding. In that case, I best be off," Zem said. He casually left the sanctuary, unbothered by the chief priest's cold glare.

"You weren't fired? Really? Why don't you just quit and work as an explorer full-time?"

Zem had gone straight from the sanctuary to the Mine Seekers Explorers Guild. He already had a decent amount of explorer friends because of his work healing people in the streets, so although this was his first time at the guild, he was welcomed like a regular. This place felt oddly familiar to him, even though he had no explorer experience.

"I wouldn't miss my medal… But I feel like losing it again would be rude to the person who got it back for me," Zem said.

"Huh… Were they a friend?" the explorer woman he was talking to asked.

"No, they… Huh. Now that I think about it, I don't remember them…," Zem said.

"That's a little weird," the woman teased.

Zem smiled and shook his head. "I don't think 'friend' is quite the right word… They were more of a…companion…"

"…You wouldn't happen to be the Survivors, would you?" the woman asked.

"Oh, please," Zem said with a grin.

The woman smiled back as if to say it was a silly question.

"Oh, right," Zem continued. "Speaking of companions, are you looking for anyone to join your party, Ada?"

"Not a chance, bud. Lettin' an indecent man like you into the party would spell the end for us. My party members are way too naive to handle your shenanigans," Ada said.

"Oh dear. I thought that would work," replied Zem. He gave a strained laugh, but he was disappointed. Priests and clerics were irreplaceable positions; he thought it would be easy to find a

party.

“I have a few other parties I could recommend, but why not try forming one with other people from Labyrinth City?” Ada asked.

“Hmm… That’s not a bad idea, but I’m worried about distancing myself from other explorers,” Zem said.

“It might actually be for the best. You’re a popular man, Zem. If you team up with some locals, people will get jealous. That’ll only cause you trouble.”

“Ha-ha-ha… That would be a problem.”

“On that note… See the girl at that table? I recommend people like her. I think she ended up alone after startin’ some kinda trouble. She looks pretty down, so why don’t you try talking to her?”

Ada pointed at a dragonian girl. She looked battle-hardened… yet also strangely lonely. Something about her compelled Zem to approach.

There was a young mage who had risen to the position of branch manager at the Thunderbolt Corporation. With its main office in Labyrinth City, it was a company that produced magic items and was known for its great contributions during the Demon God War. It was currently trying to use its expertise gained during the war to increase its presence in Cavern City, and it had dispatched a gifted young employee—the last apprentice of the genius Bellocchio—to accomplish the task.

“This is a demotion in disguise, isn’t it?! I don’t have a single subordinate or colleague! This makes no sense!”

The future of the Wegna Branch had been placed entirely on Tiana’s shoulders.

“Hey, don’t get so upset. All the greatest success stories start from humble beginnings,” said a man with a shrug. He wore a button-down shirt with suspenders and carried himself with a somewhat smug attitude. Named Hector, the man was a detective who Tiana had hired with the branch’s money to gather

information in the city.

Cavern City was prosperous, but it was located outside the Holy Kingdom of Dineez. Few in the Thunderbolt Corporation knew much about the city or its culture. Tiana wouldn't have known where to start without hiring someone who was familiar with this foreign country and its subtleties.

"…Hector. Was this really the best property you could find? The roof leaks when it rains too hard, and the neighborhood is so loud… How am I supposed to focus on my research here?" Tiana complained.

"Cavern City welcomes visitors from Labyrinth City, but it's not so kind toward people who wanna move here for work. You're gonna have to deal with this place for now. I'm sure you'll be able to find a nicer place once you make a name for yourself," Hector said.

"Easier said than done."

"You'd face the same problem in any other city. People will start to respect you once you show them that you're tough and that you've got guts."

"I hope you're right."

Exasperated, Tiana leaned back in her chair.

"Plus, losing a little money won't kill you. Or would you rather quit and join my detective business?" Hector asked.

"Don't you spend all your time investigating extramarital affairs and looking for lost dogs?" Tiana said.

"It's more fun than you'd think," Hector said, sounding carefree. Tiana gave him an annoyed look. "It's not like you have some great duty to the company. Losing money will only affect your salary and the ability to pay your rent. It won't put a dent in the larger workings of the company."

"I can't just not try. It would make me feel guilty after the way President Havok hired me when I lost my memory… And besides, I know what people expect of me. My instructor worked for the Thunderbolt Corporation, too. Its future is in my hands."

"H-huh."

"Why are you looking at me like that?"

"I-it's just… I heard you insulted the company president by saying you have no interest in joining a company that's strapped for cash and has no future."

“What?! I would never say anything so rude!”

Tiana’s temper flared, but then she realized that she may actually have said those things before she lost her memory. Maybe she’d been sent to Cavern City as punishment.

“…Wait. Did I actually say that?” she asked.

“Well, I didn’t hear it firsthand, but…”

Hector didn’t seem like he was lying. Tiana was beginning to fear this was actually a demotion meant to spite her when a loud knock came at the door.

“Who the heck…? Oh crap, it’s the landlady,” Tiana cursed.

“What do you mean, ‘Oh crap’?! Do you not have this month’s rent?!” an old woman asked after letting herself in. She was the owner of the building.

The landlady was a successful property owner who managed a variety of apartment buildings and corporate properties in the surrounding area. She wore rings on all ten fingers, and standing there smoking her cigar, she looked so intimidating that Tiana shrank back.

“I-it’s not that I don’t have the money. Well, I don’t, but you know how money works. It’s always, uh, in motion…,” Tiana said falteringly.

The landlady smirked in response. “…Fine. I’ll wait one month.”

“Thank you so much!”

“But if next month comes around and you’re not able to pay for both months’ rent…you know what the consequences will be, right?”

The woman pointed at Tiana like the wicked witch out of a children’s story.

“Wh-what’ll happen?” Tiana asked.

“There are plenty of jobs for a beauty like you. I manage a bar. The kind that adults visit to socialize after a long day. If you ever need work, let me know. Ah-ha-ha!”

The landlady left the office, laughing so threateningly that even crows would flee. Tiana and Hector were scared speechless and only pulled themselves together once they were sure she was gone.

“Wh-what should I do?!” Tiana asked.

“Nothin’ you can do but make money… Unfortunately, the

explorers here don’t trust magic items from Labyrinth City. A lot of ’em are stuck in their ways when it comes to their labyrinth expeditions,” Hector said.

“Yeah, that’s the problem…”

The Thunderbolt Corporation was struggling in Cavern City. Other companies already dominated the market for everyday magic items, making it nearly impenetrable. All the idol agencies Tiana had approached to sell acoustics and lighting equipment already had equipment supplied from other companies, and the agencies took care of transport and installation themselves. That sort of equipment was built to last, so they wouldn’t need to replace it for a while.

Having hit a dead end, Tiana had shifted to combat magic items made for adventurers, assuming she would have better luck there. She imported magic helmets for illuminating dark places without using your hands, tools that used Magic Search to notify the user of approaching monsters, magic items that shot small Fire Bullets, magic items that could defeat spirit-type monsters with no physical body, and more. These were all essential items for an adventurers’ party with no mage and were also valued by parties with mages in order to conserve mana and increase their range of options in battle… Yet frustratingly, they weren’t selling.

The main reason for that was because Cavern City didn’t have adventurers, but explorers. Not all explorers fought monsters or risked venturing into unknown spaces. Many of them stuck to floors they were good at dealing with and made a living by killing behemoth vassals that were no threat to them or by collecting materials and mining. Few people were in need of new types of weapons.

The explorers were also prideful and balked at the idea of using items from Labyrinth City. The adventurers of Labyrinth City had distinguished themselves by repelling the demon god. In fact, there had probably never been a Demon God War in history with so few victims. Yet a terrible threat slumbered in Cavern City as well, in the form of the Behemoth King at the bottom of the Behemoth King Pit, and the explorers had been fighting for centuries to prevent its revival.

“If you can show them how good your magic items are, they’ll

put aside their pride and use them," Hector said. "You might not be able to get through to the explorers who only wade into the higher floors for enough money to get by, but the ones fighting on the front lines of the middle and deeper floors are risking their lives."

"How can I do that?" Tiana asked.

"Hmm, if only there was a heavyweight adventurer from Labyrinth City who could become an explorer and show everyone how it's done… If you made it to the middle floors of the labyrinth using your magic items, no one would be able to ignore you."

"I am pretty confident in my abilities, but please don't just assume I can pull that off."

"It'd be a cinch for you. There's a secret market and casino somewhere in the middle floors, too."

Tiana had also heard that rumor. People claimed that explorers and behemoth soldiers had created a buffer zone in the middle of the labyrinth where they could do business. There were apparently contraband goods and other products that were unobtainable in human society, and even an illegal casino.

"I've heard you can buy weapons made by behemoth soldiers. There's also a beast ring where behemoth soldiers and humans fight and spectators bet on the winners. You can even perform derivatives trading using the energy difference between humans' mana and the behemoth soldiers' star power. Magic items from Labyrinth City would fit right in."

"…Are you telling me to go there? That sounds like a dream, but that doesn't mean I can do it!"

Tiana protested Hector's advice, but she ended up doing as he suggested and going to the Mine Seekers Explorers Guild to become an explorer. She realized that she couldn't argue with his point that no one would be convinced to use her weapons and armor without seeing someone use them first.

Hector stayed behind to focus on his work. He had no trouble finding jobs in Cavern City. Tiana didn't know what connections he had here, but he seemed to be very popular for jobs ranging from extramarital affair investigations to company credit checks, and despite his easygoing air, he was always working. She wanted to complain about him not coming, given that it was his idea, but

she knew how busy he was and restrained herself.

"…Huh. I think I'm gonna fit right in," Tiana mumbled.

Smoking was allowed in the guild. The wooden interior was a little smoky, suggesting that there were more heavy smokers here than in the typical Labyrinth City guild. Figuring no one would complain, Tiana lit her pipe as well and puffed smoke as she studied the job and recruitment posters on the wall.

"Let's see…," Tiana muttered to herself. "'Seeking applicants for the Sun Knight Wegna Branch. Gold-rank adventurers and above are exempt from the first stage of testing.' I don't feel like working for the government… 'The Calligraphers Guild is seeking explorers who appreciate art and song. Beginners and idol fans are welcome. Talismans and art materials will be supplied'… That sounds intense."

"Umm, are you new here?" a guild employee asked timidly. "You don't seem like a rookie, but I haven't seen you before."

"Yes, I'm clearly new," Tiana answered, completely unaware of how experienced she looked as she smoked her pipe and appraised the job board.

"Well, we don't allow people to start solo, so we'll need you to form a party…"

"…Figures. Why am I getting déjà vu?" Tiana said.

She looked around the guild. A few people looked back at her, but it didn't seem like any of them were looking for a party member. Just when she thought she'd have no choice but to pay her way into a party or just focus on selling magic items, a table caught her eye.

Sitting there was a dragonian woman with a dark expression on her face. The sight gave Tiana a surprising sense of nostalgia, and she found herself wandering toward the table and taking an open seat.

What the heck am I doing? She'll think I'm a creep, Tiana thought with derision, but then she noticed two more creeps at the table. Both of them had also sat down, seemingly unsure of what they were doing.

A skilled light warrior was making a name for himself in Cavern City. He wielded an aura blade without a single nick in it, and his martial arts mastery gave him greater versatility in combat.

People whispered that he might be the legendary adventurer known as the Survivors. He denied it, however, and the people who had met him were convinced he was telling the truth. Most accounts from the Demon God War described the hero as a silver-haired swordsman of ambiguous gender who wore dazzling white armor. One rumor claimed they were a black-haired young man with green leather armor, but this light warrior's behavior was hardly as saintly as one would expect from the hero.

"What is it, Nick?"

"There're ten monsters ahead. Five have spears, and five have bows. One of the monsters with a spear has a horn."

"That one is the leader. Be careful."

Nick was speaking to the two swords at his waist. One was the Sword of Bonds, and the other, the Sword of Might. They were both extremely strong holy swords.

"Let's go!" Nick said, charging into the darkness.

The behemoth soldiers hiding there quickly turned from the hunters to the hunted. Nick's sharp senses allowed him to locate them without seeing them, and he took out the monsters without using any kind of surprise attack.

Whether or not Nick was the hero, his strength was formidable. He ventured into the Behemoth King Pit by himself, earning him the praise—and jealousy—of many explorers.

"I might head up. That feels like enough hunting for today," Nick said.

"You have plenty of strength left...but I suppose it is best to be safe," said Bond.

"Hmm...," murmured the Sword of Might.

"What is it, Mighty? You wanna go a little deeper?" Nick asked.

"Stop calling me that!"

"'Sword of Might' is too much of a mouthful. Let's give you a name like Bond. I'll call you 'Powpow' if you don't come up with anything better."

"Anything but 'Powpow'! Something like 'Valorie' would be much better... Anyway, I think it would be a shame to stop when we can keep going. It's about time you found some party members."

“You think so?”

“It might be a good idea to make up for your weaknesses by adding a couple of members who can support us from the rear, plus maybe a warrior who can pack some real punch. Bond and I both have mana saved up to use Parallel, but our party formation is lopsided.”

“You’re not wrong, but I don’t do well with other people.”

“Oh, Nick. Are you still upset about Leon stealing your wallet?” Bond asked.

“Of course I am!”

Nick had lost his memories after the Demon God War and quickly decided to leave Labyrinth City for Cavern City. He was currently working as a solo explorer and had already made a decent name for himself.

He had moved to Cavern City for a few reasons. The first was that he had no desire to take up a profession other than adventuring or exploring, which left him with no choice but to leave Teran. The second was that his two holy swords made people suspect he had something to do with the Survivors, or that he *was* the Survivors. He had no memory of having defeated the demon god, however, and the two holy swords had also lost their memories. It was clear that in Labyrinth City he would be unable to avoid people sucking up to him or growing jealous, and wanting no part of that trouble, he’d decided to flee to a place where no one knew him.

The third and final reason was that the man he’d been traveling with had stolen his wallet, and Nick had received word that he’d fled deep into the Behemoth King Pit.

Sorry, Nick. I’m taking all the money we’ve made killing monsters and completing jobs on the road. It’s not that much if you think of it as a reward for guiding you this far. Be well.

Leon had left that note before he ran away, giving Nick no choice but to hunt him down and give him a drubbing he’d never forget.

But moving here hadn’t been the answer. Nick felt like something was missing from his life. Nothing he ate or drank satisfied him, and he was only at peace when he was fighting deep in a labyrinth. Or when he was listening to music.

Nick left the Behemoth King Pit, playing his favorite song in his head on repeat. Right when he reached the city, a light rain began

to fall. He dashed under the eaves of a nearby building in an alley and opened an umbrella, when someone spoke to him.

“Do you have your memories back, stray dog?”

“Not a single one.”

“You’re so nonchalant about it. Oh, can you let me walk under your umbrella? You only have to take me partway to the guild.”

It was an idol who had moved here from Labyrinth City, just like Nick. Her idol agency was trying to establish bases throughout the continent, and Diamond—the agency’s most popular idol—and the other young idols were performing in Cavern City as a part of that effort. The music culture here differed greatly from Labyrinth City’s, so while they had gained some passionate fans, they were having a hard time growing their popularity.

“That’s just how explorers are. What are you doing loitering out here, Aggie?” Nick asked.

Nick and Agate had quickly become friends. It almost felt as if they’d already known each other, but Agate denied having ever met him, and that was good enough for Nick. She said she was a popular idol, and her songs were really good, so maybe he’d been to one of her concerts. He wouldn’t have been surprised to learn he’d once waved around her magic glow stick; that was how much he liked her music.

“I’m famous in Labyrinth City, but I’m still a no-name here. I’m spending all my time on the road singing at bars and restaurants to get new fans to come to our concerts, which makes me feel like I’m just starting out again. It’s so much fun. Oh, that reminds me. I need to hit my ticket quota. How many people do you think you could sell to?” Agate asked.

“Wait, when did I agree to sell tickets for you?!” responded Nick. “You haven’t even asked if I wanna buy one myself yet!”

“I have something I want to talk to you about,” Agate said.

“Other than your tickets?!”

“A friend of mine is becoming an explorer.”

Nick’s expression turned serious.

“Is that a good idea? Exploring is dangerous for a novice with no fighting experience.”

“Oh, she’s not a novice. She’s super strong. She could defeat a silver-rank explorer with one hand tied behind her back. No idol

stans get into our dressing room on her watch."

"Well then, she certainly sounds strong enough. It takes more than that to make it as an explorer, though. You also need a healthy amount of caution."

"She plans our routes through the city so we won't be stalked. She also schedules our carriage rides and forms the best security plans she can within our budget. There are civil officials who aren't as cautious as her."

"Yeah, she'll be just fine. If I had one concern, it's that I don't know why someone as skilled as her would need to become an explorer."

"I'm still worried about her being alone. No matter how strong you are, exploring by yourself is dangerous. That goes for you, too."

"I'm not really alone, though."

"I know you're looking for someone. That's why you haven't let anyone join you."

It was as if Agate had read his mind. Nick opened his mouth to argue, but then he noticed her lonely expression and stopped.

"…Honestly, I was thinking of taking you for myself," she said.

"Huh? What do you mean?" Nick asked.

"I might have done so if I could've been sure your memories would never return. I thought if you came to see me as more than a friend, that would be the time to leave my life as an idol behind. But that's not going to happen, is it?"

Agate spun away from Nick and waved good-bye.

"…I don't know what you're talking about," Nick said. "And gimme back my umbrella."

"Your special someone is waiting at the guild," Agate said as she began to walk away.

Nick was unsure why, but he didn't call after her. He felt like it was a very important decision. A hunch told him that if he did call out to her, there was someone else he would never find. So, thinking that, he just watched Agate and his stolen umbrella grow smaller and smaller until they passed out of sight.

He wanted to apologize, but the words caught in his throat. When she vanished into the rain, he muttered, "Thank you."

“Oh, welcome back, Nick.”

“You’re still going solo? You need to join a party, man.”

“You make some good money? Buy me a drink!”

“Tch, you act big for a labyrinth rat.”

Nick was slowly getting to know the people at the guild. Some explorers truly worried about him, others treated him as a simple acquaintance, and some showed him open jealousy. He felt like he both fit in and didn’t, which actually suited him just fine.

“Yo, Nick. A newbie from Labyrinth City has killed the mood in here. Can you do somethin’ about it?” an explorer said.

“I’ll bet someone tried to scam them and failed miserably,” Nick guessed.

“Whoa, that’s spot on,” the explorer said, whistling.

Nick told them to stop watching them and do something to help, but the explorer just shrugged.

“Maybe you should help her, as a fellow person from Labyrinth City,” Bond suggested. “Who knows, you might become friends.”

“Eh, I’ll check them out first… Why have you guys been nagging me so much lately to make friends anyway?” Nick asked.

“Have we?” Bond said.

Nick walked through the guild and quickly found the newbie everyone was talking about. She wore one of the meanest scowls he’d ever seen and was young but battle-hardened. Her murderous aura said, “Touch me and I’ll kill you”; she had clearly been through more than a few life-or-death experiences. He could see why the explorers were so scared of her.

Nick watched as she lashed out at a guild employee and threatened those around her. She said the explorers who’d tried to trick her were pathetically weak, that she’d knocked them out with a flick of her finger, and that they had been a million times weaker than Labyrinth City adventurers.

The girl was essentially threatening everyone in the guild to a fight, and the effect was obvious. Her taunts brought out the true feelings of those around her, identifying them as friend or foe. Everything she said seemed to be half serious and half an act.

Nick’s interest was piqued as he watched her. He heard her mumble to herself, and the despair in her voice was clear. She voiced a complaint that he thought wasn’t a threat but instead came from a place of genuine sadness.

“I knew I shouldn’t trust anyone ever again.”

Those words spurred Nick to action.

“Nick?”

“What are you doing, Nick?”

He ignored the two holy swords and plopped himself down at the newbie’s table.

“You’re damn right. Trusting people is for chumps,” he said.

“Huh? Who are…you…?” the dragonian girl asked, looking up suspiciously. She froze when she saw him.

“That said, do you really think it’s a good idea to adventure alone without a single person to watch your back?” Nick asked.

The girl looked at Nick with a stunned expression. It was as if she had seen a ghost. Nick felt the same way. He didn’t fully understand what he was saying, but the words welled up from his heart like water from a fountain.

“I found working alone fun, personally,” he said. “Lotta truly disgusting bastards out there, and I want nothing to do with them. I think it was easier for me to ignore or hit anyone who approached me. But I still thought it would be a good idea to get over my suspicious nature and form another party, and I’m glad I did. I wouldn’t have been able to fight on otherwise. That would’ve been the end of my adventure.”

“I… I know you…,” the girl said.

“I know you, too.”

“I made a promise with you. I think you’re the person I’ve been missing. I’ve been searching for you all this time. I thought I would never see you again.”

“That was never gonna happen. I was looking for you, too.”

Two other people sat at the table. One of them was a young female mage who looked just as skilled as the dragonian—yet in a totally different way. The other was a young male priest who looked somewhat flippant but also tenacious.

“Geez, you stole my line. I was looking for you all, as well,” the mage said.

“I could say the same thing. I walked so much, my legs have turned to jelly,” added the priest.

Nick and the dragonian looked up in surprise at the two new arrivals. They all ended up talking and laughing at the same table as if it was the most natural thing in the world. And Nick no

longer had the sense that something was missing from his life.

Tiana, Zem, and Karan were all here. They had found each other. He now knew what he had been doing, and what he had been missing, all this time.

"Bond, Valorie. You knew all along, didn't you? You lied about losing your memory," Nick said.

"I have no idea what you are talking about. The blame lies with you four fools for forgetting such important experiences," Bond said.

"That's right. You should be thanking us. I admit we kept things from you to observe the aftereffects of Union. We didn't influence or guide you in any way. Well, that's not true, but we only gave you a little push here and there," the Sword of Might—Valorie—said.

"So you *did* know…," Nick said.

"W-we only did what we thought was best. We wanted to prevent any trouble that regaining your memories might have caused, and we wanted to make sure you could support yourselves in case they didn't," Valorie said.

"You two worry way too much," Nick said with a shrug.

"But I can say one thing for sure. Your reunion here is entirely of your own doing," Valorie added. She and Bond both materialized into their human forms with a *pop*.

It dawned on Nick that they probably weren't the only two watching over them. He immediately thought of Agate, which made his heart ache. Even so, he didn't regret getting his memories back.

"I still don't like it," Nick said.

"Details, details. Let us put that behind us," Bond said, now in his usual silver-haired form. Valorie had taken a form that resembled a slightly younger Olivia.

"So that's what you look like. You're so cute," Tiana said.

"You seem quite pleasant without Olivia's brazen personality," Zem said.

"I'm not sure I like you insulting who is essentially my parent, but I agree completely," Valorie said, blushing in response to their praise.

"…You liar," Karan said, glaring at Nick.

"Sorry," he replied.

"You said you'd never leave me."

"You said the same thing."

"Sure, but…!"

“We took a detour, but we’re back together now. Not even amnesia or distance can keep us apart. Let’s start again.”

Nick smiled kindly, and Karan looked away, embarrassed.

“…You’d better not forget me again,” she said. “Otherwise I’ll make you regret it.”

“I’d hope so. I give you permission to beat me to a pulp if I do,” Nick said.

“I want you to get really mad at me if I forget you again.”

“I’ll drag you by the collar to Daffodil and your dad so they can yell at you.”

“Don’t bring my family into this. That’s not fair. Still…” Karan blushed, her voice dropping to a whisper. “I take back my claim that I’ll never trust anyone again… I trust you all.”

Nick and the others smiled happily at those words.

“What are you two lovebirds gonna do? Get married and retire?” Tiana asked. “I’d support you, but do you want to keep this going for a little longer first? I kinda need money.”

“Keep what going?” Nick asked.

Tiana looked at him like he was an idiot, making Zem snicker.

“What else? The Survivors, obviously.”

“Oh, I thought that went without saying… Using that name’s only gonna cause us problems, though. Should we change it?” Nick asked.

It was no exaggeration to say the Survivors were being targeted. They could seek the protection of one country or another and receive a massive reward, but that would bring its own dangers.

But none of them feared that. Nick had just felt like getting a rise out of the others.

“What’s the big deal? The world might call us heroes or whatever, but that name is ours. Sneaking around isn’t my style,” Karan said, puffing out her chest proudly.

Nick nodded firmly. “Sounds good to me. Here’s to the reunion of the Survivors!”

They cheered, drawing curious looks from the explorers. Some lost interest once they saw they were celebrating the formation of a new party, some teasingly applauded them, while others gave them words of congratulations.

The Survivors thumped their six beer mugs together. Never

had they heard such a happy sound.


D.K.P. 440/Oct/6 Bond. Wegna, the Cavern City

Author's Afterword
Two Fantasies



Hello, everyone. I'm currently writing the afterword at 2,346 meters above sea level on the Manaitagura Summit of Mount Hiuchi, the tallest mountain in the Tohoku region. I recently got hooked on mountain climbing and am focusing on tackling the mountains of Tohoku.

I'm guessing that most people don't know how difficult it is to do research for fantasy light novels. This might be shocking to you, but I've heard that over 90 percent of the authors in the genre have not actually been to a fantasy world. Honestly, I have never been to one, either. This is a fact I'm not proud of, given that I write for MF Books, who just celebrated their tenth anniversary with the tagline "I will continue to live in a different world."

That said, it is possible to go on an adventure without going to another world. If you live on the outskirts of Tokyo, you can ride the Keio Takao line to the last station and climb Mount Takao. It's considered a sacred mountain because of its long history as a holy site for the Shugendo religion, and the most famous sacred mountain in Japan, Mount Fuji, is visible from it. I feel like pushing my body and reaching mountain peaks drenched in sweat has helped me understand the feelings of those who live in magical fantasy worlds. I hope you all will experience the fun of

mountain climbing as I have.

In fact, it doesn't have to be mountain climbing. There are many forms of adventures one can embark on, including starting a new hobby, quitting a job you hate and changing careers, or picking a light novel off the shelf in a bookstore without any prior information and getting lost in its world. Courage is required to venture into an unfamiliar world, but if you take that first step, you will be rewarded with a wonderful new landscape. That is my idea of a fantasy.

I'm now wondering if that's why I wanted Nick and his friends to venture into many labyrinths, meet a variety of people, and take on a range of mysteries in my fantasy light novel series, *Apparently, Disillusioned Adventurers Will Save the World*.

While writing, however, I had a different kind of fantasy in mind. The four main characters all have a hobby that could be considered unsavory. One is an idol stan, one is a philanderer, one is a gambler, and one is a gourmet. With the exception of gourmet dining, all of these would certainly raise eyebrows.

One of the reasons I gave them these hobbies is because I thought that no one would be able to go through a major upset in life without being corrupted in some way. A person might start drinking too much, or spend enough money on *gacha* games to affect their livelihood, or become addicted to something so destructive, I feel hesitant to joke about it. Even if you haven't been through something like this, you might be able to think of someone who has.

Those kinds of people will eventually stand up, face their addiction, and get their life back on track. I wrote this series with the idea that it's okay to have such hopes. That is the second fantasy I imbued this story with.

I'm sure some of you are thinking, "Can you really call that a fantasy?"

Maybe I shouldn't admit this, but I'm sure I wrote my four main characters to be agreeable and heroic so that you would cheer them on. That said, I think we've all seen strangers who we don't have any attachment to struggle in a similar fashion and thought to ourselves, "That person's life is over," just like the people who saw the protagonists before they formed the Survivors.

I'm not blaming anyone for that. Everyone knows to some degree how difficult it is for a person to get their life together after suffering a setback and developing an addiction. I'm not guaranteeing that such people will recover and telling you to trust them, either. This is a story about people who lost faith in humanity, after all.

However, the next time you hear a person who's lost all hope write someone off while gossiping or sharing drinks, if you think back to this story of people recovering from rock bottom and it gives you a little hope, then writing these books will have been worth it.

I think I wrote this story because I wanted to depict the fantasy of mustering up courage and adventuring into new worlds, and the fantasy of rebuilding one's life. I feel like I might include similar themes in my future works.

Now, I am sure that Nick and his friends will go on more adventures in brand-new settings, but this is the end of *Apparently, Disillusioned Adventurers Will Save the World*. Leaving them behind is difficult, but I am very proud as the author to be able to say good-bye to them here.

Thank you very much.

October 8, 2023
Shinta Fuji


APPARENTLY,
DISILLUSIONED
ADVENTURERS WILL
SAVE THE WORLD

Illustrator's Comments

Disillusioned Adventurers has finally reached its final volume. Looking back, even I'm surprised by just how many illustrations I did.

I also have a little trouble trusting people, so I related to the Survivors and cheered them on as I drew them.

(I wish them all happy lives...!)

I'm so grateful that this work received manga and anime adaptations. It felt like I was living in a dream.

I wouldn't trade my time working on *Disillusioned Adventurers* for anything.

I am so proud to have worked on this series to the very end!

To Mr. Fuji, the lead editor, and all the readers who supported us, thank you very much for the last four years!

Susumu Kuroi

黒井ススム



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