

SHIEN BIS

THE KING of the
LABYRINTH
Gods, Beasts, and Humans

3

KING of the **3**
LABYRINTH
— **Gods, Beasts, and Humans**

SHIEN BIS

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Copyright

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Shien BIS

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Interlude 6

The minotaur made its way down a hidden hallway on the bottom floor of the Sazardon Labyrinth leading to a small room containing stones that were glimmering with azure light. It stepped onto the stones, and when it turned back in the direction it had come, the hallway was no longer there.

The scenery around it blurred for a moment, and then it found itself in a totally different place. The flat stones it was standing on were the same shape as before, but they were shining with red light instead of blue. Immediately next to it were stones of the same size and shape, but they were a dull gray and did not shine at all.

This room was much larger than the one it had been in before. It was shaped like a distorted hemisphere. The reddish-brown floor undulated unevenly, and orbs of red, yellow, blue, green—all sorts of colors—were scattered across it.

The orbs were several sizes as well; the biggest ones were as tall as the minotaur in diameter, and the smallest reached its waist.

They were not perfect spheres—the front of each was swollen and featured jagged patterns. If a human was to see them, they probably would have said the orbs resembled giant flower buds.

The orbs were growing from the ground. The floor, ceiling, and the orbs themselves were all emitting faint lights of various colors.

It was a strange and repulsive place. The air felt sticky and oppressive, as if it contained poisonous fumes. A single breath would allow thick miasma to invade the body. A creature without any resistance to it would surely die instantly upon entering this room.

Everything about the place was uncomfortable. The wall was the color of viscera, and it had a slimy texture that continued all the way up to the ceiling.

There was no exit to be found.

The minotaur moved off the stones and took one step forward. The floor felt mushy.

It took another step forward, and then one of the orbs suddenly opened into the shape of a bell and attacked the minotaur with wriggling tentacles. The minotaur reflexively cut them all down.

It took one step back to try to gain some space, and then a slightly smaller orb behind it also opened and attacked it with its tentacles. The minotaur leaped and severed them, returning to the flat stones. It decided that taking on multiple orbs at once would not be a good idea.

The two orbs withdrew their tentacles and returned to their original shapes. The room fell silent as if nothing had happened.

The minotaur looked at its left hand, which had been grazed by one of the tentacles that had attacked it from behind. The part that had been touched was eroding with a sizzling sound and releasing an unpleasant odor.

The tentacles were quick and attacked with precision. Not even the minotaur would emerge unscathed if it fought a great number all at once. A part of its body was rotting after being touched by just one tentacle.

The orbs were sparse in the center of the room, where the minotaur was, but they were tightly packed near the walls.

If the minotaur had been human, it might have investigated and thought about the true nature of this room.

But no such inclination occurred to the minotaur.

There were opponents it could fight, and it was being attacked by them. So it would kill them.

Everything else came afterward.

A violent joy welled up from deep within the minotaur's body.

Its smile reached its eyes.

Chapter 17

The Warrior Monk Patagamon

1

“Master Patagamon, we’ve received a report from the Eleventh Unit. They say the divine spirits of Mejatoke Lake have either entered a deep sleep or vanished.”

“Thank you. Please have them return to the temple at once.”

“Master Patagamon, the Eighth Unit has sent an inquiry. Lately there have been rumors spreading through the borderlands that good omens have been sighted near the Ocean Temple, and they would like to know if they should investigate.”

“No. That is not something we need to look into right away. Have them join with the Second Unit in the Gahra Mountains as planned. A little too much time has passed, but tell them to ask around at the foot of the mountain range to see if anyone has witnessed any strange events and then to hire a person from the mountains who can guide them to the sacred ground.”

This was the Jan’Majar Temple. It was located in the country of Peza in the southeast of the continent, and it produced many renowned warrior monks. All who entered this temple received strict martial arts training. Jan’Majar Temple was unique for taking religious doctrine and its associated training and integrating it with martial arts.

They were currently in the General Affairs Division in the Denomination Affairs Building. The man sitting behind the desk in the middle of the room busily taking reports, giving orders, and working through never-ending paperwork was a monk named Patagamon, who was acting as the representative for the Chief of General Affairs.

The chief was quite old and was taking a long break due to his poor health, so Patagamon was effectively in charge of the division.

Most of the monks bustling about the temple were slender, but Patagamon had an imposing physique. His muscles stood out clearly under his shabby martial arts uniform. He had a thick neck and a shiny shaved head. His bushy eyebrows arched up toward the heavens. His eyes were slanted and emitted a powerful light reminiscent of a dragon. His voice was low but firm and clear.

Whether it came to combat, intellect, judgment, or carrying out the will of the sect founder, the most sensible young monks at the temple looked up to him as an example to follow.

A monk entered the room. He had a lanky build, hard facial features, and was probably slightly older than Patagamon.

“Mr. Patagamon, I still haven’t received a response from you.”

“Hello, Mr. Ragalat. My apologies. As you can see, I’m quite busy here. All monks capable of telepathy are currently spread throughout the continent, devoting themselves to their own missions. As I’ve told you before, as soon as anyone becomes available, I’ll comply with the additional dispatch you requested.”

“Mr. Patagamon. Monks who can perform telepathy are very valuable personnel to the entire temple. The General Affairs Division may be the core of the Denomination Affairs Building, but that does not mean you can hog them for yourself.”

“You seem to have the wrong idea. I am not hogging them for myself. I am training them. Every single year, whether this year, last year, or many years before that, the first selections of the temple’s new recruits always go to your Clerical Division and the Ceremonial Division. The other divisions pick after them, and the General Affairs Division accepts the remaining newcomers. During the education of our new recruits, some of them by chance become able to use telepathy. The methods of telepathy are not a secret within this temple. Feel free to train the new recruits in the Clerical Department.”

“Mr. Patagamon, you speak too harshly of my department. It takes time to learn what kind of talent a person possesses. We need to make effective use of

the talent that has already been awoken.”

Ragalat spent a little while longer refusing to back down; then he eventually gave up and left the room.

“Master Patagamon. Master Ragalat was strangely persistent today.”

“Hmm. The other party may have raised their asking price. It’s probably not the Gorenza Empire this time but some other country or person of influence.”

“But still, monopolizing personnel was quite a thing to accuse you of. His department reaps all the benefits of taking in the sons of nobility and wealthy families, and then when we take in the children of poor people who no one wanted and train them to acquire the power of the sect, he sees them as property. He’s planning on turning them into commodities.”

Telepathic monks worked in pairs and could communicate with each other even from opposite ends of the continent. They couldn’t contact their partner at will, as they both needed to be in the telepathic state at the same time, but all they had to do was set times for communication in advance.

No one other than the monks of Jan’Majar Temple had ever possessed this ability. It was said to be bestowed by the special divine protection awarded to the temple.

Even possessing one pair of people with this ability would bring about immeasurable benefits in politics, military affairs, economics, and more. The various countries around the continent, especially the Gorenza Empire, paid extraordinary sums of money to request long-term dispatch of telepathic personnel. Because the temple would earn resentment if they refused these requests outright, they occasionally loaned monks for short periods of time. That way they could gain favor and build personal connections.

Client relations was usually the duty of the General Affairs Division, but ever since Ragalat assumed the position of Clerical Director, the Clerical Division had been managing every case of dispatching telepathic monks outside the temple on the logic that they should handle all matters that concerned use of the power of the sect.

However, because there wasn’t even one telepathic monk in the Clerical

Division who could be entrusted with training monks, Ragalat had been frequently requesting personnel from the General Affairs Division, which possessed almost all the telepathic monks in the temple. However, because the General Affairs Division ranked higher than the Clerical Division in the hierarchy of the divisions, Ragalat could not order Patagamon to dispatch telepathic monks. All he could do was make requests. Aside from the locations where telepathic monks had already been dispatched, Patagamon had rejected almost all of Ragalat's requests.

"Master Patagamon. I need to keep my voice down when telling you this, but Master Ragalat has been saying that if he becomes the abbot, he will remake it to serve the world."

"So I've heard. He probably wants to leave two pairs of telepathic monks at the temple and lend the rest out for this purpose of serving the world. It's foolish. He does not understand the original mission of this temple."

Another monk then rushed into the room.

"Master Patagamon, I have grave news. Abbot Kau Lekan has passed away."

2

You can practically taste the combat prowess flowing through the entire mountain.

Zara was shown around by a monk in training and was currently climbing a winding, narrow staircase.

Jan'Majar Temple was located in a secluded point in Peza. Directly behind the temple sprawled a region called the Highlands that was uninhabited by humans, but Jan'Majar Temple occupied the entirety of a small, isolated mountain on the edge of the Highlands. Zara keenly felt the uncommon sense of vigor released by the entire mountain.

When he was left alone in that strange garden, he was at a loss as to what to do, but after a little while, the garden disappeared, and he found himself in a place he had never seen before. Thankfully, the strange items disappeared along with the garden.

He asked someone where he was, and they told him they were in Peza. He was in the very northeastern tip of Peza, which was right on the border with Aldana.

If you were to travel southward along the coast from the Ocean Temple at the eastern edge of the continent, you would first enter Aldana and then Peza after that. Going farther south would take you to a vast desert region, which contained the Free Cities of Karelia. South beyond that was a seemingly boundless ocean. West of the Free Cities of Karelia was the border province of Sheradan, and yet farther west was the Gorenza Empire.

These were all countries that the people of the Baldemost Kingdom knew only in name and rumor, so Zara was deeply moved that he had come so far.

Aldana had a thriving culture of swordsmanship and housed a great number of training halls. There were swordsmen Zara would have liked to try to visit, but he didn't feel like turning back to Aldana.

It was more important that he stop by the Jan'Majar Temple now that he was in Peza. He had something he wanted them to take a look at, and it was possible that he would need to return it to them.

It was situations like this that made him grateful he was an S-rank adventurer, as even places like Jan'Majar Temple that were reluctant to allow outsiders couldn't refuse the visit of an S-rank adventurer. After entering the temple, Zara was very quickly shown to a high-ranking monk, who was introduced as an aide to the Chief of General Affairs.

"It is very nice to meet you, Master Zara. I am Patagamon, and I am currently representing this temple's Chief of General Affairs. I admire your diligence in reaching S rank at such a young age. I would like the young people at this temple to learn from your example."

Zara returned the greeting and spoke with him for a while. It soon became apparent this man was a very impressive individual when it came to combat, wisdom, and even matters of the mind.

"This is actually the reason for my visit today."

Zara held out a bracelet.

“Th-this is... Where in the world did you obtain this?”

“My father was a knight of the Baldemost Kingdom. His name was Panzel. One time, he decided he needed to learn a form of bare-handed martial arts in order to face a powerful enemy. At that time, a warrior monk from this temple happened to be staying at an acquaintance’s home, and upon request, the monk gladly offered him instruction. The instruction apparently only lasted for three weeks, but my father learned a very difficult technique from the warrior monk, and he was able to defeat the enemy. After my father died, this bracelet was left among his belongings, but I did not know where it came from. I recently showed it to one of my combat instructors, and he informed me that the pattern engraved into it is the mark of Jan’Majar Temple. He also told me that my father was taught by a warrior monk from this temple, so he recommended that I stop by if I get a chance during my journey for personal growth.”

“Hmm. I’m amazed by this. I never would have expected the bracelet to return now, of all times. Hmm. This must be the will of the divine. Master Zara, I ask that you keep everything I am about to tell you a secret.”

According to Patagamon’s explanation, this bracelet had belonged to a high-ranking monk named Manda.

The bracelet was a treasure called a Sacred Beast Bracelet. There were four Sacred Beast Bracelets in total, each one imbued with the warrior’s virtue of one of the four Sacred Beasts, namely Gormedo to the east, Rasha to the west, Polpo to the north, and Yarts to the south. The sect founder gave them to his four best pupils, so each of the four people who possessed one of the bracelets in the modern day was considered qualified to be named abbot, the highest position of the temple. The owner of each bracelet passed it on to their most elite pupil.

However, eighteen years ago, Gormedo’s Bracelet was lost. Manda said that he gave it to someone he spent a few weeks training during his travels. He refused to say a word about who it was or where they lived.

“If I say who I gave it to, then a messenger will likely be sent out to retrieve it. I may have only taught this person for a short period of time, but they are

undoubtedly my greatest pupil. I know not of anyone more gifted in combat than they, and I cannot imagine giving it to anyone else,” Manda had said at the time.

Manda also said that he taught this unknown pupil the temple’s secret arts of the vajra fighting spirit and bronze alchemy. What Manda had done was inexcusable, so he was demoted to a common martial artist of the temple. He didn’t utter a word of complaint, however, and devoted himself to training the younger generation until his death six years ago.

“Did Master Manda break the temple’s rules by teaching my father martial arts?”

Patagamon laughed heartily.

“Our sect founder said to spread our techniques and prayers far and wide. He also said we should choose those to whom we pass on his teachings not by their position or their length of time served but by simple combat strength. Manda followed the sect founder’s teachings splendidly. It was only later that our temple attached special meaning to the Sacred Beast Bracelets to suit our organization. It is believed that the Sacred Beast Bracelets allow one to borrow the authority of the sect founder. The sect founder told his followers not to build him a grave and not to establish an organized religion. We made him a grave anyway, and we still pay it our respects. The highest-ranking member of our temple, the abbot, is in charge of looking after the grave. The very existence of this temple is a betrayal of our sect founder.”

After hearing Patagamon’s daring words, Zara felt strongly that he could trust him.

3

“To think that Manda’s pupil turned out to be Panzel of Baldemost. Rumors of his valor reach us even in this region, including how he defeated the monster at the bottom of that labyrinth by himself and that he crushed the Northern Knights numerous times. Though those rumors would also have you believe he defeated one hundred knights alone.”

“That’s true.”

“What? I’m sorry, but I can’t bring myself to believe that one. It is impossible for a single person to defeat one hundred knights in battle.”

Zara opened his Treasury in front of Patagamon, pulled out Bora’s Sword, and laid it down on the desk.

“He did it by borrowing this sword’s power.”

Patagamon held the sword in his right hand, closed his eyes, and activated some kind of spell.

He has the Appraisal skill?

Patagamon’s eyes shot wide open.

“This sword! This is a god-blessed item. And from a high god, no less! I didn’t think something like this could still be obtained. Hmmmmmm. What potent blessings.”

“A god-blessed item? What is that?”

“They are items produced by gods or divine spirits and imbued with the very best blessings, and they always bear the name of that god or divine spirit that created it. Nearly all the signature divine weapons we have identified have become treasures of countries, temples, or lords. It seems that the blessings of these items are related to the characteristics of the god or divine spirit that produced them. The blessings have tremendous effects, but in many cases, the conditions for activating them are very strict. It is common for there to be a limit on the people who can use a god-blessed item. No small number of them have remained unusable for hundreds of years because the people who fulfilled the conditions died out.”

“What is a high god?”

“Divine spirits that are worshipped by people and earn divinity become lower gods, and if their divinity increases to a certain point, they become middle gods. Divine spirits that inhabit lakes, waterfalls, rivers, trees, rocks, and other such places rarely move from their original location and do not take on much of a personality when they receive divinity. When divine spirits that are born from

interactions between gods and humans, such as dragons and giants, receive divinity, they become able to move anywhere and display unique personalities. High gods, on the other hand, are spiritual beings that originally lacked physical form and existed in this world before the appearance of humans.”

“If Bora is a high god, does that mean Gahra and Zara are as well?”

“That’s right. But I’m surprised a person from the north such as yourself has heard of Gahra and Zara.”

“Honestly, I only recently learned of their existence.”

Zara told him about his experience on the Gahra Mountains. He also shared the myth that the girl of the mountains had taught him.

“Well, I’ll be. So that’s what happened. I sensed that there was a strong disturbance among the divine spirits in the Gahra Mountains, so I dispatched some members from the temple to investigate if anything had happened there. But never in my wildest dreams would I have imagined someone had turned their blade against the divine spirits and then made that kind of oath. You’re as reckless as Bolton himself.”

“Is Bolton the name of a god?”

“Yes. His name is used in many expressions and metaphors in parts of the south. He is a very popular god in fairy tales. He was originally a dragon god who lived on Dona Lake along with his wife, the dragon god Raika, who was known as an angry goddess. Raika had quite a jealous personality and could fly into a rage almost instantly. Bolton was afraid of his wife, yet he seemed to have a habit of going out of his way to make her angry. Those around him would get dragged into the messes he made as well. For that reason, whenever someone willingly invites trouble their own way, they are called ‘as reckless as Bolton.’ The saying ‘don’t do anything to ruffle Raika’s scales’ survives today as well. It is said that Raika is Kaldan’s younger sister.”

Oh, so that’s why Bolton’s Charm has that kind of blessing. That makes sense.

“Do you know the names Alestra and Ende, too?”

“Ende was another dragon god, said to be Bolton’s little brother. The name Alestra is not known in the south. In the north, there is a legend that Alestra

was a god who served the goddess Pharah. Alestra's birthplace is unknown, but because there is apparently a god-blessed item bearing that name, he must have been a real divine spirit."

"Are the six major gods in the north all high gods?"

"The earth goddess Bora and the sea deity Elvetta are high gods. Toran, the god of healing and death, is a middle god. I believe the other three gods may be rising from lower gods to middle gods."

"You sure have a deep knowledge of gods and divine spirits."

"That is because of the mission of this temple."

"Is gathering legends this temple's mission?"

"No. Our mission is to watch over the trends of gods and divine spirits and prevent them from turning into devas. We calm down any who are in the process of becoming a deva."

"What is a deva?"

"This will be a bit of a long story."

4

Divine spirits gain divinity and become lower gods when they receive reverence from humans, but if afterward they are forgotten, or else avoided as a cursed god of calamity, they will sometimes turn into spiritual existences that bring about destruction and chaos. Jan'Majar Temple calls these beings devas.

Gods have a variety of dispositions. Some of them are violent and release unbridled fury when angered. Devas are not the same as these violent gods.

Devas are a warped force that have lost the disposition they once had as gods. Once a god becomes a deva, it is impossible for it to turn back into a god.

Devas spread miasma, poison, and curses, and the land their power touches becomes a hotbed for demons.

A long time ago, humans were helpless in the world, and they only barely survived thanks to the blessings of gods and divine spirits. However, the

blessings could only serve a small number of people, so a more effective method was needed to reach more of humanity.

Eventually, the method of leveling up was discovered, and labyrinths were created, which gave humans significantly greater opportunity to receive strength and items of value. The human population grew, many countries were born, and humanity prospered.

However, a problem arose.

Within labyrinths, the blessings of gods and divine spirits are drawn out forcefully and automatically. Blessings that are consumed in this way are extremely powerful, but always end up twisted and warped, and are not used up properly.

As a result, impure, twisted fragments of blessings are left behind. These fragments are power without a purpose, or a very, very small fragment of a deva, so to speak. These are born aboveground as well, but they are dangerous only if they are gathered in large quantities, and with time, they will either return to nothing or be captured by gods, divine spirits, or monsters. But in labyrinths, the creation of these fragments occurs too quickly and on too large a scale.

The ones who noticed this were people who received special blessings from the gods, known as dungeon makers. The dungeon makers devised a mechanism to cause the warped fragments of blessings to be automatically expelled from labyrinths. They also created a special space in which to send any fragments that are above a certain level of power.

Our sect founder, Jan'Majar, heard all this directly from a dungeon maker. He then asked the dungeon maker what would happen when too many of the twisted fragments of blessings gathered in that space.

“Devas will be born.”

That is what he said.

At the time, this was not a problem. There were divine spirits that would accept petitions from the dungeon makers and destroy the devas.

The distortion born from defeating devas in those special spaces would

counterbalance the power of the devas themselves, so if a deva was defeated in that space, the warped power would be extinguished completely.

The blessings characteristic of labyrinths do not work in that space. If they did, new fragments would be produced. The space is also thick with miasma, poison, and curses, meaning humans cannot enter it. For that reason, the dungeon maker did not tell our sect founder where the space is.

The dungeon maker taught the sect founder a method of calming divine spirits above the ground that are in the process of turning into devas. That was around 1,300 years ago. He then taught it to his disciples.

The sect founder died, and a long amount of time passed.

Around five hundred years ago, the holy occupation of adventurer was discovered. A variety of useful blessings and blessed items found only in labyrinths started to be discovered in quick succession. The pace of labyrinth expeditions accelerated overnight, as well as the pace at which humans could obtain strength.

As a result, humans grew wealthy and countries flourished, but we grew worried. Even before this development occurred, labyrinths were already producing great distortion. Now the efficiency of that distortion has increased by the dozens. The fragments should be accumulating at a pace significantly quicker than before.

Where is the space that the fragments are being sent to? What is happening there right now?

Every container has a limited capacity. What will happen when the space is no longer able to hold the devas? Are there any divine spirits left that can deal with them?

There is not a single dungeon maker left who can answer those questions.

5

Zara was left speechless after hearing what Patagamon had to say. He felt like everything he knew about gods, labyrinths, and adventurers had been flipped

upside down.

“What I have just told you is a secret of this temple known only to those above a certain rank. Outside the temple, the king of Peza, the emperor of Gorenza, the king of Aldana, the king of the Holy Kingdom of Roahl, the king of Mazulu, and the other influential rulers of the south also know about it. These rulers protect the existence of this temple, and we receive their patronage.”

“I’m shocked. I don’t even know what to say.”

“That is to be expected. I ask that you not repeat this to anyone.”

“I promise. By the way, Master Patagamon.”

“What is it?”

“Were the divine spirits that would kill devas at the request of the dungeon makers dragon gods?”

“I do not know the answer to that, but it is certain that dragon gods held exceptional strength among the multitude of divine spirits. But there are no longer any dragons aboveground.”

“Are dragons and dragon gods the same thing?”

“They are the same, but strictly speaking, there are differences. Creatures such as fish, birds, snakes, and beasts need a long time to become divine spirits, so they need special circumstances to award them a long lifetime to achieve it. Dragons, by contrast, are born as divine spirits.”

“I see.”

“Dragons all have long life spans and grow slowly. Dragons gain high intelligence as they age and can wield strong divine energies. They become able to take on human form and mingle with mankind. Dragons that have reached this stage are called dragon gods, or divine dragons. There are many divine spirits on this continent, but unfortunately, there is not a single dragon left.”

“I witnessed the birth of a new dragon.”

“What?!”

Zara told him about the strange trip he went on with the White Princess

Ishkriella and about the baby dragon's birth. He also told him about the White Princess's true identity and the fate of the dragon god Kaldan. He was unsure of whether he should do this, but he also told him about Narillia.

"Hmm. Hmm. This is a lot to take in. I see. So that's what happened. That means good omens actually were sighted at the Dragon Temple. I never would have guessed it was the child of Kaldan. She may have been born a dragon god. Hmm."

"I hope my experience is helpful to you."

"You've already been far more than helpful. It is enough for me to wonder if you have been given the protection of the divine spirits and directed toward this temple with a mission. Your story has cleared up a number of my long-held doubts."

"There is one thing I'm worried about."

"Oh? And what is that?"

"It's about Narillia. Her true form is that of a lamia, which is in the demon family of monsters. Will Jan'Majar Temple subjugate her?"

"Ha-ha-ha! No, you don't need to worry about that. Hunting lamias is not the role of this temple. Her true form is human, and it was clear from your report that there is no need to suspect she bears any ill intent. Besides, that area is not under the jurisdiction of any country, so there is no administrator we could even report to. The temple will forget you ever mentioned this."

"That's a relief."

"All right, Master Zara. I will ask this of you again. Will you return Gormedo's Bracelet to this temple?"

"I was already planning on doing so. This is something that my father borrowed temporarily, so it only makes sense to return it to its rightful place."

"I greatly appreciate your kindness. I ask that you keep this a secret as well, but the head of this temple's denomination, the abbot, died suddenly, and his successor needs to be chosen right away. The keepers of Rasha's Bracelet, Polpo's Bracelet, and Yarts's Bracelet are all virtuous and dependable monks,

and I believe any of them would make a good successor. However, though the keeper of Rasha's Bracelet has announced his candidacy as successor, the keepers of Polpo's and Yarts's have backed the director of the Clerical Division, Ragalat."

Patagamon's expression soured.

"It is certainly not a rule that the abbot needs to be a keeper of a Sacred Beast Bracelet. But the only reason it is not a rule is because it is common sense that the highest position of the temple should be occupied by a person of the highest moral integrity."

"Has this Ragalat not had appropriate training?"

"He was a man of great talent when he was young. But then he had a taste of power and wealth. If Ragalat becomes the abbot, I am afraid this temple will be unable to carry out its original mission. The keepers of Polpo's and Yarts's are not people who can be bribed, but I may have been able to win them over with time. I've been careless."

"Now I understand. Having Gormedo's Bracelet back means the current course of events can be stopped."

"Exactly. I am casting my vote for the keeper of Rasha's Bracelet. That way we will be stuck in a two-to-two deadlock. Then I'll get to work trying to persuade the keepers of Polpo's and Yarts's."

"Do you not need certain qualifications to be the keeper of a Sacred Beast Bracelet?"

"Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha! I am a pupil of Master Manda. Which makes your father my fellow student. My status as keeper is recognized by the temple."

6

Zara spent multiple days as a guest of honor at the temple, and he was allowed to observe the monks in training. Then, one day, a sudden development occurred.

According to Patagamon's explanation, which he delivered with a face twisted

by fury, it had been decided that the two-to-two deadlock between the two candidates would be decided by a duel between two converts in the Shrine of the Four Sacred Beasts.

Patagamon said that converts were martial artists from outside the temple who admired the temple's valor and had sworn to protect its doctrine. The spirits of the four sacred beasts resided in the Shrine of the Four Sacred Beasts, and they monitored the fight for any wrongdoing and declared a winner.

Ragalat nominated a man named Jarr Dol Baza. Jarr Dol Baza was a swordsman who headed a training hall in Aldana, and though he was approaching old age, word of his valor had spread throughout the continent, and he was called the Divine Blade to match his noble personality. Jarr Dol Baza had been named a convert by the keeper of Yarts's Bracelet, so he was a reasonable selection.

After this declaration, Patagamon decided to hold off on naming his challenger. He considered picking a young swordsman convert who lived in Peza, but he was unable to make up his mind. It would take a while for Jarr Dol Baza to arrive from Aldana, so Patagamon thought he had the time to prepare carefully.

However, a moment ago, Ragalat had entered the General Affairs Division with a sudden announcement.

"Jarr Dol Baza is already waiting in the Shrine of the Four Sacred Beasts. Hurry up and prepare your convert."

Patagamon was dumbfounded. Then he realized what had happened.

Jarr Dol Baza arrived too quickly to have been summoned from Aldana. He had probably visited the temple by coincidence for the purpose of training. The reception of visitors seeking training was the jurisdiction of the Clerical Division. Ragalat must have secretly put Jarr Dol Baza on standby, steered the meeting toward the decision to end the deadlock with a duel of converts, and then sent Jarr Dol Baza to the Shrine of the Four Sacred Beasts.

"I never would have imagined a monk of this temple would use such a dirty trick. He deceived me."

“Can you delay the duel until you have your representative prepared?”

“The four keepers of the bracelets agreed that this case will be determined by a duel in the Shrine of the Four Sacred Beasts, and now one challenger is already in the shrine. If half a day passes without the other challenger entering the shrine, the first to enter is declared the winner.”

“Is it possible for you to hurry and get a challenger to the shrine in time?”

“No. If I went to the Adventurers Guild and was fortunate enough to hire a sorcerer capable of teleporting to the temple, I could save a few hours, but even if I could manage to get a challenger here within half a day, they would not be able to get through the Trial Corridor. There is nothing I can do.”

“What is the Trial Corridor?”

“It is a corridor that encircles the Shrine of the Four Sacred Beasts, and you cannot enter the shrine unless you have cleared it. Jarr Dol Baza has been through the corridor before, so he doesn’t need to enter it.”

“What is in this corridor?”

Patagamon told him that there were statues placed throughout the corridor to ward off evil that came to life and attacked when they sensed humans. The Shrine of the Four Sacred Beasts and the corridor were built by the sect founder, Jan’Majar, himself with the help of a dungeon maker.

“So you can’t delay the duel.”

“I cannot. Ragalat becoming the new abbot is unavoidable. However, the other three keepers are also shocked and angry at Ragalat for his methods. I will drag him off the seat of the abbot no matter what it takes. Once Ragalat is appointed, though, he will be sure to use uncompromising methods to maintain his position. A conflict will be inevitable.”

“Master Patagamon. If you have no chance of winning this duel, can you appoint me as a convert and make me your champion?”

“What did you say?”

“Truthfully, I wanted to meet Jarr Dol Baza and ask him to give me a lesson. This is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity.”

“Hmm. But—”

“I also have this.”

Zara pulled out Bolton’s Charm and showed it to him. After appraising it, Patagamon was astonished, immediately appointed Zara as a convert, gave him a number of warnings, and then guided him to the Trial Corridor.

7

Zara took off running as soon as he entered the corridor. He had Bora’s Sword and Bolton’s Charm equipped. Bora’s Sword had a blessing that increased movement speed, and Zara himself possessed a skill that quickened his movement as well.

Zara ran swifter than the wind. The stone corridor was narrow, and stone beasts were lined up on both sides at regular intervals.

The beasts looked simultaneously like lions and like bears. They were standing by the support of their back legs and tail, and they were kicking out their front legs in a threatening stance. Large fangs emerged from their half-open mouths, and a long mane grew from their heads.

Their limbs were thick, and their claws were sharp. They would surely put up a tough fight. But the stone beasts remained asleep and didn’t show any sign of waking up.

That was thanks to the invisibility effect of Bolton’s Charm. This charm’s blessing allowed Zara to move through the corridor without being noticed by the statues.

The exit came into view. Zara sprinted through it with lightning speed. Ignoring the dumbfounded monks, he stored Bora’s Sword and Bolton’s Charm in his Treasury and entered the Shrine of the Four Sacred Beasts. Blessed items could not be taken into the shrine. If you did so, you would be immediately disqualified for breaking the rules. Also, special storage such as Treasuries and Bags did not function within the shrine.

“Wait a moment, Zara.”

Patagamon pressed the index finger of his right hand to Zara's forehead and filled him with fighting spirit.

Zara immediately felt his body relax. It seemed that running through the corridor had taken more out of him than expected.

"May fortune favor you."

Zara returned Patagamon's firm look with a determined nod, then calmly passed through the entrance to the shrine. That he was able to do so proved he had completed the trial and earned the right to enter. The door closed behind him as he walked forward.

The monks who thought there was no way a challenger would reach the shrine in time were surely astonished. But the real fight was yet to begin.

He walked through a small passage and entered a large room. The walls were circular, and the ceiling was dome-shaped. There were four idols that looked like combinations of man and beast embedded in the wall in each of the four cardinal directions. They were probably the four sacred beasts and the guardian deities of this temple. Until the four sacred beasts determined the battle had reached a conclusion, no one would be able to leave.

A single man was seated in the middle of the room. His hard, wrinkled face made him look like a sculpture. He appeared to be meditating with his eyes closed, but as soon as Zara reached the center of the space, he opened his eyes and stood up.

"My name is Jarr Dol Baza," he said with a warrior's bow.

"My name is Zara," responded Zara, returning the gesture.

There were two longswords set on the ground in front of the man. He motioned for Zara to make the first pick. When Zara grabbed one, the man took the other.

"Begin," reverberated a disembodied voice.

8

The man in front of him was holding a sword, but the way he carried himself

made it look like it weighed nothing at all.

The sword probably just feels like an extension of his body.

Zara slid his feet in a clockwise motion while measuring the best moment to strike.

The man slashed twice at Zara, the sword making less noise than would be expected as it cut through the air. Zara dodged the sword without ceasing his clockwise movement by simply angling his body.

He had an opportunity to counter by slashing at the man during each of those two attacks. But if he had gone for it, the man likely would have moved out of the way and landed a blow on Zara.

Zara swung his sword up from the bottom left of his body. The man dodged by taking a half step back. Zara then spun to the right, accelerating into a cutting strike. The man leaped out of the way; then, before landing, he twisted his body in the air and used centrifugal force to slash down diagonally from the left.

Zara's sword was still caught in the air to the right, leaving the left side of his body defenseless. He dodged by intentionally falling backward onto the ground. The man's sword brushed lightly against Zara's body as it cut through the air.

Zara then used centrifugal force to lift himself back up. They struck at each other once more with their swords.

That was close. If he hadn't reversed his clockwise movement at the last second to throw off his opponent's spacing, he would've been sliced open.

The man wasn't out of breath, but his chest was visibly heaving. If there was one thing Zara had over his opponent, it was youth. The longer the battle raged, the greater his chance of victory would become.

Zara suddenly realized something. Not too long ago, he had felt fear at the prospect of being injured by simple ice wolves, but now, against an opponent of this caliber, he was fighting with joy. One blow could mean losing a limb or even his life. His chances of victory were fairly low, yet still, he felt no fear.

What was the reason for that? Was the thrill of the battle eclipsing his fear?

Was it because unlike the ice wolves, if he lost, it would be to a prestigious opponent?

The man once again slashed downward from his shoulder. Zara dodged to the left and thrust the tip of his sword at the man's face. The man cut off the attack by swinging his sword upward from right to left, tracing the exact opposite direction of his last strike. Zara used his sword to knock his opponent's blade off its trajectory, then took a step back. The man also took a half step back.

That was an incredible move.

Zara had dodged the first strike, but the man slashed his sword back up in the opposite direction without delay. That was a move he had never seen before.

He understood what happened. The man's center of gravity initially traveled downward along with the sword, but then, like a ball bouncing off the ground, he suddenly accelerated upward. That move had been burned into Zara's mind.

If I do the same thing, I can pull off that attack, too.

A duel is a fight between two people, but in a way, it is also a fight between their moves. As the duel progresses, each of the opponents' moves is communicated to the other person.

Just then, there was a move that Zara wanted to identify, and there was surely a move that Jarr Dol Baza wanted to identify as well. Those moves would be exposed as soon as they used them, and then they would belong to their opponent. As their moves were communicated to their opponent, they would have to refine them, polish them, and grow them.

Show me all your moves. Dance to your heart's content. Then expose all your moves right before my eyes.

The young swordsman and the elderly Divine Blade continued to trade blows.

Zara slashed his sword down vertically from the left and then from the right in quick succession, and the man dodged each strike with very little time to react. The man spun to charge into Zara's space, but when Zara held his ground, the man had no choice but to abandon the attack. Immediately after that, Zara moved his sword behind his back to the right and tried to strike at a distance

from which it would be impossible to avoid, but the man used his sword hand to strike Zara's arm and throw off his attack power.

They continued to exchange moves. Then, as he gave himself entirely to the fight, Zara recalled a scene in a section of his clear mind.

Barrast was using a brutish war hammer, as usual. At first Zara scoffed at him for thinking he could take on a sword with a weapon that was limited to such simple motions, but Barrast proved able to use the hammer in an infinite variety of ways by making effective use of the head, handle, grip, or all three at once, depending on the time and situation. Barrast switched back and forth between attack and defense so quickly and freely that Zara couldn't keep up, which limited his sword's movement. The war hammer was way too strong for Zara to even think about trying to block any blows. Zara eventually came to think that swords were a difficult-to-handle weapon and that they had no chance against a hammer.

Barrast would occasionally strike his sword and break it. One day, when Zara had his sword broken repeatedly, he said that the hammer was unfair. Barrast stared at him with a look of confusion and then burst out laughing. He said he would use a sword, too.

They then both fought using longswords, and Barrast broke Zara's sword almost instantly. He then said it's not about the weapon but rather the technique.

Here it is!

He saw it on the man's blade a third of the way up from the hilt.

An opportunity. One that an ordinary swordsman would not have registered.

In the blink of an eye, Zara pierced his blade accurately through that point on the man's sword. The blade broke with a shrill sound and went soaring through the air.

"MATCH."

The disembodied voice announced the end of the duel.

It was over. He had won.

“That was very impressive,” the Divine Blade said.

“Thank you very much,” Zara responded, bowing his head.

He suddenly noticed something.

I didn't use a single skill during that fight.

“Is something wrong? You're making a strange face.”

“No. I just noticed that I didn't use any skills during our duel. I was wondering why.”

“Honestly, I was thinking the same thing.”

The Divine Blade laughed. Zara laughed, too.

The four sacred beasts around them appeared to be laughing as well.

9

Zara's victory was welcomed favorably by most of the monks in the temple. Ragalat had won many to his side by giving favors and promising even greater favors down the line, but his overly forceful methods and his recent words and actions earned him no small amount of discomfort and opposition throughout the temple.

For somehow recovering the fourth Sacred Beast Bracelet and skillfully seizing a hopeless victory during what was a crisis situation for the sect, Patagamon gained tremendous trust and support.

News of Ragalat's cowardly behavior in regards to the duel in the Shrine of the Four Sacred Beasts also spread throughout the temple. It was unlikely he would hold a position of influence ever again.

Zara ended up spending four months at Jan'Majar Temple. As a convert who had fought for the sake of the sect, he was qualified to study the temple's secret techniques, so he took advantage and received instruction. It was a tough but beneficial four months.

Zara turned seventeen years old while staying at the temple.

After that, he went to Aldana on the invitation of Jarr Dol Baza. He was

allowed to stay at his training hall, and the two of them became close friends despite their difference in age.

Jarr Dol Baza asked Zara if his family name of Goran meant he was a relative of Eisha Goran. After Zara answered that Eisha Goran was his great-grandmother's father and that his father revived House Goran, he began to be treated even more warmly and politely.

The Divine Blade said that his grandfather was a pupil of Master Goran, which made Zara equivalent to his instructor.

Zara told him his real name and rank and asked him to keep it a secret.

The Divine Blade and his new pupil crossed swords many times. Zara went to a number of training halls through the introduction of the Divine Blade and learned a great many techniques. But strangely, Zara never managed to defeat him after their initial duel.

It seemed that the Divine Blade couldn't resist telling some people in secret that Zara was a descendant of Eisha Goran, which resulted in Zara receiving great kindness wherever he went and being told many anecdotes about the legendary swordsman.

One time, Zara asked the Divine Blade why he'd allied himself with Ragalat. He answered that there was no greater honor for a martial artist than to stand in the Shrine of the Four Sacred Beasts as a convert, so he hadn't even thought of refusing.

He had not been told what he was fighting for, so he simply offered his polished fighting prowess and entrusted everything to the decision of the sect founder and the gods.

"I was overcome with excitement as I thought about what kind of opponent I would be able to fight. That was the reason I accepted."

"You were very close to not fighting anyone at all."

"What?"

The Divine Blade grew very angry after Zara explained Ragalat's scheme.

"But all's well that ends well. I was able to fight you, and you won. The sect

founder really is impressive. Ha-ha-ha!”

“Ah, so that is the reason I was able to win.”

Zara spent seven months in Aldana and then headed for the Free Cities of Karelia. There was a man in Bia-Dharla with whom he really wanted to cross swords.

Interlude 7

The minotaur was breathing heavily.

It had cut open every one of the squishy, round enemies in the room. It figured out that their regeneration was slower near their roots than near the top of their bodies. After that, it made full use of an acceleration skill to cut down as many of the orbs as it could at once while doing its best to slice near the roots.

That did not work.

The enemies ended up regenerating anyway. There was no end to it. They would always regenerate, shoot out the body-melting liquid, and extend their tentacles to ensnare the minotaur. They would also erupt with bodily fluid whenever the minotaur cut one open, causing the minotaur's body to melt even more.

The minotaur was in really bad shape. It had been showered by the fluid of the orbs, and its skin was melted all over. It spent some stamina to use a skill to heal its wounds, but it had no effect.

The melted parts of its body were oozing and bubbling, and they turned a sickening color after mixing with the blood flowing out of its body.

Its body was not the only thing melting. Parts of its belt that it always used had melted as well, and it could no longer stay up on the minotaur's waist.

It reached into its storage because it felt it had no other choice, then remembered the existence of red potions. It grabbed a number of them and downed them all. But its body did not recover.

Neither skills to heal injuries nor the red juice seemed to work here. That was the only conclusion the minotaur could reach.

The minotaur took a moment to catch its breath, then sucked in a massive amount of air, activated a special skill, and blew a powerful breath against the round enemies throughout the room. The breath was violently strong and caused anything it touched to burst into flames with its intense heat.

This skill was called Burning Breath.

With just one breath, it burned a third of the orbs in the room to ash. However, they quickly regenerated.

The minotaur drew in another breath, took aim at the round enemy growing nearest it, and released Burning Breath on it relentlessly.

It burned. And it burned.

The round enemy was reduced to ash, and a hole was being gouged in the uneven rock beneath it.

The minotaur's attack stopped when its lungs began to ache.

The regeneration started immediately. But the minotaur caught sight of something. Something that looked like thin, densely packed, and wriggling roots was buried in the slimy ground beneath the burned orb. The minotaur wondered what would happen if it destroyed them.

An idea flashed into the minotaur's mind, and it swapped its weapon.

It stored its sword in its Bag and pulled out a crushing weapon called a barrel hammer. It looked like a crude barrel with a long skewer sticking out of it. It was an extremely sturdy and impossibly heavy weapon.

The minotaur had obtained this barrel hammer from a human adventurer.

The adventurer who had used it was slightly shorter than the minotaur but was significantly fatter and looked to be twice as heavy. His skin was dark red, the top half of his body was bare, and he was wearing baggy pants. His build made him look like he had packed flesh on top of his own flesh and then had more flesh drooping down over that. He bellowed and rolled his shining eyes in his head as he swung around his barrel hammer. He would swing at the minotaur from the side and from above, each attack housing enough destructive force to prove lethal for the minotaur at the time.

He had an endless reserve of energy, and he never stopped howling and swinging his hammer no matter how many blows the minotaur dodged. It turned into a long, hard-fought battle because of the man's inexhaustible stamina and uncommon ability to fight on after taking damage, but the minotaur had won in the end.

The minotaur lifted the barrel hammer above its head and smashed it down onto the nearest orb. It was not aiming for the orb itself, but rather the wriggling roots located within the slimy ground beneath it. The enemy burst open, its pieces scattering across the room, and the roots were crushed together with the soft rock.

The minotaur waited, but the round enemy did not regenerate. It now understood how to kill them.

The minotaur gleefully smashed all the rest of the round enemies and their roots. Its body was rapidly melting as a result of the fluids being jettisoned from the orbs, but it did not care.

It then finished killing every enemy in the room. It looked around and bathed in the afterglow of its victory; then its body was enveloped in a soft light. It began to regenerate and be remade.

It was a level-up.

Its injuries were all healed as well.

This was the minotaur's first level-up in a very long time. It had been ages since it had encountered a human who would give it enough experience points.

Now that the minotaur thought about it, this was weird. It always gained experience points from defeating humans, but never when it defeated monsters. Despite that, it had just leveled up from killing these monsters. It did not know the reason, but it understood that it had found a new place where it could grow stronger.

The minotaur noticed one other thing. The stones next to the flat, circular ones shining with red light had been a dull gray when it entered the room, but now they were shining blue.

The minotaur stepped onto the stones shining with blue light and then

disappeared.

Chapter 18

The Red Knight

1

The sun was beating down, its light reflecting off the desert sand. Zara felt a wave of emotion as he gazed absentmindedly into the rippling air.

If I hadn't arranged for a guide and a bobo, I probably would have died out here.

He felt a renewed sense of gratitude toward the Divine Blade for his advice and for helping him prepare. He'd had no idea the desert was such a scary place.

According to the map, he was currently on the South Elga Highway. But there was only sand as far as he could see and nothing resembling a road.

"Sir, there's something coming."

Zara answered the guide's words with a simple grunt.

Some monsters emerged from the sand that looked like spiders as big as humans with two whips protruding from their bodies.

They were imotarbas. There were five of them.

The guide tossed some bait as a decoy, then urged his bobo to sprint. Zara also ordered his bobo to run by kicking it in the flank.

One of his bobo's ears was black. That black ear twitched, and the bobo ran.

It ran at a comfortable speed. His rear was in pain from being jolted around relentlessly on its back, however.

He sensed that the five imotarbas behind them were eating the decoy bait. He and the guide relaxed their pace after they crossed over three hills.

They weren't enemies he was incapable of defeating, but Zara was following all the guide's instructions in order to study the etiquette of the desert. There were many dangers in the desert that Zara was unaware of.

The man dismounted from his bobo and gave it some salt as a reward. Zara did the same thing.

Bobos were as tall as horses, but they had only two legs. Their torso was a little short. Their face was not as long as a horse's, and their muzzle was somewhat thin. They had sleepy-looking eyes, but they seemed friendly and full of charm.

Zara remounted the bobo.

It was hot. And bright. And hot.

He felt listless. And he was hot.

He couldn't imagine that any human could live here. Could there actually be a town in this kind of place?

Zara bounced up and down on the bobo's back, feeling weary and fed up with the desert.

2

Conflict was forbidden at oases. It didn't matter if you ran into a mortal enemy or a rival soldier. That was a law of the desert.

Zara was wary of the approaching group, but because he had been taught that rule, he didn't make any hostile actions.

"Looks like someone beat us here. Coming through."

The guide gave a very deep and humbling bow to the approaching group. They must have been of high rank.

The group outnumbered Zara and his guide five to two. Four of them stopped at a distance, and one person approached them.

Zara stood up and spread his arms, then crossed both hands in front of his chest and greeted the person as he had been taught.

“My fire, my soup, and my dried meat are yours as well as mine, O Traveler of the Desert.”

The person made an amused expression and gave the same gesture.

“Thank you, O Friend of the Desert. But we have no need of fire or soup. We will be content to simply rest at this spot for a bit.”

Zara realized she was a woman. And incredibly beautiful, too.

Clothes worn for travel through the desert had no distinction between men and women, and it was dim outside, but she was close enough that he should have been able to tell her sex. However, there was a reason Zara hadn't noticed she was a woman.

Her gait, the way she carried herself, and her presence were all that of a warrior. She also had an aura that reminded one of a knight with plenty of battle experience. That was why Zara had subconsciously thought she was a man.

He also felt high combat prowess and a strong will from the other four people.

The group moved into the shade halfway around the spring and got to work right away on preparing for their break and their meal.

It had been a week since Zara and the guide entered the desert, but he could still not get used to the heat. Even the slightest bit of warmth still caused him to go into a daze.

Shortly after the group of five finished their dinner, one person walked over to Zara and the guide.

“Would you two like to come join us for a drink?”

It was natural for travelers to want to exchange information, so there was no reason to be suspicious of them. Zara answered that they would be glad to.

It was customary that in this situation, the people who extended the invitation would offer drinks, and the people who were invited would offer food. Zara presented some delicacies that he'd brought with him from Aldana. The group received them enthusiastically, and their gathering grew lively.

“By the way, Zara, where are you headed?” asked the beautiful woman named Laura.

“I am traveling to Bia-Dharla.”

“Hmm. You don’t look like a merchant. I can tell you’re not used to the desert, either. What do you seek in Bia-Dharla?”

There was nothing in Laura’s expression that suggested any ulterior motive. Her beauty was radiant, but he didn’t sense anything flirtatious from her, either.

She had narrow eyes with emerald irises and a thin nose. Her eyebrows were flat. Zara thought she looked like a moon goddess illuminated by a bonfire next to a spring in the desert at night.

“There is someone I want to meet.”

“Oh, how exciting! Did you hear that, everyone? Beautiful people always give beautiful answers. That’s such a romantic trip.”

“Oh-ho-ho, it sure is.”

“You have it made, boy.”

Zara realized they’d gotten the wrong idea from his answer, but he didn’t want to say anything to land him in any more trouble.

People invited to eat at an oasis were supposed to offer treats to go with the alcohol, but Zara felt that he himself was becoming their entertainment for the evening.

Laura seemed to take a liking to him and pulled out an instrument to sing a love song. The group cheered, and it ended up being a fun night.

3

They rested until close to dusk the next day before they departed. Laura’s group joined them because they were heading for the same destination.

In order to reach Bia-Dharla, they apparently had to leave the highway at their current position and head south for ten days.

In this era, countries were nothing more than an assemblage of towns and villages. In between those towns and villages were vast landscapes devoid of human settlement. The name of the Free Cities of Karelia referred to the small, isolated cities scattered throughout the expansive desert region, but in truth, uninhabited desert made up the vast majority of the land.

Laura and the four other members of her group were as skilled as Zara expected them to be. They were attacked by four giant scorpions not long after they set out, but the five of them defeated the monsters in no time.

Laura used a longsword slightly big for her build, but she handled it with great speed and accuracy.

The large man named Moura swung around a battle-ax with ease.

The thin man named Jamagar used an extremely sharp sword with a curved blade and was very good at attacking from out of sight. He was also skilled at moving while hiding his presence. He was probably an assassin.

The man of short stature named Shariabro was an archer who was adept at shooting while moving.

The plump man named Orien was a support sorcerer capable of support magic, restricting enemies, and healing.

They were each an elite of their own skill set, and they fought with polished coordination.

They were attacked four more times in the next two days. Whenever Zara tried to participate in combat, they politely refused his help, probably because they didn't want him to get heatstroke.

The guide asked Laura and the others why they were fighting instead of using meat as a decoy and fleeing. Their answer was that because this road was essential for traveling to and from the highway, they wanted to try to reduce the number of monsters to make it at least a little safer for people passing through after them.

The five of them shared a Treasury. That meant that they all had the holy occupation of knight. They didn't look like family, so the fact that they shared a Treasury must have meant they had especially strong bonds and held a

common mission.

On the third day, they were attacked by the largest group of monsters yet, so Zara fought with them. The first thing he did was defeat the two grigols that looked like the strongest of the pack.

Grigols were monsters slightly larger than horses. They traveled swiftly on their four legs. The majority of their bodies was covered by a carapace, and they each had a pair of enormous pincers on their head.

Zara sliced through a grigol's front legs with one swing of his sword, and then he cut off its head when it fell. Another grigol looked like it was going to attack Moura, who was defending himself with a shield, so Zara leaped onto the monster's back and beheaded it as well.

The situation then turned in their favor.

Next Zara took on the sandal bugs. Sandal bugs were insect monsters that were the size of a large sandal and had countless tiny feet. Their extreme speed and habit of diving into the sand made them very difficult to hit. Their poison was paralyzing, and enough of it would likely result in the victim becoming prey for another monster.

Catching the bugs was no problem with Zara's Detection skill and the speed of his sword. He wiped them out as they threw themselves at him in rapid succession. They couldn't even hide from Zara when they traveled under the sand.

Once Zara cleaned up the sandal bugs, the group was able to relax and focus on the remaining medium-sized monsters. The battle ended shortly, and then Laura hugged Zara.

"Zara, you're amazing! Simply amazing! I've never seen anyone swing their sword as quickly and brilliantly as you! I also can't believe you cut through the thick necks of the grigols with just one strike. What skill you have! What incredible technique! I've made a decision. Enter our party. Together we'll take down that minotaur, the Labyrinth King!"

Laura continued to speak to him enthusiastically as they cleaned up after the battle, and even after they got back on their bobos and resumed travel.

To hear her tell it, when Zara had leaped on top of the grigol, he looked as gallant as Arza, a hero of old.

To hear her tell it, even the famous Divine Blade would have been amazed at his swordsmanship and how he'd wiped out the sandal bugs without falter.

This woman had a much more excitable personality than Zara expected.

“What do you mean by taking down the Labyrinth King?”

“Didn't you say you were born in Baldemost? Do you really not know? In the town of Micaene near the royal capital of Baldemost Kingdom, there is a labyrinth called Sazardon. This labyrinth has one hundred floors, and the monsters are pretty tough, but the boss monster on the bottom floor possesses special strength. Minotaurs aren't known for being very strong in other labyrinths, but the one in the Sazardon Labyrinth is a unique monster. It grew stronger by continuing to fight humans and monsters, and it eventually gained strength enough that even the wicked dragons and giants you hear of in myths would fear it. It drove out the metal dragon that was the original boss of the one hundredth floor and became the master of the labyrinth. It has great intelligence, physical strength, and speed; it's robust; it has high resistance to magic and status ailments; it has an undying thirst for battle; and its skill with the sword stands out above all. It really is like a monster from a myth. It also has many skills, including its scorching hot breath and its strengthened Howling. Before long, people came to call this minotaur the Labyrinth King. No one knows how much experience will be gained for defeating the Labyrinth King. And that's not all. The Labyrinth King has taken down many adventurers and monsters and has amassed a great collection of items. It is said that when it's defeated, its drops will be worth enough to buy a country. For that reason, people from Baldemost and from all over the continent who desired fame and fortune have challenged the Labyrinth King. And they've all been killed. Can you believe this? Since it appeared a little over thirty years ago, this minotaur has never once lost.”

“It is said that one knight defeated it.”

“I don't believe that. If the knight defeated it, then why is the minotaur still alive? It's nonsensical that anyone would take on the minotaur alone in the first

place. If a hydra or a real dragon appeared above the surface, would anyone be stupid enough to fight it alone? A few years before that, the king of Baldemost sent one hundred knights on a mission to take down the King of the Labyrinth, but every single one of them ended up being killed. The story of the knight was probably fabricated to cover up that shameful failure. They just want to say there is a knight in their kingdom who can defeat the Labyrinth King solo. Don't make me laugh. That's impossible. In order to defeat the Labyrinth King, a truly skilled warrior needs to form a party, and they need to challenge it with tight-knit coordination. There is no honor in going at it with great numbers, and carelessness and disorder are bound to be a problem. The Labyrinth King is a modern legend. Whoever defeats it will be a hero whose name will live on in posterity. So join our party. This is fate!"

Laura's fervent invitation continued even into dinner.

"All right, I get it. You don't have to worry. What is the name of the girl you are visiting? No harm will come of this. Just tell me. No matter what she says, I'll make sure you get her hand in marriage. If she has a man, I'll get her to break up. I'll pay the man to leave her. I give you my word. So you can join our party without reservation. First just tell me her name. Go ahead, tell me!"

Having no other option, Zara told her the truth.

"I've heard rumors of a certain knight. This knight serves the ruler of the desert city of Bia-Dharla and kills monsters in the desert to make people's lives easier. He is proud and incredible with a sword, and he is called the Red Knight because of the color of his armor. I want to meet him and ask for a lesson."

Everyone in Laura's group burst out laughing except for her. Even Zara's guide was laughing shrilly. Laura looked upset, and she may have even been blushing.

"Oh, Zara, you don't know how lucky you are. The gods have granted your wish. For Laura, no, Lady Laura just vowed to give you her hand in marriage! Hoo-hoo, congratulations. Okay, I suppose I should introduce you. This is the daughter of Lord Coralior, the ruler of the desert city of Bia-Dharla, Lady Laurasalim Taripetra Tolito Bia-Dharla. She is the current Red Knight!"

Laura was in quite the mood, and the group was paying dearly for it.

“The boy says he wants a lesson, but what kind of lesson could he mean?” asked the usually silent assassin Jamagar absentmindedly.

He then received a punch in the face.

“Zara, are you and the lady betrothed?” asked the defensive specialist Moura earnestly in a moment of down time.

He was then kicked into a spring.

The uncompromising Shariabro asked Zara his age, and Zara said he was about to turn eighteen. Shariabro then glanced at Laura, said “hmm,” and seemed to fall deep into thought.

Laura then cut off his proud beard.

The usually eloquent Orien was wise enough to keep his mouth shut, but that seemed to get on Laura’s nerves as well, and she kicked him in the back of the head.

When Laura’s attention turned to the guide, he went ahead and jumped into the spring himself.

After Laura calmed down, Zara sat at a distance from the spring and looked up at the stars. The sorcerer Orien came over and sat next to him.

“The original Red Knight was the lady’s uncle. The next Red Knight was her older brother. The rumors you heard were likely about him. He was kind and strong. He gave his life protecting the city and its people from monsters.”

“May I ask a question?”

“The lady is twenty-two years old.”

“It’s not about that. Why does Laura want to defeat the Sazardon minotaur?”

Orien answered after taking a moment to think.

“Human lives are fleeting in the desert. Your life vanishes without a trace the moment you are unable to escape the jaws of death. Right now, you are holding countless grains of sand in your palm, but when tomorrow comes, you won’t remember a single thing about any of them. Yet if just one of those grains of

sand was to be illuminated by the stars and shine with a quick, beautiful flash of light, it might stick in your memory. The lady surely wants to leave proof of her existence. She also believes it will make her brother proud.”

“There have got to be plenty of stronger magical beasts and spirits. I’m sure there are also monsters and bad people nearby who are making people suffer. Why the Sazardon minotaur?”

“Probably because it’s far away. We don’t get much information about the north in this region. We don’t know how true the rumors about the minotaur are. To us, it’s a mythical monster from a distant land we know little about. That is probably what has spurred the desire in her heart to fight it.”

“So she’s not actually serious about fighting it?”

“Oh, she’s very, very serious, I assure you. You can see how our party formation is better suited for fighting a small number of strong enemies than it is for taking on many monsters at once, right? Our training is geared specifically toward fighting the Labyrinth King, and we are readying equipment for that purpose as well.”

“But you have all devoted yourselves to fighting monsters here every day. Wouldn’t that be difficult for the city if people as skilled as you left for a long period of time?”

“I’m sure it will be. The lady has an extreme sense of responsibility. She has made it her life’s mission to defend the populace that her brother fought to protect.”

“Then wouldn’t preparing for a fight with the minotaur be a waste of time?”

“Working as hard as you can toward achieving a dream cannot be considered a waste of time. We all love that aspect of the lady.”

For some reason, Zara remembered a conversation he’d had with Barrast Logan, the instructor who sent him on this trip.

“Uncle, earlier you said that there was no way that Father did not know the pain of human life. What did you mean by that?”

“Ah, that. When your old man, Panzel, was born, his family ran a sword

training hall, and they were quite well off. I'm sure they were the envy of many. But when Panzel's old man fell sick, their lives were flipped upside down. It sounds like it was a real struggle for Panzel's mom to support the family. After his old man died, whenever his mom's body failed her, they would have to go without food. Panzel started supporting when he was five years old. There isn't much work a five-year-old can do, though, as you can imagine. They did their best to scrape by, but when he turned seven, his mom's condition took a nosedive. He then started going into the labyrinth to get enough money to buy medicine, and that's when he encountered the minotaur. Even at his young age, he already knew the futility of human life to a tragic extent. His old man was dead, his mom was growing thin, and he experienced many nights with the knowledge that they had no food to put on the table. It was all hopeless. But even within that hopelessness, he did have some constants. There were things to be happy about. His mom's attitude toward his old man or him never changed, regardless of whether or not they had money. After they fell into poverty, his old man's pupils would come to check on them and bring them food. They were even kind enough to give Panzel work. Panzel once said something to me. He couldn't even allow himself to hope that he would live to see the next day. But even then, he decided he would love his mom and do everything in his power to support the family. That was when he found something he could do. He said he was very grateful for that. People who only think in terms of victory or defeat, strength or weakness, can't fight like Panzel. If you understand what it means to fight honorably but are unable to put everything else aside, you can't fight a monster like the minotaur. Knowing the pain of human life allows you to give your all without being distracted by things such as greed or insecurity."

Barrast's words had been like a riddle to Zara at the time. But now he felt like he had an idea of what he meant.

5

Bia-Dharla was on fire. Smoke was rising up from the city. They were still a good distance away, but a putrid stench hung in the air.

It was the smell of viscera. The smell of living creatures being burned. The

smell of death.

As they approached the city, they saw heaps of monster corpses lying on the ground next to the rampart.

A Mass Craze!

There was a phenomenon among monsters called a Mass Craze, which caused them to suddenly gather and attack human settlements.

Monsters that had settlements of their own would even throw away their equivalent of society, livelihood, and property that they had built up to join this strange march. Monsters that didn't normally form groups would show up and join as well.

Different species of monsters were often hostile toward each other, but at this time alone, they would have no hostility. They would forget about hunger and exhaustion, throw away all instinct of self-preservation, and relentlessly attack humans right up until they perished.

Bia-Dharla was under assault from monsters in a Mass Craze.

When they finally entered the city, they realized that it had not been completely destroyed. The damage, however, was great. The rampart was holding, but the south gate had been breached. Flying monsters that could breathe fire also greatly added to the damage.

Laura was mad at herself for being absent when the city needed her most, but there was no undoing what had already been done.

She spoke with her father, who was the ruler of the city. She then opened up the palace and set about carrying in injured people who had nowhere to go, treating them, and distributing emergency food. She ran around the city from early in the morning to late at night, providing medical care and giving words of encouragement to all who were injured.

Zara felt moved as he accompanied her and helped her out. Saying that you care about your people is nice, but he wondered how many nobles would be willing to go this far.

He was the eldest son of a marquis, and the time would soon come when he

had to take his seat as ruler of the domain.

He stopped a moment to consider whether the people of his domain had ever been important to him. That train of thought led him to decide that he would support Laura in this moment with everything he had.

The first thing he did was offer all the medicinal goods he had on hand, taking care to keep a bit for himself. The medicines he had received from Narillia in the Great Ravine were extremely effective and were very gladly received. The antidotes for curing poison worked remarkably well.

The biggest problem that faced the city then was whether or not there would be second and third waves of attacks.

Bia-Dharla's military force numbered three hundred and fifty people, including patrols and gatekeepers. There were fifty knights among that number, and the other three hundred were common soldiers. They also had four hundred volunteer soldiers from among the populace.

Ten knights had died and twenty were injured during the first attack. Twenty common soldiers died, and thirty were injured. Among the volunteer soldiers, thirty died and two hundred were injured. The losses were many. However, the safe return of Laura's party to the palace caused the soldiers and the citizens to not lose heart.

Laura consulted with the commanding officers of the knights and then recruited three hundred more volunteer soldiers. It was decided that the volunteer soldiers would not participate in battle even if there was a second wave. They would instead help with transporting supplies, treating the injured, and other kinds of rear support.

Then on the fourth day, the second wave arrived.

Consisting of a number of monsters that far surpassed the defensive capabilities of the city.

6

The monsters numbered more than two thousand. Of those, nearly two

hundred could fly. There were also as many as one hundred and fifty ogres on the ground.

It was a really bad situation. But that wouldn't change their tactics. First, they would firmly shut the castle gates and attack the monsters from up on the rampart. Then, if the castle gate or a part of the rampart broke, they would lure in fixed numbers of monsters and wipe them out in manageable chunks.

There were currently one hundred soldiers waiting on top of the rampart with bows at the ready. This group had been formed after gathering people with experience. Every one of their arrows had been laced with the poison Zara received from Narillia. It was lamia poison that Narillia herself had secreted.

Zara had all five of the treasures he'd borrowed from House Mercurius equipped. He had been told not to use them in places where he stood out, but this wasn't the time to worry about his appearance.

He had not yet taken out Bora's Sword. Zara's father, Panzel, died from overuse of the sword's blessings. His mom had always told him not to use it unless he absolutely needed to.

"Fire!"

Arrows were loosed at the commander's order. Very few of the soldiers were able to handle their bows steadily in the face of the approaching monsters. As a result, most shot their arrows too quickly and were way off the mark, but a few of them did still find their target.

The effects of the poison were immediate, and just being grazed by the arrows caused the flying monsters to crash to the ground. Some of them collided into the rampart, and some fell within the palace grounds.

A great number of the archers forgot that they had been ordered to get down immediately after firing an arrow and fell victim to the flying monsters as a result.

Zara loosed three arrows in rapid succession with his Tirika Bow. He immediately drew three more arrows and fired.

The small size of the Tirika Bow made it look like a toy compared to the bows of the soldiers around him, but it was actually very strong. With his strength

and skill, Zara could manage significantly greater distance than the other soldiers were capable of, and his arrows penetrated more deeply.

The flying monsters dove at them. Zara dodged nimbly, turned to face the ones that had made it inside the rampart, and fired three more arrows. He was using the bow technique he had been taught by the girl of the mountains.

Eight of the nine arrows he shot found their mark and felled the beasts. The one arrow that missed ended up traveling a long distance and hit an ogre directly. The ogre toppled over and brought down a decent number of monsters with it, so it was fair to say he got a decent return out of that arrow.

They had taken down less than forty of the flying monsters so far. Over one hundred and fifty of them remained, but thankfully, it seemed like all the ones that possessed the ability to breathe fire had been killed. Those could cause a lot of trouble if ignored, so they had been priority targets.

Next, all they could do was leave it to the mobile forces within the palace walls.

The army of monsters on the ground was approaching. They could not let them take the rampart with that level of force. Zara decided it was time to use a trump card.

“Summon Comet! Summon Comet! Summon Comet!”

Giant comets were summoned, falling to the ground where Zara pointed his sword and destroying and burning everything in their path.

Raika’s Ring ran out of magic power, and its light extinguished.

Each one of those spells was powerful enough to exhaust the magic of an elite sorcerer. And Zara had used three of them. He’d probably killed fifty monsters.

The surrounding soldiers looked at Zara in mute amazement. Even the commander.

“Prepare the bombs!”

On Zara’s order, a group that was on standby spread out atop the rampart.

The bombs were big and heavy but extremely effective at killing enemy forces. When Zara pulled out three hundred bombs that he had stored in his

Treasury and offered them to the defense effort, Laura was shocked and asked him if he had been planning to go to war against this land. That was a perfectly understandable reaction. Just one of the bombs was worth more than all the equipment of an elite knight put together, so it was unimaginable that one person could be walking around with that amount of them.

Some of the soldiers started to rush to throw the bombs immediately, but Zara stopped them.

“Don’t throw them yet! Wait until they have drawn closer and are about to hit the rampart. Aim for specific monsters and make sure you hit your target! Don’t hit the rampart!”

He wanted to tell them to aim for only ogres, but that would have been expecting too much. There was no point in giving them an order they were incapable of following.

“Now! Throw the bombs! Archers, what are you doing? Fiiiiire!”

A mass of bombs and arrows flew together on Zara’s order. This strategy wouldn’t last very long, but it would be effective if they bombarded the enemy with everything they had.

The explosives detonated, sending monsters flying in every direction. The arrows fell over the monsters by the rampart like a blanket.

They were doing as well as could possibly be expected. That said, they had taken down only around 20 percent of the enemy’s numbers. If they had been fighting an army of humans, the enemy probably would have temporarily withdrawn after suffering such losses, but monsters in a Mass Craze did not stop their assault until all had perished.

The real battle started now. The monsters began to attack the rampart. Judging by the quaking, it wouldn’t last long.

Zara advised the commander to have the soldiers evacuate to the right and left and leaped within the walls of the rampart. He kicked off an overhang on a tower, landed on a staircase, then jumped down to the ground in an instant.

Laura then called out to him. “Zara, good work up there.”

“We need to retreat. It’s about to collapse.”

“Got it. Everyone, fall back!”

They heard the constant booming sound of the rampart being hit. The wall finally gave in near the south gate. The large quantity of falling stones crushed about ten monsters.

The monsters instantly began to climb over the wreckage. They let in about fifty monsters and then blocked any more from getting through. Their five valuable sorcerer knights were given the role of blocking the monsters.

Laura, the archer Shariabro, and the support sorcerer Orien were also with them.

The defensive specialist Moura, the assassin Jamagar, eight knights, and fifty common soldiers were in charge of killing the monsters they’d allowed past the wall. Seven more knights and fifty more common soldiers were close by, awaiting orders to switch places with them. There were also fifty common soldiers stationed around the city to deal with flying monsters or anything that broke through the line of defense at the rampart.

Moura, who was using a tower shield, attracted three ogres his way. Normally it would take five soldiers to defeat a single ogre. An elite knight would be able to fight one on their own. He may have been a defensive specialist, but taking on three at once showed that Moura was no ordinary warrior.

Each clanging noise of the ogres striking his shield was dreadful enough to make even battle-hardened warriors cower in fear, but Moura’s face was perfectly calm.

Jamagar snuck behind an ogre and sliced through the tendons of its legs with his curved sword. The ogre then fell, and he cut its hands so that it wouldn’t be able to hold its weapon. From there, he left it to the common soldiers and turned toward the next monster. Jamagar and the soldiers made short work of three ogres using that method.

Eight knights were fighting two ogres a short distance away.

Fifty soldiers were fighting forty medium-size monsters.

Zara charged forward and severed the legs of the two ogres one by one. Then, without even looking back, he plunged into the pack of medium-size monsters and began to slay all within reach.

The commander of the knights issued an order, and those who were fighting switched with the group that was on standby. Laura then judged it was time to let in the next batch of monsters.

This time, they let in sixty monsters, ten more than last time. They then used offensive magic and explosive arrows to obstruct any more from getting through.

After using his Tirika Bow to help keep the group of monsters in check, Zara got to work on cleaning up the monsters they'd allowed in. Everyone watched in awe at the brilliance of his movements, all wondering who in the world this young man was.

Zara was thinking about the current situation.

It was going well. For the time being. But the sorcerer knights' magic wouldn't last very long. The arrows would eventually run out. The monsters were in the process of breaking through in a number of other locations across the rampart.

At this rate, they had no chance of holding back the remaining 1,500 monsters. Eventually their front line would collapse.

This was a battle without any hope of victory.

7

A part of the rampart that was not yet broken was struck with a magic attack from the outside. It was a lightning attack.

Zara was surprised.

There are still monsters that can use magic?

If that was the case, then a new possibility had opened up.

"Laura! I'm moving!"

Zara took off without waiting for an answer, cutting down every monster he

passed. He then leaped onto the fallen stones of the rampart, killed the enemies around him with speed and precision, and jumped through to the other side.

By that point, he had become the target of the bloodlust of all 1,500 monsters outside the city. The people watching him were surely taken aback by this seemingly suicidal act.

There they are!

The magic attacks were coming from a strange type of monster. There were just over ten of them. They looked like giant earthworms with thorns all along their bodies, and they were five times the height of the average human.

Zara made full use of his Acceleration skill and circled all the way around the army of monsters to get behind them. While doing so, he disabled the blessing of Alestra's Bracelet and enabled the blessing of Bolton's Charm.

An ogre swung its club at him, and he blocked it with Ende's Shield. The shield reflected the force of the blow, causing the club to shatter.

The ogre tried to punch him, and he blocked that with Ende's Shield as well, greatly injuring its arm.

Zara slaughtered the enemies around him with the sword in his right hand. When he got within arrow's range of the giant earthworms, he stored his shield, drew out his Tirika Bow, and fired at two of them in quick succession while dodging the attacks of the enemies around him.

The first giant earthworm trembled violently after being hit with the arrow, and then it turned toward Zara and fired a lightning attack. The second one did the same.

Zara allowed both lightning attacks to hit him, and his entire body jolted from the shock. He looked down at Raika's Ring. Its light had returned.

"Summon Comet!"

A comet fell and blasted away the monsters near the rampart.

Each of the five blessed items of House Mercurius had incredible blessings.

Alestra's Bracelet eliminated magic at the user's discretion.

Kaldan's Dagger protected the user from status ailments and poison.

Ende's Shield reflected physical attacks back at the user's opponent.

Raika's Ring fired offensive magic.

Bolton's Charm absorbed magic and granted invisibility.

There were a number of extremely strong spells sealed within Raika's Ring, and even people without magical ability could cast them. Naturally, the spells could not be cast once the magic power within ran out.

As for Bolton's Charm, in addition to the blessing of invisibility, it was also capable of absorbing enemy magic attacks for the owner to use as magic power. If you were hit by a magic attack with both Bolton's Charm and Raika's Ring equipped, the magic power would be stored in Raika's Ring. Most of the damage from the attack would be absorbed, but the pain would remain the same.

In other words, Zara could continue casting Summon Comet as long as he could bear the pain of the lightning attacks. What would make this difficult, however, was that he needed to dodge the attacks of the crazed monsters around him while remaining in firing range of the giant earthworms. In this chaotic of a battle, there was no way even Zara could avoid all their attacks. He would receive a constant stream of injuries, so it could not be said that this method had a high chance of success.

But this was the only sliver of hope they had in a hopeless situation.

Zara continued to fight with the rage of a demon. His memory from that point on was vague.

8

Laura smiled as she wiped off Zara's face.

"Are you awake?"

Her own face was covered in injuries, but they did nothing to detract from her beauty.

Zara's entire body was numb, and his senses were dull. He hadn't yet fully regained consciousness, either. Everything seemed vague and unreal, as if it were all a mirage.

"Just who are you, Zara?"

Laura's voice sounded distant despite her close proximity.

Zara was lying in a bed. Laura knelt down and buried her head in his chest.

"It doesn't matter who you are. Thank you."

He couldn't see her face, but he somehow understood she had been crying.

Time passed in silence.

He may have lost consciousness for a moment, because before Zara knew it, Laura's face was right in front of his. She kissed him gently.

He felt like he was enveloped by a sweet, soft wind.

"I thought we would be lucky to save one person. But I knew even that would be impossible. You're a miracle worker, Zara."

Zara was finally able to get his mouth to move.

"How many...survivors?"

"Excluding me and the ones who didn't fight due to injury, all the knights died. Close to one hundred common soldiers survived. The king and the palace are safe, and two-thirds of the populace survived. We won."

"What about Moura? And Jamagar? And Shariabro? And Orien?"

"All dead. Each one of them died valiantly."

He couldn't move his head, so he looked at Laura by moving his eyes. Her right arm was gone. Her bandages were soaked with blood. As if noticing Zara's gaze, Laura explained what had happened.

"The painkillers you gave us are unbelievable, Zara. I was also sleeping until just recently. The pain from my missing arm hurt so much that it woke me up. But I'm okay now thanks to the painkiller. A desert alligator clamped down on my arm. I was trapped and nearly received a fatal blow from an ogre, but Orien saved me by using a flash bomb to burn my right arm off and free me. Then the

ogre hit and killed Orien instead. I used my left arm alone to kill both the ogre and the alligator.”

That was how she’d survived.

They’d actually succeeded in defeating that large of a force. Though it seemed the sacrifice was great.

“I saw the way you fought. It wasn’t just me—a lot of people saw you. No human can fight like that. Everyone is saying that you must be the warrior god Arza.”

“Arza... That is...my other...name.”

Arza was his original name. In order to prevent his identity from being found out, he had changed his name temporarily to Zara.

“Huh? Are you actually Arza? If you are, then I want you to tell me something. It’s said in the Gorenza Empire that the warrior Arza was a servant of the wicked dragon Kaldan. But in the north, they say that he was an attendant of the goddess Pharah. In the desert, it is believed that Arza is the name that the goddess Bora’s brother took after throwing away his status as a god and becoming a human. Which one is correct?”

Zara did his best to answer while still half asleep.

“The goddess Kaldan... Today’s victory...was made possible...by Kaldan’s blessing. The earth goddess Bora’s...blessings were...even greater. The goddess Pharah... I don’t know...much about her.”

“I see. Then from now on, Bia-Dharla will worship the goddess Bora and the dragon goddess Kaldan. A festival will be held on this date. So, Zara. If you can —”

Laura’s speech broke off. There was a big commotion happening in the city.

Laura grabbed her sword with her left hand, said something to Zara, and left.

Zara’s entire body was numb, and neither his headache nor the ringing in his ears would die down. He opened his Treasury without getting up, but he couldn’t move his arms. After much effort, he managed to withdraw Bora’s Sword.

He got to his feet using his sword to prop himself up. Ende's Shield was leaning against the bed, so he stored it along with the dagger sheathed within it. He checked for the bracelet, charm, and ring. Using the sword, he staggered his way out of the building.

The city was in terrible shape. Many people were looking in the direction of rubble, piled-up corpses, and the crumbled rampart. There were also some fleeing in Zara's direction.

There were trolls. More than ten of them were approaching.

Trolls were big-bodied and unbelievably strong. Just one swing of a troll's arm packed the punch of ten ogres. Their skin was highly resistant to blows and cutting attacks, and they could not be brought down with swords or lances. As far as the city's defenses were concerned, they may as well have been gods of death.

Zara dragged his feet as he approached them; his stiff body wouldn't move as he ordered it to. He then felt like he heard someone calling out to him. He turned around and saw his guide shouting something and waving his arms.

A single bobo ran up to Zara, spurred on by the guide. It then bent its knees and held its back out in front of him. Zara noticed that it had one black ear. He clung to its back, and the bobo skillfully slipped through the wreckage of the rampart and the corpses and went outside the city.

It would take about twenty more seconds to reach the trolls. Laura was running straight ahead of Zara with a sword drawn in her left hand. Zara urged on his bobo.

There were twelve trolls. They were a variety of sizes. The four smaller ones in the back were probably children. Zara wondered if trolls also felt sadness at the death of children or parents.

Arza had never seen trolls before, but he didn't think they would be this big. The troll at the front of the pack was especially gigantic. Trolls had long arms and torsos and short legs, but their knees were still even with Laura's head as she approached.

A giant troll raised the club in its right hand and drew it back. Laura was

charging straight at it. Zara felt a sincere sense of dread as he urged his bobo forward, but he wasn't going to make it on time.

The troll swung at Laura with its club in a sweeping motion. She dodged by dropping to the ground; then she got back up and rotated into a powerful strike that cut off the troll's right arm.

The troll then kicked her, and her body went flying high into the air. After she landed, the trolls stomped on her mercilessly.

Zara's bobo reached the foremost troll. The bobo changed course to the right to avoid the trolls.

Zara was thrown off, and he turned toward the trolls closing in on him and rolled like a barrel. The largest troll lifted what was left of its right arm to its head and screamed as if it had just registered the pain. Zara, still lacking total freedom of movement, succeeded in using the force from rolling to slash the troll's leg with Bora's Sword.

At that moment, Bora's Sword gave Zara a tremendous blessing.

The divine sword was furnished with a number of powerful blessings, including Health Leech 10 Percent, which just activated. Zara absorbed 10 percent of the damage he inflicted on the troll. The effect was dramatic.

His body was freed as if being released from shackles, and his thinking, hearing, vision, and his other senses regained their clarity.

He twisted out of the way to avoid being stepped on by the second and third trolls he encountered, and he cut off the leg of a fourth troll. He once again regained a significant amount of stamina, and then he cut off the collapsed troll's head and ran up to Laura. The eleven remaining trolls headed for the city, seemingly having lost interest in Zara and Laura.

Laura was in terrible shape. Her red armor had just barely protected her from being crushed to death, but the blood flowing from her mouth suggested more than a few of her internal organs had ruptured. Her eyes were hazy, and she couldn't even focus her vision. Her left leg had suffered a full break and was twisted in an impossible direction.

Laura was going to die. She would pass through the gate to the underworld at

any moment. Even a priest capable of working miracles would not have been able to save her.

Then, as if possessed by something, Zara took action that defied reason or explanation.

He lifted Laura's body, supported her weight from behind, and placed Bora's Sword in her limp left hand. He then wrapped his left around hers, raised a beast-like cry, and attacked the eleven trolls approaching the city.

He cut. He slashed. And he killed.

Despite the restrictive posture of holding Laura's body in his right hand and holding the sword through her left, he was like a hurricane as he swung Bora's Sword. The trolls were probably never even aware of who they were fighting. Their hands, legs, and heads were cut off in quick succession before they ever understood what was happening. Before long, all that was left was Zara and Laura and the mutilated flesh of the trolls.

Zara's mind was surprisingly calm. Laura had still not opened her eyes. Zara laid her down on the sand, then got on his knees and prayed.

"O Earth Goddess Bora. O Great Bora. I humbly thank you for your divine protection and do beseech thee: grant this woman restful slumber."

Laura's lost right arm was restored.

Her left leg was restored as well. Her body, which had been covered in injuries, was brought back from the brink. Her head was still plastered with clotted blood, but the injuries had healed.

She was asleep and breathing peacefully. Less than a thousand paces away, the citizens of Bia-Dharla looked on at the rubble of the rampart without a clue as to what was going on.

A booming voice resounded in Zara's head.

"Arza, son of Panzel, known also as Zara. The time has come. Honor our agreement and become my blade."

Zara's body then disappeared.

Interlude 8

The minotaur had been transported to a new room shaped like a hemisphere.

The boundaries were distant. The ceiling was bluish and seemed to recede and draw closer in rhythm. The air felt unusually humid, and a sickly haze hung over the room.

Breathing the air burned the minotaur's throat. This air would likely kill anyone without a strong resistance.

The floor was once again crooked, but it slanted up and down in soft waves as opposed to the jaggedness of the last room. Long, narrow, and flat blades of grass emerged from the floor across the room. They were all subtle shades of green or blue. Some of them appeared to be slightly brown as well.

Each blade of grass tapered to a thin point at the top and bottom. Their roots were extremely thin, making it appear as if they were floating.

The tallest ones reached the height of the minotaur, and the smallest ones were half that size.

The minotaur looked down and saw that it was standing on flat, circular stones shining with red light. Next to it were dull gray stones of the same shape.

The minotaur stored its barrel hammer in its Bag, withdrew two scimitars, and stepped down onto the floor. The sword in its right hand was called the Blood Scimitar, and the one in its left was called the Lizardman Scimitar. They were both weapons it had earned from defeating the lizardman, but the Blood Scimitar was a rare drop and had a blessing that increased its sharpness significantly.

The blades of grass began to tremble, rustling noisily, as if they were being blown by a wind that was not there. Depending on the angle from which they were seen, the countless blades either appeared wide or disappeared

altogether as they wriggled.

It was as if the room had awoken after noticing the presence of the creature foolish enough to wander inside.

The minotaur quickly twisted its body and used the scimitar in its left hand to deflect an attack that came at it from behind. A second attack came an instant later, and the minotaur twisted out of the way and deflected it as well.

Two more blades of grass went for its feet, and it used both scimitars to slice through them simultaneously. The minotaur looked down and saw that both blades of grass had wilted.

A single soft-looking blade of grass that had been swaying in front of the minotaur detached from the ground and extended its body straight upward. It looked like the blade of a sword. It then pointed itself at the minotaur and charged forward.

The minotaur twisted out of the way.

The blade of grass flew past the minotaur's back, slowed its pace, turned around, and attacked the minotaur once more. This time, the minotaur cut it down with one of its swords.

The minotaur felt pain in its left side. It had been stabbed by a blade of grass that flew at it from behind. It tore it out and threw it to the ground.

Something felt off to the minotaur. These grasslike things appeared soft, but when the minotaur was cut by them or deflected them, they felt as hard as a sword. Also, what it just tore out of its body felt like metal.

These grasslike things were not what they appeared to be.

Now that the minotaur thought about it, the way the tentacles in the last room felt did not match their appearance, either. In this place, the minotaur could not even trust what it saw with its own eyes.

Every blade of grass in the room detached from the ground simultaneously and bobbed up and down gently. An untold number of them were suspended in the air, filling the entire room. Every one of them pointed toward the minotaur.

The minotaur was greatly displeased with these enemies. The reason for that

was not because they had been catching it off guard or because their true form did not match their appearance. It was because they did not have emotion.

Humans and monsters always had wills of their own. They would direct their hatred or their fear toward the minotaur and attack it, fully determined to kill.

Furthermore, living beings constantly projected signs of their existence. The minotaur would feel the activity of its opponent's mind as wind and the presence of their life as heat. But it felt no wind or heat from these grasslike things.

These grasslike things are not fighting. They are simply moving.

These cold, mindless weapons are pointing their blades at me.

These weapons that do not know the ecstasy of combat or the joy of victory dare try to take my life?

A burning rage welled up from deep within the minotaur's stomach. Then, with a frightening expression, it sucked its lungs full of the cursed air and let out an explosive roar.

ROOOOOAAAAAAARRRRRR!!

The minotaur used Warcry. The brutal roar resounded throughout the room.

Warcry was an area-of-effect attack that was equally valuable in all directions. The minotaur used it in the middle of the room so the effect was equal throughout the entire space.

The countless grasslike things paused in the air and began to shake. When the minotaur saw that they were not attacking, it understood that Howling had probably worked. If that was true, then their stamina had been halved, their resistance was lowered, and they were unable to move.

The minotaur sucked in another breath.

KUUUUUAAAAAARRRRRR!!

This was a skill called Crushing Breath. The many grasslike entities floating in front of the minotaur began to tremble violently.

Eventually, thin cracks began to run down their bladelike bodies.

The minotaur continued to use Crushing Breath. The shock waves crushed the grasslike things to pieces, as the skill's name suggested.

The minotaur gradually changed the direction it was facing and used Crushing Breath over and over again. When all the blades of grass had been reduced to a pile of mulch, the minotaur stopped roaring, and silence returned to the room.

The minotaur leveled up, and the injury to its left side was healed. The dull gray stones next to the shining red stones began to glow blue.

The minotaur reached up and touched its right horn. Half of it was still cut off. It had been cut off by that man.

Every time it touched its misshapen horn, it was consumed by rage. Its horn could not be made whole again until it defeated that man.

The minotaur sucked in a deep breath. Its chest was burning, but not because of the filthiness of the air. It stepped onto the blue stones in search of its next opponent.

Chapter 19

The One Who Waits on Time

1

It was a few days before Zara would fight to defend Bia-Dharla. Alkan, the former head of House Riga, was relaxing and looking down on the royal capital from his veranda.

It was Alkan's eighty-first birthday. His family members and servants understood that he hated extravagance and pomp, so they had a modest but heartfelt dinner party.

Harmony spreading among people—nothing made Alkan happier than that.

What brought him joy was seeing a great number of family members, relatives, and friends journey to visit him. There were, however, people he wanted to come but couldn't bring himself to invite and people who wouldn't come despite his invitation.

As he expected, Esseluleia did not come.

Banust was quite far. But she did have to come to the royal palace once a year, so she could have timed that trip to make it to his birthday.

That Esseluleia didn't even send a letter or a present showed her feelings more than anything else.

She really does think that I stole her Panzel's life, doesn't she?

That was a bitter thought. To Alkan, nothing could have been more absurd. In no way did he harm Panzel. But it was the truth that he had done certain things that made it only natural for her to think he did.

You reap what you sow, huh?

He laughed softly and brushed away the loneliness he felt at growing old and being hated by his daughter.

2

The first head of House Riga came to serve the founding king not long after the creation of the kingdom. At first, he was not a vassal but a simple onlooker.

The first head was the heir to House Onis, which ruled over an expansive land facing the North Sea. By comparison, the founding king's country consisted only of the royal capital and a handful of towns. The first head of House Riga did nothing more than offer some advice and cooperation as an observer while basking in the fun environment of a new country being born.

The founding king was a strange man, thought Alkan.

He was greedy and lacked modesty. He had no self-control when it came to items or women he wanted. He would try to forcibly snatch anything he desired for himself, even if it belonged to one of his vassals. It was fair to say he was a man of many faults.

But on the other hand, he was not stingy in the least when it came to recognizing the distinguished service of others. If he was admonished, he was capable of acknowledging his error with honesty. And above all, he was capable of inspiring others to dream big.

That was why no small amount of people who possessed the virtue and ability to build a country gathered around the founding king. They all exercised their talents, believing that they needed to support him. The founding king also had the ability to draw out the full potential of others.

Alkan thought that if he had been alive at the time and had been permitted to join them on that adventure, he would have hastened to do so. That was how joyful, unprecedented, and grand an era the founding king had built at the birth of this country.

When the founding king died, the first head of House Riga made to travel back to the North Sea. His parents had grown old, and he'd lost interest in the country after the founding king's death.

He was in his carriage leading his family and retainers out of the royal capital when the founding king's queen detained him. Then, holding the child who was to be the second-generation king in her arms, she lay down on the road in front of the carriage and said the following.

“If you leave, then neither I nor this child will be able to keep this kingdom together, and it will soon perish. You may as well run us over and kill us now.”

After the founding king's death, the queen had watched in silence as his most influential vassals left one after another, but as soon as she caught word of the first head of House Riga's departure, she suddenly dashed out of the royal palace and tried desperately to stop him. She all but wrapped herself around his feet to implore him to stay.

The first head was unable to shake her off, and he remained in the royal capital. That was when he threw away his position as heir to the land of Onis.

When the kingdom was founded, the king named his twenty-four direct vassals Defenders of the Realm and established the noble families of counsel. Many of those houses had been passed on to the next generation when the founding king died.

Of those twenty-four houses, the only two that swore allegiance to the kingdom after the founding king's death were House Mercurius and House Lowell, the latter of which died out with the death of Evert. The rest of the houses became effectively independent and focused all their efforts on managing their own domain and expanding their territory as they pleased.

The first thing the head of House Riga had to do was bring those noble families back into the kingdom. Acting at times with negotiation and at others with force, over a long period of time, he managed to bring all the other twenty-two families back into the kingdom. It was a truly great achievement. When his life's work was over, the Baldemost Kingdom occupied more territory than any other country in the north of the continent.

The next thing they worked to accomplish was securing a road to the sea. His first objective was a collection of small coastal cities to the northeast of Baldemost.

He chose not to take them with military might. Instead, he developed a city of

commerce in the region of Riga, which sat between Baldemost and the coastal settlements.

The city of Riga bought salt and marine products from the coastal cities and sold them in the Baldemost Kingdom. The coastal cities benefited from this because a new market had opened in which they could easily sell large quantities of goods. Riga took care of the transport and escort, so it was a great opportunity for the coastal cities to develop industry. Riga also cooperated with the development of processing technology and even lent funds. Riga became an essential presence for the coastal cities, and they came to rely on each other deeply.

The lords of Baldemost put pressure on the coastal cities to lower the price of salt, but the cities would not budge from a price that would turn them a sizable profit. In contrast, Baldemost sold medical goods and metal products to the coastal cities as cheaply as possible.

The industries of the coastal cities expanded, and once the shipping industry really started to boom, they ended up with a shortage of personnel. The first head of House Riga gathered up refugees and poor people from all across Baldemost and sent them to the coastal cities.

Eventually, villages made up of Baldemost citizens began to be established along the sea. The people of the coastal cities welcomed this gladly as a sign of development. The rulers of the coastal cities then paid tribute to the king of Baldemost of their own accord through Riga, and they were eventually incorporated into the kingdom.

A number of direct-control municipalities were established, starting with Anpoan. Riga also achieved striking developments and became an important strategic point for both industry and defense. The first head was named the Duke of Riga, and he changed his family name to Riga.

In the final year of his life, he visited the place that was once the land of Onis.

The once-prosperous land had fallen to ruin and had become a borderland overrun by monsters. The first head of House Riga realized his mistake in thinking that the division of land would not affect the livelihood of its people.

That land was once a country, and he was supposed to be its ruler. But there

was no longer a country, because its people had disappeared.

Which meant that a country was its people.

That was the true essence of the country that the first head of House Riga spent his whole life to build.

3

The true essence of a country was its people, and those people increasing in population, spreading, and gaining wealth was how a country prospered. That was the philosophy that House Riga centered itself on, and from their perspective, the majority of the lords of Baldemost had too narrow an outlook, were obsessed with ideals with no real substance, and mistook the possession of military power for the use of it.

Those lords said that loyalty to the king was the basis a kingdom needed to flourish. Raising strong kings should be what the kingdom's system hoped to accomplish.

That was not wrong.

But when the king was the only great man, the country would decline after his death. Alkan couldn't believe how many people failed to see that the founding king's death was an indictment against that system.

It was true that buildings need a pillar, living beings need a spine, and families need a head of the household. However, if you were to set sail across the ocean on a ship with only one sail, the voyage would be a perilous one.

Why did no one realize that the second-generation king made the first head of House Riga a duke as a clear expression that he wanted to build a country where the king and the lords supported each other?

For most of the lords who clamored for loyalty toward the king, the word *loyalty* was nothing more than a decoration on their behavior that was driven by jealousy toward other houses and the desire to bring profit to their own. In the end, all their attention was on their own house, and they didn't spare a thought for the kingdom.

A good example of such a lord was Earl Wezor.

House Riga had a long-cherished desire. That desire was to establish an economic community between the Baldemost Kingdom and the coastal region on the northwest of the continent. This was the greatest wish of the first head of House Riga that he entrusted to his successor.

The west coast of what was currently the feudal states of Fenks had been a good harbor since olden times, had an excellent and large-scale salt pan, and also possessed developed marine-processing technology.

Their trade with the western archipelagos was flourishing thanks to their advanced shipbuilding technology and naval strength, they had the technology to process all the minerals from throughout the feudal states of Fenks, and there were wealthy merchants with financial power that surpassed that of some kings.

The wealthiest cities in the northern part of the continent were all clustered together in this region.

The Baldemost Kingdom needed to be tied to that region. Not through conquest or by demanding allegiance but by becoming equal trading partners and enabling people and goods to move freely between the kingdom and the northwest coast. That was what the first head of House Riga said would be the key to the kingdom's development.

House Riga had gradually increased exchange with the cities along the northwest coast over a long period of time. The house had also worked to decrease animosity with the powerful feudal states of Fenks, which were located between the Baldemost Kingdom and the cities along the northwest coast.

Then a day arrived when those efforts paid off enormously. In the year 1040 of the Royal Calendar, House Nadal of the feudal states of Fenks declared its return to allegiance to the king of Baldemost, thanks to intermediation from Alkan's father, Molzora, and the head of the house was named the Baron of Paulo.

Molzora was thirty-five years old at the time. Alkan was only four years old, but he remembered well the festival-like bustle and joy in his household. From

then on, he would be reminded at every opportunity of the importance of House Nadal's declaration of allegiance.

The lords in Fenks defended their territory using corps of soldiers called the Northern Knights, which boasted unrivaled strength on level ground with their heavy equipment and unique battle formations and tactics. The lords of Fenks all acted independently and did not interfere with one another, but they would band together when it came time to face a foreign threat.

The lords of Fenks called Baldemost a country of cowards. They looked down on it as a country created by nobles who fled from the weak south. They didn't even take kindly to citizens of Baldemost passing through their territory. Fenks had become an impossible obstacle in House Riga's attempts to trade with the northwest coast.

Baldemost then regained House Nadal's allegiance. The Northern Knights of House Nadal were known for their exceptional strength. Gaining House Nadal's allegiance meant adding their military might to the Baldemost Kingdom.

Also, by integrating the baron's domain of Paulo into Baldemost, the kingdom drew closer to the northwest coast. House Nadal also had many relatives in the central region of the feudal states of Fenks, and you could almost reach the sea just by lining up the territories of those relatives.

House Riga moved forward carefully with preparations for establishing trade routes.

Then an incident occurred in which vassals of Earl Wezor were massacred by a group of government officials in the territory of Lord Daina of the feudal states of Fenks. The vassals were on their way back from buying jewels in a city of commerce on the coast in preparation for a marriage ceremony.

They were captured and killed despite possessing a permit to pass through that land, and their killers fled with the jewels. There were no excuses for their deaths. Lord Daina admitted fault and sent envoys to apologize.

When Molzora heard this, he jumped for joy. Lord Daina had always been prejudiced against Baldemost, and he was in opposition to the opening of trade routes. Molzora could use this incident to silence Lord Daina. If he handled the situation well enough, he might even have been able to win Lord Daina's

support for the trade routes.

That joy lasted for only one day.

News arrived that Earl Wezor had invaded Lord Daina's territory. Alkan had never seen his father so depressed.

At the time, Molzora was forty-nine years old, and Alkan was eighteen.

"Alkan, I don't understand. Why did the earl go to war?"

"Probably to gain territory."

"What good would scraping off a slice of that territory, which is mostly wasteland, do for his people? How much military strength would he need to expend to protect the land he obtained? Lord Daina admitted fault. Debts only mean anything if you keep the other side in debt. If we invade, then the debt disappears, and we end up in the wrong."

"Yes, but the earl would surely point out that increasing his domain increases the territory of the kingdom."

"If the Northern Knights united their forces, our kingdom would stand no chance of victory. Then we would be the ones who end up losing territory! All right, what would he say to this: *I know you're angry that your vassals were killed, but who made it so that you could obtain a permit and purchase goods on the coast in the first place? Do you know how much time and money that took?*"

"The earl would likely answer with the following: *That was done for the kingdom. Our war is also for the kingdom. So you have no right to say that to me.*"

"Hmm. I see. But I've been saying for years that our country does not have territory-related ambition. What happened to that?"

"Expanding the territory of a kingdom is the duty of its loyal subjects. He would probably say you have been disloyal to the crown for your dealings with the feudal states of Fenks."

"We no longer have any need for increasing our territory! Opening up genuine trading with the northwest coast will bring great wealth to the kingdom and lead to population growth, which will increase our productivity. We have

plenty of usable land left even within the kingdom right now. Our first priority should be developing within the country and increasing our own strength. To do that, we need to bring wealth to our economy through trade. The lords in Fenks whose territory the trade routes will pass through will benefit as well. Creating an economic relationship where both sides depend on the other will decrease the chance of war. Once we have grown our nation's power to a sufficient degree, we can invite the lords into our kingdom economically. Taking territory by force will not endear its people to us, and their resentment will run deep. Countries grow prosperous through the profit of their people. Was that not already proven with the northeastern coast?"

"That won't convince anyone. The lords of Baldemost will see your actions as benefiting only House Riga. They'll argue that everything to the north and east of Riga is essentially our territory. We invested money and people from the kingdom to increase its wealth, and then we made it our own. Because of that, they'll say that we need to give them a chance to grab some land to the west for themselves."

"So not even saying that this is all for the kingdom's benefit rather than our own will reach them. Hmm. Alkan, what can I do here?"

"Father. Have you received a request from Earl Wezor to provide logistic support for the war effort?"

"No. I have received nothing of the sort."

"Then let's sell our salt to Tada."

"What?"

That year, the northeast coast of the continent had suffered consistently bad weather, and the production of salt had fallen tremendously. As in other countries, the royal family in Baldemost had a monopoly on salt, but in reality, it was House Riga that had total control over the production and sale of it. They had built up a healthy stockpile of salt under House Riga's direction.

House Riga sold that entire supply to the neighboring country of Tada. Tada had been suffering from a shortage of salt, so this placed the country in Baldemost's debt and brought enormous profit to the kingdom. All distribution of salt, aside from regular provisions, to the cities throughout Baldemost was

cut off temporarily, prices inflated on the open market, and then it disappeared entirely.

The opinion that Baldemost should supply Earl Wezor with reinforcements was voiced in the Privy Council, but that was rejected mainly for the reason that it would result in a war between nations. There were no lords who wanted to go so far as to spend their own money to support the earl, so the war dragged on.

The earl then ran out of salt. There was no salt for him to buy, so the war effort had to be suspended without gaining any territory.

If any one lord had assisted the earl, it would not have worked out that way. When Molzora asked Alkan why no one came to his aid, Alkan answered with the following.

“If any of the surrounding lords had supported the earl, it would have been because they thought their turn to receive support would be next. But they also couldn’t stand the idea of the earl reaping all the rewards from this war. No lord was going to be willing to help increase the earl’s territory at their own cost.”

That was exactly what happened.

A crack had formed in the friendly relationship between the lords of Fenks and House Riga, and the dream of opening trade routes grew more distant. However, learning that they were capable of holding back the earl’s army opened up possibilities for the future.

4

Just like that, House Riga’s generations of hard work were torn down by another house.

Conversely, there were also cases where House Riga trampled other houses underfoot and showed them the foolishness of their desires.

The extermination of House Vald was one such example.

At the time, Alkan’s father, Molzora, was nineteen years old, and Molzora’s father, Krelm, was forty-nine years old. Krelm had held the positions of head of

the cabinet and prime minister when the king declared he wanted to appoint Mazel Sou La Vald, a common knight of the Imperial Guard, to the position of Royal Inspector. Krelm advised the king that the knight's social rank and personal history made him unfit for the position, but in his heart, he actually welcomed the appointment.

The king would come to be known after death as Shana Eran, or the Kindhearted, but he was too idealistic and too purehearted. Krelm always ended up passing political measures that went against the king's wishes, and he felt bad about it. If selecting his favorite knight would make the king feel better, then Krelm was perfectly okay with it.

Also, government affairs at the royal palace had become extremely inefficient and unproductive due to being bogged down by complicated issues of power and prestige, so he had hopes that a young Royal Inspector could come in and win people over by breathing new life into the court.

However, the newly appointed Royal Inspector very quickly took action that was equivalent to bringing a poisoned blade to a friendly training match. He suddenly launched an investigation into the government offices of the Marquis of Anpoan, and then he implemented punishment without any consultation.

It was true that three viscounts under the jurisdiction of House Riga had been using their position to line their own pockets, and they were clearly in the wrong. If Krelm had been consulted about this, he would not have hesitated to make them take responsibility and reflect on what they had done.

But what the Royal Inspector called unfair trade with foreign countries was definitely not unfair trade. They were beneficial investments that were necessary for maintaining friendly relations with an eye on opening trade routes in the future.

Normally these kinds of practices should have been implemented as national policy after consulting with the Privy Council. However, whenever former heads of House Riga brought this to the Privy Council, the response would always be that if they had the leeway to give beneficial deals to foreign countries, then they should lower the prices on salt and other goods stored in the royal palace. In other words, they demanded profit for themselves.

There was no other country that had such disregard for diplomacy.

That left House Riga with no other choice but to bestow favors on foreign nobility at their own discretion in order to maintain favorable relations with foreign nations. Those nobility were the window of their respective territories.

If Krelm had been asked about their dealings with foreign countries, he would have been able to explain himself in a dignified manner, as it was not behavior he had to feel guilty for in the least. Nevertheless, the investigation was performed and judgment was delivered without any questions asked, resulting in House Riga losing face with foreign countries and with the coastal regions. People began to scorn the trustworthiness of promises made by House Riga, which did nothing but hurt the future profits of the kingdom.

This event was also likely going to lead to Anpoan losing its status as a center for shipping and industry on the coast, ruining years of hard work to build it into a marquis's domain.

“That idiot inspector can't see the big picture. He'll pay for this.”

Krelm reacted violently. He framed the Royal Inspector for rebellion and killed his entire family, as well as all his retainers.

Some days later, an unusual sound came from Krelm's room. Molzora rushed into the room and found Krelm striking his desk repeatedly, blood streaming from his hands. He was screaming the following as he did so.

“I made a mistake. I made a mistake.”

That day, Krelm had looked through the Anpoan investigation files that were collected from the royal palace.

The documents were perfect.

They were precise with no wasted space. The points of comparison, the depiction of the fluctuation of numbers, and everything else about the documents could be described only as exceptional.

The responsibility of each person involved in the event was explained in a concise and well-reasoned manner, and the writing was powerful and beautiful.

The documents concerned the potential of under-the-table payoffs to foreign

countries, but they eloquently explained the reason for the judgment given.

They didn't simply follow the law but laid a path to return back to the original spirit of it. A compassionate legal principle was present in the documents that wished for the growth of systems and people.

The person who wrote this report was the kind of government official who came along once every hundred years.

The Royal Inspector was an outstanding person who House Riga should have humbly invited to be their master of law. Judging by the number of documents he put together in such a short period of time, he must have had truly gifted subordinates as well.

And Krelm had killed them all.

They were talented, righteous, and worldly—they were the government officials this country needed the most. He had failed to realize this and stamped them all out.

Krelm felt that he needed to take responsibility for inflicting such tremendous harm on the future of the country and decided to resign.

Before he tendered his resignation, he reinstated the Marquis of Anpoan as well as the three viscounts who had been punished in the incident. He then appointed the Marquis of Anpoan to the cabinet as Black Minister. Given that he couldn't turn back time, he needed to do what he could to suppress the damage.

Then, just as he was about to resign, the king died.

Baldemost always spent a year in mourning after the king's death and refrained from decisions on important political measures or changes in important offices.

Krelm then applied for resignation the next year, along with the new king's coronation. The reason he gave for his departure was being unfit to rule, citing poor health and other factors, so naturally, he stepped down as the head of House Riga as well.

His oldest son, Molzora, succeeded him to become the Duke of Riga, inherited

the seat of head of the house, and assumed the post of Black Minister.

The failures of Krelm were a bitter lesson for House Riga.

Alkan had a thought. Krelm must have had arrogance and self-righteousness in his heart.

The anger of being defaced by an insignificant government official caused him to react that violently.

When distinguished families quarreled, sometimes it would end with one family killing every member of the other. This was done because if even one child was left alive, they would one day seek revenge.

But House Riga had never done such a thing. What's more, given the size and station of House Vald, there was no reason for House Riga to pick a fight with them.

It was difficult for people with power to escape from arrogance. Whenever House Riga forgot that, it became poison to the country.

Through their simple existence, humans always served as a hindrance to some and poison to others. If a person possessed great wealth and power, that became even truer.

Working hard at the center of this country for so long had ended up giving birth to a rotten stagnation.

What could they do to purify themselves of that stagnation?

5

Alkan took the seat of White Minister in the year 1065 of the Royal Calendar at the age of twenty-nine.

Alkan worked hard as the head of House Riga and as the White Minister while carrying the burden of Riga's past successes and failures. When he had just begun to think of retirement, an event occurred that suggested a major turning point in history was at hand.

The arrival of a hero.

The impetus of this event was the issue surrounding the investiture of the crown prince.

The king died the same year that Alkan became the White Minister. A year later, the new king ascended the throne at eighteen years old.

As was suggested by his posthumous name of Yuulala Eran, or the Sword King, the new king had a personality full of vigor. The Sword King was one of the founding king's nicknames, so this posthumous name fit him exceptionally.

He had wed a consort before his enthronement, and a year after he became king, a son was born. He was the first prince.

There was a problem with the first prince—his maternal grandfather was a marquis who was starting to openly demonstrate ambition for expanding territory. The cabinet ministers were concerned about the influence of this marquis and were not enthusiastic about naming the first prince the crown prince.

The next year, Alkan's daughter wed the king and became the second queen consort. Two years later, she birthed a son who became the second prince.

There was much argument over which prince should be named the crown prince, and much time passed without the issue being decided on. In the year 1096 of the Royal Calendar, the king turned forty-eight years old, and the investiture could not be delayed any further.

By that time, the first prince himself had become more of a problem than his maternal relatives due to his clear intention to use military might to expand the kingdom's territory.

Alkan opened the Privy Council after thorough preparation. Normally Privy Council sessions would be performed with only the king, the cabinet ministers, and others related to the case present, but when it came to important matters, everyone above a certain rank participated.

Votes for the second prince numbered ten to one until the twenty-two-year-old Julius Mercurius overturned the course of events with the following statement.

“It is an ancient tradition that the eldest son inherits the house. Does that not

apply to the kingdom as well?”

No one took this worse than Alkan's eldest son, Garrest. He felt a deep sense of anger toward Julius for trampling on Alkan's carefully laid plans.

Garrest was then approached by the Baron of Paulo to ask if he wanted to attack House Mercurius together.

The head of House Nadal had changed twice since the house returned to the Baldemost Kingdom and had its territory renamed as the baron's domain of Paulo. Bolan was thirty-four years old at the time. He was a childhood friend of the thirty-eight-year-old Garrest.

House Nadal was a house of superior military strength, but for a while after returning to Baldemost, they didn't get a chance to show that. Eventually, however, the king became assertive when it came to suppression within the country, and House Nadal was given a big stage on which to flourish.

There were many forces throughout the expansive kingdom that were not obeying the king's rule. The Baron of Paulo had been accepting royal orders and putting down one rebellious influence after another.

When Bolan inherited the house, Garrest began to frequently act with him.

Bolan was perfectly okay with financing his missions himself as long as he had a moral cause and stage on which to make a name for himself, and he even set out on expeditions far from his own domain that wouldn't gain him any profit. His knights were unrivaled in their strength, and his achievements far outpaced anyone else's.

By the time Bolan's military fame had resounded throughout the country, Julius Mercurius appeared like a comet.

In the year 1088 of the Royal Calendar, various forces that had been driven from the country joined hands with the barbarians of Jami Forest and tried to attack the royal palace with an army of twenty thousand. At the young age of fourteen, Julius gathered two thousand soldiers and enlisted the help of six S-rank adventurers and laid out a defense camp in the town of Micaene in just two days. He then took advantage of the enemy's weak coordination, killed two commanders, and halted the enemy army's advance for a whole week. The

lords then finally amassed their troops and exterminated the enemy.

With this battle, the kingdom drew much closer to total suppression.

Afterward, the king used Julius for many important jobs, and the boy continued to live up to expectations.

The baron's domain of Paulo was far from the royal capital. House Mercurius was located within the royal capital. The lords weren't thrilled with the Baron of Paulo's army passing through, so naturally, royal commands for subjugation began to more often fall to House Mercurius.

Over time, Bolan was filled with a deep desire to challenge the military might of this great fourteen-year-old commander who regularly routed armies larger than his own.

When Alkan was told by Bolan that he was going to attack the Mercurius estate in the royal capital and then told by Garrest that afterward they would enter the royal palace and pressure the king into crowning the second prince, he was shocked by the radicalism of their plan.

"When are you going to attack?"

"In the middle of the harvest festival, of course. That way we'll have the attention of the entire country."

That was an answer he never would have expected. But once he gave it some thought, he realized it wasn't such a bad idea.

There would be no one in the labyrinth on the day of the harvest festival, so he could devise a means to send that hindrance Panzel to his death.

The chief vassal Pan'ja Raban was old and bedridden.

Most importantly, despite the fact that this plot was equivalent to treason, he felt no maliciousness in Bolan's words.

This might work.

Alkan then reached a point where he could no longer turn back.

He had been overly thorough with his preparations, and as a result, the actions of the second prince's faction reached a larger scale and became more

radical than he'd expected. The first prince being named the crown prince would be a crushing defeat for House Riga and its sympathizers. Mass political confusion would likely ensue. If wars then began to be waged to gain territory with no moral cause, it would likely spell the kingdom's ruin.

But House Riga would be throwing away its pride if it used force to make the king abdicate and place the second prince, Alkan's own grandson, on the throne. They could not afford to lose the struggle over the investiture of the crown prince, but they could not afford to steal the country, either.

All right!

Alkan made up his mind.

First we will defeat Mercurius. We will defeat them and send Julius through the gates of hell. Then we will gain control over the royal palace. But we won't steal it. We will negotiate directly with the first prince and get him to abandon hopes of a foreign campaign. We should be able to break the first prince's heart with the death of Julius. Only then will we crown the first prince. I will apologize for my crimes with my death. Then House Riga should be safe in Garrest's hands.

The plot moved forward, and then the day arrived.

The only people who knew of the plan to send soldiers to the royal palace after defeating House Mercurius were Alkan, Garrest, Bolan, and a number of Garrest's closest aides. Alkan would take care of everything after they occupied the royal palace.

Bolan marched his soldiers into Pantram Square, which was lively with exhibitions, stalls, and crowds of people, and called out the following.

"Listen up! I am Baron Bolan of Paulo! I have led my northern warriors here today to cross swords with the renowned young general of this kingdom, Julius Mercurius. My observer is Lord Garrest of House Riga. Let us have an honest contest of military strength!"

The crowd then grew very lively, vacated the square, climbed up onto nearby buildings, and shouted cheers of encouragement for the Northern Knights marching on House Mercurius's residence. That was a good indicator of how

charismatic a general Bolan was.

A delighted Alkan roared with laughter when he received this report in his villa in the royal capital. He then felt relief at the steady stream of reports saying that House Mercurius was having to devote all its resources just to defend themselves against the Northern Knights.

Everything was going according to plan.

But when he next received a report that the knight Panzel had returned, invaded their camp by himself, and taken Garrest's head, he felt as if his world had been flipped upside down.

This report might have meant the ruin of all his plans, but Alkan felt strangely moved.

A hero might have just arrived.

6

Why did I choose the unjust path of attacking House Mercurius in the first place?

Alkan had never viewed House Mercurius as his enemies. Far from it, he thought highly of them as a truly loyal family who stuck to their principles.

He had felt some frustration in regards to the house.

House Mercurius may have been famed for its military might, but the heads of house throughout the generations had always held intellect and perspective to match House Riga's. Percival, the previous head of the house, had an especially sharp eye for seeing the true nature of things.

He was definitely not a fool who only had interest in fighting. A fool would not have been capable of maintaining the unity of such a great house. Percival was not the simple warrior he appeared to be. He even had the ability to challenge Alkan on level ground when it came to managing affairs of state.

Despite that, Percival avoided the royal court. He held a seat, but he didn't even try to participate. Alkan thought that it may have been for self-concealment because Percival didn't want to be suspected for ambition after

marrying the king's little sister, but that wasn't the reason.

Alkan once tried to appoint Percival as the commander of the Fourth Division of the Imperial Guard. The Fourth Division was the order of knights assigned to protect the second prince, so Percival would be able to earn favor and enter the cabinet when the second prince was named the crown prince.

But Percival refused outright.

This ended up inducing a strange sequence of events after Percival's death.

The commander of the Imperial Guard's Fourth Division was the head of one of House Riga's branch families, and after Percival declined to succeed him, the commander's son assumed the role. This new commander felt a strange sense of rivalry with Percival, and that continued even after Percival's death.

That sense of rivalry ended up having a direct impact on the Fourth Division's attempted subjugation of the minotaur.

The commander's initial plan was to challenge the minotaur with a group of eight elite knights. However, the subjugation force ended up swelling to eighty people. It was common knowledge that the king was singularly devoted to the minotaur's defeat, and because subjugation missions never failed—provided the proper preparations had been made—knights signed up in quick succession, none of them wanting to miss the boat.

Every one of the knights' families was adamant about their sons' participation. None of them wanted to be the odd one out. There was also an absurd rumor that loyalty to House Riga was being tested on participation in this subjugation force.

In the end, the commander himself pulled out of the operation. That was understandable. He wanted to demonstrate his own valor by taking down the monster that had defeated Percival. There would be no meaning in a fight where they just overwhelmed it with numbers.

As a result, the subjugation force ended up lacking strong leadership.

Even still, Alkan never would have expected them to be wiped out. When he heard the report, he grew so weak at the stupidity of the knights that he felt like he had lost all strength in his legs.

The families of the knights completely forgot the sequence of events that had led to the massacre and blamed Alkan. He had opposed the dispatch of the subjugation force from the beginning to the end and then was made out to be responsible for the tragedy.

But political leaders were occasionally placed in this kind of position. Alkan definitely had some responsibility for the incident, in the sense that he should have foreseen the outcome and taken measures to prevent it.

Regardless, Alkan's hope that Percival would actively participate in politics ended when he died too young.

House Riga needed a political rival. A mighty political rival.

How long had it been since they had had a decent discussion in the royal court? A discussion in which the members of the court did nothing but agree with every statement made by House Riga's cabinet minister was not a discussion. Political measures became sound through exhaustive debate in which they were battered by opposing opinions. Answers that rose to counter objections were what polished political measures and made their significance apparent. For that reason, Alkan was earnest in his desire for a political rival.

That political rival then appeared. It was Julius Mercurius.

Julius was the new head of House Mercurius, and he distinguished himself in a way typical of a family known for their military prowess. Alkan had called out in his heart on numerous occasions for Julius to use his accomplishments as background to enter the political world.

When Julius did enter the royal court, he made dignified and sound arguments. It was a scene that should have pleased Alkan greatly.

But for some reason, what Alkan felt was fear.

He had been very thorough in his preparations to set up the second prince as the crown prince, and the chances of his plans being overturned were minuscule. Then, with just one statement, Julius realized that minuscule chance. With a voice that didn't contain a fragment of greed or high-handedness.

He was a person who could overturn years of effort with just one act.

He was a person who could make an impression with casually spoken words.

He was a person who possessed a natural ability to have an immense influence on other people.

It was then that Alkan learned that Julius Mercurius was that kind of person.

He then had a thought. House Riga could not oppose Julius with Garrest. Julius was too dangerous.

That thought was what made him consent to killing Julius.

But Panzel protected Julius and killed Garrest.

This plunged House Riga into a life-or-death crisis.

7

Alkan's decision was quick. He would throw away everything and demonstrate his allegiance to the king.

He groveled in front of the king and high-seated nobles for the purpose of House Riga's survival and concentrated all his attention on Panzel. He couldn't stop thinking about the blessed sword that was received for defeating the monster in the labyrinth and the strength Panzel showed when he fought with it.

After watching Panzel easily defeat one hundred knights on his own, he spontaneously said that Panzel should be named Defender of the Realm.

The king agreed without a moment's delay, and it was decided. Panzel was appointed Defender of the Realm, and House Goran was established.

The first prince became the crown prince, the second prince fell to the status of a subject, and the second queen consort lost her position.

A subjugation force was sent for Bolan Nadal, the Baron of Paulo. House Riga did not take part in the campaign and instead bore the burden of the army provisions. This was done in order to give the achievement to other houses.

Alkan gave the house and his rank to his second son, Draydol; withdrew from center stage; and watched over Panzel.

The baron's domain of Paulo was difficult to attack from the kingdom, and the Northern Knights would be on them immediately upon detection, so the campaign should have ended in nothing more than a stalemate.

As expected, as soon as they arrived in enemy territory, five of the seven knights who the baron's domain had been divided among took command of their armies and solidified the defense of each of the potential points of invasion.

Panzel then left the disheartened lords behind, broke through the steep ground of all nine strongholds one after another, flew like the wind through the wide plains, and approached the baron's castle.

Panzel was accompanied by the one hundred Imperial Guard knights who had been given to him by the king and two hundred cavalymen of House Mercurius.

Bolan would likely have had no chance of losing if he had just shut himself away in his castle, but he ended up leaving it to meet the daring general and his lightning-quick charge. Panzel's knights were extremely fatigued from their impossible advance. Bolan felt like he owed the reckless and ambitious Panzel the courtesy of burying his army personally. He had also been wishing for a chance to determine which of them was the better general.

The armies then clashed on the plains.

The two hundred cavalymen of House Mercurius followed behind and blocked the extra knights rushing to join Bolan. Then the two hundred and fifty Northern Knights led by Bolan himself and the one hundred knights led by Panzel collided.

Panzel had his army take a wedge formation with himself at the tip and attacked the square formation of the Paulo Army head-on.

Everyone watching thought Panzel's charge would break like a wave against a rock. But instead, it ended up piercing the rock like a longsword cutting through a curtain.

Panzel heavily wounded Bolan, soundly defeated the Northern Knights who were supposed to boast unparalleled strength on level ground, and occupied

the castle. Bolan relied on his relatives and fled.

It was a perfect and impossible victory. Enemies and allies alike could not believe the result upon first hearing it.

Then something even more unbelievable happened. Three of the seven knights who had been given land in Bolan's domain swore their allegiance to Panzel.

Panzel was a rare hero, and Alkan made every effort to ensure he could exercise his strength to the fullest.

First, through Draydol, he publicly stressed the meritorious service of House Mercurius in the capture of the Baron of Paulo's domain. Panzel was under Julius's command in the organization of House Mercurius's army, so this was not a stretch.

He engineered for Julius to enter the Baron of Paulo's castle and take command. He did that because it had been a long-cherished desire of Panzel's for House Mercurius to be appreciated.

The lord of the domain had been driven out, and the troops under his direct command had been defeated, but there was still much unoccupied land, and it would not be easy to get the domain under control. But Alkan was sure that Julius would be able to handle it.

Just as Alkan expected, Julius showed wondrous cunning and flaunted the might of the Mercurius Army and the Goran Army, ultimately expanding the land under his rule and stabilizing it. The three knights who swore their allegiance were very helpful.

Alkan wed his beloved daughter Esseluleia to Panzel and sent him a dowry along with fifty elite knights. The king's face lit up upon hearing this, and he said that he would send fifty knights as well.

Alkan felt that his and the king's feelings were aligned for the first time.

The king probably felt the same.

Two years later, when rule was completely established in the domain, Alkan had Draydol suggest to the king that it would be suitable to give the entire

former Paulo domain to Julius.

Julius was then made the Marquis of Keza. The land was named after the site of the royal palace.

Alkan also felt that he needed to ensure the stability of House Mercurius by tying it to a lord who was versed in domestic affairs and rich in property, so he had Draydol arrange a marriage with the daughter of a marquis's family that had a long history of friendship with House Mercurius.

8

The Baron of Paulo turned to his relative Lord Banust for help when he fled the Baldemost Kingdom.

Baldemost demanded that Lord Banust hand over the Baron of Paulo, but Lord Banust, whose name was Orubine, demanded that the king of Baldemost return the Paulo domain to Fenks.

The negotiations didn't get anywhere, but there was a strong vigor in Baldemost's diplomacy at the time and a sense that the character of the kingdom had changed.

Behind the negotiations, both sides were preparing for the outbreak of war.

In Fenks, the Baron of Paulo excitedly convinced his friends and relatives that it would make for a fun war.

In Baldemost, the king and the crown prince led the charge for war, arguing that because rule had been established throughout the kingdom and there was money to spare in the coffers, it was the perfect chance to show the outside world their power.

Eventually, the negotiations that had stalled for four years broke down, and both sides exchanged extremely old-fashioned letters saying that they would have a contest of military might and entrust judgment to the gods. The war then began.

Banust boasted the most territory in the feudal states of Fenks. The Banust castle was the strongest fortress in all of Fenks, and it was surrounded by

multiple layers of branch castles and strongholds that made it difficult to even reach. Early in the war, the cabinet ministers of Baldemost occupied a number of the branch castles with an eye on exchanging some of them for the Baron of Paulo.

The feudal states of Fenks did not have a king. Instead, the lords involved in the matter would gather and hold a conference, and the lord who sealed and safeguarded the resulting pact would act as the representative. In this war, Lord Banust was made the representative. Fourteen lords ended up signing the document voting to start the war, so the conflict became close to an all-out war between two countries.

Baldemost named the crown prince himself the supreme commander and invaded Fenks.

Panzel fought like a god who had descended to the earth.

In a period of just over three years, they defeated six divisions of Northern Knights, took the head of the Baron of Paulo, drove Lord Banust to commit suicide, occupied Banust castle, and also captured five branch castles.

In the year 1100 of the Royal Calendar, Panzel and Esseluleia had a son named Arza. It was impressive that they even found the time to have a child.

The lords of Baldemost carefully expanded the occupied territory to prevent the front lines from becoming isolated.

Alkan spent those three years feeling as if he were inside a pleasant dream.

Panzel differed greatly from other military commanders on two points.

The first was that he won the respect of the enemies he defeated.

The Baron of Paulo praised him by saying the following.

“He is the god of thunder made flesh...”

Every division of the Northern Knights wanted to fight Thunderstorm Panzel, and after they lost, they would sing his praises for his magnificent, thunderous fighting style.

The second way he differed from other commanders was his mastery of House Mercurius's treasures.

The heads of House Mercurius had tried many times throughout the house's long history to have their family members or vassals use the five blessed items, but as far as Alkan knew, the blessings had never activated for anyone other than the head of the house. Panzel was likely the first exception.

There was something to Panzel beyond his supreme military prowess.

The kingdom was moving in a direction that ran completely opposite to what House Riga had always strove for.

But what was this fulfilling and exhilarating feeling welling up inside him?

They were struggling for land with blood and violence, but why did he feel a refreshing wind blowing through the country?

The only explanation he had was the presence of a hero on the level of the era of the kingdom's founding.

Alkan was able to believe that he was living in a grand era.

The entirety of Banust ended up becoming Baldemost territory, which meant the coast wasn't far now. If he appealed for the opening of trade routes on the backing of Panzel's military prowess after Banust was stabilized, there was no doubt it could be achieved.

Just a little more.

Just a little more and House Riga's generations-old desire could be realized in a wholly unexpected way.

And then Panzel died, along with the dream.

Panzel was laying siege to the branch castle in the deepest position in the Banust territory, and then one night, he suddenly died in camp.

He was thirty-one years old.

9

Alkan thought that Julius's performance at that time could not have been praised enough.

Julius hid Panzel's death entirely. He announced that Panzel had fallen ill and

then put a body double in his place. He took great care in regularly sending a doctor to see him, delivering him food, and having it look like he was giving orders.

He then had the crown prince hasten to sign a peace treaty.

Talks for a cease-fire had begun slightly before that.

The Baron of Paulo had been killed, and Lord Banust had died as well, so Baldemost didn't have a great cause to continue fighting.

Fenks did not want to lose in such a one-sided manner. They had clearly shown that they would not agree to a peace treaty unless they had half the occupied territory returned to them. That said, the lords of Fenks should have known that they were in an inferior position and recovery would be difficult.

The eventual peace treaty returned a few strongholds but specified that nearly all the occupied territory would be retained by Baldemost. However, the people on Baldemost's side of the negotiations greatly praised the admirable fighting of Fenks and showed great generosity by giving them a vast amount of relief funds and saying that they would not impose tariffs on items imported from Fenks for a period of ten years.

Also, the nobility and citizens of the former Fenks domain who wanted to move to Fenks were allowed to do so while retaining a certain amount of their assets.

Furthermore, the nobility among the prisoners of war were returned without condition, and it was decided that the commoners would be released after a few short years of labor. It was the standard for prisoners of war with rank to be exchanged for a ransom and to make commoners into slaves who performed manual labor, so enemies and allies alike were taken aback by this stipulation.

The crown prince finalized the conditions of the peace treaty, but he was acting on the suggestions of Julius, who occupied the position of Black Minister.

Alkan was in awe.

First off, it was fair to say the other lords of Fenks entered the war for personal gain. Letting them profit through relief money was very smart. What Baldemost saw as relief money, Fenks saw as indemnities, so both sides

maintained their honor.

Next, the temporary abolition of tariffs would become a stimulus for active trade and serve to relax relationships frayed by the war, and it would also serve as a significant preliminary arrangement for the future opening of trade routes.

Although citizens of Fenks had been granted permission to move, farmers could not leave the farmland that they had poured their blood, sweat, and tears into for as long as they could remember. Merchants were used to crossing borders anyway. In the end, the freedom of movement served as a means to rid the domain of discontented nobles. The nobles who elected to stay were likely to serve as a bridge to the citizens of the domain.

There were some in the royal court who loudly opposed releasing prisoners of war without payment, but once implemented, the policy brought about an unforeseen result.

First, half the knights among the prisoners of war and most of the soldiers ended up wanting to swear allegiance to Baldemost. Then Fenks returned the Baldemost nobility among their prisoners of war for remarkably small sums of money, and they also set commoners free after a few short years of labor. The lords of Fenks were proud people. Baldemost's fighting style was the picture of chivalry, and that was matched by the generous terms in the peace treaty, so there was no way Fenks was going to do any less.

This was not an idea that a twenty-year-old cabinet minister should have been able to come up with. Alkan thought that Julius, too, must have spread his wings and rode the wind summoned by the hero.

The crown prince was the same. He grew a great deal during the war. Alkan no longer felt any concern about him being the king's heir.

The lords of Baldemost gained almost no financial reward, but they did win expansive occupied territory. The king generously awarded new land to the lords who distinguished themselves in the war. Most of that land could not have been said to possess much economic strength, but the lords were deeply satisfied by the honor of having won it from the feudal states of Fenks.

They were able to implement such a policy because they fought in a way that limited the exhaustion of farmland and the citizens, and because House Riga

made free use of the reserves it had been accumulating for the last thousand years.

The biggest issue was deciding who should rule the Banust domain, which was the crown jewel of the occupied territory.

If Panzel had still been alive, then there would have been no debate. No other lord was worthier of the land. But Panzel was dead.

Being named the lord of the Banust domain was a great honor, but it was also on the front lines and could be attacked from three cardinal directions. Only a capable lord could be entrusted with it.

The crown prince declared in the Privy Council that it was unthinkable for anyone other than House Goran to govern Banust. Draydol, who held the position of White Minister, vehemently opposed this.

He may have held the highest position in the court, but Draydol was only thirty-nine years old. Other than the twenty-nine-year-old Julius, who occupied the position of Black Minister, he was the youngest of the cabinet ministers, and he didn't have much experience.

Draydol had never opposed the other cabinet ministers since joining the cabinet, and this was the first time he had ever disputed the crown prince's words. With a voice that sounded like he was suppressing a violent emotion, he said it would surely be too heavy a burden to bear for a widow.

No decision was reached that morning. Panzel's widow, Esseluleia, was Draydol's much younger sister, and there was no one who didn't know how fond of her he was. For that reason, everyone thought that he spoke his mind out of a reflex to protect his little sister.

But Draydol's words were not born of affection for his sister. They came from his hatred of Panzel.

To Draydol, Panzel was a bitter enemy who took the head of Garrest, the hope of their family. The night that his beloved little sister was offered to Panzel as a sacrifice, Draydol went mad with rage.

Draydol had become the White Minister, but he had been on a bed of thorns during the war with Fenks. He devoted himself to showing loyalty to the king

and worked to coordinate fairness among the ministers, all the while feeling like he was groveling in mud. He sunk incredible sums of money into the quicksand of that war. All while being careful not to take any of the credit for himself.

Whose fault was it that House Riga, the house that had worked harder than any other for this country, had to prostrate themselves and bear this absurd fate?

Draydol had thought that their days of submission and patience would finally be over with the signing of the peace treaty, but then it was said that the largest occupied territory would be given to Panzel's house. Draydol decided that was the one thing he couldn't allow.

Alkan was troubled by this.

The crown prince grew enormously from this war, but my son has been twisted.

In politics, you needed to be able to have an outside perspective. This country's internal affairs were not the most important thing to consider when selecting the lord of the Banust domain. More important was the mindset of the people of Fenks.

Banust would be given to Thunderstorm Panzel, and the valor of his spirit would become the land's protection. There was no other way the people of Fenks would accept it as Baldemost territory.

It was actually the same for the Baldemost government. The government was run by the king, the cabinet ministers, and the lords, but what really mattered was that this country stood on the achievements of the founding king and the twenty-four heroes and that the king ruled through reverence for the spirit of the deceased founding king. Running governmental affairs without being aware of that was akin to thinking that crops grew thanks to your power alone rather than from the blessings of the earth and the sun.

It was not hard to figure out. Would the deceased Lord Banust or the Baron of Paulo accept anyone other than Panzel as the lord of the domain? If those two important figures were not satisfied, then the people of Fenks who revered their honor would not accept it, either.

But his son was blinded by hate and couldn't see reason. Understanding that, Alkan approached his son from a totally different angle.

“Then steal.”

Alkan surprised himself with the intensity of the emotion he felt behind his words.

“Steal everything that Panzel had. Why do you think I gave Panzel my daughter? It was to drown House Goran in the blood of House Riga. Give the domain to his family. Give them the faraway land of Banust. That way, we can separate House Goran from House Mercurius. House Goran doesn't have much in the way of vassals, so who else can they rely on but House Riga? Send people skilled at administration, people who excel at diplomacy, and people with a thorough knowledge of economics to serve Esseluleia. Banust will belong to House Goran, but they will be entirely under House Riga's thumb. Send skilled instructors. Fill Panzel's son with Riga's history, Riga's ideology, Riga's spirit, and Riga's hatred. Then you will have your revenge.”

Draydol's eyes regained their sanity at Alkan's words.

The next day at the Privy Council, Draydol took back his previous words and agreed to award the Banust domain to House Goran. He said House Riga would do their best to offer what little support they could, and he made a deep impression on the king, the crown prince, and the cabinet ministers.

That wasn't all. The lords of Baldemost had been under the impression that the former Banust domain would be partitioned and divided among them, but Draydol said that the defense of the domain could not have proper coordination unless it was under one rule, so the new Banust domain ended up larger than initially expected.

House Goran received Banust, and Panzel Goran, Defender of the Realm, was given the title of the Marquis of Banust posthumously.

Panzel's funeral service was performed in Banust. Surprisingly, Baldemost's former enemies in the feudal states of Fenks sent twenty-two envoys to give their condolences.

10

Alkan would occasionally reread letters he had received from Esseluleia.

He didn't tell her to do anything for Riga when he married her off. He desired for her to put House Goran first and perform her duties as a wife and to find happiness. He thought that could lead to a friendship between Riga and Goran.

Esseluleia was very attached to her older half-brother Garrest, so he was a little worried about whether she would be able to get along with Panzel.

That fear turned out to be unnecessary. She almost immediately became Panzel's wife in the fullest sense. He was surprised when he read the letters in which she gushed about how she adored her husband. He hadn't thought she had that kind of personality.

Panzel had entrusted her with the internal affairs of House Goran, and she warmly watched over the estate as it struggled to find its footing. Alkan felt her love toward her father in those frequently delivered letters, and they brought him comfort.

After Panzel's death, the letters suddenly ceased.

Esseluleia thought that her father was behind her husband's death.

At first, everyone believed Panzel's passing was an assassination. Given the blessings of his divine sword, it was difficult to imagine he died from an injury suffered on the battlefield. Apparently, his death was sudden, and his health had shown no signs of deteriorating. He had returned all of House Mercurius's blessed items to Julius except for Alestra's Bracelet, so death by curse or poison was a possibility.

But Alkan had been impressed by the precautions Panzel had taken against assassination and subterfuge.

Panzel had such integrity when it came to his fighting style and his tactics that his enemies had given him the nickname Panzel the Pure, but he did know how to play dirty as well. He likely gained that knowledge from the half-dwarf who was a former Adventurers Guild president and had come to live at the House Mercurius estate.

He would hire a great number of adventurers with the ability to work as spies in order to gain control over the information war, and he would begin his battles only after making preparations to ensure his opponent could not use any underhanded tactics. The adventurers were so skilled that the spies House Riga sent to Julius's and Panzel's respective camps reported that the adventurers turned a blind eye to them and allowed them to operate.

No matter how Alkan racked his brain, he could not figure out how Panzel's life had been taken. Esseluleia probably didn't know, either.

That would place suspicion on anyone who hated Panzel and would want to kill him in a way that Esseluleia could not discern.

I see. From Esseluleia's perspective, she can think of no culprits other than me.

This misunderstanding would not be undone easily. The only thing he could do was wait for time to pass.

Esseluleia acted fast after Panzel's funeral in order to get a jump on House Riga. She went to the royal capital and appealed directly to the king.

"My husband, Panzel, the Marquis of Banust, obeyed a royal order and achieved victory against the minotaur, but he was forced to leave the labyrinth without reaching a conclusion. That means the order has not yet been fulfilled. My husband promised to the monster in the labyrinth that he would return one day to settle things. Children inherit the will of their fathers. Please order my son, Arza, to fight the minotaur when he reaches the age of twenty-four, the same age my husband was when he fought it. Also, I do not have the ability to train Arza to be a knight. Please grant me permission to entrust Arza to House Mercurius until he settles things with the monster of the labyrinth, and I beg of you to order me to rule over Banust until that time comes."

His daughter was considered the most beautiful woman in the kingdom, and Alkan was sure the scene of her draped in black and holding her three-year-old son must have looked like a painting.

The king was deeply moved, and then he descended from the throne and granted her request. He appointed Esseluleia to the rank of marquis and ordered her to rule over the Banust domain until Arza completed his mission.

Draydol was enraged. In the Privy Council, it was said that Panzel's heir, Arza, would inherit his father's position of the Marquis of Banust, but he would be taken in and raised by House Riga, and Draydol would rule Banust as his representative until he came of age. However, a royal order from the king on his throne could not be overturned. This was Esseluleia's victory.

This development meant that House Riga would no longer be able to freely raise Arza and shape him into their dog. Also, if Draydol had been allowed to rule Banust as Arza's representative, he would have been able to manage the domain however he wanted, but with Esseluleia as the marquis, he would need her permission to pass important matters.

That said, it was clear that she would be unable to rule the domain without personnel support from House Riga, so Esseluleia wasn't much more than a figurehead ruler.

By Alkan's estimation, Esseluleia was more talented than Draydol. Esseluleia pretended to follow along with Draydol's policies while in reality protecting House Goran from House Riga.

One good example of this was how, through the mediation of Logan, she appointed a former president of the Micaene Adventurers Guild named Palos as her officer of finance. Palos was a shrewd and capable official, and he rescued House Goran from being swallowed financially by House Riga by gaining control of the movement of its money and property. He also made effective use of the abolition of tariffs, expanded economic exchange with the lords of Fenks, and even repressed the profits of House Goran by sharing some of their wealth with the lords in the northern part of the kingdom. These preparations would help Arza immensely when it came time for him to take his seat as marquis.

Later on, the investigation into Panzel's death made it clear he had died as a result of overuse of the divine sword's blessings. Even that did not remove Esseluleia's suspicion that Alkan had assassinated Panzel.

He really couldn't blame her for thinking that way. As the Marquis of Banust, Esseluleia had likely thoroughly investigated the events that had happened around Panzel in the past. She surely knew that Alkan had tried to send Panzel to his death at the time of the Pantram Revolt, and that Draydol had sent

assassins on a number of occasions to kill him. There was no way she wouldn't suspect him.

Being hated by Esseluleia was very hard for Alkan.

Not being able to meet Arza was even harder.

No matter what Esseluleia or anyone else thought, to him, Arza was a cute grandson. He was the son of Panzel and Esseluleia. He had never once met him, never once heard his voice, and never once embraced him, but he had never gone a day without thinking of him.

What Alkan was looking forward to more than anything else was watching over Arza's growth. He had laid out an information network around him.

When Arza was fourteen years old, he started delving into the labyrinth.

One day, Julius had Arza try to use Alestra's Bracelet. Its blessings activated for him. And it didn't stop with Alestra's Bracelet—Arza was able to use all five of House Mercurius's treasures.

When Alkan received this report, he was so excited, he thought his heart would burst.

My grandson might be a hero.

Arza then left on a journey. For better or worse, much happened on the road that Arza walked. He significantly changed the fates of people, he roused divine spirits, and he had an impact on countries and the future of the continent. He was no ordinary person.

Arza would likely fight the minotaur once his travels came to an end. He would then become a hero, and his real work would begin once he returned to Banust.

Esseluleia, Palos, and Panzel's close aides were patiently waiting for that moment. He would become the Marquis of Banust seven years from now, so it was unlikely Alkan would get to see it.

That reminds me, Pan'ja Raban died when he was eighty-one years old—the same age I am now.

I wonder how deep and violent his hatred was of Riga and of myself.

I felt a chill when I heard that royal envoys were sent to his funeral.

The royal family hasn't forgotten about Vald, either.

Pan'ja Raban achieved a lot in his life, but the king never tried to confer him with peerage.

The royal family probably learned about Pan'ja Raban's identity early in his life.

Once one is given peerage, they have to visit the royal palace. If anyone realized who he was, House Riga would not have been able to leave him alone.

If it had come to that, House Mercurius would have suffered a large blow.

That was why he had to live in the shadows.

But he made the best of his circumstances and died having given his utmost loyalty to House Mercurius and the royal family.

He is also the one who raised Panzel.

He was an impressive man.

How deep was the royal family's grudge against Riga?

Riga had given its all toward the royal family for a millennium. They had taken a lot of harsh criticism when it came to the royal family. The royal family might have thought of the words of Riga as a curse and the embodiment of arrogance. There were a thousand years of baggage between Riga and the royal family.

That year, Julius became the Red Minister. Julius would likely become the next White Minister when Draydol retired.

Riga and Mercurius had always had a mutual respect for each other, but animosity had been born due to Alkan's ignorance. He hoped that animosity would naturally come undone once Arza became the Marquis of Banust.

He hoped that would once again be the start of a grand era.

He was happy that he was able to live in anticipation of such a day.

Alkan had a thought.

There were a multitude of blessings in this world. Time itself may have been

the greatest blessing bestowed by the gods.

Time healed wounds.

Time softened painful memories.

Time allowed living creatures to grow and progress.

Time provided a great sense of tranquility.

Time changed hatred to love, suspicion to trust, bitter enemies into friends.

Every moment one lives is rich with the blessing that puts things in order and eases things that had become entangled.

Riga had been waiting for a thousand years.

That gave birth to stagnation and distortion.

But at the same time, they had built up a thousand years' worth of blessings.

When I die, it will be Draydol's turn to wait on time.

Even if he won't know what he is waiting for, the blessings of time always provide.

Alkan closed his eyes and prayed for the good fortune of those who would bear the future.

Interlude 9

This time, the minotaur appeared underwater.

This water was completely different from the refreshing springs it had jumped into before. The rotten water was a cloudy white and smelled of blood, and it pained the minotaur's eyes greatly just to open them.

Though the minotaur did possess the ability to swim, it was not among its most polished skills.

As soon as the minotaur tried to surface for air, something grabbed its right ankle. It swung the scimitar in its right hand and cut something. A little air escaped its mouth as it did so.

The minotaur was fortunate that it had sucked in a large breath before it stepped onto the blue stones. It had a significantly higher lung capacity than humans, but the amount of time it could spend underwater still had a limit. It needed to defeat this enemy before the air in its lungs ran out.

What grabbed its ankle was a giant, slimy tentacle. The minotaur looked ahead and saw that there was a monster dozens of times bigger than it about fifty paces away. It had a great number of tentacles, one of which was around the minotaur's ankle.

The tentacle was large and translucent.

A number of other tentacles reached out to grab the minotaur. It needed to do something or it would become unable to reach the surface.

The minotaur was getting truly fed up with how none of the monsters it encountered in here showed any signs of life.

It dodged the incoming tentacles, and it cut down four of them with the Blood Scimitar in its right hand despite the murky water hindering its movement. It

tried to cut tentacles with the Lizardman Scimitar in its left hand as well, but the tentacles just wrapped themselves around the blade.

The tentacles were difficult to cut because they defied water resistance and were elastic, and the Lizardman Scimitar was not nearly as sharp as the Blood Scimitar, so it was not surprising that it could not cut them.

The tentacles wrapped around the scimitar were powerful, and the minotaur could not tear it free.

Tentacles then wrapped around both of the minotaur's legs. They appeared to have a slimy texture, but when they actually grabbed the minotaur, they felt rough and painful.

The tentacles wrapped around the scimitar in its left hand turned from transparent to white. The tentacles around its left hand and left leg turned white as well.

Two more tentacles came at it from the right, but the minotaur cut them down with the scimitar in its right hand.

It then felt a violent pain in its left hand and left leg. Some bubbles escaped from its mouth as it twisted its body; then it used the scimitar in its right hand to cut off the tentacles around the scimitar in its left hand and the tentacles around its legs and regained its freedom of movement.

The parts of its skin that had been touched were bubbling and corroded. The tip of the scimitar in its left hand had been corroded as well.

It seemed like the tentacles did nothing more than grab when they were transparent, but they gained the ability to melt when they turned white.

Dozens more tentacles circled around the minotaur and started to close in.

It was running out of breath.

The minotaur dropped the scimitar in its left hand, moved the scimitar in its right hand to its left, then put its right hand above its left shoulder and pulled a new weapon out of its Bag. It was a sword that the metal dragon had dropped, and it could perform a special attack.

The minotaur cut down three approaching tentacles with the scimitar in its

left hand, and then it slashed at another tentacle while activating the special attack of the sword in its right hand.

The cloudy water was lit up by lightning.

The electric attack traveled through the water and shocked the minotaur, but it did not look like the tentacles took any damage.

Two tentacles wrapped around its right leg and right hand. It used the scimitar in its left hand to cut down the tentacle around its right hand. The tentacle around its right leg then turned white and attempted to melt it, and the minotaur thrust the sword in its right hand at it and activated the lightning attack.

This time the effect was intense.

The tentacle around its right leg burst open, and the monster's main body and the rest of its tentacles shook violently.

It seemed like the electric attack was ineffective when the tentacles were transparent, but it hurt them when they were white.

A large number of the tentacles drew back quickly from the minotaur as if displeased by it. The minotaur's irritation grew more intense when it saw this monster could apparently feel pain despite not being alive.

The main body lifted itself up with a rumbling noise and opened a mouth large enough to swallow even the minotaur whole. The mouth was round and had over a hundred bladelike teeth growing from the rim toward the center.

A significantly larger number of tentacles stretched toward the minotaur. Dozens of them wrapped around it simultaneously.

The monster pulled the minotaur toward it. The tentacles were still transparent. The minotaur did not resist, instead allowing itself to be carried toward the monster's jaw.

The minotaur's entire body was crying out for air. It would only be able to fight for a little while longer.

The monster's mouth opened and closed repeatedly in anticipation of its prey. When it finally pulled the minotaur close enough, it opened its mouth

wide.

The tentacles then pushed the giant prey into the sword-filled mouth, which closed with a *thud*.

If the minotaur had not done anything, it likely would have been bitten clean in half. But the moment the mouth began to close, the minotaur hooked its right leg and the scimitar in its left hand around the monster's teeth and propelled itself into its mouth.

The monster's mouth closed, biting off the minotaur's right foot at the ankle as it did so. The minotaur ignored the pain, activated the electric attack of the sword in its right hand, and stabbed the monster from within its mouth.

The lightning flashed white, crackling as it wreaked havoc on the monster's insides. The monster's digestive fluids melted the minotaur's skin mercilessly.

There was not even an ounce of air left in the minotaur's lungs. Its head hurt so badly, it felt like it was going to split, and its body was twisting itself in knots. Its vision had gone blurry.

But the minotaur did not care at all. It just continued to release the electric attack at maximum output.

It heard a noise that sounded like something bursting open. The monster then suddenly lost its strength, and its mouth opened.

A blue light was shining at the bottom of the water. The minotaur desperately made its way toward it, and when it reached the blue stones, a level-up occurred, and its body was restored.

All except for its right horn, the top half of which was still missing.

Chapter 20

The Two Heroes

1

Zara was transported to some unknown location.

A level-up occurred immediately, and his body was restored. His injuries were healed, and his exhaustion dissipated.

The place was dark, lacked any wind, and there were no signs of life. There were flat, circular stones in the center of the room, shining with blue light.

It felt like he was inside a labyrinth. But he didn't know of any labyrinths with rooms that looked like this. It was shaped like the top half of the inside of a round fruit.

He checked his equipment. He had Bora's Sword, Alestra's Bracelet, Raika's Ring, and Bolton's Charm all equipped. Ende's Shield and Kaldan's Dagger were stored in his Treasury.

Zara waited for his body to become accustomed to the room. He had moved suddenly from the desert, where the sun was beating down, into a dark room made of stone, so adjusting would take some time.

He checked his adventurer medal and found that he had become level 80.

Wait. Is my Night Vision skill not working?

That was a skill he had obtained from defeating a monster in the Sazardon Labyrinth, and it automatically activated within labyrinths. If that hadn't activated, that meant this was not a labyrinth.

It feels like a labyrinth, though.

He could not see an exit. The only thing he could see was the stones shining

with blue light in the center of the room.

Zara made to move toward the blue stones. At that moment, he heard a voice.

“Zara?”

Before he could figure out where the voice came from or muster a response, he heard it again.

“It really is Zara. Don’t move. I’ll head toward you now.”

Before he had time to remember whose voice it was, a spectral figure emerged in the dark room.

It was the beautiful man he had met in the Elstoran Labyrinth one year ago. He was a rare sorcerer and a dungeon maker. He was also the husband of the dragon god Kaldan.

“Mr. Ghost. It’s been a while. How have you been?”

“It does indeed feel like some time has passed. I don’t seem to be doing well. My real body is dead. I have become a ghost in the truest sense. I only have a very short amount of time left in this world.”

“What?”

“There’s no time to explain. Do you know what kind of place this is?”

“No. I just heard a voice in my head saying that the time has come for me to fulfill an agreement and become a blade, and suddenly I was here.”

“It sounds like you really are here by the will of the gods. It was probably the same for the other person. Either that or they came here from a labyrinth after fulfilling the requirements. Anyway, I can’t believe they would use a human. Zara. This is a very unique place. It is a place where warped blessings are gathered.”

“Oh, is this the deva labyrinth? If it is, then I know that skills that should work in labyrinths won’t work here.”

“How did you come by that knowledge?”

“I heard it from a monk at Jan’Majar Temple.”

“Jan’Majar? Ah, that strangely amorous monk. If you already know that, then this will be quick. The reason you were summoned here is undoubtedly because the warped spirits have grown to the point where they can’t be ignored any longer. The gods have given you the role of killing them. Now that you’re here, you can’t leave until you have killed them all.”

“Did you build this place?”

“I did. But as I said to you before, I am not much of a fighter, and I can’t take on the warped spirits myself. For that reason, I made it so that they can’t reach me from within the labyrinth, and I can’t interfere with them from the outside. Do you know the structure of this place?”

“No. I heard that you can’t use items and skills specific to labyrinths; I know that it’s swirling with miasma and poison, and if you defeat the devas, the warped blessings will disappear. I don’t know anything about the structure.”

“This room is the entrance, and there are five lower floors. The warped spirits are born on each floor, but the number of them, the form they take, and their abilities differ each time. You do not gain experience for killing them, but after you defeat every enemy on the floor, you receive a level-up as a kind of bonus. At that point, the blue teleport stones will light up, and you will be able to move on. There is no other way to leave a room. The deeper the floor, the stronger the monsters. The one on the bottom floor is extremely powerful.”

“What are teleport stones?”

“They’re those stones over there that are shining with blue light. When you step onto them, you are teleported to the corresponding stones. In the case of this labyrinth, you can use them to advance to the lower floor. The way forward shines blue, and the way back shines red. All right, this next part is important. You have the five blessed items that Kaldan left behind with you, right? Equip all of them. Kaldan’s Dagger is especially important. Do not let it leave your body. If you drop it, you will likely die instantly.”

Zara withdrew Ende’s Shield and Kaldan’s Dagger from his Treasury. He inserted Kaldan’s Dagger into his belt and wrapped a leather strap around it tightly to ensure it wouldn’t fall.

The ghost continued to speak as Zara equipped the treasures.

“Someone entered the labyrinth before you. That person is probably fighting alone and ran into trouble with their advance through the labyrinth. I imagine that is the reason you were summoned.”

“So someone is fighting right now?”

“Yes. If anyone enters this room, it is treated as the highest emergency, and I am summoned. I somehow managed to appear in this ghostly form. This is the second time I have been summoned on this occasion. The first time ended abruptly. I had started to fade, but I was able to appear here again because I was summoned this second time. Truthfully, there is a hidden door in the tenth floor of the Sazardon Labyrinth that leads to the room where I sleep.”

“In the place that the minotaur came from?”

“That’s right. But I would like for you to keep this a secret. When Kaldan died, I went into an eternal slumber next to her casket. However, it seems that just recently, the container preserving my body broke down. I then died. The version of me here is essentially a mirage. I will soon disappear. Ah, don’t make that face. It doesn’t bother me. I had planned from the beginning to sleep for all eternity anyhow. I did promise I would give you a reward to repay my debt to you, though. I’m sorry I couldn’t fulfill that.”

“I appreciate your guidance more than anything.”

“I see. Thank you—you’re a nice person. Ah, shoot. I forgot about the most important thing. Once you defeat the enemies on the bottom floor, you will be automatically transported outside. Someone went in before you, but they have not come out yet. I am hearing quite a commotion from inside the labyrinth at the moment. That means they are still fighting.”

“Is that person alone?”

“Huh? Ah, that’s right. It’s not impossible it could be more than one person. Hmm. I don’t know how many people there are. If there are two or more people, they would have all entered here at the same time. Anyway, moving on. In this labyrinth, you can’t properly see anything other than yourself and the things you brought with you.”

“I won’t be able to see anything?”

“No, that’s not what I meant. You see warped versions of things. What is solid may appear soft. What is white may appear black. A strong and beautiful person may appear ugly and frail. You will meet whoever arrived here before you, but they might appear to you as a terrifying monster, so you should keep that in mind.”

“Understood. That’s very valuable information. Thank you very much.”

“Don’t mention it. Lastly, I’ll adjust your body for you.”

The ghost approached Zara, opened his right hand toward him, and closed his eyes. Zara felt his body being enveloped by a warm sensation.

“Truthfully, your level of strength is insufficient to enter this place. Your level is not high enough, and what’s more, your capabilities are not keeping up with your level. This place was not made for humans to enter, after all. Even so, you have the five blessed items and Bora’s Sword, so you should be able to fight a little. What’s more, the warped spirits can only use a small fraction of their power in this place. I just blended your body and spirit with Bora’s Sword. I also filled Raika’s Ring full of magical power. Do your best.”

“I will. Thank you very much.”

“I also have one thing I’d like to ask of you. If you ever happen across my daughter, please tell her I love her.”

The fact that he couldn’t go say that to her himself showed how weak the ghost was. He had saved the last of his remaining strength for Zara.

“I promise I’ll tell her.”

“I’m glad. That is another reason for you to live and get out of here. Mm-hmm. The era of humans needing to rely on labyrinths may already be coming to an end, Zara. I despaired for humanity and turned my back on the surface. But meeting you at the very end of my existence has reignited my faith in humans, and I can now rest in peace. The journey you showed me before was truly incredible. Thank you.”

Zara wanted to say something but couldn’t figure out what would be appropriate, and then the ghost started to disappear.

Zara suddenly remembered something that he wanted to ask.

“What is your name?”

The ghost looked a little surprised, then grinned widely and gave his name.

“Alestra.”

He then disappeared.

Zara felt as if he had been struck by lightning.

He stared at Alestra’s Bracelet on his left hand and thought about all the people it had saved.

Himself.

His father.

Percival.

The people of House Mercurius.

Zara performed a knight’s bow in the direction of the disappeared Alestra.

“Lord Alestra. I had already received from you the best gift you could have bestowed upon me.”

He gave his thanks with a small yet clear voice and then stepped onto the blue teleport stones.

2

The minotaur opened its eyes.

There was air. It was as stale and muggy as ever, but the minotaur was thankful it could breathe.

The minotaur had reached the blue stones just before it ran out of strength, and it was moved to the next location. It then fainted.

It inhaled as it lay collapsed on the ground. Its rough breathing gradually settled, and it got up once its strength had returned to its entire body. The minotaur then saw it was standing on red stones.

It was not in bad condition. Its right ankle that had been bitten off by the monster in the water had been restored.

This room was smaller than the ones before it. It was a little less than sixty paces from one end to the other. The floor was even and covered with coarse white sand, so there was nowhere to hide.

It did not see any enemies. There were only two fan-shaped boards, facing each other from the right and left edges of the room. If a human saw them, they might have thought they looked like giant seashells.

The boards were crooked in shape. They were smooth and shiny and released a beautiful, flickering light.

There was a jewel in the center of the room in between the two fan-shaped boards. It was enveloped by a light that appeared either white or silver, or perhaps pink or purple.

The minotaur was bare-handed. It had lost the weapons it was holding in the previous room. It drew a wide longsword from its Bag and stepped off the red stones.

The red jewel quickly released a flash of intense light. The minotaur readied itself for a fight, but the jewel once again went quiet.

It looked at the fan-shaped boards and noticed something that had not been there before.

Shadows.

A shadow as big as the minotaur itself was imprinted onto each of the boards. Beyond the size, the shape of each also somewhat resembled the minotaur.

The shadow on the right roused and began to move. It gradually swelled and then forced its way out of the board.

It was an exact copy of the minotaur. Even the weapon it was holding was the same.

It walked toward the minotaur.

The minotaur walked toward it.

What the minotaur had thought was white sand actually seemed to be either cast-off skin of small creatures or small broken bones.

Once its opponent was in range, the minotaur lifted its sword high and struck. Its opponent did the same thing, and their swords collided.

The monster's strength, speed, timing, and the way it swung its sword were all exactly the same.

The minotaur unleashed three consecutive attacks, and its opponent fended them off.

Its opponent then unleashed three consecutive attacks, and the minotaur parried them as well.

They both took one step back to collect their breath.

We have the same strength.

At that moment, the shadow on the left board also came to life. It, too, was an exact copy of the minotaur and was holding the same weapon.

It looked like the minotaur had to fight two imitations at the same time. The minotaur did not once consider the disadvantage it was at, facing two enemies with its same abilities and equipment.

The minotaur's attention was directed toward the heads of the two fakes.

They both had only half of their right horn. The same as itself.

Seeing that filled it with an unreasonable, violent anger.

The enemy nearest it struck at the minotaur. Fighting spirit burned within the minotaur, and it forced the enemy back.

The other enemy was approaching.

After the minotaur had the enemy in front of it on the back foot, it leaped backward to give itself plenty of room and then used Burning Breath.

A few seconds later, the two enemies both used Burning Breath as well.

These enemies can do the same things as I can.

They can also return my attacks.

But they can't move at the exact same time as me, and the way they swing their swords and blow their breath is not exactly the same. That means they are imitating me while each attacking in their own individual way.

As the minotaur analyzed the enemies, they approached and entered its space.

The minotaur moved the longsword in its right hand to its left and drew its Zweihänder from its Bag. The Zweihänder was longer and heavier than the longsword that was now in its left hand.

The two enemies also pulled out a Zweihänder.

The minotaur appeared to lick the handle of the Zweihänder, and then it instantly entered Berserk Mode.

The two imitations also entered Berserk Mode.

Berserk Mode was a state that significantly increased the user's attack power in exchange for significantly decreasing defense and intellect.

It slashed at the first enemy with the Zweihänder in its right hand. The enemy blocked the attack with its longsword.

The minotaur slashed with the longsword in its left. The enemy blocked it with its Zweihänder.

The second enemy attacked from the left. It struck the minotaur's back with the Zweihänder it was holding in its right hand.

The attack was strong enough to kill, but the minotaur jumped forward to lessen the impact of the blow and then swept the Zweihänder in its right hand horizontally from right to left.

The minotaur's jump carried into the space of the first enemy, which stooped

down to avoid the Zweihänder and then thrust the longsword in its left hand at the minotaur's abdomen.

The minotaur had no way of dodging it. The longsword stabbed deeply into the center of its abdomen.

The minotaur threw its Zweihänder at the second enemy on its left. The enemy failed to dodge, as if it had not expected the minotaur to throw its weapon in that circumstance, and the sword pierced its right thigh and threw off its balance.

The minotaur then walked toward the enemy that had pierced its sword through its abdomen, and it stabbed the longsword in its left hand through the enemy's throat.

The enemy was slow to respond, as if it had not expected the minotaur to move toward it while willingly deepening its own wound.

The enemy was holding its Zweihänder in its right hand, but that weapon was not fit for attacking an opponent who had charged into one's space, and the second enemy was also blocking its sword. Not letting go of the sword that was stabbed into the minotaur's abdomen was what sealed the enemy's fate.

The minotaur buried the sword in its left hand deeper into the enemy's throat. It twisted the sword and tore open the throat, then put its right foot to the enemy's abdomen and used the strength of its leg to push it away.

The minotaur regripped the longsword with two hands and tried to attack the second enemy, which had gotten up and was moving to attack. The enemy was a hair too quick, however, and slashed the minotaur's throat with its Zweihänder.

Even for the minotaur, that attack was strong enough to be fatal. Especially with its defense weakened due to Berserk Mode.

The minotaur lost strength and began to fall, and the enemy lifted its Zweihänder up high. Likely to deliver the final blow.

But the minotaur held its ground firmly and swiped the longsword from right to left with both hands.

The attack was so fast and powerful that one never would have thought the minotaur was suffering from a nigh-fatal wound.

The enemy tried to quickly bring its Zweihänder down. The minotaur was holding its longsword with both hands, and the enemy was holding its long and heavy Zweihänder with only its right hand.

Before the enemy's sword reached the minotaur, the minotaur's blade cleaved the enemy in half at the abdomen. The enemy's top and bottom halves collapsed to the ground.

Once the two enemies were completely dead, the jewel in the middle of the room shattered.

Berserk Mode ended.

A level-up occurred and healed the minotaur's wounds.

Its significant injuries had been healing to an extent before the level-up occurred. When the minotaur had drawn its Zweihänder out of its Bag, it also pulled out some immortal flesh, and it ate it throughout the battle.

Immortal flesh was an item that could be obtained from hydras on the one hundredth floor of the Sazardon Labyrinth. If consumed in a labyrinth, it would cause the user for a short amount of time to enter a state in which they would revive even after death. It would not give the immortal effect if consumed outside of labyrinths, but it would grant an extremely powerful recovery effect.

Red potions did not work in this strange place the minotaur was in. Some of the skills it had gained did not activate, either. For that reason, it was not confident that the immortal flesh would work, but it had put some in its mouth just in case and ate it when it felt death was unavoidable.

The minotaur thought for a moment that, in the end, it was the flesh that had made the difference between victory and defeat, but then it immediately rejected that.

They had no anger, no fear, no joy.

They had never met a powerful enemy. Never learned. Never grown.

Even when my heart was filled with anger, their hearts were empty.

They only had their attack raised and their defense lowered.

There was no way I was ever going to lose to them.

Even so, the strength of the enemies in this place increases significantly every time I advance.

I wonder what I will encounter next.

As that was going through the minotaur's mind, it picked up its Zweihänder, put it in its Bag, and stepped onto the blue stones.

3

Zara was assaulted by intense pain the moment he appeared.

The thick miasma burned his eyes. He closed them immediately, but the pain did not quickly go away.

The air he instinctively breathed in stabbed the inside of his mouth, throat, and lungs.

His skin stung as if it had been ripped off. His entire body went numb and stiffened, and he fell to the floor like a log.

Kaldan's Dagger's blessing of removing status ailments and curing poison was very powerful. It was supposed to take effect immediately on poison, to the point that inserting it into your belt would make it feel as if you were never poisoned at all. The same could be said for status ailments.

So why was this happening even though Kaldan's Dagger was equipped to his body?

It must have meant that the poison and status ailments he received during the minuscule amount of time it took for Kaldan's Dagger to activate had this violent of an effect on him.

Zara was now fully aware of how dreadful a place this was.

He lay down for a period of time, unable to do anything else. Eventually, he

started to gradually regain his senses and his ability to think.

He carefully inhaled while bearing the pain. Then, as he exhaled, he used a breathing technique he had learned at Jan'Majar Temple to collect himself.

After he regained his full consciousness, he activated a recovery technique he had learned at Jan'Majar Temple. A lengthy amount of time later, he regained full use of his body and mind.

Zara surveyed his surroundings. There were holes broken into the uneven floor all throughout the room. They were traces of an intense battle.

There were teleport stones next to Zara shining with blue light.

He said you move to the next floor by stepping onto the blue teleport stones.

What would the next floor be like? What kind of enemies would be there?

He might arrive in the middle of an intense battle. It would likely be full of miasma, just like this room.

Zara mentally prepared himself and stepped onto the blue teleport stones leading to the second floor.

The moment he appeared in the next location, he was attacked by a chill and a headache that forced him to the ground.

He thought he had prepared himself, but the miasma on the second floor was significantly thicker than on the first floor, and it was a different kind as well.

He couldn't even move for a while, and just like on the last floor, it took time for him to gather himself.

He looked around the room. There were no clear traces of a battle like there had been on the first floor.

But he didn't doubt that an even more intense battle had taken place here.

Zara sat down on the floor, pulled out some preserved food and some water, and began to eat. He ate slowly, thoroughly chewing the dried meat and dried potatoes.

It's a blessing that I can still enjoy food.

Dried meat tasted like dried meat, and dried potato tasted like dried potato.

Water also tasted like water. The water was especially delicious after eating dried meat and dried potato.

His body gladly welcomed the food as it was digested.

This was what it felt like to live. On the next floor, or the floor below that, he could die. The odds of that were high.

This was not a battleground that Zara was ever supposed to enter.

Ha-ha. It's funny. I got a big head when I was given the title of S-rank adventurer.

In this labyrinth, I'm less capable than an F-rank adventurer challenging the Sazardon Labyrinth for the first time.

I can barely stand, let alone fight.

Is it even possible for me to fight in this place?

In the battle at Bia-Dharla, he'd fought by abandoning himself to the madness of war.

His fight in Jan'Majar Temple's Shrine of the Four Sacred Beasts was completely different. It was said that spirits sometimes entered the bodies of elite warriors, and he wondered if that was what had happened there.

I didn't rely on items or special skills. I simply became one with my sword technique. I was my sword, and I was my moves. I want to be a part of that kind of fight again.

Zara stood up slowly. Deciding that he wouldn't let the next room throw him off again no matter how poisonous the air was, he stepped onto the blue teleport stones leading to the third floor.

But there turned out to not be an ounce of air in the next room. That was because it was full of poisonous water.

Bubbles burst from his mouth, and the water he ingested made him feel pain and numbness, but he somehow managed to cling to the blue teleport stones leading to the fourth floor.

The fourth floor was somewhat brighter than the earlier rooms. Zara

crouched from difficulty breathing and laughed at himself.

He hadn't come across one enemy. He had done nothing more than move through the labyrinth. And yet the simple act of going from room to room had continued to take him off guard and overwhelm him.

What could he do but laugh?

He collected himself mentally and sat down cross-legged. He lightly clasped his hands together and set them on his feet, then relaxed his muscles and gathered his breath.

The teleport stones on the fourth floor were shining with blue light as well.

That meant that the warrior who had entered before him defeated all the devas on the first four floors and was now fighting the strongest enemy on the bottom floor.

Zara was an S-rank adventurer and had Kaldan's Dagger and Bora's Sword equipped, but this labyrinth had him as good as dead just from moving through it. It was incredible that this warrior was able to fight their way through and reach the bottom floor.

What kind of person are they?

It might have been a swordsman with the body control and brilliance of Percival.

A mighty warrior who could take on thousands like Panzel.

A wise sorcerer who had mastered the depths of magic like Gil Linx.

A priest with healing and support abilities on the level of Gondona.

No, I don't think that's right. It's probably a party with each of those roles filled by a different member.

He wanted to meet them. He wanted to see that party with his own eyes as they fought against the strongest deva.

If possible, he also wanted to do his best to put his own skills to use in that battle.

Zara himself didn't notice this, but while advancing through this labyrinth and

fighting desperately to adapt, his mind and body had been stirred, polished, and sharpened.

His training at Jan'Majar Temple, his numerous matches in Aldana, and the various fights on his travels were all bearing fruit.

His capabilities were in the process of catching up to his strength, which had been raised by the mechanisms of the gods that were level and rank.

Zara, who was reaching greater heights than he ever had as a warrior, calmly filled himself with fighting spirit without any arrogance or faltering and stepped onto the blue stones that would lead to the decisive battle.

This time, he did not end up within a room. The teleport stones were on top of a circular rock five paces across and located in the middle of a hellish sea of boiling lava.

A thin path of rock extended forward from the circular rock on which he was standing, and beyond that, there was a large rock dome. The dome was floating on the sea of lava, and Zara sensed a greater degree of repulsiveness than he had ever felt before coming from it.

The final battle is taking place inside that dome.

He could tell that an intense battle was unfolding within the dome, though he couldn't see it from where he was.

Zara focused power into his navel and slowly gathered his breath. He made his skin adapt to the overwhelming heat.

He then performed the secret vajra fighting spirit technique of Jan'Majar Temple. This was a technique that dramatically increased muscle strength for a limited time but also lowered sensitivity to temperature and pain.

He repressed the effect so he would be able to use it continuously.

Zara would not feel pain while using this technique. For that reason, he wouldn't even be aware of it when he took damage.

He intended to heal injuries by using the blessings of Bora's Sword. The moment Zara's damage or the recoil from his skills surpassed the recovery effect of Bora's Sword, he would die.

He would be walking a tightrope during the battle. But he no longer had any hesitation.

He walked onto the road made of rock and moved forward step by step. When he reached the dome, he found blue teleport stones in front of it.

I see. Stepping onto this will take me into the battle.

And so Zara did just that.

4

The minotaur was irritated.

The final enemy was even bigger than the aquatic beast on the third floor, the speed of its attacks surpassed the grasslike things on the second floor, and it even had regenerative powers on par with the orbs of the first.

It could take a variety of different forms and could even divide itself and join back together.

It was currently taking the form of a giant tree with its roots spread out across the stone floor. It had hardened the lower part of its body, rendering attacks ineffective.

It was no less than ten times as tall as the minotaur, and it had tentacles extending in four directions from the top of its body. The tips of the tentacles were also hardened and were as sharp as lances.

While dodging the four tentacles that were flailing in all directions, the minotaur looked for opportunities to strike them above their hardened tips. It could not manage to sever them, but it was able to inflict considerable damage.

The problem was that the enemy regenerated over time. The minotaur also sometimes failed to dodge the tentacles and took damage itself.

When the minotaur first entered the dome, the enemy had assumed the form of a giant beast. It attacked the minotaur with incredibly dense physical and magical attacks.

But because the minotaur's attacks were effective no matter what part of the

monster it hit, it ignored the small amount of damage it was taking and used its footwork to focus single-mindedly on attacking consistently.

The enemy lost a significant amount of energy as a result. Its body actually seemed to be made of energy, and it grew smaller as the minotaur inflicted damage. It was still quite large at that point, but it had grown two or three sizes smaller than it was at the beginning of the fight.

Eventually, the enemy hardened the points of its body that the minotaur's assaults could reach and took the form of a giant tree. It couldn't move the parts of its body it hardened, so it became completely stationary.

It stopped using magic attacks, possibly for the purpose of saving energy.

The minotaur also stopped using Warcry, Burning Breath, and other magic attacks. The reason for that was because the enemy absorbed magic power and used it to heal its injuries.

The minotaur could use its leaping ability to strike the higher parts of the tree that were not hardened. But its actions were limited while in the air, and it could not dodge the enemy's assaults. After a number of failed attempts, it quit leaping attacks altogether.

It also tried pulling items out of its Bag and throwing them. But that did not do much damage. Its explosive weapons were more effective, but it had only a limited amount, and it was saving them for when it really needed them.

The minotaur's attacks could not get through the hardened tips of the incoming tentacles, but it could cut into the higher, more mobile parts. As a result, the minotaur inflicted a small amount of damage every time the enemy struck.

The minotaur needed to remain within the enemy's range of attack for that reason. The tentacles hit relentlessly, so occasionally the minotaur got injured after failing to dodge.

The fight was in a deadlock.

But this deadlock was disadvantageous for the minotaur.

Its opponent was not a living creature. It likely did not experience exhaustion

or pain.

Its reserves of energy seemed limitless, as if it could fight forever.

The minotaur may have been a monster born in a labyrinth, but it was also a being that lived for a finite amount of time. It gradually became more exhausted and would eventually be unable to fight.

This infuriating enemy caused the minotaur's heart to tremble with rage.

This thing is ridiculous.

It's intolerable.

It's not even trying to fight.

It's just waiting for me to die.

This thing is an enemy.

An enemy that insults all living things.

An enemy that brings shame to battle.

But the minotaur could not find a means of breaking the stalemate.

Unable to see a way out of this, the minotaur continued to swing its giant sword.

It was unsure of how much time had passed.

The minotaur's sharp senses picked up someone entering the floor.

Something is here.

Something alive.

Is it a new enemy?

I can sense it. This one possesses blood, flesh, rage, and joy.

I welcome your presence.

Come here so I can kill you.

Come here so that I may spill your blood!

It did not occur to the minotaur that the new presence could be anything other than an enemy. That was only natural. It had never once gained an ally since being born in the labyrinth. Every human and every monster it encountered was an enemy. However, it had, on occasion, come across humans who did not want to fight it. In those instances, if the people did not challenge the minotaur, it would leave them alone.

The new enemy stood still for a while and appeared to be preparing itself to fight. The minotaur could tell from its presence that it was quite strong.

Eventually, the new enemy ran up to where the minotaur was fighting the monster.

It was a kobold.

The minotaur did not know the name *kobold*, but it had come across this monster on a higher floor of the Sazardon Labyrinth. The minotaur had just been born at the time and was still relatively inexperienced, but even then, they were totally worthless enemies that could not even leave a scratch on its body.

The minotaur was extremely disappointed.

However, as the minotaur continued to fight the monster, something drew its attention back toward the kobold.

It had round eyes, compact arms and legs, and drooping ears. It was holding a wooden shield in its left hand and a bronze sword in its right. It was equipped with boots made of cloth and light armor, and it even had protective equipment on its head and forehead as well.

What is this weakling doing here?

As soon as the minotaur asked itself that question, the kobold dashed forward and disappeared. Its footwork was that of a seasoned warrior, making the minotaur's eyes go wide in astonishment.

With its figure still hidden, the kobold quickly circled around behind the monster. It could not currently be detected with eyes or ears, but the minotaur could still sense its location.

The minotaur did not rely on equipment or skills to fight. It became able to handle magic attacks by continuing to challenge opponents capable of using them.

It became strong enough to win by focusing on training itself. That was the minotaur's style.

As a result, even though the kobold had a blessing that made it undetectable to eyes and ears, the minotaur could sense its movement. It would probably have been better described as *intuition* than *sense*. The minotaur was a warrior that had polished its intuition to the absolute limit.

Its figure still hidden, the kobold raised its sword and struck the monster's roots. The minotaur could tell by the sharp sound the sword made that the dog was no ordinary swordsman and that the sword had a rare sharpness.

But of course, the attack did not injure the monster at all. It probably did not even notice it.

While continuing to dodge the monster's attacks, the minotaur watched to see what the kobold would do next.

An arrow suddenly appeared and hit the base of one of the four wriggling tentacles. It was a magic arrow, and it pierced deeply into the monster.

The kobold released another arrow.

A small disturbance began to show in the monster's movements.

Now!

The minotaur jumped without even taking a running start, reached the mobile part of a tentacle, and cut it down.

The section that was now squirming on the floor was thicker than the minotaur's torso.

The minotaur slashed quickly at the rampaging tentacle.

Quickly, over and over again.

The monster now had two enemies to deal with, and as a result, its attacks were being spread out. This was a good chance to inflict some damage.

"Summon Comet!"

The kobold chanted a spell, and a comet crashed into the base of another tentacle.

It was rare for monsters to be able to speak the language of humans. It was also rare for monsters to be able to chant incantations and use magic attacks.

There was an impressive amount of magic power contained in that spell. However, the comet did not explode, and the energy was absorbed by the monster. Even then, the direct impact of the comet was powerful enough to completely sever the tentacle and send it flying.

Just when it looked like the tentacle was going to go limp, it made a low-pitched noise and then rose into the air and rejoined to the monster's main body. Once it was reattached, it was a little shorter than before, but then the monster used magic to restore it to its original length and toughness.

The pieces of the tentacle that the minotaur had cut up split into orbs of an unpleasant color and were absorbed into the monster's main body. New tentacles then grew from the places where the orbs had been absorbed, but they were only about a third as big as the original tentacles.

Did you see that, whelp?!

The minotaur called out to the kobold in its mind.

Any parts of the tentacles or the main body that were severed would quickly reattach, but the monster did become smaller the more they damaged it.

That did not work with magic attacks. The powerful magic attack the kobold fired at the monster definitely did damage, but it also gave it the energy to heal that damage. That was not a strategy they could afford to employ.

Now, surely you also understand what happens when you attack it with magic.

You surely also understand that it will pick up and reattach its limbs immediately if they are cut down.

That was what the minotaur thought.

The minotaur guessed that the kobold would have that level of observation.

The kobold lifted its invisibility, showed itself, and then began to run around. It fired arrows in succession as it ran, aiming for the base of the tentacles.

That's right.

That is where attacks are most effective.

The minotaur was impressed by the speed of the kobold warrior's understanding. It seemed that just by trying that one attack and observing the monster's response, it was able to figure out what was and wasn't effective.

The minotaur also had no doubt that the kobold showed itself in order to draw the monster's attention.

The whelp is telling me to get to work.

The monster was clearly preoccupied by its new enemy.

The minotaur severed one more tentacle and then slashed at it.

The kobold continued to fire arrows while nimbly and casually dodging the monster's attacking tentacles. Its supply of arrows was never-ending.

The deadlock had been broken.

This has gotten fun.

A savage smile appeared on the minotaur's face.

5

When Zara arrived in the room, he saw a giant with skin the color of green, corroded copper fighting an enormous deva.

It was not a party or a group.

A single warrior was fighting against the strongest deva one-on-one.

There was no doubt that he had cleared the path to this room all by himself.

He must have been a tremendous warrior.

But what country was he from?

Zara had never seen a person with that skin color before. He had heard that some of the barbarian tribes that lived in the Jami Forest had strange skin colors, so that might have been where the warrior was from.

The top half of his body was bare, he was wearing a modest loincloth over his waist, and he was completely barefoot, so he looked just like a barbarian

warrior.

The muscles throughout his body were well developed. His head was hairless. His lips were thick. His face was bony, and he had a protruding chin.

His eyes were large and contained a calm light that made it seem as if he had stifled his anger. His nose was long and thick.

What stood out more than anything was his weapon. It had the appearance of a long knife used to prepare large fish, but it was significantly bigger.

Zara was about five and a half feet tall, but the warrior was over eight. The blade was even longer than that. It was also slightly wider than Zara's shoulder width.

The giant warrior was swinging around that fearsome lump of iron, which couldn't even be considered a sword, as if it were a rapier.

It was an incredibly powerful sword, but there was nothing rough about the way he handled it.

His swordsmanship was polished, with no wasted movements. He had perfect control over his body. His muscles contained outrageous strength. He had a mastery of the sword that didn't suggest a hint of showiness.

He was all those things, as well as limber. He was as graceful as a leopard, and his movements had a wildness and a uniqueness to them that Zara had not seen in any of the schools of swordsmanship he had studied.

Judging by Alestra's words, the warrior's skin and figure were probably not exactly as they appeared to Zara. But his movements, his presence, and his sound swordsmanship were definitely real. It was unbelievable that anyone could fight in a place full of miasma so thick that an ordinary person would be killed in an instant.

The world is a big place.

To think there is a warrior this strong in it.

This man is a hero.

The deva he was fighting overwhelmed Zara with its gigantic size. It had the shape of a giant tree that was thousands of years old.

Its four tentacles were powerful and quick. The thickness of each tentacle roughly matched the average person's height. They also had enough destructive force to smash through rock. One blow from them would probably be lethal, even for the giant.

That the giant was able to engage it calmly was incredible.

The first thing Zara did was activate the invisibility of Bolton's Charm and attempt to strike the hard trunk with Bora's Sword. He didn't even scratch it.

Next he stored his shield, pulled out his Tirika Bow, and fired an arrow. He learned that attacks were effective against the parts of the deva that could move.

The giant warrior cut down one of the deva's tentacles. Then, without a moment's delay, Zara hit the stump with Summon Comet. The blast claimed another of the deva's tentacles, but that was the extent of the damage.

Why didn't it explode?

Where did all that magic energy go?

The fallen tentacle gently rose into the air and rejoined to the deva's main body. It was a bit shorter than before.

But a moment later, the deva's body wriggled, and the tentacle returned to its original length.

No way... Does it absorb magical energy and use it to repair its body?

Zara lifted his invisibility and started to fire arrows while moving around. That way, he could distract the deva and make it easier for the copper-skinned warrior to fight.

While acting as a decoy, Zara went over what he had learned.

First, he absolutely could not use magic attacks with any significant amount of magic power against this enemy. However, attacks that had only a small amount of magic power like the Tirika Bow's arrows were surprisingly effective. Even if they didn't damage the deva, they could divert its attention.

The roots of the deva and the tips of its tentacles were hardened. This rendered them immobile but also impervious to attacks.

The giant warrior is relentlessly attacking the tentacle he cut down. Why is he doing that?

The tentacle the giant warrior was attacking was eventually absorbed back into the main body and returned to its original position, but it was clearly smaller than before.

Oh, I understand what he's doing!

Basically, he was focusing on building up the total amount of damage inflicted. By doing that, they could whittle down the deva's body and weaken it.

Zara increased the intensity of his arrows and drew the deva's attention.

Mana was required to form the arrows of the Tirika Bow and fire them. But Bora's Sword had a continuous mana regen blessing, so he could fire as many arrows as he wanted.

The addition of Zara changed the state of the battle significantly. It was happening slowly, but the deva was clearly shrinking. The balance of the battle was tipping toward Zara and the giant warrior.

The battle continued in this way for some time, and then the deva began to transform. With the sound of rock being broken apart, the roots that were spread across the ground retracted and turned into two giant legs, each landing with a *thud* as it started to walk. Every one of its tentacles split in two, making eight in total.

It was much more flexible than before and was capable of a greater variety of attacks, which made it much more difficult to deal with. But this transformation was welcomed by Zara and the giant warrior.

They were in greater danger of getting hit, but they also had more opportunities to deal damage. The part on the ground had been completely invulnerable, but now they would undoubtedly be able to injure it.

The giant warrior attacked the deva's right leg.

It got smaller!

He jumped back to dodge the tentacles, then instantly attacked the right leg again. He performed that action repeatedly.

Zara felt inspired by the persistence of the giant warrior.

While diverting the deva's attention with arrows, Zara waited for a specific timing. The moment he was waiting for came when the deva lifted its right leg in order to kick the giant warrior.

"Summon Comet!"

Zara summoned a comet and smashed the rock in front of the deva's left leg. The deva's balance was thrown off significantly, and it stopped moving.

Then, as if they had discussed this beforehand, the giant warrior and Zara charged simultaneously and sliced at the bottom of the deva's left leg. The deva swayed dramatically and collapsed.

Zara and the giant warrior then slashed at the deva quickly and repeatedly. The first thing they did was cut off six tentacles, which was all of them except for the two hidden under its body.

The deva let out a strange roar and got up. But in the small amount of time it spent on the ground, they had already inflicted a significant amount of damage.

Its body had become considerably smaller.

We're doing it!

As soon as the thought came to Zara's mind, the deva's body split into a countless number of tiny clusters and flew up into the air. They floated just below the ceiling of the dome, dividing and rejoining repeatedly.

They then took the shape of thousands of flying orbs with the color and pattern of internal organs, and they began to shiver. The orbs swooped down at the giant warrior and Zara and attacked them from every direction.

Zara retrieved Ende's Shield and ran up to the giant warrior. They both stood with their backs to each other and repelled the orbs of the deva as they flew at them.

The smallest of the orbs was about the size of Zara's head, and the biggest was as tall as he was.

The orbs coming from overhead were moving a bit slowly. The deva would probably take damage if they crashed into the ground. That meant the orbs

they needed to pay attention to were the ones attacking quickly from in front of them and to the sides.

The giant warrior and Zara entrusted their backs to each other and focused on tearing open the orbs and knocking them to the ground.

Zara had Ende's Shield. He could use it to repel the big orbs. The shield's blessings reflected physical damage and reduced recoil, so Zara shouldn't have been getting pushed back at all, but every time an orb hit the shield, he felt like he was going to get lifted off his feet. The impact was also being reflected back onto the opponent, of course, which should have been inflicting great damage to the deva.

He repelled smaller orbs with Bora's Sword. But because the massive number of orbs attacked without pause, there was no way he could block all of them.

The orbs appeared as if they would be soft, but they were actually as hard as metal. Some scraped against his side and waist, some knocked him off his feet, and some injured his elbows and shoulders. The injuries were healed by Bora's Sword's Health Leech ability, and he continued to focus all his attention on fighting off the flying orbs.

If either Zara or the giant warrior received a direct hit and had their timing thrown off, it was likely they would both have been immediately overwhelmed by the tornado of orbs and killed. Zara's heart pounded hard in the middle of this life-and-death battle.

No orbs came at Zara from behind. The giant warrior was blocking all of them.

Unfortunately, Zara's defense was not so perfect. The giant warrior was much taller than him, and as a result, a few orbs were getting through and injuring the giant warrior from behind. But the giant warrior didn't utter a word of complaint and continued to handle the orbs in silence.

They weren't simply standing in place. They were also stepping to the right and to the left and making use of their entire bodies for defense and attack.

Zara drew his left foot back deeply; then, while turning counterclockwise, he waved about his shield and used centrifugal force to send the orbs flying with his sword. Then, with effortless coordination, the giant warrior matched his

timing brilliantly and turned with him, and the two switched places.

The two warriors moved in perfect sync, as if they were professionally trained dancers. It was a dance of death, where one missed step meant certain doom.

Zara did not feel the least bit of despair.

Normally when fighting with a party, your movements were restricted somewhat because you had to pay attention to your companions, but he didn't feel that restraint at all in this fight. His partner picked up on his every movement and responded accordingly.

Zara felt as free as if he had been given wings, and while feeling immersed in the joy of the greatest battle of his life, he watched as every move he had ever learned came flowing out of him.

The orbs then suddenly stopped attacking. They lifted high into the air and combined together.

It was clear the deva had taken no small amount of damage. It had also been fighting out of desperation.

Zara scolded himself. He was breathing heavily and felt like he would fall to his knees.

The giant warrior had also been cut up all over his body and was in terrible shape. But he looked calm as he stood and stared at the deva, and it seemed as if he felt no pain or hardship at all.

Zara thought he looked just like a king.

No.

He had to be a king. There was no doubt that this warrior was a hero revered by the people of his tribe.

Zara was fighting with the five treasures of House Mercurius and Bora's Sword, all of which contained impossibly powerful blessings, but this proud barbarian warrior who was wielding nothing but a single sword was still stronger than him.

He found that humiliating, but at the same time, it made him feel strangely encouraged and joyful. This was the height that people, that warriors, could

reach.

The deva was growing more and more compact. It then stuck to the roof of the dome and stopped moving.

Zara was shocked when he realized what it was planning on doing.

The deva is going to quit fighting and wait us out!

The deva could wait for a thousand years. If it waited, then more fragments would be sent its way, enabling it to regenerate and build up its strength.

They, however, would not be able to leave this place until they killed the deva.

Zara wasn't sure about how the giant warrior was faring, but Zara would soon die from miasma poisoning if things continued like this. The only way for Zara to survive was to continue fighting and absorbing health from the deva.

The deva was shrinking and trying to harden itself. When it had collapsed to the ground earlier, it did not attempt to harden itself right away. It could soften in an instant, but hardening took time.

We need to get it down from there and kill it quickly. We won't be able to damage it if we give it time to finish hardening.

Zara looked at Raika's Ring. There was still light in it. He could fire one more Summon Comet.

He held up Bora's Sword in his right hand to establish his aim for Summon Comet, but then the giant warrior threw something.

It hit the ceiling right next to the deva and exploded, cutting into the rock. It looked like a bent animal bone, but it was probably an exploding sword. That was a blessed weapon obtained on the ninetieth floor of the Sazardon Labyrinth.

I can't believe he threw it so high. This warrior's strength is not normal.

The giant warrior threw one exploding sword after another at the deva. Cracks formed in the rock that made up the ceiling of the dome.

Zara counted fifteen explosions before the giant warrior stopped throwing

them. It seemed like that was all he had.

The giant warrior then looked at Zara, who answered his wordless demand with a nod, and raised Bora's Sword to the ceiling.

"Summon Comet!"

A huge comet appeared and collided with the ceiling. There was a massive explosion at the point of impact. Cracks spread quickly, and the ceiling began to crumble.

The deva then fell. It crashed to the ground with an enormous sound.

It had become shockingly small compared to the beginning of the fight. It was trying to condense and harden itself, but its hardening was not yet complete.

With a leisurely motion, the giant warrior swung his sword horizontally. The deva's body was larger than the sword's length. But the giant warrior didn't worry about that and swung his longsword anyway.

That technique!

That circular movement!

This sword movement that looks easy but is guaranteed to cut anyone who enters its inviolable arc!

This was a secret technique handed down in House Mercurius. Zara had learned it from Pan'ja Raban.

While wondering how this giant warrior knew that technique, Zara swung his sword as if being invited to do so. They surrounded the deva from perfectly symmetrical positions and drew two circles.

The circles were different sizes, but they traced exactly the same arc. The two swords penetrated the deva's body easily, the tips passing each other as they did so.

By the time the giant warrior's and Zara's blades returned to them, the deva's body had been cut in two, and it collapsed to the ground. Its shape then melted into something that looked like sand, which absorbed into the ground and vanished.

They had killed the strongest deva.

The ground began to tremble.

Softly at first, then it grew gradually more violent.

The rock dome was beginning to collapse.

The deva labyrinth would probably remain in ruin for a time, then be reformed and wait for the day it began to collect fragments again.

The giant warrior disappeared.

Zara also disappeared.

6

It saw a familiar ceiling.

It had returned.

The minotaur tried to get up and realized that it could not move its body at all.

Judging by its healed injuries, it seemed like a level-up had occurred while it was unconscious.

All except for its right horn.

But it could not move.

After experiencing such an exhausting battle, this was not surprising.

That left it no choice but to rest.

The minotaur took a deep breath and assumed a resting posture.

That whelp was really something.

Its swordsmanship was sharp and polished.

The speed of its movements and attacks surpassed mine.

It could also use powerful magic attacks.

Above all, its defense was awe-inspiring.

I thought it would be sent flying when it was hit directly by a tentacle, but it was able to repel those powerful attacks and remain composed.

It seemed like its shield had special blessings, but its shield technique was very impressive as well.

It also had courage.

It should have been impossible to bear such relentless attacks for such a long period of time with skill and stamina alone. Its mind was thoroughly trained.

I had a thought as we fought...

After we defeat this monster, I want to fight the whelp next.

The minotaur's wish did not come true. After they defeated the monster, the minotaur lost consciousness and was transported to the one hundredth floor of the Sazardon Labyrinth.

The minotaur was robbed of the battle it had eagerly anticipated.

But it had absolutely no regret. On the contrary, it felt a sense of satisfaction greater than any it had ever felt before.

The minotaur wondered why it was in such a good mood, and after a while, it got its answer.

The minotaur learned how to fight from humans. It studied their technique and then polished its own skills. But there was one technique, just one technique, that it thought was really nice but was unable to replicate.

That was coordination.

The minotaur did not have any companions, so even if it understood the advantages of coordination, it was unable to put them to use. But deep in its heart, it had always wanted to try that coordination for itself. That was a wish that could never come true, of course.

But then in this battle that it never could have seen coming, the minotaur and the kobold warrior had fought while entrusting their backs to each other.

The minotaur reflected on the battle with the final monster.

It reflected on every action the tiny kobold had taken after it entered the battle.

Then it had a thought. It had seen extraordinary coordination from humans many times, and its coordination with the kobold in this fight was not inferior to what it had seen on any of those occasions.

No.

Actually, it was the best.

It was the best and the strongest.

No one could top the coordination the whelp and I showed today.

Hmm.

But I never would have imagined there was such an individual among those whelps.

I'll have to travel upward every now and then.

But for now, I'll sleep for a little while.

That was what the minotaur thought.

Its body was totally spent. It needed a long, long rest.

Overcome by the sense of fulfillment wrought from a great battle, the minotaur went to sleep.

Interlude 10

Zara ended up on the first floor of the Sazardon Labyrinth. A group of adventurers found him there, unconscious, and they carried him outside.

When he awoke, he was assaulted by a terrible headache. The monks and apothecaries who examined him said his body was suffering from extreme fatigue and was under attack from some kind of poison.

Healing magic, medicine, and blessed items could not heal Zara. They tried carrying him into the labyrinth and having him drink potions, but that did not restore his proper movement, either.

It was determined after a more thorough investigation that Zara's body was being tormented by recoil from overuse of the divine sword's blessings.

While Zara was resting in the estate in the royal capital, Julius ascended to Red Minister. That year, Julius was forty-three years old, and Zara was seventeen.

An incident also occurred that year in which the minotaur on the bottom floor of the Sazardon Labyrinth suddenly moved upward and spent ten days on the fifth floor. It had been thirty-seven years since it became the master of the one hundredth floor. The Adventurers Guild declared a state of emergency and observed the minotaur, and preparations were made at the royal palace to deal with a disaster-level event should the minotaur leave the labyrinth. The scouts sent into the labyrinth observed the minotaur meditating with its back to the rock wall and kobolds cowering in fear in the corners of the room. In the end, the minotaur spent ten days there without fighting any humans or monsters, then returned to the bottom floor.

The year 1118 of the Royal Calendar arrived. Zara finally became able to get up and move, and he began training for his recovery.

Zara had been asked by Alestra to tell his daughter that he loved her if Zara ever happened to see her. He wanted to fulfill that final request as quickly as possible.

Gondona had told him that he was going to take the dragon child to the Dragon Temple. Zara then heard that there was currently a girl in the Dragon Temple being called the Dragon Maiden who was bringing aid to people by performing miracles. The Dragon Maiden was likely the dragon child he'd met.

Zara remembered what Patagamon had said to him.

Dragons lived long lives and grew slowly. They gained great intelligence with age and became able to operate strong divine power. They even gained the ability to take on human form and interact with mankind. He said dragons that had reached that stage were called dragon gods or divine dragons. He also said that the child born from the goddess Kaldan would probably be a dragon god at birth.

If the dragon child from that time was taking the form of a girl and performing miracles, then she really was born a dragon god.

Zara wrote a letter to the Dragon Maiden. He had a messenger sent to the Holy Kingdom of Roahl through the use of multiple sorcerers capable of teleportation, and from there had them arrange a carriage to deliver the letter to the Ocean Temple.

He received a reply from the Dragon Maiden. It turned out it was her, just as Zara had thought. The shrine maiden thanked him for naming her. She had heard about Zara from Gondona. Zara learned from the shrine maiden's letter that Gondona was no longer a person of this world. She said she was waiting eagerly for Zara's visit.

Zara put more effort into his recovery. When he was starting to regain the muscle he lost while bedridden, a big incident occurred that shook every country on the continent.

In the spring of 1119 of the Royal Calendar, foreigners from across the sea arrived in the east on the coast of Anpoan with a fleet of ships.

The ships were made of iron. The foreigners could not use magic, but they

had weapons more powerful than magic, as well as a number of strange tools.

The majority of the foreigners had white skin, silver hair, and green eyes, causing their appearance to vastly differ from the people of the countries of this continent. They could not speak the language, but they had made some castaways from this continent learn their language and interpret for them.

The foreigners demanded submission upon their arrival.

An outraged Marquis of Anpoan gathered soldiers on the coast, but the foreigners' boats loosed balls of fire from a distance that magic couldn't reach and wiped out the Anpoan Army. The town of Anpoan fell under the rule of the foreigners in just one day.

Thus the Foreign War began.

After Anpoan, the foreigners brought the rest of the cities on the coast under their control and then stayed put for a while without invading inland.

House Riga invaded twice to try to recover Anpoan, but they suffered miserable defeats in the face of the enemy's overwhelming firepower. They were not an enemy House Riga could handle alone. Not even the entire country of Baldemost could have defeated them without help.

At the appeal of the Baldemost Kingdom, all the countries in the north joined together. The Gorenza Empire and other countries to the south participated in the war as well.

The king gave a royal order for Panzel's son, Arza, to succeed to his title and join the fight leading his domain's army, and Zara changed his name back to Arza and became the Marquis of Banust at the age of nineteen.

The Foreign War became a hard-fought war beyond what anyone imagined, and a great number of people died.

Duke Draydol of Riga took command of the royal army and died a heroic death in battle.

Logan died protecting Julius, who ascended to White Minister after Draydol's death.

Arza considered Draydol to be a strange uncle. He had always found him to be

a melancholic person.

His mother, Esseluleia, had told him that Draydol was originally a nice, fun person, so his personality probably darkened after the death of his older brother, Garrest. But in the final few months of his life, Draydol's personality brightened once again. He became a light illuminating the continent before he died.

His performance in getting the countries of the north to come together and join an alliance was splendid. He also advocated that they appeal to the countries to the south. He got meetings with the various kings and lords in a very short amount of time, an accomplishment not even the anti-Riga faction could find anything to complain about.

His impassioned speech to the emperor of Gorenza, who thought the war had nothing to do with him, astonished Patagamon, who acted as mediator for the discussion.

Then, when Draydol drove him out of the burning castle saying that that wasn't the place for him to die, Arza definitely felt the warmth of a family member.

Julius also showed dramatic growth.

He figured out from a small amount of information that the foreigners were not a force representing their entire continent but instead a defeated group of people looking for a new world.

He showed off one of the foreigners' advanced weapons to the emperor of Gorenza as an offering and convinced him that this was an opportunity to study a far more advanced culture.

He borrowed magic soldiers from the country of Mazulu and priests from the Holy Kingdom of Roahl.

His insight, negotiation skills, and talent were all impressive, but what the rulers of the various countries were most taken by were his tactics and vision that emphasized continental cooperation after the war.

Arza continued to grow during the war.

The army of the Marquis of Banust came to be seen as the most elite force in the Northern Alliance, and Arza often took on the most challenging battles.

In the year 1122 of the Royal Calendar, the Anpoan Covenant was established, and the war came to an end.

Arza rendered the most distinguished service in the victory, and he was given the title of Defender of the Continent, agreed upon by six different kings.

After the war, his days were spent receiving the foreigners as immigrants, rebuilding neglected territory, and performing diplomacy with other countries in the new state of the continent. The name of Eisha Goran remained in the memory of the people of the south to a surprising extent, and as a descendant of his, Arza was held up as a symbol of the close relationship that had formed among the various countries.

Then, in the year 1124 of the Royal Calendar, Arza became twenty-four years old.

Final Chapter

The Dream of the Legendary Beast

1

A new challenger was standing in front of the minotaur.

It was a young knight with black eyes and black hair.

In his right hand, he was holding the sword the minotaur had given away twenty-eight years ago.

In his left hand, he held a shield of fine quality.

The minotaur remembered the presence of the dagger sheathed into the inside of his shield and the bracelet on his left arm.

It also felt exceptional blessings coming from the ring and the charm around his neck.

This knight also had uncommon temperament and skill.

The minotaur's body trembled with the anticipation of a worthy challenge.

At first, the minotaur thought that man had returned. But after it drew closer, it realized that was not the case.

This is not him.

But he looks a lot like him.

He has items that should be in the possession of that man.

Which might mean that man sent him.

He is representing that man.

So be it.

All right.

Show me your strength.

The knight faced the minotaur and spoke. The minotaur did not understand the language of humans, but it listened closely. The knight readied his sword and shield when he finished talking and then calmly raised his fighting spirit.

The minotaur took a quick breath, mentally prepared itself, gripped its greatsword with both hands, then rushed forward and swung at the enemy's head. The knight lifted the shield in his left hand overhead and blocked the minotaur's attack without moving one step.

The violent collision wrought a sound so loud, it seemed like the air of the entire boss room shook.

The knight defended against the minotaur's powerful blow perfectly.

That was not all. The minotaur was almost lifted off its feet by the recoil generated from the shield.

Its muscles creaked, and a number of tendons snapped.

The minotaur was astonished. That was not the feeling of an attack being blocked by a shield. It felt as if it had crossed swords with an equally powerful opponent.

The minotaur grew frustrated.

He just stopped my attack with his left hand alone, and without even taking a step back. With a shield held in the air.

That's impossible!

Giving itself over to its emerging rage, the minotaur drew its greatsword back to the right and struck horizontally with the force of a gale. It expected the

enemy to step back, as there was no way he should have been able to take that attack directly.

But the knight did not budge. He casually moved his shield, adjusted the positioning of his feet, and blocked the attack effortlessly.

Once again, with just one hand.

This defense was impossible. That was a powerful horizontal blow utilizing the minotaur's giant body and abnormal strength. No matter how strong this knight was, he should have been blasted off his feet.

But the knight deflected the powerful attack completely, only sliding back half a step.

Instead, the minotaur felt like it was going to be blasted backward from the recoil produced by the shield, despite being the one that had delivered the blow.

The minotaur put strength into its legs and endured the recoil. Its sturdy right shoulder, left elbow, and back had all been injured and were crying out in pain.

One more time!

The minotaur drew the greatsword back to the right once more and unleashed the same powerful attack from the same angle and the same height.

The knight calmly blocked it. He was only pushed back a half step, just like last time. He did not look injured in the least from the minotaur's successive attacks.

He was watching the minotaur's actions with a calm and clear gaze full of fighting spirit.

The minotaur received recoil from the shield once again and took damage. It would not be able to fight until its right shoulder, left elbow, and back were all healed.

It activated a healing skill and took a step away.

2

The minotaur was bewildered.

It had fought a variety of shield users throughout its life. A tower shield set on the ground might have been able to block its attacks, but there was no one who could block a full-strength attack from the minotaur with a kite shield held in the air. That should have been impossible.

Furthermore, people who fought with kite or round shields used them to weaken their opponent by messing with their timing and by scattering and diverting the direction of their opponent's attacks.

But this knight was using his kite shield to block full-strength attacks from the minotaur. Directly in the center of his shield.

Nothing about that made any sense.

Actually, wait.

I've seen this shield technique somewhere before.

I was impressed by their skill.

It was there!

In that strange place with those nasty enemies.

It was that whelp I fought with during the final fight.

That whelp used its shield like this.

The minotaur looked at the knight one more time. It did not use its eyes but instead used its body to try to feel the presence of the opponent in front of it.

It then became aware of the opponent's identity.

This man!

This man is the whelp!

Where did you go?

You weren't there when I searched for you.

The minotaur's heart was full of joy.

It activated a certain skill.

Humans called this skill Indomitable Spirit. It was a skill possessed by the highest class of ogre-type monsters, which were called ogre gods. It increased the hardness of the user's body, resistance to magic, and also restored health continuously at a set rate, all in exchange for the consumption of energy. The minotaur had obtained it by defeating the boss of the eighty-fifth floor. It then ranked up the skill, and it had proven useful when fighting the metal dragon.

The minotaur then quickly grabbed a red potion from its Bag and drank it.

The knight saw that as an opportunity to attack and slashed his sword.

He's fast!

His feet and his sword were astonishingly quick. The minotaur remembered that the kobold warrior's movement and attack speed had surpassed its own.

The minotaur decided that it could not dodge by jumping back, so it jumped up. It could not fly, but it could jump high without any preparatory movement.

The jump was also performed for the purpose of an attack. It was planning to take control of the battle by jumping into the air and using Burning Breath from a distance that the knight's sword could not reach.

But the knight was too fast. He pointed the tip of his sword at the minotaur.

Shoot!

The minotaur called off its attack, got into a defensive stance, and prepared for impact. The knight performed a short incantation, and then a comet hit the minotaur directly.

The knight was able to release extremely powerful magic attacks without the need for a preparatory incantation and without showing any signs of gathering magic power.

The comet dug into the minotaur's back and greatly damaged it internally. The movement of its right shoulder had been impaired.

The knight raised his sword overhead and waited for the minotaur as it fell. Before it hit the ground, the minotaur blew Burning Breath on the knight. The knight raised his shield and blocked it. Burning Breath was absorbed into the shield and disappeared.

But the minotaur got what it wanted. The minotaur's goal was to get him to lift his shield and obstruct his field of vision for even a small moment.

The minotaur kicked the knight's shield and used the recoil to jump backward.

As it did so, the minotaur reached into its Bag with its left hand, pulled out some immortal flesh, and ate it.

The knight recovered instantly from the recoil of being kicked by the minotaur and then pursued with incredible speed. He swung his sword down from above, aiming for the head of the slouched minotaur.

His attack had extreme force behind it from the use of some skill.

The minotaur still could not move its right shoulder.

It caught the sword with its bare left hand. The knight then forced the sword in between the minotaur's index finger and middle finger and drove it into its elbow.

The mysterious effect of the immortal flesh then manifested, and just as if time itself were being reversed, the minotaur's sliced-up arm returned to normal and its back, right shoulder, and internal organs were all restored.

The minotaur lunged forward with the greatsword in its right hand. The knight diverted it diagonally upward with his shield and then performed an angled

upward slash with lightning speed.

The minotaur quickly drew a circle with its sword and repelled the knight's attack. The knight's sword then changed trajectory in midair and raced for the minotaur's neck.

The minotaur may have been in a temporary state of immortality, but it could not allow its head to be cut off. It lifted its sword from below and drove away the opponent's sword.

The knight skillfully used the momentum from his sword being deflected to trace a circle with his sword and swing for the minotaur's neck from the right.

The attack was very natural and very quick. The sword cut halfway into the minotaur's neck.

Fortunately for the minotaur, the immortal effect had not yet expired. The injury healed immediately.

The minotaur swung its sword down from the left toward the enemy's neck. The knight just barely missed it with his shield, and the sword penetrated through a gap in the armor. It cut a fourth of the way into his neck.

Given the fragile bodies of humans, that injury was close to lethal. However, the knight quickly knocked aside the minotaur's sword and slashed its right side. The blood that was starting to spout from the knight's neck then stopped, and the injury healed in an instant.

The minotaur's right side also healed immediately, and then the effect of the immortal flesh ran out.

3

They both took a step back and gathered themselves.

That's right.

This guy has that sword.

The sword that I gave that man.

It was a sword that heals injuries when you slice an enemy.

I see!

He used this sword in that strange place when he had the form of the whelp.

It looked like a completely different sword, but just like his form, it only appeared that way.

Also, the sword technique he just used.

I've definitely seen it somewhere before.

It's...

It's...

It's the same as that man's sword technique.

That's not all.

His fighting spirit.

His presence.

So he is that man after all.

Actually, no.

He is not that man.

Judging by his features, he is a different person.

The minotaur may have gained intelligence, but it was a monster from a labyrinth. It was born without parents and would never have a child, so it did not understand anything about family and blood relations.

As a result, the minotaur processed what it saw with its own sense of logic.

That means he is not that man, but he is that man.

That man was the last version of this one.

This one is the next version of that man.

He was also the whelp.

So beating him will mean beating three people.

Their exchange of offense and defense began yet again.

The knight attacked from the side. The minotaur blocked it with its sword.

The knight attacked again from a slightly different height. The minotaur blocked that one, too.

The knight repeated his attack twelve times at a terrifying speed. The minotaur could not block every blow, and it was cut three times in the side.

The knight then attacked from the front. Once again, it did not end with one attack—he unleashed twelve consecutive attacks at incredible speed. The minotaur was slashed twice on the shoulder and chest.

When the minotaur thought he was going to attack again, the knight's body vanished.

Over there!

The minotaur trusted its intuition and struck at air. Its efforts paid off, and its blow found purchase. Surprisingly, however, the surface the minotaur struck felt like an ordinary shield, and the minotaur sensed that the knight was sent flying.

The knight then charged into the minotaur's space and swung his sword down diagonally from the right. He was still invisible, and the minotaur could not feel his presence, either, but it did sense the sword.

The knight's strength and speed were less than they had been before. The minotaur repelled the knight's attack without difficulty.

The knight took a step back, and his body reappeared. It might have been the case that the blessings of the shield and sword grew weaker when he was

invisible.

The minotaur unleashed three consecutive vertical slashes. The knight blocked them by lifting his shield overhead.

The minotaur faked like it was going to attack a fourth time, then instead pressed its greatsword against the shield, shoved the knight away, and jumped backward. It reached its left hand into its Bag and tried to grab a red potion.

The knight charged and zigzagged his sword back and forth, from right to left and left to right. The minotaur quit reaching for a potion, gripped its greatsword with both hands, and swung down to stop the knight's attacks.

The minotaur's greatsword struck the rock floor at the knight's feet. Rocks were blasted up into the air, many of them traveling in the knight's direction.

The knight dodged or blocked most of the rocks with amazing reflexes and vision, but due to the sheer number of them, some still got through and hit his legs and stomach. His armor was extremely tough, however, so it did not look like he was injured at all.

The minotaur swung its sword to dig into the cracked floor, sending ten large pieces of rock at the knight. The knight protected his vital points skillfully with his shield, then jumped back lightly and dodged the incoming rocks.

The minotaur was impressed.

He moves impossibly well, as always.

How can he move so quickly in such restrictive clothing?

That consecutive chain of attacks was amazing.

It was impossible for me to dodge every blow.

I have no choice but to attack him knowing that I am going to get hit.

But his entire body except for his face is covered by those tough clothes.

He is a difficult enemy to attack.

The minotaur grew excited as its mind raced.

How long had it been since its last fight where it could not see how to win?

How long had it been since it had been subjected to such fighting spirit?

The minotaur bought itself some time by firing rocks and tried to reach for a red potion.

Then a comet fell. The minotaur moved hurriedly and managed to escape from the center of the comet, but its left shoulder was greatly injured.

Its left shoulder and left chest had been cut deeply, and its left hand could not move.

That's right!

He is not a normal swordsman.

He is actually more dangerous from a distance.

This human.

He is trying to stop me from drinking the red liquid.

That's the second time he's stopped me.

Yes.

There is no doubt.

He has the ability to quickly recognize an opponent's strengths and weaknesses.

He must have seen that not letting me use my invisible bag would have a big impact on the fight.

I can never let my guard down with this one.

The minotaur could not use its greatsword with both hands now that its left hand was impaired.

If the minotaur distanced itself from the knight, a comet would fall. If it got close, the knight would unleash a flurry of consecutive attacks that could not all

be defended against. If it attacked, the knight would block with his blessed shield.

The knight's oppressive fighting style was gradually cornering the minotaur. But it was this exact kind of situation that always brought the best out of it.

That was why, out of hatred and awe, adventurers called the minotaur the King of the Labyrinth.

4

The minotaur charged at the knight, creating a gust of wind as it did so.

It lifted its greatsword high with just its right hand and then swung it down. The knight blocked it with his shield. The sword was repelled upward from the powerful recoil.

The minotaur swung the sword down with its right hand again. It executed twenty-three consecutive attacks.

In that time, Indomitable Spirit restored the minotaur's injured left shoulder.

I knew it.

He is incapable of attacking when he receives a strong blow on his shield.

That means I can seal off his offense with continuous strong attacks.

On the twenty-fourth strike, the minotaur added its left hand to the grip and made like it was going to strike the shield, then changed course and tried to slice through the knight's feet. The blow looked like it had enough force to cut through the armor.

It was a sudden change-up that the knight should not have been able to keep up with after dealing with the powerful twenty-third blow. But he dealt with it skillfully.

He quickly lowered his shield and struck the minotaur's sword to change its

trajectory. The sword hit nothing but the floor.

The knight would not overlook this opportunity. He drew his sword in a horizontal arc. The minotaur had anticipated that an attack would come and activated a skill to raise its defense dramatically for a brief period.

The tip of the knight's sword traced a perfect circle, easily cutting through the minotaur's chest from left to right.

The minotaur swung its greatsword up from below. The knight blocked it with his shield. The minotaur's blow lifted the shield and the knight together into the air.

Blood gushed from the horizontal line cut into the minotaur's chest.

The knight turned around nimbly in midair and landed on his feet.

The knight's movements were more monster than human.

The minotaur charged, ignoring the blood it was losing. Its entire body was immersed in the joy of battle, in the thrill of squaring off against a strong opponent. Pain and tactics no longer mattered.

It just swung its greatsword down on the knight with both hands over and over again.

As it did so, it made a surprising discovery.

The movement of his sword.

That unwavering swordsmanship that makes it appear as if time has slowed down.

That belonged to that man!

He uses his sword the exact same way as the man who used the thin sword.

This guy was once the thin sword user, too!

The minotaur at that time wanted to get stronger from the bottom of its heart, and it felt that there was a limit on how much it could do with brute

force. It yearned for polish. It craved technique.

But the minotaur had no one to teach it. It did not know what it could do to improve its skill. After much thought, it landed on the method of recalling that thin sword user's swordsmanship and replicating it.

That marked the beginning of a truly hellish training period.

The monsters became a resource for the minotaur's training. Its skills were also sharpened by the humans who attacked it in succession.

Then, before the minotaur knew it, it had become able to draw that beautiful circle.

This knight's swordsmanship was identical to that thin sword user's.

This knight inherited that thin sword user's technique and life.

That meant that this was a rematch with that thin sword user, and this time it would be a grand battle fought on even footing.

The minotaur's heart leaped with joy. It attacked again and again and again.

The force of its blows had not waned in the slightest. It delivered swing after overhead swing.

The knight blocked every single blow with Ende's Shield. But not once did the minotaur relent.

No matter how tough the shield was, if the minotaur continued to attack with power that exceeded its defense, it would surely crack eventually. That was what the minotaur believed as it continued to slash single-mindedly at the knight.

It had been in this kind of fight before, or so the minotaur believed.

Even if it took one thousand or ten thousand blows, the minotaur would keep slashing until the barrier had been broken.

The knight continued to block every attack.

Deep in the darkness, without anyone's knowledge, the greatest fight in the history of the continent was unfolding.

5

The knight tried a number of different attacks.

He side- strafed in quick, repetitious patterns while searching for opportunities to strike. His aim was to throw off the minotaur's spacing.

He blocked the greatsword with his own blade, then slipped past the minotaur's side and lunged. The minotaur diverted the attack, then jumped back and unleashed a magic attack.

Over the course of this endless battle, the minotaur noticed a number of things.

This knight could absorb the magic attacks of opponents and use the stolen energy to press the assault. Also, attacks that inflicted status ailments had no effect against him. For that reason, the minotaur quit using Howling, Burning Breath, Crushing Breath, and other magic attacks.

The knight then stopped using magic attacks, too.

They continued to trade blows.

This is bad.

My sword is going to break soon.

This guy probably won't give me time to use my bag.

But I can't fight without a sword.

I need to retrieve a new sword, no matter the risk.

The minotaur acted like it was going to raise its greatsword overhead, and then it jumped back. The knight pursued without delay.

The minotaur threw the greatsword. The knight deflected it with his shield.

The minotaur then puffed out its chest, boosted its physical strength, and reached its right hand toward its left shoulder.

The knight's sword cut into the minotaur's chest.

The minotaur pulled a longsword out of its Bag and immediately swung it down for the knight's head. The knight blocked it with his shield.

The shield was splattered with blood from the minotaur's chest.

The minotaur knew that the wager had paid off. The wound was superficial.

It also learned one more thing.

The tip of the knight's sword had cut easily into the minotaur's hardened chest before, but this time it managed only a light scratch. The knight was tired, too, and his moves were losing their power.

After that, the minotaur and the knight exchanged blows for so long that time ceased to have any meaning.

Then the moment the minotaur was waiting for finally arrived.

It swung its longsword down and broke the shield as the knight held it overhead. The minotaur was overjoyed. The knight then tossed aside the shield and charged, swinging his sword with both hands.

This was the first time in the fight the knight had performed a two-handed strike, so the minotaur was a little late to react. Despite that, it still managed to use its longsword to block the knight's attack.

Then it happened. A shrill sound echoed as the minotaur's longsword was smashed to pieces.

The minotaur immediately reached for its Bag with its right hand, but the knight cut the hand off with his sword.

The knight should have been exhausted. Where had he been hiding this much strength?

The minotaur, as indestructible as it had become, had used up its stamina. It stood completely still for a moment, staring at the knight with glazed eyes.

The knight's sword swept at the minotaur's neck.

The minotaur jerked its body backward. Its neck should have been out of reach of the knight's sword.

But the knight's attack extended outside his range. The minotaur's head

would be severed if it did not react.

Not caring that it was going to lose its balance, the minotaur twisted its body and dodged the sword. The knight then unleashed a flurry of slashes at the unbalanced minotaur.

The minotaur immediately twisted its head to the left. Its right horn was cut off from the base, and it went flying through the air.

The minotaur then recovered its balance with astounding reflexes, picked up what remained of the longsword with its left hand, and raised it overhead.

But before it could swing it down, the knight's sword pierced the minotaur's heart.

6

Fresh blood painted the knight's sword, hands, and chest red.

I'm dying.

I'm going to die.

Ahhh... That was thoroughly enjoyable.

Would that the fight could have gone on forever, but it had to end eventually.

A blissful feeling of satisfaction washed over the minotaur.

The two of them had fought for longer than a full day and night. They had exhausted the limit of their skills, and they gave and received many blows.

After a while, the question of which one of them was going to survive began to feel trivial to the minotaur.

Then, in the final moment, just as the minotaur's life was about to expire, it cried out from the depths of its soul.

This isn't over!

I'm still alive!

The minotaur twisted its body violently. The knight's sword slipped from his hands, and he stopped moving.

Now!

The minotaur mustered the last of its strength and swung down the remains of the longsword in its left hand onto the crown of the knight's head. It thought it felt the knight's skull shatter, but it could not see anything through the red obstructing its vision. The minotaur then collapsed.

In the small amount of time it took for the minotaur to fall to the ground, the figures of the enemies it had encountered throughout its life flashed through its mind.

The sorcerer, the thin sword user, the shield user, the knight, and a multitude of monsters.

They were all magnificent enemies.

They had made for very fun battles.

And in the end, it was able to have a satisfying, all-out fight to the death with the strongest enemy it had ever encountered.

It had no greater desire than that.

The minotaur's body collapsed on the stone floor.

The knight then collapsed on top of the minotaur.

Within its fading consciousness, the minotaur felt its body enveloped by a strange warmth.

It's them.

The one who gave me this second life is here. The one who allowed me to fight again.

They were probably by my side this entire time.

They watched me intently to see how I fought and how I would use this life they gave me.

The minotaur felt as if the existence that watched over it asked if the minotaur's wish had been fulfilled.

It could answer only in the affirmative.

But then its thoughts took a sudden turn.

No.

No, wait.

What if there is a new version of this human?

And also a new version of me?

Yes, that's right.

One more time.

One more time.

I want to fight one more time...against the new version of this human.

I want to fight until I'm satisfied one more time.

Give me more!

Give me more, more combat!

More bloodshed!

Give me the chance to keep fighting!

The minotaur pleaded strongly.

Then came a voice in its head—one that it had heard before.

The minotaur did not understand language, so it did not know what the voice was saying.

The minotaur's consciousness faded into a tender darkness.

Epilogue

1

Well, well, my lord Marquis!

What a pleasant surprise to see you in a borderland so distant as this.

I thank you again for your numerous heartfelt offerings and generous donations.

As you can see, this temple welcomes, in vast numbers, people who have nowhere to go.

We also give food and a place to sleep free of charge to the sick and injured who come here to be healed. We manage somehow.

There are attendants preparing tea in another room.

We want to hear all about your accomplishments, my lord.

They were grand enough for you to earn the honor of being named Defender of the Continent, after all.

You are owed a debt of gratitude not just from the Baldemost Kingdom but from the entire continent.

We all offered a prayer of thanks when we heard that you defeated the foreigners who came from across the sea.

Yes.

If I had to describe what we do here, it's praying.

You're probably wondering what all that prayer accomplishes.

I thought the same thing at first. That it is wrong for a person in service of the gods to do nothing but pray. That before they shut themselves away in a temple

and make self-aggrandizing statements, they should go out into the streets and help people in need.

But I learned something when I met Father Raillura—that there is no work greater than prayer.

This temple has stood for a long time.

In the past, it was known as the Ocean Temple.

Praying was all Father Raillura did at this temple. Aside from taking meals and educating the shrine maiden, he devoted his every waking hour to prayer.

I'm not sure why, but the first time I beheld his visage, locked in prayer, I was moved to tears.

Before long, I settled down here and came to serve Father Raillura.

A number of other people arrived at the temple and had an experience similar to mine.

Father Raillura passed away only four months later. In his parting words, he asked the shrine maiden to pray for the suffering.

I was told that Father Raillura and the shrine maiden secluded themselves in the temple three months before I arrived.

That's right. This sect started with just two people—Father Raillura and the Dragon Maiden.

Actually, I shouldn't call it a sect. Father Raillura had a distaste for words that suggested we were some sort of organization. The sect just happened to form as people who adored both the Dragon Maiden and Father Raillura gathered here.

Huh?

Did you say Gondona?

Ha-ha-ha-ha!

Where did you hear that word?

That is slang used by congregations in the west. It means something like a corrupt priest.

Yeah, yeah.

Father Raillura would sometimes refer to himself as Gondona as a joke.

He would do that because he hated being revered in any way. He even said that he fled the Gorenza Empire because it seemed like he was going to be recognized as a saint.

Huh?

Oh, I guess you didn't know that.

Father Raillura was a high-ranking priest at the Elvetta Temple in the imperial capital. He is very famous. I didn't realize who he was, either, until he told me his real name. If not for his hatred of nobles, he would have been made the head of the temple long ago.

But we don't call him anything like *saint* or *founder*, as other sects would. We simply call him Father Raillura.

We would never call him Father Gondona, of course.

Ah, now that I think of it, a little earlier, you visited Father Raillura's grave and left a lot of high-quality wine as an offering.

No, no, I think it is certain to make him happy. After all, no one could match his love for wine.

I've never seen the meat you offered with it.

What? That's smoked ettin meat?

W-wow, that's very rare. Thank you very much.

Oh!

I knew it. I thought that might be the case.

You met Father Raillura in life, my lord.

Apologies if this is invasive, but what kind of relationship do you have with the shrine maiden?

Whaaaat?

You say you named her?

B-but you don't look like you could be old enough.

When I met the shrine maiden nine years ago, she must have already been fourteen or fifteen. She certainly doesn't look over twenty now, though.

Ah, well, it doesn't matter.

The shrine maiden is a strange person.

She is at once like a young girl and a loving mother.

She is at once innocent and full of wisdom.

She is beautiful like a goddess, and she has mysterious blessings that can heal any sickness or injury.

And she has gained powerful protection.

There have been many lords who have sent soldiers in order to forcibly invite the shrine maiden to their land. They have all been obstructed by rain, wind, and lightning, and they always end up crying and begging the shrine maiden for forgiveness. The rumor of her dragon form comes as no surprise.

Do you mind if I ask you one more question?

Just before, you offered what looked like an animal horn at the temple's altar.

What was that?

Oh! Okay. I see, I see.

So you thought visiting the Dragon Temple and offering that symbol to the altar was the most appropriate way to show thanks for all the blessings of the gods and the people you encountered on the trip you once took for personal growth.

Ah!

I have no doubt that Father Raillura will be very happy.

Sorry for taking so much of your time.

Please enjoy a rest on this balcony.

The shrine maiden will finish her business and be here shortly.

How long the shrine maiden has looked forward to this day!

She even called this a fated day.

Ha-ha-ha-ha.

If you'll excuse me.

2

"It took me a long time to get here," said Arza Goran, the Marquis of Banust.

Borante was silently waiting behind him.

Arza had finally made it here.

This temple had once again come to be called the Dragon Temple, and it had also become the base of a new religious sect.

The fight in the deva labyrinth occurred in the year 1117 of the Baldemost Royal Calendar. His body finally recovered in the year 1119, and so he set off on his pilgrimage.

But then the Foreign War began.

On royal orders from the king, Arza took his seat as the Marquis of Banust, and he also changed his name from Zara back to Arza.

Borante and Himatra, Narillia, a gladiator named Worvargan who he met in the Gahra Mountains, the Red Knight Laura and her subordinates, and the pupils of the Divine Blade all raced to offer help.

In 1122, the Anpoan Covenant was established, and the war came to an end, but he was still consumed by his postwar duties. Before he knew it, the year 1124 had arrived, and Arza turned twenty-four.

Esseluleia had made a plea to the king of Baldemost. Her husband, Panzel, had fought the minotaur on orders from the king at the age of twenty-four, but he had to leave things unfinished. She said she wanted the king to order Arza to fight the minotaur once he turned twenty-four.

As promised, the king gave the order, and Arza headed off to subjugate the minotaur.

Then, when Arza stood in front of the minotaur, he realized that the monster

before him was the giant he had fought with in the deva labyrinth.

By the end of the frantic battle, he had used up all the magic power in his ring, and his shield had been broken, but Arza managed to smash the minotaur's sword, sever its right hand, cut off its right horn from the base, and finally drive his sword deep into the minotaur's heart.

When the minotaur's life was about to end, it twisted its body violently. The divine sword slipped from Arza's bloodied hands, and after losing the divine sword's blessings, he ended up unable to move from exhaustion.

As the minotaur fell, it used the remains of the sword it was holding in its left hand to smash Arza's head. Arza didn't even have the strength to use a potion.

Arza watched the minotaur's body fall flat on the ground—watched the light fade from its eyes—and then he fell on top of it and lost consciousness.

When Arza woke up after what should have been a killing blow, the only thing he saw was that familiar horn.

No one had seen the minotaur since.

But if the minotaur had died and vanished, then it was peculiar that the right horn alone was left behind. It was also strange that the items hoarded in the minotaur's Bag were nowhere to be found.

There was also currently no master of the boss room of the one hundredth floor of the Sazardon Labyrinth.

The strangest thing of all was that the level-up Arza obviously should have received from defeating such a great enemy did not occur. But even without a level-up, he had revived without injury.

The only way he could think to explain what had happened was that it was the grace of the gods at work.

He asked Julius for advice on how to process what had happened, and his answer was as clear and easy to understand as always. He said that the great, inhuman hero should be enshrined as a divine spirit.

Arza agreed completely. He thought about what temple the minotaur should be enshrined in, and he came to the conclusion that it had to be the Dragon

Temple.

It took more than a little effort to obtain royal permission.

Many years ago, the minotaur killed Percival. It later wiped out an entire division of Imperial Guard knights who were sent to subjugate it. The minotaur had been a target of the king's enmity for a long time.

But that did nothing to undo the fact that that creature defeated the devas and saved the continent. Julius reached the king's heart by saying that if they extolled that monster's skill, they would bring honor to his father and the knights.

A royal order was then given for Arza to visit the Dragon Temple. But because information about the devas could not be made public, they made his trip out to be a pilgrimage in which he would travel the path of the trip he once took for personal growth and give thanks to the gods.

Circumstances along the way led to a large number of people following him, and eventually, he made it to the temple.

He would now be able to meet the Dragon Maiden. Once he met her, he was going to petition her to have the minotaur worshipped as a divine spirit. After that, he would tell her about his memories of Alestra. He would tell her about how Alestra had transcended humanity and become a divine spirit, about how great and kind he was, about the personality Zara saw firsthand, and about his deep love for his daughter.

3

He looked out over the expansive blue ocean from the veranda.

He could see Yuto Island to the left.

Wind drifted toward the temple from the island. It carried the vivid scent of the ocean.

Yes, something new was coming from the ocean.

The humans who suffered from the cruelty of the world asked the gods for salvation.

The gods then gave people labyrinths.

Humans used the blessings of labyrinths to grow strong and wealthy.

The King of the Labyrinth was a shining example.

This warrior was born as little more than a feeble monster fated simply to wait for someone to arrive and kill it. But it fought and struggled against that fate and wished for greater strength.

The gods granted its fervent wish. It continued to fight and gain incredible power.

Arza felt that he was the spitting image of the humans who challenged labyrinths seeking blessings.

But would a human have been able to fight their way so single-mindedly and heroically through every battle the way that warrior did? Would they have been able to so proudly oppose fate and blaze their own path down which they should walk?

Arza wondered if the green-copper-skinned giant he saw in the deva labyrinth might have been the King of the Labyrinth's true form.

He wanted that to be the case.

Far to the north of Yuto Island was the Anpoan Harbor. A ship would soon be completed there. It was a ship gained from the foreigners and remodeled into a state-of-the-art adventuring vessel.

The selection of the crew and training were both underway.

The continent the foreigners originated from was across the ocean. There were also other continents and a countless amount of islands.

By the sound of it, there was a great variety of peoples and countries.

New friends likely awaited out there.

New enemies as well.

They would probably encounter brand-new cultures and things they could never have imagined.

Labyrinths could be thought of as cradles that the gods bestowed upon

humans for growth.

The era of labyrinths was coming to an end, and a new era of sea voyage was beginning.

King of the Labyrinth *END*

Chronology

Year 1 of the Baldemost Royal Calendar

● The founding king subjugates the wicked dragon Kaldan ● The kingdom is founded

Year 1024

● Mazel Sou La Vald and his entire family are wiped out for planning treason ● Eisha Goran (41) dies

● Shana Eran, the Kindhearted King (42), dies **Year 1032**

● Panzel's father, Welzea, is born

Year 1040

● Lord Paulo of the feudal states of Fenks swears allegiance to the king of Baldemost and is named a baron **Year 1051**

● Percival is born

Year 1065

● Duke Alkan of Riga (29) becomes White Minister ● Tera Eran, the Punished King (43), dies **Year 1070**

● Percival (18) protects the king's life from assassins **Year 1071**

● Percival (19) wins the Royal Combat Tournament **Year 1072**

● Panzel is born

Year 1073

● Percival (21) marries Sharuliea (18)

Year 1074

● Julius is born

Year 1079

● The minotaur that will come to be called the Labyrinth King is born ● Percival (27) dies

● Gil Linx (69) dies

Year 1081

● The minotaur becomes the boss of the one hundredth floor **Year 1083**

● Logan (72) retires as president of the Micaene Adventurers Guild ● Eador (29) becomes president of the Micaene Adventurers Guild **Year 1091**

● Fourth Division of the Imperial Guard fails to subjugate the minotaur **Year 1096**

● Alkan's oldest son, Garrest (38), dies ● The knight Panzel (24) is named Defender of the Realm for his accomplishments in subjugating the minotaur and suppressing the Pantram Revolt, and House Goran is revived ● The first prince is named the crown prince, the second prince falls to the status of a vassal, and the second queen consort is dethroned ● Alkan (60) resigns

● Alkan's second son, Draydol (32), becomes Blue Minister ● The Baron of Paulo seeks asylum in the feudal states of Fenks **Year 1097**

● Panzel (25) marries Esseluleia (21) ● Draydol (33) becomes Red Minister

● Julius (23) becomes Black Minister **Year 1098**

● Julius (24) marries

● Julius is given the former baron's domain of Paulo, renamed Keza, and becomes the Marquis of Keza **Year 1100**

● Panzel's son Arza is born

● Julius's oldest daughter, Serruria, is born ● Pan'ja (81) dies

● Draydol (36) becomes White Minister ● War breaks out with the feudal states of Fenks **Year 1103**

● Panzel (31) dies suddenly in military service ● Peace treaty is signed with the feudal states of Fenks ● House Goran is given the Banust domain; Panzel is given the title of the Marquis of Banust posthumously ● Esseluleia (27) petitions directly to the king for court peerage and for permission relating to Arza's upbringing **Year 1105**

● Julius's oldest son, Rioran, is born

● Julius (31) becomes Blue Minister

Year 1106

● Yuulala Eran, the Sword King (55), dies **Year 1108**

● Eador (54) retires as president of the Micaene Adventurers Guild ● Druga (47) becomes president of the Micaene Adventurers Guild ● Eador is appointed as financial minister for the Banust domain **Year 1114**

● Arza (14) changes his name to Zara, becomes an adventurer, and begins delving into the Sazardon Labyrinth **Year 1116**

● Zara (16) rises to an S-rank adventurer, takes Logan's advice, and leaves for a trip of personal growth ● Zara meets a girl of the mountains in the Gahra Mountains ● Zara meets Narillia in the Great Ravine ● Zara escorts Ishkriella, the White Princess ● Freya, the daughter of the dragon god Kaldan, is born ● Zara meets a ghost in the Elstoran Labyrinth ● Zara duels the Divine Blade at Jan'Majar Temple **Year 1117**

● Zara (17) stays at the Divine Blade's training hall ● Zara participates in the war to defend Bia-Dharla ● Zara fights a deva

● Julius (43) becomes Red Minister

● The minotaur suddenly moves up the labyrinth and spends ten days on the fifth floor; the Adventurers Guild declares a state of emergency **Year 1119**

● A fleet of ships carrying foreigners from the east arrives, and war begins ● Zara (19) changes his name back to Arza and assumes his position as Marquis of Banust **Year 1120**

● The Northern Alliance is formed

● Draydol (56) dies

● Julius (46) becomes White Minister

● Draydol's oldest son, Doruban (36), becomes Blue Minister **Year 1122**

● Logan (111) dies in battle

● The Anpoan Covenant is established, and the war ends ● Arza (22) is named Defender of the Continent **Year 1124**

● Arza (24) heads to subjugate the minotaur on a royal order ● Doruban (40) becomes Red Minister

● Arza visits the Dragon Temple

Year 1125

- Alkan (89) dies
- The adventurer ship Dragon Maiden departs for an expedition to the east

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