

APPARENTLY, **DISILLUSIONED** ADVENTURERS WILL SAVE THE WORLD

*The Magic Mirror in
a City of Carnage*

Shinta Fuji

Illustrated by
Susumu Kuroi



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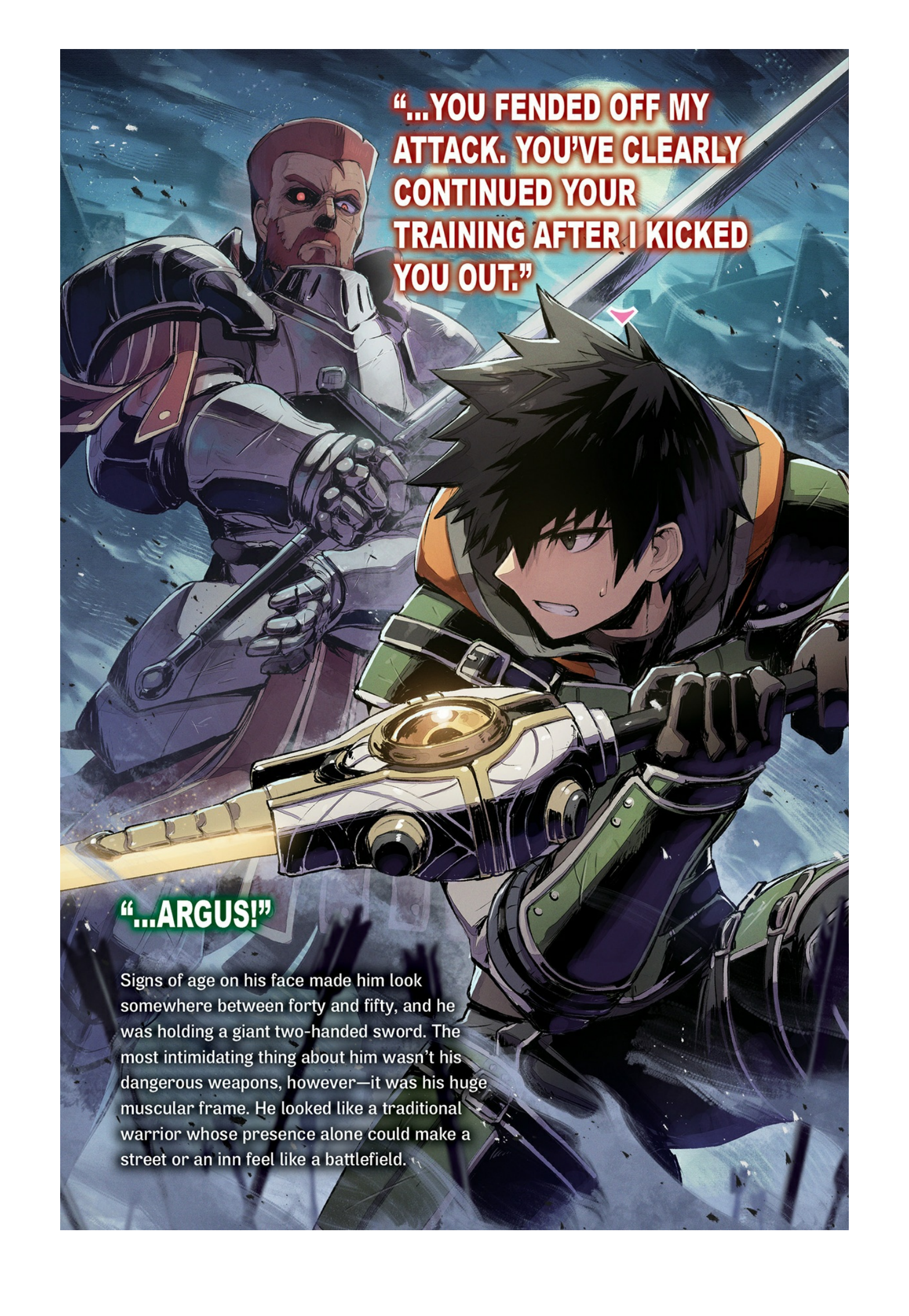


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**“...YOU FENDED OFF MY
ATTACK. YOU’VE CLEARLY
CONTINUED YOUR
TRAINING AFTER I KICKED
YOU OUT.”**

“...ARGUS!”

Signs of age on his face made him look somewhere between forty and fifty, and he was holding a giant two-handed sword. The most intimidating thing about him wasn't his dangerous weapons, however—it was his huge muscular frame. He looked like a traditional warrior whose presence alone could make a street or an inn feel like a battlefield.



“N-NO WAY...”

Tiana gasped, shocked by the familiar face and voice. This was a man she greatly respected and had been worried about for some time.

“MARVELOUS. THAT WAS AN EXCELLENT REACTION TO DANGER. HMM-HMM... YOU HAVE IMPROVED, TIANA.”



**"THERE IS A BOUNTY
ON YOUR HEAD."**

The beautiful woman with fiery red hair spoke with certainty, and her shocking claim scared the mistress, causing her to shiver.

**"I DON'T UNDERSTAND.
WHO ARE YOU?"**

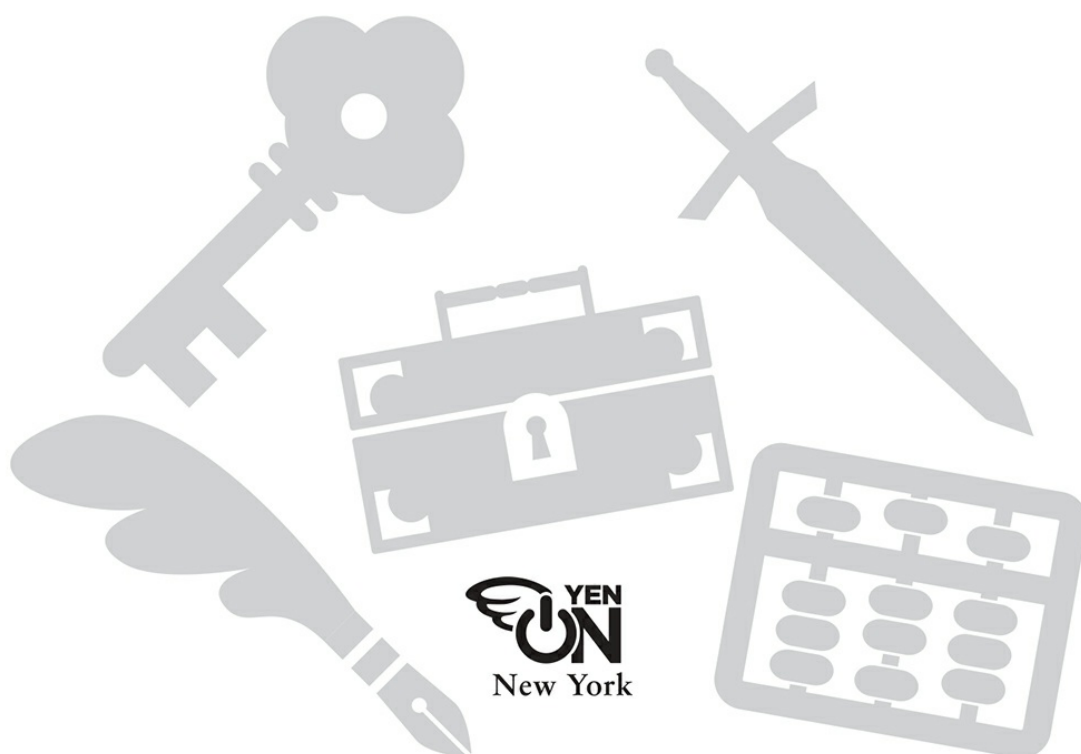
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YEN
ON
New York

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Dineez Adventurers Credit Union



“I can’t lend you a single dina. You don’t qualify for a loan.”

Shock flashed across the young man’s face.

“H-huh... Guess that makes sense. I wouldn’t loan me money, either.”

It was the dead of night. A shabby altar stood under a bridge, next to the employee entrance to a drainage tunnel that had long been left unrepaired. A lone young man was speaking to it. While that may not sound like sane behavior, he wasn’t hallucinating from alcohol or hard drugs. There was, in fact, a voice coming from the altar.

Almost as if it had a mind of its own.

“It’s not as if you’re asking to make your dream come true, like if you wanted to open your own store or become an idol. You just need to apply yourself. You don’t need money for that.”

“Th-that’s not true! I’m at the end of my rope here.”

“Hmm. Objectively speaking, you’re already a decent man. You’re aiding those in need with your work serving at a soup kitchen. You even helped bury some people who died on the street.”

“How...how do you know all that?”

The young man stepped back timidly. The altar seemed to know everything about him.

“I try to keep an eye on as much as I can in this city. I could hardly do this job otherwise.”

The young man nodded, sweat running down his face.

“R-really...? Then you should know it was just happenstance I helped those people.”

“You didn’t do any of it out of the goodness of your heart?”

“I...developed a gambling addiction and lost the bar I used to own. I even borrowed money from my girlfriend to save it, and then I gambled that away, too... Someone assumed my debt for reasons I can’t get into, but no restaurant’s gonna hire me as a cook now. I’m so broke, I’m living under a bridge... I started to help at the soup kitchen ’cause I didn’t know what else to do. I wasn’t trying to do good or anything.”

The young man confessed everything to the altar. He told it about how immature and foolish he was. How he didn’t have enough money or food to save anyone at the soup kitchen. How he wanted to make food others would enjoy, even with the cheapest ingredients. And how he thought if he could do that, he might be able to establish himself as a cook again and go back to making a decent living.

The details spilled out of him uncontrollably until he was on the verge of tears. A grown man losing it before a piece of wood.

“I can’t trust myself. I know I’ll just get tempted by some get-rich-quick scheme or waste it on something else. I don’t deserve a single dina of your money.”

“...You lack self-awareness. You may be a terribly flawed person, but there is good in you.”

“H-huh...?”

The young man was unsure of what the altar meant.

“...I see. You don’t want to pursue a dream until you feel worthy of having one. In that case, I’ll show you a path. Find the young woman who will come here beneath the bridge at the start of next week and turn to her for help. She’s in a similar position as you, but has far more skill, money, and virtue. Prostrate yourself before her and ask for her teaching.”

“You’re telling me to become her apprentice? Why would she want someone like me?”

“Don’t worry about that. The hard part won’t be getting her to accept you, but whether or not you can keep the momentum. As a former bar owner, you should know that well.”

The young man seemed satisfied by those words. He bowed slightly before the altar and walked away.

“...That was rare for you, President. It’s not like you to help someone who won’t make you any money,” another voice commented. This voice didn’t come from the altar but from a physical person, who had simply been skilled enough to mask their presence.

“This isn’t always about making money.”

“I didn’t think you were such a softie. You lent thirty million dina to a girl who dreamed of becoming an idol and one hundred million dina to a young student with no connections, and you actually managed to collect from both.”

“Don’t make me sound so heartless. I only invest in people who I think will be able to pay me back. And...everything I’ve done has been in preparation for this moment. I’ve been sowing seeds to help as many people resist White Mask’s temptation as I can. I hoped this day would never come, but a part of me has always been anxious for its arrival.”

There was a passion now in the voice that greatly contrasted its earlier calmness.

“...I wanted to be the one to guide the boy when he was left all alone. I wanted to love him just as Richard and Robin wanted me to. But I couldn’t do it. He suffered so much, but all I did was watch. That is my nature.”

“Don’t speak of yourself like that.”

“...We need to be absolutely sure of ourselves here. One wrong move, and all we have done will come to naught. Those who have lost everything cannot miss their chance to gain it all back.”

The person by the altar left, and the owner of the voice also disappeared. All that remained was the worn-out altar standing alone under the bridge.

A City of Wild Dogs



The basement was damp and dark. Windowless rooms lined the hallways, lit only by the weak candlelight that drifted through their iron bars. Each one contained nothing but a crude bed with musty sheets and a thin blanket for furniture, and the floor quickly chilled bare feet.

Those confined in each room spent all their time on the bed, which was hardly comfortable. It was made of thin boards of wood that provided no warmth, and it was so small that turning in one's sleep would cause its occupant to either kiss the wall or crash to the stone floor. The ceiling was also oppressively low. The darkness and the lack of space wore people down over time.

The place had every appearance of a prison, but the people confined there were not technically convicted criminals. Not yet anyway. They had received no punishment beyond being placed in these cells, but that alone was bad enough, and their captors had no reason to treat them courteously.

This facility, officially called the Sun Knight East End Law Enforcement Center, was located in the eastern part of Teran, the Labyrinth City. It was built nearly one hundred years ago during Labyrinth City's rebuilding phase and had much history.

At the time, Labyrinth City was a lawless zone with a lord who lacked power over the many ruffians who inhabited it. Knights deployed from distant cities despaired at the difficulty of maintaining public order and joined gangs instead, while adventurers frequently turned to banditry to stave off hunger. But as the city grew larger, the influence of the just Teran Lord and the city council expanded. The lord worked with the Sun Knights to entice bandits into the order, establish order by pardoning criminals and granting citizenship, and

break up lawless gangs from the inside.

A stronghold was built during this process to temporarily “safeguard” the people who betrayed the gangs of bandits and criminals—in other words, the ones who sided with the Labyrinth City government—and that stronghold was called the Law Enforcement Center. Those who knew its true use called it the Snake’s Nest, the Kennel, or the Center for Cowards out of contempt.

The facility’s function hadn’t changed much in the last century, even now that any criminal gangs large enough to challenge the lord’s rule had been wiped out. It was used to hold suspects for crimes committed in Labyrinth City and safeguard people who became informants as part of plea bargains. Fewer people called it the Center for Cowards today, but those confined within rarely referred to it by its tediously long full name. They simply called it prison, and its rooms, cells.

Not just anyone was confined in the East End Law Enforcement Center—only those who were involved with particularly violent crimes or serious magical terrorism. A guilty verdict was essentially guaranteed for every one of them. Despite that, one young man waited quietly on his crude bed.

“Ah-ha-ha! What’re the odds you’d be tossed into the cell next to mine?! That’s freakin’ hilarious!” a man said from his neighboring cell.

“Be quiet,” the young man snapped.

His neighbor’s roaring laughter echoed down the hall and into every cell, causing other inmates to either perk up their ears with interest or cover their heads with their blankets in annoyance. He was clearly delighted by the young man’s arrival.

“Oooh, someone got up on the wrong side of the bed today.”

“Do you really expect me to be happy here? Now, shut up.”

The young man was in a very bad mood. He had black hair and a lean, muscular body. The shabby shirt and pants of the prisoners’ uniform suited him oddly well; the clothes and his intensely bitter glare created the quintessential image of a violent criminal.

His neighbor continued to speak in a carefree manner. It was unclear if he was

trying to comfort, mock, or both.

“I’ve been so bored since my last neighbor moved out. You don’t wanna get used to being alone in this place.”

“...What happens if you do?” the young man asked.

“You start mutterin’ to yourself in the mirror.”

“People do that outside of jail, too. And we don’t even have mirrors.”

“They’ll give you one if you ask for it, but only once a day. They put it down outside the bars to prevent people from usin’ it to off themselves.”

“...And people talk to the mirror through the bars?”

“Some inmates like to try buildin’ morale for themselves as part of their morning routine. Y’know, ‘Hang in there, man! You’ve only got one month left!’ Stuff like that, which is fine on its own, but... Some folks hear the mirror talkin’ back. If havin’ a full-on conversation with a mirror isn’t proof that you’ve lost your marbles, I don’t know what is. Don’t let that happen to you, Nick.”

“A mirror, huh...,” the young man named Nick muttered to himself. Something about the word caught his attention. It gave him a nostalgic feeling, as if he used to have someone who spoke to him when he was alone. His neighbor’s warning didn’t feel as eerie as it should have.

“What’s the matter? Did I remind you of something?”

“...Just stop talking already. You’re being too loud.”

Unfortunately, the young man’s warning was too late. He watched as three large-bodied prison guards laughed joyfully and stomped down the hall toward his cell.

“Don’t stop talking on our account, Leon! Continue your friendly chat—if you can!” a guard taunted.

“Heh-heh! It’s been a while since we’ve had anyone in here with some backbone!”

The guards lined up before the two cells—Nick’s and Leon’s—smiling and holding dangerous-looking metal rods.

“Oh, goddamn it,” the young man cursed, starting to sweat.

The prison guards didn't beat the inmates directly. Labyrinth City was a place where adventurers could live and work freely despite their violent occupation, but there was a respect for the law rooted in its people. Not even the guards of the East End Law Enforcement Center, where the inmates were guaranteed to be convicted, would beat someone with a metal rod for fun. They had no qualms about getting creative and harassing them in other ways, however.

“You guys ready?”

“Hell yeah!”

The guards lifted their rods without opening either of the cell doors. The young man looked confused, as if he had expected a thrashing.

His expression quickly turned to comprehension and distress.

“Hi-yah!” a guard shouted, clanging his metal rod against the bars and causing a cacophonous echo.

“Urgh... That's loud!” the young man complained, clapping his hands over his ears.

“They call this ‘jailhouse drumming,’ a longtime staple here at the East End Law Enforcement Center. It's used to scare the shit outta prisoners and make it difficult for us to speak to each other,” Leon explained, smiling as he covered his ears.

“Looks like you still feel like talking! We need more volume, boys!”

“Clang clang, you crooks! Get ready for your questioning!”

“Someone get a flute and gong! Sing! Dance!”

The rods thundered against the bars with one earsplitting clang after another. It felt less like sound and more like an assault of powerful vibrations. The guards were striking the bars so hard, the young man feared his eardrums really would rupture. His obvious discomfort only encouraged them.

“Ah-ha-ha! Come on, man, join in on the fun! It won't last that long!” the tigerian next door yelled, kicking the wall between their cells.

“How the hell do you expect me to enjoy this?!” the young man screamed, responding with an angry kick of his own.

“Dance, dance! That’s all you scum can do!”

The knights continued to give the bars all they had. The other inmates reacted in varied ways—some pulled their blankets over their heads in annoyance, some started enthusiastically banging their own walls and singing, and some were mystifyingly able to shut out the noise and sleep.

This was where music began in ancient times, when there was no boundary between the wild enthusiasm of battle and song. The prison swelled with excitement. Someone began to guffaw at the absurdity of it all. And just when the young man started wondering if some kind of drug had been slipped into his food, a cold voice sliced through the cacophony.

“Stop this right now, or I’ll cut your pay!”

The knights froze. Leon sensed it was time to stop dancing and sat cross-legged on his bed.

“Alice,” the young man said, irritation clear in his voice.

“It’s been a while. How do you like your new quarters?” the new arrival asked, her steps echoing off the floor as she walked up to his cell. She was a beautiful blue-haired woman wearing a white cloak that suited her well.

“Best hotel I’ve ever stayed at. The room service even includes musicians. Mind if I go take a shower, too?” the young man joked.

“That depends on your behavior. Be a good boy, and I might reward you,” the woman named Alice responded. “Inmate number 54988, Nick. It’s time for your interrogation.”

Alice snapped her fingers, and one of the guards opened his cell door. Nick rolled his neck and shoulders, massaged his joints, and stood up.

“I’m surprised you’ve remained so tough after all you’ve been through,” Alice praised him, impressed by his calm—or at least *outwardly* calm—demeanor.

“I’m more worried about what’s coming up. Let’s go,” Nick said.

“That’s the first time an inmate has ever rushed me to an interrogation. It’s

this way,” Alice said, leading him down the hall.

“Come and see me again,” Leon called out.

“Not gonna happen,” Nick responded.

“Suit yourself. I have a feelin’ we’re gonna meet again. Something’s startin’. I don’t know what it is, but I know one thing for sure—it ain’t gonna be over anytime soon.”

Nick ignored Leon’s ominous words as he walked away.

The history of the Holy Kingdom of Dineez—the country in which Teran was located—was considerably long. The nation was founded after the Demon God War by the survivors of an ancient civilization that had been destroyed during the conflict. Most ancient magic and technology had been lost in the war, but the people worked hard to rebuild as much of society as they could. The majority of what they recovered had very little direct relation to war, as the demon god had been thorough in stamping out any and all military technology.

One thing that the demon god and their armies had ignored was music. A great many instruments that did not utilize magic items or mana survived, and a variety of magical instruments and sound generators were remade using new styles in Labyrinth City, where musicians worked together to write new music.

Another survivor was food culture. Items that could be preserved, such as fermented foods, alcohol, vinegar, and packaged foods, survived the wreckage, and people studied these commodities to learn how to reproduce them.

Technology for agriculture and rearing livestock was reproduced without much difficulty, thanks to the knowledge having been passed down in the Sanctuary of Baer, the god of harvest. Changes in vegetation and climate and an increase of monster habitats—known as labyrinths—meant that farmers had to adapt, but the culture remained.

While much in society had to be reproduced or changed in this manner after the war, one thing remained almost entirely unaltered from the ancient civilization—law. Or at least there was little change to the ethics on which the letter of the law was based.

“Long story short, they saved me. The viewpoint that I am a magic item in the

possession of the Adventurers Guild ignores my right to self-determination! It is an insult and totally unacceptable!”

A number of men and women were sitting on either side of a cold, white table in a room so clean and spacious, it was hard to believe it was in the same building as the cells. Sun Knights sat on the far side of the room with Alice at their center. The blue-haired woman smiled while the others watched emotionlessly.

Nick was sitting at the center of the table on the side by the door. He leaned back in his chair with his feet crossed, looking defiantly relaxed despite his prisoners’ clothes. The people sitting on either side of Nick did not adopt the same attitude, however, and were in fact staring at the knights with active hostility. No one was more worked up than the silver-haired boy sitting next to him, who had slammed his fist on the table and yelled with such vigor, it was a surprise that spittle didn’t fly from his mouth.

“Calm down, Bond,” Nick said.

“How could I possibly calm down?!” the silver-haired boy—Bond—yelled back. When he was angry, he resembled Nick enough that they could have been brothers, with Bond the younger by about six years.

Alice shrugged in exasperation. “Let’s review. The Survivors are accused of ignoring the request of their client, the Adventurers Guild, to deliver a holy sword to them, and consequently of concealing an ancient weapon. But you’re claiming this interpretation of the situation is unfair?”

“Quite so. I, the Sword of Bonds, requested their help. The Adventurers Guild has no right to treat me as their property. Following the guild’s request to the letter would have been legally and morally wrong,” Bond said with a firm nod.

Bond looked like a young boy, but he was actually an ancient superweapon called the Sword of Bonds, which could perform a powerful forgotten spell called Union.

“Still, was saying nothing of that and giving the guild a counterfeit sword really the best move?” Alice responded.

Nick and his party, the Survivors, had once accepted a request from the

Adventurers Guild to explore a labyrinth and search for the Sword of Bonds. When they finally found Bond, however, he insisted he didn't want to be given away to the guild—the organization that shut him in that labyrinth in the first place—and practically forced his way into the party. The Survivors had then submitted a sword that looked identical to the Sword of Bonds to the guild with the intent of fooling them.

Naturally, the other sword's power came nowhere close to matching the real thing. An accusation of fraud would have real weight behind it, but Bond just laughed confidently.

"That is not a counterfeit. It is a genuine Sword of Bonds. If the guild wanted me and not one of the many other copies that were made, they should have specified my serial number and version," he said.

"Do the rest of you believe yourselves to be free of guilt, too?" Alice asked, looking at the other Survivors in turn.

One of them, a petite woman with blond hair, shrugged. "All we did was help a boy in difficult circumstances. Does he look like anything other than a person to you? We had no idea he was the sword the guild was asking for," she said.

A young man with chestnut hair sitting next to her nodded. "That is right. He was all alone in that dangerous place—anyone in our shoes would have chosen to shelter him. It may sound like we were trying to do a good deed, but I thought it was simply the commonsense thing to do."

"Hmm. Tiana and Zem, are you both claiming you had no idea he was a holy sword? Even though he could transform into one?" Alice asked.

The woman named Tiana answered, her smile frozen on her face. "Perhaps some people can transform into swords, and perhaps some swords can transform into people. How were we to know which he was? You don't learn that kind of magic in school. It was beyond our understanding. And what options are there for a boy with no relatives or identification other than working as an adventurer?"

The young man named Zem adopted the same smile as Tiana. "If you want to call us careless for recommending the risky career of adventuring to a young boy...I would accept that criticism without argument. But I do not believe it is

right to condemn us for deciding not to treat him like treasure to be sold. Do you not think so?”

“So you all see the Sword of Bonds as a party member through and through. I would have liked to ask your other party member about this as well, but...I’ll trust you on that,” Alice said.

A shadow fell over the faces of Nick and his party members. The Survivors were an adventurers’ party with five members. They consisted of a light warrior, a swordsman, a mage, a cleric, and one more person—a dragonian warrior—who was unfortunately unable to attend.

“Yeah, he’s one of us. And that’s all there is to it,” Nick said curtly.

Alice nodded. “I understand your reasoning for the Sword of Bonds. But how do you explain the Sword of Evolution?”

That question made the Survivors anxious. They had come across four holy swords since forming the party. One was Bond, who was in this room. Two more were living as citizens of Labyrinth City. The problem was the other one.

“This is where our argument turns technical. Bond and I will explain everything, if you don’t mind,” said a beautiful woman who was sitting in the dragonian’s place. The expression on their face clearly suggested a belief that they were a member of the team.

The woman was wearing a suit with a badge shaped like a set of scales—proof that a person was certified as a lawyer in the Holy Kingdom of Dineez. Their name was Redd, and they were both a lawyer and the mistress of Zem’s favorite drinking hole. They were so beautiful, you would never have known they were cross-dressing.

“If I may. The law dictates that artifacts of spirit class and above must be stored in buildings stable enough to survive disasters on a continental scale. The Survivors also sealed it with a ritual spell and reported directly to the Teran Lord. Law also requires confidentiality surrounding artifacts of spirit class and above, which would explain why no other organizations were informed. Discussing administrative measures and documents won’t bring us to any sort of conclusion, but given the risk of the Sword of Evolution causing destruction again, we have little choice. The Sword of Evolution was sealed voluntarily and

cannot be submitted as property, meaning there are no legal issues with regards to the Survivors' actions. I brought all the paperwork to prove everything has been filed correctly. Artifact possession inspections are exhausting for everyone involved, so are you sure you want to do this?"

Redd removed papers from a binder and spread them neatly on the table. That was just the beginning—Tiana and Zem then set cardboard boxes on the table, each packed with documents.

"...You weren't lying about having a lawyer who works at a cross-dressing bar," Alice said, looking at Nick in disbelief.

"Honestly, I wasn't sure if Redd was actually a lawyer when I said that," Nick admitted.

"Hey! Rude! I'm hurt!" Redd said, glaring at Nick.

"Can you blame me? You spend practically all your time serving booze at your bar!"

"I'm perfectly capable of keeping up with my studies as I work. Talking to customers is no great distraction."

"Like that makes any sense," Nick retorted, then decided to stop talking before he gave anything away. The claim they reported to the Teran Lord about sealing the Sword of Evolution was more than a little flimsy.

When Nick was arrested by the Sun Knights, Tiana and the others quickly got to work. They had asked for help from Redd, a lawyer, and the idol Diamond, who was a client of theirs, and the two of them quickly put together a defense team for Nick. Redd was the only member of the team present now, but a longtime lawyer of Diamond's and the Teran Lord's administrative staff had also worked hard for his release.

During that process, the team had determined the decision of what to do with the Sword of Evolution fell into a gray area of law. The sword had been in Leon's possession when they caused destruction in the city. The Survivors had stopped them and sealed the sword in an undisclosed location, but they all could have been easily charged with punishing a criminal without due legal process or stealing an ancient relic.

Bond had an excuse, unlike the others. As the Sword of Bonds, he had the essential duty of stopping other holy swords that had grown violent. Looking the other way would have gone against the code of ethics he had been installed with. His code of ethics did not, however, require him to tell the whole truth to the Holy Kingdom of Dineez, the Teran Lord, or the Order of the Sun Knights. Nick's legal team took advantage of that and rushed to gather documents to make sure their story added up.

Why did Bond refuse to be given to the Adventurers Guild? Why did they fight the Sword of Evolution? Was the Sword of Evolution sealed safely? Did they have proof that they hadn't sold it or weren't using it illegally? Redd and the team worked hard to answer all these questions and get him released.

"I'm going to miss you here, Nick. Feel free to stay the night whenever you want. I'll leave your room unlocked for you," Alice teased.

"If you give me room service on par with a three-star hotel, sure," Nick responded bitterly.

"You knew how this would turn out all along, didn't you? I have no desire to prolong it any longer than necessary," Redd interrupted.

"Hmph..."

"If you were really serious about arresting Nick, you wouldn't have brought his whole party into this room and questioned them all at once. I don't think you ever intended to keep him here."

"Yeah. It would've been a problem if you overexerted yourself now, Nick," Alice said.

Nick frowned, wondering what she meant. "Are you trying to tell me that the real trouble has yet to begin?"

"You're free to go, Nick. But Leon was right—we're going to meet again. We share a common foe," Alice said.

Nick ended up here after an incident involving a man named Garos, who was a member of his old party, Combat Masters. Garos was Nick's senior in the party and his mentor as an adventurer, but he had turned out to be an assassin working for demon-god worshippers. Around the same time Garos began

behaving suspiciously, Combat Masters and its leader, Argus, all vanished from Labyrinth City, making it natural to assume they were all involved with demon-god worshippers, too.

Nick had been in the process of offering a bounty for Argus at the Adventurers Guild when Alice grabbed him and brought him here.

“I’m gonna catch Argus. I was about to put a bounty on his head when you stopped me,” Nick said.

“I saved you from wasting your money. They’ve already decided to post one for him. The government will foot the bounty, so there’s no need for you to pay for it out of pocket. We both want the same thing—to discover the truth and capture demon-god worshippers.”

“Thanks a lot. But that’s not my goal.”

“What is, then?”

“...I just want to help my friend. Nothing else matters.”

Alice’s expression turned strict. “If you’re gonna be that distracted by a friend’s illness, you should call it quits now. We’re fighting enemies who won’t hesitate to kill or curse people to accomplish their goals. You’ll only get in the way if you fight without a firm resolve.”

Her words made Nick angry for a second, but a part of him had to admit she was right. If someone asked if he was currently capable of defeating the enemy, he’d have to say no. Something was missing.

“...You know, you’re probably right about that. It must be tough, then, working with people who spend all day waiting for their next bribe,” Tiana jabbed. It wasn’t uncommon for Sun Knights to take money and turn a blind eye to wrongdoing.

Alice didn’t flinch. “You’re not wrong. People who make a living by fighting are going to start dropping like flies, no matter where they work. I suggest we all prepare ourselves,” she said sharply.

Prisons such as this one didn’t exist just to lock up and intimidate criminals; their greater purpose was to protect their inmates from further temptations or

dangers that could lead to death or depravity. A prisoner might have friends on the outside, but there were also dangers lurking in the dark.

This was not an official hospital. It featured around-the-clock treatment of injuries and illnesses from priests, doctors, and their assistants, but the facility hadn't been built for that purpose. The patients were all people who had difficulty going out in public, including idols who were plagued by stalkers or people in highly confidential jobs who couldn't risk going to a public hospital. It was for them that this facility had been established underneath a concert venue called Starmine Hall.

"It's this way," said a girl with pink hair after greeting the Survivors and leading them inside. Her tracksuit made her look like a student without a care in the world, but there was a shocking lightness to her movements.

"Thanks for this," Nick said.

"Hmm-hmm. Not just any man can lay claim to having the most famous idol in the land wrapped around his little finger. You're a real lady-killer," she said, doing a twirl.

The girl was the most popular idol in Jewelry Production, the idol agency that built Starmine Hall, and also its behind-the-scenes boss. On top of all that, she was also a holy sword called the Sword of Resonance and was hundreds of years old. Her name was Hibiki Diamond.

"*You* wrapped around *my* finger? You've been manipulating us this whole time. You might have gotten me out of prison, but I still resent you for everything that's happened," Nick responded.

Tiana, Zem, and Bond had filled Nick in on Karan's actions and her thinking behind them on the way here. She had predicted exactly where Garos was going to attack and made sure Nick wouldn't be there—a decision Diamond had agreed with and offered her full support.

"As long as you don't resent Karan, feel free to resent me all you want. That's part of my job, after all," Diamond said.

"...I can't promise that. I don't know what you filled her head with, but Karan's a full-fledged adventurer and a member of our party. Only she and her

leader can bear responsibility for her actions.”

Nick clenched his fists. He was admonishing himself as much as anyone else.

“It wouldn’t hurt to rely more on others,” Diamond said softly.

“Are you talking about Karan?” Nick asked.

“No. I’m talking about you,” she replied.

The group fell silent, their rhythmic steps the only sound as they walked through the facility. Diamond led them to a clean and modest room. There were no windows because it was underground, so magic lamps provided light. The room consisted of a strange box set against a wall and a white pipe-frame bed.

A red-haired girl in a white hospital gown was lying on the mattress. She sat up and smiled softly when they entered.

“Hey, Karan. Sorry I haven’t been able to visit until now,” Nick said.

“You should be. What kind of leader gets themselves thrown in prison?” the girl—Karan—said with a laugh.

Karan didn’t look directly at Nick as she spoke. She wasn’t being unfriendly—her eyesight had simply deteriorated to the point that she couldn’t find him in the room. Her bright eyes had become hazy, and she had clearly lost weight. She lacked the strength to see clearly or even get out of bed.

It wasn’t long ago that Karan had been the most vibrant member of the Survivors. Her tremendous skill as she fought on their front line always impressed other adventurers. It hurt Nick to see her like this, but he pushed those emotions away to avoid letting them show on his face.

“Oh, you got a haircut,” Nick noticed.

“Is it weird?” Karan asked.

“No, it looks good.”

“Hee-hee.”

“They left my hair alone, thankfully. I thought they were gonna shave me like a monk.”

“I would’ve liked to see that, personally.”

“Don’t say that. That place was hell already. Imagine having Leon as your neighbor—the guy never shuts up.”

“You should learn how to keep a cooler head.”

“I’m working on it.”

“Now, *that* I don’t believe,” Karan said, looking away in a huff.

Nick laughed resignedly, which elicited a small smile from the dragonian.

“...I know I don’t look great right now, but I’ll get better soon,” she said, looking as bright and cheerful as ever. It was clear she was trying hard to be her normal self. “I just need a little rest. Don’t worry about me.”



That was enough to break the dam over Nick's heart, and his emotions came bursting out.

"A little rest won't do anything, Karan. You're staying here," he said.

"Nick..."

"There's no quick cure for this. You're not gonna jump outta bed and be back to your old self anytime soon. You need to consider retirement."

"No."

"That's the wrong answer. I won't let you pretend you forgot what I said to you and Daffodil."

Karan fell silent. No one else said a word, either.

"...Why didn't you tell me?" Nick asked.

"I...um...", Karan stuttered.

"You knew exactly what was going to happen. You predicted that he would use Eishu as a decoy and attack the gem directly. You're so much more amazing than Eishu, Garos, or any other demon-god worshipper. But we lost. Completely. Did you think I couldn't beat Garos? Is that why you kept quiet?" Nick pressed.

Karan flinched, startled.

"Nick, that's enough...", Tiana said, reaching weakly for Nick's back, but he moved away stubbornly.

"Did you think he would kill me because I felt sorry for him?" Nick asked.

"S-sorr—" Karan began, but Nick interrupted her.

"Don't apologize! Blame me for being weak!"

"That's not it! I...didn't want you to get hurt."

"So it was okay for you to be in danger, but not me?! Do you think we're happy you got hurt?! Did you not think of Daffodil and your nephew?! What about your family back home?! You're the last person who should've put themselves at risk like that! I would've been the better choice!"

“Don’t say that! I—”

Karan tried to get out of bed but didn’t have the strength. Her body wouldn’t obey her, no matter how hard she tried to make it.

“Hey, what’re you doing?!” Nick gasped, instinctively grabbing Karan and stopping her from getting up. He felt a chill when he did. She had gotten obviously lighter. The stark evidence of her failing health cleared his head and forced him to see how much he had hurt her. “...Sorry. I went too far.”

“No... You didn’t. I don’t know if I did the right thing, either,” Karan said. Silent tears began to roll down her cheeks.

“Forgive me. It was my fault. I couldn’t do anything. I don’t want you to be unhappy,” Nick said.

Karan was like an infant in his arms, crying and unable to shake herself free. She couldn’t even argue without tiring herself out, and the realization weighed heavily on the Survivors’ hearts.

Zem, Tiana, and Bond couldn’t blame Nick for his outburst. They were all devastated by the undeniable truth that Karan would never be able to fight with the party again.

Diamond led the Survivors to another room, each of them feeling like they were heading to their execution. It was the room of Karan’s physician.

“Both magical and medicinal treatments have been ineffective. Her life is not presently in danger...but I do not see her recovering,” the female priest said. She appeared to be in her forties, and the sense of futility showed on her face.

Nick took a moment to digest her words.

“...Okay,” he said.

“Please know that while I will do all I can to help her live comfortably, I will not be able to cure her. She is the first cursed patient I have ever treated,” the physician said.

“Is it truly incurable?” Zem asked, looking troubled. The physician glanced at Diamond as if she was unsure, too.

“I promise, it is. Also...did you notice it, Tiana?” Diamond asked.

“Yeah,” Tiana replied with a nod.

“Notice what, Tiana?” Zem asked.

“I used Magic Search to check her mana. What I sensed should have been impossible. It was as if there was no one there,” she said.

“What d’you mean? She was right in front of us,” Nick said, not hiding his irritation.

“I didn’t understand it, either! I’m just saying that’s how it felt,” Tiana said.

“Calm down. Her mana has simply dwindled to the minimum amount required to maintain her body. She will get better once that improves,” Bond said.

Diamond nodded. “We’ve just been calling it a curse so far, but specifically, she was inflicted with the star curse.”

“The star curse...?” Nick repeated, unsettled.

“The old gods—or rather, the people from the super-ancient civilization who we call the Originators—were not from this land. They lost their original home to a calamity and created this planet, which we call the Land of Sacred Fire. Have you heard that before, Nick? It’s one of the foundational stories of our mythos.”

“Yeah, of course. The Originators lost their home to some war and ended up here. Then the gods that are worshipped now left for the heavens with the last of the Originators in the Rueful Departure, which started the era of humanity.”

“The reason I’m bringing it up is because this planet is not suitable for the Originators or their descendants,” Diamond continued.

“What does that mean?”

“The composition of the atmosphere, the length of the days and the resulting sleep cycles, and a variety of other things are slightly off from the Originators’ first home. The gravity here—the weight that presses down on our bodies—is also considerably lighter than what they were used to. Living on this world without protection would have caused them to develop osteoporosis from diminished bone mass and suffer deteriorated eyesight from the change in

pressure on their skulls and eyes.”

“Wouldn’t healing magic be able to fix issues like that?” Nick argued.

Zem shook his head sadly. “No. Most healing spells rely on the recipient having mana. They do very little or are entirely ineffective on people without mana.”

“That’s right. Everyone in this world is born with mana. You need a certain amount to perform magic, but everyone has the minimal amount required to maintain their health and recover from the use of healing spells,” Diamond added.

“...And that mana is currently missing from Karan’s body?” Nick asked.

“Yes. I would guess that Curse Stake is a three-pronged attack. First, it fires the steel stake at the target with great speed and inflicts physical damage. If the impact doesn’t kill them, it incapacitates the target by stealing their mana. Finally, it triggers chronic impaired coordination resulting from that loss of mana. It’s a detestable, heretical spell that specializes in inflicting pain,” Diamond explained. She spoke matter-of-factly, but there was an air of hopelessness in her voice.

“Eishu’s alive, right? Doesn’t he know a lot about curses?” Nick asked.

Eishu was a demon-god worshipper the Survivors had captured. Garos had used him as a sacrificial pawn in his plan to obstruct the Jewelry Production Concert, but Nick and Zem saved him from the brink of death with a barrage of healing magic.

“No... He’s just a talisman maker. I doubt he’s familiar with the logic behind inducing curses. He’s not even an expert on magic, so I’ll bet he had a teacher. I do want to question him when he recovers, though,” Diamond said.

“Sounds like the fastest method of curing Karan really is defeating the person who inflicted the curse,” Nick speculated.

“There could be other ways, but most likely, yes.”

The Survivors looked relieved. However, they all sensed that defeating the one who had inflicted the curse would be a difficult task; otherwise, Diamond

wouldn't be wearing such a somber expression.

"I'm considering a number of other methods...but we do need a fundamental solution," Diamond said.

"You said we have to defeat the Sword of Tasuki, right?" Nick asked, determination welling up as he said the name.

Diamond nodded, and shock flashed across Bond's face.

"The Sword of Tasuki?" said Bond. "Was he not destroyed?"

"You've heard of him?" Nick asked.

"I'm aware of his official catalog specs. My knowledge is limited beyond that, however. We were forbidden from interacting with each other, so he was essentially a stranger."

"The Sword of Tasuki was created for the final battle with the demon god, so everything about him was kept highly secret," added Diamond.

"Why did he curse Karan?" Nick asked.

"He wasn't after Karan. He was after me," Diamond said.

"I'm not mad at you for that. We took on the job of defending you, so it would be wrong to hold it against you when one of us got hurt. The reason I'm mad is because you didn't say anything," Nick said. His party members clenched their fists, frustrated by their sense of powerlessness. "This isn't your fight anymore. It's ours. Tell us everything you know."

"I can't."

"...This isn't the time for jokes."

Nick glared at Diamond, but her expression remained cool.

"I'm not joking. You guys are adventurers. Tracking down someone so you can fight them would make you no better than outlaws. Karan faced the Sword of Tasuki as an adventurer and was defeated. It's my duty to treat her."

"Where are you going with this?"

"I'm giving you an order as your client. I'll tell you everything I'm allowed to say, and I'll continue to protect Karan, too. I don't mind if you fight—just make

sure you return.”

In other words, Diamond wouldn't tolerate anybody acting on their own or going against her wishes. But if they stayed in line, she would continue to provide the Survivors with her support.

“I won't let you put yourself in danger by rushing blindly after the Sword of Tasuki. Or do you want me to tear up our contract now? Should I go ahead and charge you for your legal fees?” she said threateningly.

Nick almost retorted angrily but caught himself and took a breath. There was no scorn in Diamond's voice—she sounded more like a parent admonishing a child.

“...No. I got ahead of myself. Thank you for the legal help and for arranging things with this hospital. And...sorry,” Nick said.

“It's my duty to listen to the complaints of my subordinates and workers and to give what help I can. Listen to what Karan has to say. Giving her a self-serving apology without giving her a chance to speak will only hurt her,” Diamond said. There was no hint of blame in her voice, which only made her words cut more deeply.

“...But you know she won't give up, right?” Nick said.

Karan would never stop fighting, no matter the circumstances. That was exactly why Nick had needed to intervene. It was also why neither Tiana nor Zem nor Bond had kept him from arguing with her.

“You can't use that as an excuse to run off and put yourself in danger! What if she loses the will to continue her treatment because of you?!” Diamond said fiercely.

Nick couldn't argue. He knew she was right.

“I know you don't want Karan to get hurt, and I want to respect that feeling. Karan should have listened to you. That's why I didn't stop you back there. You all noticed how Nick felt, too, right?” Diamond asked.

“I guess so... Honestly, I was also shocked to learn that Karan acted without us, but I don't want to hound her for that decision now. We all feel that way,”

Tiana said, her shoulders slumping as she spoke for the group.

“I’ll do what I can for Karan. All I ask is that you watch over her for a little longer. And please, try not to worry yourself about this too much,” Diamond said.

“But—” Nick started to argue, but Diamond put her hands on his shoulders.

“I’m not against you all putting yourselves in danger to save her. In fact, I wish I could ask you to do just that... But you can’t forget about yourselves. Karan’s just as worried about you all as you are about her. That’s why she wants so badly to recover,” she said.

“I...guess so...”

“I want you all to be motivated by a desire to help your friend, not by anger and a desire for revenge. The average adventurer would’ve already given up or gone into a blind rage and gotten themselves killed by someone stronger than them. You are all made of much greater moral fiber, which sets you apart. That’s why so many people care about you. Don’t forget that.”

“...You think awfully highly of us. Have you seen what we’re into on our days off?” Nick said with a wry smile. He looked more relaxed than before.

“Hey, what are you trying to say about being an idol fan? I’m right here,” Diamond said.

“Oh shoot, I made the sergeant mad.”

That had lightened the mood a little.

“...Back to the topic at hand. We were talking about what I know,” Diamond said.

“Please, tell us everything you can,” responded Nick.

“I’ll start with the Sword of Tasuki’s ability. First, do you know about White Mask...or rather, holy armor?”

“It gives you endurance and skills to explore incredibly difficult labyrinths, right?”

“Exactly. Holy armor has the ability to store the skills and personalities of its

users. The Sword of Tasuki can do the same thing and then use them to perform Integration.”

That word caught the Survivors’ attention.

“Is that different from Union?” Nick asked.

“It’s another ancient ritual spell, but the way it works is quite different. Integration gathers power and gives it to one person. Putting it unkindly, there’s a hierarchy between the person who absorbs the power and the people it is taken from, which makes it easy to control,” Diamond explained.

Bond scoffed loudly. “Integration cannot achieve the same power as Union. Being easier to control sounds convenient, but it is a violent spell that plunders the strength and skills of the ritual participants and wholly ignores the state of their souls.”

“You know about it, Bond?” Nick asked.

“I saw the ability once at a test site. It was astounding to watch the Sword of Tasuki’s wielder absorb the strength of twelve people and instantly become a hero. However...” Bond trailed off, looking reluctant to continue. Nick listened nervously. “The wielder was a rather unsavory person.”

“Is that relevant?” Nick said, sounding exasperated.

Bond’s expression, however, was serious. “I am not just insulting them. How can I describe this...? It felt like the Sword of Tasuki’s power gave its user a greater feeling of omnipotence and intoxication than the other holy swords.”

Diamond cocked her head. “Are you sure about that? The Sword of Tasuki should have been perfectly safe. It’s understandable that a hero chosen to fight the demon god would face a lot of stress in their life...”

“Hmm... Well, it would be nice if it was just my imagination,” Bond said.

Tiana looked confused. “You two don’t seem to know as much about the sword as I would have expected. Weren’t you active at the same time?”

“We were, but I fell out of the picture in the middle of the war. I ended up sleeping for a long time after the Teran Distortion Agency was destroyed. I know more than modern people, though,” Diamond said.

“I and the Sword of Evolution were both isolated underground before the operation to slay the demon god. The only swords that would know the details of the final battle would be the Sword of Tasuki...and the Sword of Might,” Bond added.

“Oh yeah, you guys have already met Olivia. What’s she doing now?” Diamond asked.

“She said something about exposing White Mask’s identity and disappeared. You know her, too?” Nick said.

“We have a kind of alliance... But we try not to interfere with each other too much. I suspect she’s up to something in secret. What the heck is she doing working as an occult magazine editor anyway? That’s so weird,” Diamond said.

“We’re in agreement there,” chimed in Nick.

“Anyway, five holy swords were forged during the war against the demon god,” Diamond continued. “I was developed to strengthen human strongholds. Olivia was developed as a backup plan and with an eye on the postwar future. Bond, the Sword of Evolution, and the Sword of Tasuki were developed for defeating the demon god, and in the end, the Sword of Tasuki was chosen for the task.”

“The Sword of Tasuki was supposed to have been destroyed after sealing the demon god. If he turned on humanity and has been gathering power in secret with Integration, that would be quite bad. Even if he has been selective with his targets, it would not be surprising if he has gathered the strength of hundreds of A-and S-rank adventurers,” Bond said gravely.

“Argh... Would we even stand a chance against that?” Tiana asked.

“White Mask was formidable enough. We cannot possibly imagine his strength,” Zem said.

Given their previous experience fighting holy swords, the prospect of doing so again made them nervous.

Nick reacted differently. “Why’re we already assuming he’s unbeatable?”

Zem and Tiana looked at him with surprise.

“If he was, then why would he be hiding and ordering people around from behind the scenes? You say he defeated the demon god, but if he’s really that strong, the adventurers and Sun Knights of Labyrinth City should be nothing to him,” Nick continued. That was sound reasoning, but he also just didn’t want to let go of the best method they had of saving their friend.

“You’re right,” Diamond said, sounding convinced. “That is a mystery. He’s undoubtedly a fearsome opponent, yet his current actions prove he has a weakness to hide.”

“Yeah. He’s being cautious about something,” Nick agreed.

“There are other questions, too, like why the Sword of Tasuki is operating under the name *Callios*,” Diamond mused.

The room grew gloomy at these words. Callios was the name of a man in Karan’s past who had deceived her and stolen her dragon king gem, a precious family heirloom. According to Leon, he was a major magic item broker who led a band of thieves.

“...Oh yeah. Holy swords are bound by their name. That would explain why he’s been using the same name for all his criminal activities,” Tiana surmised.

Diamond and Bond nodded in agreement.

“Karan said that name before he attacked her,” said Diamond. “I’m having Hector trace him through history under the assumption that he’s lived for an incredibly long time. It’s likely that Karan’s deceiver, White Mask’s employer, and the Sword of Tasuki are one and the same. He’s been lurking in the shadows of Labyrinth City while using White Mask to collect magic items and kill people who inconvenienced him. We need to proceed with caution and be certain of his plans and weaknesses before we act. For Karan’s sake.”

Nick digested her words as emotions welled up within him.

“I usually try not to let any anger show, but...we cannot let him get away with what he’s done,” Zem said, his voice brimming with anger. It sounded strange coming from him.

“Calm down, man. Diamond just told us we have to be careful,” Nick chided him, but he felt the same way. He was burning inside, but he did his best to

keep his emotions in check.

He couldn't wait to pay that bastard back for what he did to Karan.

"Either way, you bet your ass we're gonna save Karan," he said.

The rest of them nodded.

The group split up, unable to do anything now except wait for information. Ten days later, however, no progress had been made. Diamond and Hector were working behind the scenes, and there were signs that Alice and her team were investigating something, but nothing major happened.

Nick and the rest of the Survivors were taking a break and had not even set foot into a guild. They were unsure at first if they should visit Karan, but Diamond told them that if they weren't sure, they didn't need to go, and they ended up spending the ten days doing very little.

That night, Nick went out with Bond to get some food. Normally, Karan would have been there with them.

Karan was very popular at the inn where the three of them lived. She was always using her strength to help others, doing things like helping the innkeeper fix doors that fit poorly in their frame or carrying heavy objects such as bags of wheat for people. When Nick wasn't with her, other residents would often say some version of "How's Karan doing?" "Are you her boyfriend? You'd better not make her cry," or "Karan's not with you? lame."

Nick thought the other residents would be sad to learn what had happened to her. He had no idea his life would feel so hard after getting out of prison.

"Hey, Nick... Should we get something quick and head back?" Bond asked, sounding lonely.

"...Yeah," Nick responded hoarsely.

He felt like the reality of Karan's absence as an adventurer hadn't hit him until he left the hospital.

He wanted information. He wanted to do something. He wanted to throw himself into mortal danger right this instant.

That near-suicidal death wish was about to be granted.

“Bond. Return to your sword form, now,” Nick said telepathically.

“Wh-why? I don’t sense anything near us, aside from maybe a rat on the roof...”

“Hurry, damn it!”

Bond hurriedly assumed his sword form, and Nick took him in hand. Less than a second later, a volley of arrows raced quickly toward Nick.

“Crap!”

He deflected the arrows with the Sword of Bonds before they could pierce his skull and heart. A sword then swung down from above him, and he spun and blocked that, too. The sword was surprisingly light; it looked like a greatsword, yet its wielder used it with the quick precision of a rapier without sacrificing any strength from its blows. Nick realized with a chill that the blade would cut right through him if he let it make contact.

The assailant was clearly an expert swordsman, and Nick had to struggle to protect himself.

“...You fended off my attack. You’ve clearly continued your training after I kicked you out.”

A tall, dark-skinned man stood before him. Signs of age on his face made him look somewhere between forty and fifty, and he was holding a giant two-handed sword. He had a bow, too, but had tossed it to the ground, likely because he had spent all his arrows. The most intimidating thing about him wasn’t his dangerous weapons, however—it was his huge muscular frame. He looked like a traditional warrior whose presence alone could make a street or an inn feel like a battlefield.

“...Argus!” Nick shouted. He’d tried to post a bounty to find this man, but Argus had just come to him.

“Long time no see, Nick.”

“...Garos is dead.”

“Seems that way,” Argus replied dully.

His disinterest only poured oil on Nick’s inner fire. “An old comrade of ours just died. I might as well have killed him myself. Why are you acting like you

don't care?"

"The only death on your mind right now should be your own. You don't have time to worry about an old coworker."

"You always said that adventurers need to value their party members above all else. That a leader should protect his party and receive full loyalty in return. What happened to that? Have you gone senile and forgotten everything you taught me?"

"...I believe I also taught you to never hesitate when you pick up your blade."

"Why're you trying to kill me? Because I embarrassed you by defeating White Mask?"

"Don't get a big head, Nick. You are not nearly skilled enough to have accomplished anything of great importance."

"You would know. A backwater style of swordsmanship like Combat Masters is nothing to be proud of."

Nick spoke with hostility, as if intending his words to sever the relationship with his old master for good.

"You're right. No one should take pride in this style... And yes, I may have lost some edge with my old age," Argus said, quietly agreeing with Nick's jabs. The younger man looked surprised. "Combat Masters is a school designed for assassination. It's not meant for adventurers. Garos was closer to the ideal practitioner than you are."

"What...?" Nick responded, astonished. He wanted to reject Argus's words, but the cooler part of his head knew it was true. His rational mind screamed to accept that all his worst hunches were right. "...Was that true of our other party members, too?"

"We were a collection of criminals, assassins, and military janitors. Garos purged traitors in the military until he was scouted by demon-god worshippers for his skill. The others had similar stories... You were the only one who joined Combat Masters as an adventurer."

"...Then why did you always lecture me to act more like an adventurer? I

respected you. Was that all a lie?”

“I was just keeping up appearances. We couldn’t have you growing suspicious of us.”

“What?!” As Nick’s glare intensified, Argus went on as if he was bored.

“We could not have been a convincing adventurers’ party without members. A party was also a perfect source of fodder for the Sword of Tasuki.”

Nick felt a wave of horror at those words, and not just because of their ominous nature; he knew exactly what they implied.

“Argus, don’t tell me... Are you really the Sword of Tasuki’s wielder?”

Considering what Nick had just learned about the Sword of Tasuki’s ability, the “fodder” Argus spoke of was likely the abilities of assassins and adventurers he had fed to the sword. That would explain Argus’s impossible strength. His holy sword was the secret to how he had managed to master every weapon and martial arts style and acquire the strength to overpower any person or monster—despite having no sense for magic.

He might not have created his unbeatable Combat Masters style by personally mastering all manner of martial arts. It now seemed likely that he had used the holy sword to steal that mastery from others.

“That’s right,” said Argus.

It was becoming harder for Nick to deny that the person he had respected as a father was a corrupt monster beyond his wildest imagination. His heart burned with fear and anger.

“Argus...did your strength come entirely from Integration? Did you obtain none of it through your own training?”

“Imagine whatever you like. All that matters now is that I am a blade pressed against your neck. I might spare you depending on how you answer my next question. Choose your words carefully.”

Nick repressed his anger before it consumed him, and he spoke to Bond telepathically.

“Bond, call Tiana. We’re using Union.”

"I already have. What is with this man...? I can process visual and auditory information from him, and yet I can barely sense his presence! He is not using a trick like Nargava, either."

"I was baffled by that, too, but I just figured it out... He's using Light Body."

"He is still too quiet, though. I can understand silent footsteps, but even the creaking of the roof was barely audible."

"He's mastered his gait and breathing. He's also trained his body not to make any unnecessary movements, and that extends to his muscles and bones. When he does move, though, he does so with the ferocity of a beast."

"Hmm... He may be a tougher opponent than someone who simply erases their presence with a phantom king orb."

"He's the top adventurer in Labyrinth City in terms of raw strength. Common sense won't apply here."

Just then, Argus swung his sword down with such force, it felt as if he were cleaving the world in half. Nick dodged...

"You were using Telepathy, weren't you? You must be confident if you think you can have a chat right in front of me."

...But Argus guessed which way he would go and kicked him in the ribs with a leg the size of a tree trunk.

"Argh...!" Nick grunted, flying backward. He quickly used Light Body and sprang off a wall to land on a nearby roof.

"I'll say this again—choose your words carefully. Where is the mirror?" Argus asked.

"Mirror? What mirror?"

"The mirror you used to speak to the one you called your teacher."

"What the hell are you talking about? You really are going senile," Nick sneered. But he genuinely had no clue what Argus meant.

In response to the jab, Argus rushed at Nick. "Then you leave me no choice... It's time to give you the same fate as your parents."

"Huh?"

Argus was on him and swinging down with his greatsword before Nick could ask what he meant. He moved his great bulk with impossible speed; his proficiency with Light Body far surpassed Nick's and Garos's. His agility reminded Nick of when Olivia carried him through the city on her back. He was painfully aware that the shadow of death was near.

"Ngh!"

But at the moment, Nick had the locational advantage. They were near the inn where he lived, and he knew where he could put his full weight on the rooftops and where he couldn't. He used this knowledge to flee, jumping from roof to roof with all his strength.

"Hold out for five more seconds! She's almost here," came Bond's voice.

"Got it!"

Swordsmanship was no different from magic once a certain level of mastery was reached. An attack that should be out of range would reach farther than the opponent expected and cut through skin. A firmly planted foot could move without warning and shift into your blind spot, causing you to lose track of your opponent completely.

Argus moved faster than Nick could sense, meaning he could dodge his attacks only with intuition. He knew he wouldn't last much longer—Argus was learning his habits and would soon catch him. His blade was about to reach Nick's neck when...

""Union!""

...Tiana had made it just in time.

""Flowers, scatter your petals! Dragons, take to your slumber! Spirits of the old stars, ring the bell that bids farewell to white autumn! Ice Age!""

Snow began to fall.

Tiana had sprinted as fast as she could until she was close enough for them to use Union. Once she and Nick had combined, she immediately cast a spell to temporarily summon a severe winter. The temperature plunged below zero in a wide radius, causing snow clouds and freezing wind.

Residents of the area noticed the bizarre weather and tried to go outside, but their windows and doors had frozen.

““Sorry, everyone. This’ll be over soon,”” Nick/Tiana said.

“We can’t last against him for long. What should we do?” Bond asked.

““We have no chance of beating him in close combat. Ranged combat won’t work, either, though. He’ll read our eyes to dodge or deflect any spells. Let’s use Steal Heat to lower his body temperature.””

“Are you sure? Using that at full strength will kill a warm-blooded mammal in this environment.”

““...We’ll die if we hold back. We shouldn’t need to tell you that.””

“That is true... Huh?”

Bond seemed to realize that something was off. The weather in the surrounding area had already surpassed the limits of what an ordinary person could survive. People who were indoors or far from here would be fine, but around Nick/Tiana, it was cold enough for the moisture in a person’s breath to freeze and their lungs to be damaged. Leon, the last person they used Ice Age on, had survived because of his incredible healing ability, but Argus should have lacked such protection.

And yet he simply put on a coat and walked calmly toward them with sword in hand.

“This is bad... That is a Kaso Cloak. Wearing it shields one from extreme heat or cold. It also blocks offensive spells such as quick lightning strikes.”

““No freaking way!””

“Relax, it is not invincible. It can withstand strong spells but only lasts for a few seconds. It is meant to be used as a consumable item.”

““...He’s using that small amount of time efficiently. He’ll use it to take the impact of our next attack and then rely on his skill to

dodge the rest. That'll let him get the maximum effect from it while using as little strength as possible.””

“...I suppose to a skilled fighter, it is a perfect shield rather than a consumable.”

““But we can break it if we know how it works... We just need an attack that nothing can escape, not even an ant! Brinicle!”” Nick/Tiana yelled, as Tiana’s mind saw victory.

“Ngh...!” Argus grunted.

The Sword of Bonds produced a ring of light, which swelled and spread outward. The cold air solidified, freezing even the wind and sound, and frozen streetlamps were pushed to the ground.

““Aww, what’s the holdup? Too cold to move?”” Nick/Tiana taunted.

Argus had stopped moving. The air was so cold that not even his Kaso Cloak could withstand it, and he was clearly suffering. His eyes, however, still contained a murderous glare even colder than the air around him. Nick/Tiana should have had a massive advantage, but their intuition told them Argus still had the upper hand.

“Whoa there, Argus. Rare to see you in such a bind. Need any help?” said a man’s voice. He didn’t sound like an ally.

An arrow raced for Nick/Tiana’s neck like a ray of light.

““Ngh...!”” they grunted, dodging it. The arrow did not come from the direction of the voice, which meant multiple new opponents had arrived. Cold sweat formed on their neck.

“...Don’t interfere,” Argus said.

“Don’t say that. They have a holy sword—that makes this my fight. If anything, *you* should get out of *my* way,” the man responded.

“You’ve never shown an interest in holy swords other than yourself,” replied Argus.

The owner of the voice walked into view on the street. He was a blond man

with a calm expression, and he wore a longsword, though he hadn't drawn it. His manner was as casual as if he were simply walking to the nearby Adventurers Guild. Nick/Tiana probably wouldn't have noticed him if he hadn't strolled directly into their freezing barrier.

His conversation with Argus and the presence of the armored guards behind him made it clear who he was, however.

““F-five White Masks... If he brought them to save Argus, that must mean...,”” Nick/Tiana trailed off.

The guards wore black full-body armor and white crystalline masks exactly like the holy armor the Survivors and Olivia had destroyed after defeating White Mask. Their weapons set them apart, however. The previous White Mask had wielded an aura blade, but one of these White Masks had a bow, another had a shield and hammer, and another, a katana. The other two held the staffs of a mage and a cleric. The weapons had to conceal great power.

“There is no doubt... He is Callios, the Sword of Tasuki!” Bond finished.

It should not have been surprising to see him, given that they were already fighting Argus. Even so, Nick/Tiana and Bond couldn't help but shudder.

“Long time no see, Sword of Bonds... Though I suppose we never spoke that much to begin with. Looks like you found a good wielder. Your soul is shining bright. Congratulations,” Callios said.

“How dare you say that as you try to kill us! You truly have become depraved!”

“Come now, there's no need to be so angry. I'm after your wielder, not you. I have no desire to destroy you. If you want, I'll even help you find someone new to hold you.”

“Wh-what...?” Bond stammered, too shocked to even retort.

““...Where'd that bow come from?”” Nick/Tiana asked.

“It's a fine weapon, isn't it? It's a magic bow called Grasshopper. It was named that because it can be used to fire an arrow four hundred kilometers over a grassy field and accurately pierce its tar—”



““That’s not what I mean! That archer! And the guy with the shield...and the one with the katana...! Who is inside those suits of armor?! Whose skills did you steal?!”” Nick/Tiana yelled.

Combat Masters was a five-person party consisting of Argus as the leader, a light warrior, a samurai, an archer, and a heavy warrior. Nick was the light warrior, and the samurai—Garos—was dead. The other two members’ whereabouts were unknown.

One was the archer, Dean. His arrows were faster and more accurate than any spell, and they also had a longer range. He was skilled at piercing a target’s weak points and could kill monsters in intermediate labyrinths on his own as long as they were vulnerable to physical attacks. He could get through a beginner labyrinth like Goblin Forest without the monsters even spotting him.

The other was the heavy warrior, Berik. He was a large man who wore full-body armor and wielded a hammer and shield, and served as a reliable tank for the party. He wasn’t a musclehead; rather, he had just as good an understanding as Nick of the subtleties of hand-to-hand combat and the keys to strength, and could kill a three-meter ogre with his bare hands.

Both men liked dragon racing as much as Tiana, but unlike her, they were hopelessly bad at gambling. Nick was always at a loss for what to do when they bled money in the winter betting on the large number of big races, but they didn’t lose as much as Garos did on women, and they always bought him dinner on the rare occasions they won.

To this day, Nick thought of them as kind, good-natured people.

“Nick. That arrow should make it clear,” Argus said.

““Quit talking to me like you’re still my master! Did you let them die?! Or did you kill them yourself?! Did it mean nothing more to you than adding some skills to your dumb collection?!””

Before Argus could respond, a second, third, fourth, and fifth arrow shot at Nick/Tiana. They dodged one aimed for their neck, but two more flew at their head and another two at their heart.

““Ice Shield!””

They summoned a magic shield to protect themselves, but it nearly crumbled from the impact of the four arrows. A different White Mask then charged at them with the force of a war chariot, intending to finish them off.

““Ngh...! Are you guys—”” Nick/Tiana began, but they were interrupted when they felt a chill on their neck that had nothing to do with their ice magic. They could sense that their life was in danger.

““Graaaah!”” they yelled, creating a foothold made of ice to jump onto and regain their balance. They followed by using Stepping to dodge the katana that was tearing toward their throat.

““Icicle Dance!”” Nick/Tiana shouted, shooting icicles in all directions. The White Masks easily dodged them, forcing Nick/Tiana to come to a harrowing realization. There were slight differences in the White Masks’ mannerisms as they dodged, but they were all using Stepping. Their weapons, the rhythm of their attacks, and their skills were all familiar.

“Don’t worry, they’re all simple dolls. Unlike the last White Mask, there’s no one inside them. I decreased their consciousness to make them less annoying, too. They just fight automatically. There’s no need to reminisce on old times—they’ve got no ears to hear you,” Callios said casually.

““I’m not talking to you! Argus!”” Nick/Tiana yelled.

“You’ll get no answers from me,” Argus responded, suddenly right in front of them. He drove a punch deep into their stomach.

Nick/Tiana belatedly realized the reason Argus’s punches were so strong and his movements so unnaturally quick. His attack was similar to the punch Olivia had used to take down White Mask and defeat Nick with one hit. His form was as fundamental as could be, but there was a force to his punch that couldn’t be explained by Stepping.

Nick/Tiana understood at least part of what he was doing. Argus was likely making simultaneous use of Heavy Body and Light Body by rotating between them with great speed. Someone who had trained their body as Argus had could swell and contract their muscles almost as if they had total conscious

control. Similarly, he was also modifying the part of his body that invoked mana and spells to keep them still as he generated high-speed movement.

Unfortunately, the discovery did nothing to reduce the searing pain from his punch. Busying their mind with idle thoughts was the only thing that prevented Nick/Tiana from fainting.

““...! Urrrgh!””

“...It seems that Union does not change your human anatomy,” commented Argus.

Nick/Tiana’s stomach was ruptured, and other nearby organs were greatly damaged as well. They couldn’t breathe, and the blood burbling up from their torso ravaged their lungs and esophagus. The pain was hell. A normal human would have already died, but their Union body held on. They just had to endure the suffering as stomach acid ate through their body and blood drowned their lungs until their mana healed the injuries.

Their enemies, however, were not kind enough to allow them that time.

Ten more lightning-quick arrows shot at them. Three were meant to restrain them, six were meant as bluffs, and one was aimed for their heart. The arrows shattered the Ice Shield, and Nick/Tiana quickly lifted their hand to protect their chest. The arrow pierced the back of their hand, sending excruciating pain down their arm.

Intending to share that pain, they spun around and stabbed the arrowhead—which was still stuck through their hand—into the samurai White Mask, who had snuck up behind them. Just when they thought they had a moment to catch their breath, however, the heavy warrior White Mask charged into them with its shield, resulting in a bloody collision.

Nick/Tiana were suffering too many injuries for their body’s recovery to keep up, so they summoned ice to stop the bleeding and hold their broken bones in place. Inspiration then struck—they could use the bloody ice as an extension of their body.

““Silver Armor!”” they yelled, mixing bloody ice into their cognition armor. The cognition armor came undone, and the ice grew to replace it. Soon they

were encased in armor of ice that had turned them into a five-meter-tall giant.

The giant reached out its right hand and grabbed the heavy warrior White Mask. Nick/Tiana remained as quick as an experienced martial artist despite the bulk of their form.

““Sorry, Berik...””

Berik had always been the cornerstone of Combat Masters’ tactics. Whenever they fought monsters, Berik would start by drawing their attention and protecting the party. Nick would confuse the monsters, Dean would provide rear support, and Garos and Argus were the main attackers.

Argus had been their teacher as well as their leader. He let the members determine for themselves how to handle each adventure and gave them advice afterward. Nick and Berik were the subleaders who helped Argus run the party. Nick was the party’s financial manager, while Berik paid attention to their stamina and the condition of their weapons and armor to determine what monsters they could and couldn’t handle.

Berik was normally an untalkative man, but get some alcohol in his system and he would start telling you all about his favorite dragons. He had a thing for dragonian women, too, and especially liked women with shiny blue scales. Nick didn’t know much about dragon racing, but he was always aware of each month’s races because of Berik. And because of Tiana, he even had an idea of when dragons liked to rest.

Berik had always been Nick’s favorite member of Combat Masters.

A loud crunch sounded as they squeezed the heavy warrior White Mask in their ice-giant hand. The metal creaked and shattered, and the fragments of the helmet and mask fell to the ground.

There was no one inside the armor. It contained nothing but thick mana, which vanished as it drifted into the air. Nick/Tiana felt both relief and despair—the fact that Berik wasn’t in the armor was proof he had already served his purpose to the Sword of Tasuki. It had taken just one look at the samurai White Mask for them to expect that to be the case—its fighting style with the katana was exactly the same as Garos’s, who they knew to be dead.

Whether it would have been better if Berik and Dean were alive, they couldn't say; that would have meant they were either puppets or, like Argus, intentionally trying to kill Nick.

A fireball shot toward them, reminding them they didn't have time to be sentimental.

"Those two in the back are the mage George and the cleric Beran, both from White Heron. Well, technically they're just holy armor that copied their abilities. They performed splendidly alongside Garos and Eishu during the war. We worked together as a special task force called Viper. Those were fun times... Anyway, I recommend you be careful. They know how to fight together," Callios advised without a hint of hostility. "They were pretty messed-up guys, to be honest. They preferred preying on newbies over killing monsters... It was me and them who left Karan to die in that labyrinth, if you hadn't figured that out. I'm sure she'll be happy to learn that they're dead."

""Don't you dare speak of Karan!""

Nick/Tiana swept away the flames, but they turned out to be a trap hiding a volley of arrows that thudded into their ice-giant arm, making it look like a hedgehog. The arrows were strange—the arrowheads were made of gold instead of rusted iron or shining steel, and little bottles of what looked like white sand hung from each one. Bond realized what they were.

"...Look out! They're going to start a fire using a chemical reaction! Cut off the giant's arm, now!" he shouted, but it was too late.

"Alchemy," the mage White Mask chanted, causing the arrows in the ice giant's arm to explode with tremendous force. The arm broke off and fell to the ground.

""Grk...!""

The attack bought the cleric White Mask enough time to collect the pieces of the heavy warrior and cast a healing spell to put it back together. It was as if time itself had been rewound.

""Dammit... What the hell're we supposed to do?!"" Nick/Tiana cursed. The heavy warrior White Mask stood before them with its shield in

hand, ready to rejoin the battle.

None of the White Masks were a match for Nick/Tiana individually, but perfect coordination could be used to take down a significantly stronger opponent. They weren't sure if they'd be able to win even if their opponents were ordinary humans, and they were up against several tough sets of holy armor.

Nick/Tiana smiled self-pityingly at the thought. They felt frustration at their lack of experience, which caused Nick and Tiana's negative emotions to combine into a feeling of defiance. They tightly gripped the Sword of Bonds.

The White Masks began another violent assault. Nick/Tiana fought against their desire to faint from the intense pain as they battled the enemies in front of them and stayed wary of attacks from out of sight. Each second seemed to last an hour. They tried every trick up their sleeve and, when those ran out, every out-of-the-box idea they could think of, but the White Masks quickly foiled everything.

It wouldn't be long before they completely ran out of energy.

"Slow down, boys. Don't kill them. These two seem fun—I wouldn't mind adding their skills to my collection," came Callios's voice.

"They won't die so easily. They have a holy sword. Besides, I told you not to interfere with my personal fights," Argus retorted.

"Don't say that. I'd leave you to it if you were just fighting your apprentice, but they have a holy sword. You can't tell me I don't have a stake in this."

"...I won't let you use them as fodder," Argus said, turning to Callios with open hostility.

"Whoa there, buddy. Don't turn on me. We're partners, remember? Well, we'll discuss what to do with them later. Let's finish the job first."

Callios snapped his fingers, and the White Masks assumed attack stances. Even the mage and cleric, who had spent most of the battle standing in the back, readied their staves and pointed them at Nick/Tiana.

Death—or a fate much worse than death—was close at hand.

“Run, Nick and Tiana!” Bond shouted.

““...Don’t be ridiculous. I’m not taking one step from here,””
Nick/Tiana responded.

“Use me as a decoy so you can escape! Throw me down, now!”

The White Mask with swordsmanship like Garos’s stepped calmly forward.

The White Mask with archery skills like Dean’s nocked an arrow.

The White Mask with heavy armor like Berik’s raised its hammer.

The mage and cleric White Masks gathered mana in their staves.

And Nick/Tiana just watched in a daze.

“STOP RIGHT THERE!” a voice cried out.

One of the White Masks in the rear was suddenly blasted away. Nick/Tiana were hardly able to believe what they were watching as it flew through the air like a toy thrown by a child. It was only when the White Mask was skewered by a frozen streetlamp and stopped moving that Nick/Tiana realized they weren’t experiencing pre-death hallucinations.

““Olivia?!!”” they shouted.

“Nick! Tiana! Get yourselves together, now!”

A familiar woman in a black overcoat stood before them. The overcoat was battered from long use in combat, and when she threw it off, she was even more beaten up underneath, but it was undoubtedly Olivia. Her clothes were torn, her glasses had slid halfway down her nose, and she was covered in bruises. Yet her eyes shone bright, as if she was ready to expend every last ounce of strength she had.

““Wh-why do you look so beaten up?”” Nick/Tiana asked.

“There were White Masks—or suits of holy armor, I guess I should say—scattered all throughout this area,” Olivia responded.

““What?!!””

“Don’t worry. It wasn’t easy, but I destroyed them.”

Worn down as she was, Olivia gave them a dazzling smile. She was telling them to leave this situation to her.

“...You’re the Sword of Might, aren’t you. You may have used Parallel to assume a different form than before, but those moves and that spirit are unmistakable,” said Argus.

“Hey, that’s where you’re supposed to say, ‘You’ve only grown more beautiful in the long years since I last saw you,’” Olivia teased.

Argus ignored her, instead stabbing his sword into the ground and assuming a combat position.

“All right! Enemy threat level: S-minus! Application to remove limiters: granted for sixty seconds! Now, practitioners of Combat Masters—witness true martial mastery!” Olivia declared. She assumed a combat stance, then rushed at the White Masks like the wind. Nick/Tiana were so captivated, they forgot where they were.

““...So beautiful,”” they muttered.

It was like watching an elegant dance. Her charges, palm strikes, punches, dodges, and kicks were all so perfect, it was as if they had been choreographed beforehand. When Nick faced Olivia, he had felt frustrated by his inadequacy in comparison to her unlimited skill. But now, as she fought at her full strength, he had to admire the painstaking effort she had put into her training.

The archer White Mask shot an arrow, the heavy warrior White Mask charged, and the samurai White Mask leaped all at the same time. The mage White Mask readied its staff to ensure she’d have nowhere to run. Even so, Olivia dodged each attack with ease, moving only as little as required.

“Listen up, Nick. Your enemies have you at a permanent disadvantage here. In a situation like this, you need to avoid fighting on their terms. Do something to change the fight and throw your opponent off. Think about what kind of fight suits you. Just like this!”

Olivia stomped on the ground, kicking up ice and stone pavement. The Stepping-enhanced impact from her foot traveled through the ground in the form of thousands of waves and crashed into the White Masks in less than a

second.

“I’m not telling you to copy me. Your physical strength should actually surpass mine. Realize your potential and you’ll never lose to useless puppets like these,” she said in a teacherly tone as she pressed the White Masks. She whipped a graceful arm right through the heavy warrior White Mask as if it were made of paper, and she drew her hand back holding its core. “You were right to start by trying to disrupt their coordination. But you guys aren’t quite skilled enough to win with nothing but precise attacks. There are times when you need brute force.”

The heavy warrior White Mask collapsed, and Olivia set her sights on the cleric as it initiated a healing spell. The other White Masks tried to protect it, but that was exactly what she wanted them to do. When they tried to attack, she manipulated them into hitting each other. When they tried to run, she was always there to block their escape. She anticipated every scenario, toying with them as if they were birds in a cage.

“Hmm-hmm, do you believe me now, my apprentices? I wasn’t holding back the last time you saw me fight. I just wasn’t capable of exercising my full strength!” Olivia said with a laugh. She was as resolute and cheerful as the sun, which made her feel out of place amid the artificial winter.

““...You didn’t have to fight all out like this, Olivia. You could’ve just stuck to writing your stupid articles, pissing off guild employees and pleasing occult enthusiasts,”” Nick/Tiana said, their voice full of regret.

Olivia seemed to feed off the seriousness of the situation, growing even stronger and more cheerful. She roared with laughter hearing their words.

“Ah-ha-ha! Wouldn’t that be nice! I always wished those days could last forever! I wasn’t able to finish teaching you all. I especially wanted to train you more, Nick,” she said.

““Stop acting like you’re my teacher,”” Nick/Tiana snapped back, but they didn’t mean it. Nick had formed the Survivors after being kicked out of his old party by Argus, but a part of him had wanted another mentor. He was able

to face Garos without getting killed only because he had been inspired to work toward the martial might that Olivia embodied.

A desire to beg her for more teaching and guidance welled up within Nick. But he didn't want to admit his weakness. They weren't supposed to be master and apprentice—they were supposed to be able to fight on equal footing.

"Oh, Nick...you're so competitive. That's a strength of yours, though. Make sure you stay strong, no matter what happens," Olivia said.

She turned toward Argus and assumed a combat stance while keeping an eye on the White Masks, who were clearly unsure how to attack her. Rather than face her, however, Argus swung his greatsword and beheaded the mage White Mask.

""What...?"" Nick/Tiana said, surprised.

"The presence of great mana makes her stronger. They're only a hindrance," Argus said, felling the rest of the White Masks with two more swings of his blade. Nick/Tiana hoped for a fleeting moment this meant he had switched sides, but the effect of his actions soon became clear.

The mana rising from Olivia's body was vanishing.

""Oh, I see... You're reducing the threat,"" they observed.

Olivia's strength grew depending on the mana or threat level of her opponents. Argus, however, couldn't cast spells. He could use tricks like Stepping that required a minuscule amount of mana, but he couldn't handle enough mana to produce flames or ice. That meant that, from an objective standpoint, he was just an ordinary human. He just happened to be among the physically strongest and most skilled adventurers alive.

""Hold on... Where'd Callios go?!"" Nick/Tiana exclaimed. They forced themselves to their feet—still not fully recovered from their injuries—and looked around for Callios. ""Damn it... Magic Search!""

"That won't work. He can use a space-time spell called Fold Space to instantaneously travel great distances. It's impossible to know where he is," Argus told them.

"I would play with you all some more, but I have my own work to do... Don't take too long, though, Argus, or you'll get caught up in it, too," Callios called telepathically from wherever he was.

"I know," Argus responded, facing Olivia.

"...Hey, Sword of Might. I raised our threat level for you by bringing holy armor, but so much for that, I guess. If you haven't found the mirror yet, you should just give up. You can't win here," Callios reasoned.

"You're the one who should give up. Your plan will never work," Olivia retorted.

"My plan was originally your mission. You were to train the sorry excuses for humans who have infested this land and give them a new human form. To create an existence that could conquer even the gods... It's wonderful. I was truly moved by your project. I believe Argus was, too."

"What are you getting so hung up on that for? Let's leave it behind and do something more enjoyable with our lives," Olivia replied.

"You're the one who needs to loosen up. An advocate like you should not be so fixated on the life of an individual sword wielder... This is your last chance. Surrender and come over to our side."

"Never! The path of might is not built around such arrogant ideology! You'll never win pursuing a mission you stole from someone else!"

"I see... Then farewell, Sword of Might. Do it, Argus."

Argus obeyed Callios's disembodied voice and walked leisurely toward Olivia.

"Nick, Tiana, Bond. I have a request for you all," said Olivia.

"...A request?" Nick/Tiana repeated.

"I can't explain everything right now. The Sword of Tasuki's Fold Space ability normally only allows teleportation over small distances; however, he can use a contractor or wielder as a focal point to create a much larger field, within which he can move around freely and intercept conversations... That was why I had to camouflage my efforts and work in secret. It's also why I avoided interaction with the Sword of Distortion—Diamond—and why I couldn't support you all directly," Olivia explained.

““You know about Diamond?”” Nick/Tiana asked.

“I...suspected her of being on the other side until recently. I regret that we never had a proper heart-to-heart,” Olivia said with a laugh and her usual shrug. “Now I have no choice but to entrust everything to her. Listen up, Nick. If you want to save Karan from her curse, you have to defeat the Sword of Tasuki. You can’t do that without surviving here first. Got it?” Olivia said.

She forced a small cloth bundle into Nick/Tiana’s hands and pushed her glasses back into place. Both the frame and the glass were cracked, but that was nothing compared to her wounds.

Yet her nonchalant smile remained.

“Secret Technique—Spiral,” Argus chanted quietly.

He was remarkably calm given the rapid flurry of attacks he had been hurling at them until now. Nick/Tiana found it almost anticlimactic at first, but then they noticed something and braced themselves. The snow on the ground and rooftops was rippling outward from his every step like water in a pond. That was not natural.

““Wh-what is that...?”” they asked hesitantly.

“Don’t rely on your vision. Something mystical is swelling within Argus’s body. Sense what you can and memorize it so you can come up with a countermeasure,” Olivia instructed them.

““Stop talking like that... It’s like you’re—””

“Secret Technique—Spiral,” Olivia said, interrupting them by chanting the same words as Argus.

Argus approached Olivia and struck out explosively with his palm. Olivia dodged and responded with an attack of her own, which Argus dodged in turn. Their fight continued in a series of perfect moves and counters, developing a perfect equilibrium and beauty that made it look like a dance. Just from watching them, Nick/Tiana was gripped with a concentration one felt only when fighting a master of martial arts.

They seemed to perform hundreds of blows in a single second, then dodge

just as many in another, all delivered from impossible angles. It took only five seconds for them to strike a flawless balance between motion and stillness, like a dance from a theoretical world.

Just when it felt like that dance would last forever, Olivia struck Argus's solar plexus with the outer edge of her foot. Argus went on the defensive after that. He dodged, parried, suffered the blows he couldn't avoid, and tried to dish out the same amount of damage he took. Before long, however, the difference in the amount of damage he had taken became clear. Nick/Tiana shivered at the sight of the great Argus being overwhelmed in such a manner.

But that didn't last.

"...How inconvenient it must be, for someone with your level of skill to be unable to fight at full strength," Argus said.

Olivia had come to a sudden stop, her body bleeding all over.

"Ha-ha... You should be proud. I reserve my full strength for people with a vast pool of mana or powerful monsters. You're just an ordinary human with very little mana, yet your strength is unsurpassed," she said.

"...My skill is nothing to be proud of," Argus said.

"Come on, don't say that... You're gonna make me sad."

Olivia's broken glasses slid from her face and clattered to the ground.

"You're the one who twisted the Combat Masters discipline," Argus accused her. "You founded it as a pure form of martial arts designed to help one achieve the greatest heights as a fighter, but then transformed it into a skill set only meant for killing the Sword of Tasuki."

"I can't deny that," Olivia admitted.

"“What...?”” Nick/Tiana said.

"Nick. This woman who now calls herself Olivia is the founder of the Combat Masters school of martial arts," Argus said, panting from exhaustion.

That aligned with much of what Nick/Tiana had heard. Olivia had once talked about training people to fight the demon god, and the Sword of Tasuki had also spoken of her creating an existence that could conquer the gods. There was also

the fact that Argus, the wielder of the Sword of Tasuki and a practitioner of Combat Masters, had achieved true mastery of martial arts.

Nick/Tiana was confused, but they could see the logic in what Argus said.

“...The purpose of a martial arts discipline is nothing but a blank slate. Pupils are free to use it as they will. You’re trying too hard to grasp its meaning. Nick, you should also use it however you want,” Olivia said calmly.

““Olivia...stop talking! Just run, now!”” Nick/Tiana pleaded.

“You learned how to fight from Argus, didn’t you...? No matter how you feel about him now, stop resenting the skills you’ve learned. They aren’t inherently good or bad. Please use them to the fullest,” she told him.

There was a woman whose whereabouts had been unknown until a short time ago. Her name was Olivia Taylor. She was an editor for an occult magazine called *Lemuria Monthly* as well as an adventurer. She frequented the Adventurers Guild branch called Manhunt, where adventurers made a living off bounty hunting, but she worked in many places around Labyrinth City. Most knew her as an eccentric person who was constantly asking around about suspicious rumors.

In reality, she was a true Steppingman who maintained peace in Labyrinth City by spending her nights searching for kidnappers posing as Steppingmen or fighting demon-god worshippers in secret. She was a living legend who raced across the rooftops under the moonlit sky.

And Nick had just learned she was the founder of the Combat Masters style he’d studied.

““That doesn’t matter right now!”” they yelled.

She had saved the Survivors’ lives and offered Nick guidance when he was lost. Nick wanted to yell at her to run, to leave him behind...

But it was too late.

“...Using your final words...to entrust everything to an apprentice...is a pretty dramatic way to die, huh?” Olivia said. Her form seemed to fade into the snow as her body turned to ash.

“Her human body is crumbling...,” Bond said.

““Hey... This can’t be real... Olivia!”” Nick/Tiana called out, but no one answered.

The bright, eccentric, tough woman they knew had disappeared without a trace.

“...You don’t have time to fixate on the dead, Nick. Run or fight. Those are your only options... Though you are unlikely to survive either way,” came Argus’s voice.

““Damn you...!”” Nick/Tiana cursed.

Argus’s fight against Olivia had lasted less than a minute, but Argus had suffered countless injuries in that time. He might have been exhausted enough for Nick/Tiana to defeat him with a single desperate attack. Nick’s mind screamed for them to fight.



But that choice could cost them their lives. In fact, that was the much likelier outcome. Which was why Tiana's mind screamed for them to run.

"Th-this is bad...! I can't hold your consciousnesses together any longer...! Ngh...!" Bond said, his voice straining with anguish.

Nick/Tiana then realized something—if their consciousnesses weren't on the same wavelength, Union would come apart. Bond was trying to sacrifice himself to prevent that from happening.

"...Split," they chanted, ending Union. That released the Ice Age barrier, ending the extreme winter weather and inviting a lukewarm wind reminiscent of early summer.

Nick turned toward Argus and glared at him empty-handed.

"Ngh... Take Tiana and run," he said to Bond.

"Nick, you can't... Grk...," Bond tried to protest.

"Just go! I'll hold him here! Use that time to find help!" Nick yelled.

Bond hesitated, but he saw he had no choice. Tiana had fallen unconscious, which meant she was in great danger. He couldn't take his own exhaustion lightly, either, so he lifted Tiana and slowly hobbled away.

"...Give me the mirror. Do that, and I'll have no more business with you or your companions. Leave this city and find somewhere to live a quiet life," Argus commanded.

"I told you; I don't have a clue what you're talking about," Nick told him.

"Then it would be best for you to remember."

"What part of 'I don't know' don't you understand?!"

Instead of answering, Argus only raised his sword.

"...I don't know what you want," Nick said. "But I have realized one thing—you got close to me after I lost my family so you could steal something, didn't you?"

"...That's right."

“Then you should’ve just killed me when you found me. Why raise me as an adventurer? Why form Combat Masters?”

“I told you. It was camouflage.”

“If that’s all it was, then your degree of commitment was absurd, Argus. You’re an even bigger piece of trash than the Sword of Tasuki.”

Argus twitched.

“...Callios clearly didn’t give a rat’s ass about me, but I heard enough to understand. He’s having fun. He’s doing exactly what he wants. But with you, it feels like you’re just reluctantly following him because you don’t think you’ve got any other choice. It’s plain to see,” Nick said with a quiet fury. He spoke like a man with nothing to lose; he had already angered a superior fighter and didn’t have long before his head would fly from his shoulders anyway.

“You despised your skills and yourself, so you took in an orphan and raised him to distract yourself from how big of a scumbag you are. Hear this, Argus. You might think I’m disenchanted because I learned how cruel you really are, but I’m not. I’m just disappointed by how weak you are. You don’t have the courage to die or to kill. You’re pathetic. I can’t even stand to look at you. You’re a disgrace to adventurers everywhere.”

“Shut up,” Argus growled.

“Something happened between you and Olivia in the past... You probably didn’t really want to kill her. But the reason you’re alive right now is not because you defeated her. She let you live because she felt bad for you.”

“...Winning and losing are determined by who lives and who dies. Nothing else matters.”

“Even Garos understood he was the Sword of Tasuki’s slave. He didn’t try to act all evil and pretend to be something he wasn’t—like you’re doing. You’re a small man compared to him.”

There was a man who hid from society and lived in the darkness of his own ignorance. His name was Argus. He was the leader of an adventurers’ party called Combat Masters, and the current master of a martial arts discipline of the same name.

His elite skill as a martial artist set him apart from most adventurers who made a living by hunting monsters or stealing treasure from labyrinths like scavenging hyenas. He was strong enough to defeat powerful monsters without relying on mana or weapons, earning him the admiration of other men. It wasn't just his strength and bravery that earned him respect—adventurers often shared the moving tale of how he adopted a boy whose parents were murdered by thieves and raised him to be a capable young man.

That young man treasured the knife Argus gave him. He regarded the Combat Masters style as his philosophy for life. The taste of the meal Argus had treated him to after completing his first labyrinth was ingrained in his mind forever, as was the feel of the bandage Argus had wrapped around his sprained ankle, the weight of the scolding Argus had given when the young man carelessly endangered himself against a monster, the sight of Argus's large back as he protected him from gang members, the burn of the booze Argus made him drink on his fifteenth birthday, and Argus's large and kind arms that hugged him when he lost his parents. Argus was a man among men who embodied the perfect ideal of a father.

The young man was afraid of disappointing him and trained hard to win his approval. Even after Argus kicked him out of Combat Masters, he remained devoted to his training, thinking their paths might cross again in the future.

But it had all been an illusion. The man was nothing more than an assassin and a slave who couldn't disobey his master.

Nick realized that tears were streaming down his face. He pushed aside the old image of Argus and let his anger flare.

"...You'd better kill me this time, or you'll regret it," he said.

As Nick's illusion shattered in his mind, the ground suddenly began to shake. He braced himself, thinking it was a magic spell, but there was an expression of annoyance on Argus's face. Nick was relieved that this wasn't an attack, but then he realized with shock that the ground wasn't just shaking around them. The buildings around them were shaking, and possibly the entire city was, too.

"Wh-what's happening...?" Nick muttered.

"It's already started... Damn it," Argus cursed, clicking his tongue in

frustration. “...Whatever. Come to the bottom floor of the Colosseum of Carnage. The Sword of Tasuki and I will be there.”

“The Colosseum of Carnage? Is that a labyrinth?”

“You’ll know soon enough... This shaking means it’s coming.”

Argus turned and walked off, unbothered by the tremors. Nick wanted to yell at him not to run away, but couldn’t bring himself to do so.

“Dammit!” he cursed. His feet were heavy, but his frustration at Argus for leaving without a fight and the knowledge that he was still in mortal danger kept him moving.

Just then, he heard a building collapse.



The ground shook that night in Teran, the Labyrinth City. Uncertain rumors swirled as people wondered if monsters were attacking in a Stampede, if another country or demons were invading, or if it was an earthquake, a natural disaster that hadn’t occurred in millennia. However, an investigation by the Order of the Sun Knights and the Teran Department of Construction soon found the cause.

A system of tunnels existed beneath Labyrinth City. They were mainly used for sewage and waste disposal, and there were also some emergency shelters. The tunnels were strictly managed so that only people who had reason to be there could enter. At least, that was supposed to be the case.

There were many repaired buildings from ancient Teran in the underground tunnels that were currently in use. Unlike the ruins in Hyena Waste, however, an abundance of blueprints, administrative documents, and account books containing information on legal ownership and property values had been left behind, which led people to assume the underground tunnels had been managed by the city since ancient times. In truth, it was the Sun Knights who monitored the whole system.

Yet Labyrinth City’s management did not extend to the area farther underground, and it was from there that a giant cylindrical building suddenly

rose up with a violent shaking that reverberated through the tunnels to the rest of the city.

That structure turned out to be the top part of a larger tower. There were windows on the outside and a large spiral staircase leading down from the top. Presumably, the rest of a much larger edifice was still hidden farther underground, though any details about it remained a mystery.

It would be called the Colosseum of Carnage—the name of a legendary labyrinth that was said to have been constructed by the demon god's side to launch assaults against Teran during the ancient war. It was also where the demon god created monsters, meaning it was essentially a monster farm.

Until now, only researchers and experts had ever heard of the Colosseum of Carnage, and its very existence was doubted. However, the people of Labyrinth City came to know its terror firsthand, when the tower's entrance opened and allowed a flood of monsters into the city. The monsters were as strong as those found in B- and A-rank labyrinths and included ogres, amalgam stags—a more powerful version of a silver stag—and unusual monsters such as cursed armor, a reanimated life-sapping suit of armor that was born from a dead knight's deep-seated grudges.

Fortunately, the Teran city council, the Sun Knights, and the Adventurers Guild were quickly able to put together a response team made up of advanced adventurers and Sun Knights. They exterminated the monsters before any citizens were harmed, but that was all they were able to accomplish; the labyrinth's entrance had been closed from the inside. A temporary peace was established, but everyone knew monsters would once again surge into the city if the doors were reopened.

To make matters worse, reports said massive numbers of goblins had been born in Goblin Forest when the Colosseum of Carnage appeared. They were a tough mutant breed that possessed unusual abilities, and they were mobilizing themselves into an army. Similar phenomena were occurring in other labyrinths around Labyrinth City.

Both the birth of a new labyrinth and the mass spawning of mutants were clear signs of one thing—that a large-scale Stampede was occurring. The

Adventurers Guild responded by demanding emergency assistance from every branch in the Holy Kingdom of Dineez. As the general public abandoned their homes and fled the city, adventurers from all over the country flocked toward it seeking honor, sizable rewards, or the simple thrill of risking their lives.

There were also some who were already taking action after hearing information from sources other than the Adventurers Guild.

“Long time no see, Havok. How is business faring?”

“Couldn’t be better. My regulars are all doing very interesting work... And we’re about to have our most lucrative period ever.”

On the western side of Labyrinth City, at the corner of a wealthy residential district that featured noble mansions, churches, and the Jewelry Production idol agency, was a magic item factory called Thunderbolt Corporation. A man and a woman were talking not in the neat, tidy reception room, but in a small workshop tucked away behind it that was cluttered with strange magic items.

“Is that so? Sounds like Animator Havok is still in her prime,” the man said courteously.

“Of course. I’m not slowing down anytime soon. I want to thank the gods for sending a Stampede before my retirement. I wouldn’t be able to seize the opportunity as a decrepit old lady,” replied the woman named Havok.

She appeared around forty years old. Her chic purple dress was suitable for the affluent area, but her pirate-like eye patch and the sharp look in her uncovered eye gave her a dangerous flair that was conspicuous even in Labyrinth City.

“What about you? I hope your skill hasn’t dulled in all that time surrounded by fledgling mages,” Havok said.

“Never. My time there was quite stimulating. I was even blessed with an apprentice,” the man said.

He had the skinny build of a mage. He lacked the obvious gaudiness of Havok, and his monocle, fine shirt, and navy blue jacket made him look like a baron. But there was something unsettling about the look in his mysterious green eyes.

“It’s a school for stuck-up nobles, right? Hard to imagine you’d find an apprentice there you like or who’d care for your personality,” Havok said.

“Ha-ha-ha. She was expelled from the academy, and she’s now working as a mage in Teran. I’ve heard rumors that she’s taken quite a liking to this place,” the man said.

“Ha! Sounds like you corrupted her, Engineer Bellocchio.”

“You wound me. I kept my teachings strictly professional... I am looking forward to seeing how much she has grown.”

Bellocchio smiled mischievously.

“You’re terrifying, you know that?” said Havok. “You could end up fighting this apprentice you care so much about. She’s an adventurer, right? Much more respectable than the likes of us, I’m sure. I feel bad for her.”

“I wouldn’t be so quick to write her off. If she has gained experience and continued to train tirelessly, she could prove a match even for me... Hee-hee, I can hardly wait...”

The Colosseum of Carnage



Teran, the Labyrinth City, had changed overnight.

More specifically, the city's character had been radically changed. Its progressive entertainment industries flourished, it attracted ambitious adventurers and merchants, and its commercial districts remained alive all through the night. Meanwhile, sources of violence and pain lurked and pounced on anyone who took even one step into the city's darkness. The worst aspects of Labyrinth City's nature were spreading.

The cause of this change was an announcement by Vishma, the lord of Teran, informing the populace that a large-scale Stampede had been triggered by demon-god worshippers and that hordes of monsters would soon attack the city. He also revealed that a labyrinth had appeared directly beneath their own streets.

The bad news continued when scholars and sages studying the ancient civilization predicted that estivation—a prolonged period of dormancy for monsters in the summer—would not occur this year. Monsters would not have been able to resist estivation in a normal Stampede, but they were so stimulated by this one that they could ignore it.

Reservations for long-distance stagecoaches were quickly filled by those fleeing Labyrinth City. Some people started taking tents to stagecoach ticket offices to line up overnight. The schedule had to be revised, and brigades were put together to travel to the capital escorting people's personal carriages, stagecoaches, nobles' dragon carriages, and travelers who recklessly decided to walk.

Meanwhile, an endless stream of people traveled in the opposite direction toward Labyrinth City, the ambition on their faces greatly contrasting the terror

of those who were fleeing. Each one was lured by the great riches promised by the Dineezian orders of knights and the Adventurers Guild as a part of their mass recruitment efforts.

Normal Stampedes were dealt with by letting racing dragons loose across the land and to kill the monsters that left their labyrinths, with the dragon knights keeping the large harvest of monster parts for themselves. A large-scale Stampede, however, would require more manpower, and every order of knights knew they had to shore up their numbers, no matter what the cost.

The Adventurers Guild also needed help to hunt as many monsters as possible before they left their labyrinths. The labyrinths were dangerous because of the large number of mutants, but waiting idly for the Stampede to begin would allow the numbers to balloon out of control, and even more powerful monsters would spawn. Many adventurers were eager to take on this work, as the rich mana in the labyrinths turned the monsters into very valuable game. Simply put, it was highly profitable work. Labyrinth exploration during a large-scale Stampede yielded significantly greater earnings than during peacetime.

A considerable number of noncombatants remained in Labyrinth City either because they anticipated the unprecedented economic boom or because they wanted to support the fighters and those who were too weak to run. This strange sense of unity driven by ambition and chivalry barely kept the city functioning.

It wasn't just money that lured people to Labyrinth City. There was also the honor of protecting one's country and the chance to earn glory from killing powerful monsters. While a large-scale Stampede was a terrible battle for survival, it was also a once-in-a-lifetime chance for those who lived in the world of blood and violence to work their way up in society.

Fighting in a large-scale Stampede was obviously a big risk. The number of countries that had been physically overwhelmed and destroyed by similar events in the past was considerable. Yet the Holy Kingdom of Dineez had survived a large-scale Stampede two centuries prior. It was certain that many people would die, but a portion of those who remained burned with hope and ambition, believing the battle was still winnable.

The unprecedented economic boom extended to overly crowded bars, but many restaurants and cafés with a more relaxed atmosphere put out signs announcing a temporary or permanent closure.

In the west of Labyrinth City, one restaurant found itself in an awkward situation. Business was undeniably bad, but they hadn't closed up shop, and its employees still had the composure and compassion to help a man they'd found collapsed in the street.

"Oh, you're awake. You feeling okay?" said a man who appeared around thirty years old.

"...Yeah," Nick grunted.

"You were out for three whole days, man. Do you remember coming here?" the stranger asked.

"Three days?!" Nick exclaimed, shocked. He didn't believe the man at first, but then his exhaustion hit him. He was certainly tired enough to have slept for that long.

After his fight with Argus, Nick had wandered the streets on the verge of death trying to regroup with Bond. He had been heading toward Starmine Hall when he found a collapsed building and broken pavement obstructing his path, and he had fainted from exhaustion without reaching his goal. The next thing he knew, he was lying on tatami mats in a quiet southern-style restaurant.

Nick tried to get up—this was no time for another nap—but he failed.

"Ngh...", he groaned.

"Hey, did you get hit in the head, too? You need to stay put. You're seriously injured," the man scolded him.

Nick felt helpless. He could barely move, and even if he could jump up and rush outside, it was too late for him to do anything.

"...I don't know if I should be happy I survived or not," he muttered numbly.

"I won't ask you to thank me, but who the hell says that to someone who saved their life? What a pain in the ass," the man said irritatedly.

"I tend to act more angry than I am. Sorry," Nick apologized. Another

powerful wave of helplessness and guilt had made him want to snap at the man to shut up and mind his own business, but he resisted.

The man seemed to sense that and softened slightly. "...Well, to be fair, I'm not the one who treated your injuries and nursed you back to health. That was the mistress. Make sure to thank her... And thank Belle—er, Agate, too," he said.

"Huh?"

"It's the mistress's policy that we should always save people on the verge of death, but I don't want her getting involved with criminal types who would only cause her trouble. That's why I turn away anyone who seems dangerous. I was unsure whether to take you in or not... But then I saw that you're a fan of that idol and wanted to help you."

Nick was baffled to suddenly hear idols mentioned, but then he remembered the Agate keychain he had in the inside pocket of his armor. The man must've helped him because he recognized the merchandise. He relaxed a little, figuring he was in good company.

"You're into idols, too? Who's your fave? Is it Aggie?" Nick asked.

"I tell ya, I can't even go to her concerts. I screwed things up in the past, and her manager banned me from getting anywhere near her," the man said.

"Whoa, really? What the hell did you do?" Nick asked, exasperated.

The man shrugged his shoulders self-consciously. "If you have to know, it was gambling," he said, then told Nick he had work to do and walked away.

Nick almost called out to him to stop, but then he heard soft footsteps coming toward him. He looked in the direction of the noise and saw a woman enter the room.

"Oh, you're awake. Sorry about my new hire. He can be a bit blunt," the woman apologized.

"No, that's... Thanks. It sounds like you saved me," Nick responded.

"Hold still. I'm going to change your bandage."

The woman had a calm demeanor and wore a kimono typical of waitresses in

southern-style restaurants.

“Who are you?” Nick asked.

“I am the mistress of this restaurant,” she replied. For some reason, she didn’t offer her name.

“I need to meet up with my friends. I’ll send you money later,” Nick said.

“You’re safe here. Stay and rest a little longer before you go,” the woman said, as if he were a child.

“There’s no way it’s safe here. Didn’t you feel the ground shake?”

“Yes, of course. That was caused by a Stampede.”

“...It was?”

Nick was disappointed but not surprised. Given what Diamond had told him and the violence of the tremors, he had known it was a possibility.

“Oh, had you not heard yet? Lord Vishma made a statement,” the mistress said, offering him a newspaper.

It was that day’s issue of the *Dineez Mirror Times*. Unlike Olivia’s *Lemuria Monthly* or the dragon-racing newspapers that Tiana loved, this paper was as reputable as they came. The reporters and special correspondents must have remained in the city to continue producing it.

“‘It has been three days since Lord Vishma announced the first large-scale Stampede in two centuries,’” Nick read. “‘A ten-ton giant salamander has appeared in the Five-Ringed Mountains. Meanwhile, the Colosseum of Carnage remains ominously quiet beneath Labyrinth City. Attempts to investigate the labyrinth have been foiled by a barrier blocking magic spells. The Adventurers Guild has announced they are prioritizing the Five-Ringed Mountains and will postpone the creation of the expedition team for the Colosseum of Carnage. Many citizens are voicing complaints because of the danger the labyrinth poses to the city...’ Sounds pretty bad.”

“Wow, you don’t seem that surprised. You’re a brave man,” the woman said.

“No, I just knew it was a possibility. But isn’t this place in danger as well?”

“Earthquakes and Stampedes are no big deal here. This building has a firm foundation and supports, and ruffians cannot get in. There is a barrier that prevents anyone from entering without a letter of introduction.”

“...You can use barrier magic?” Nick asked, surprised.

Barriers that warded against people required tremendous skill to cast and were very problematic when used for crime. Kidnappers could use them to hide victims like the false Steppingman had. If this woman could openly use one, that meant she was either richer and of a much higher social position than Nick had imagined, or she was a very skilled mage.

“This restaurant is mostly used for clandestine meetings between people of great importance. Hmm-hmm... Though I’m not getting any business with the city in this state,” the mistress said with a mischievous smile.

She was short and young in the face, but there was a mature air to her. Something about the mistress reminded him of Diamond and Olivia, and Nick felt a weight press down on his chest at the thought of Olivia.

“But...I need to reunite with my party members. If they’re still alive, that is...,” Nick told her.

“What is your party called?”

“Hmm? Uh, the Survivors...,” Nick answered, unsure why she was asking.

“The newspaper has been publishing a list of victims and missing persons from the last three days. Let’s look at the ‘S’ column... Oh, there you are.”

“Really?!”

“Survivors leader, Nick. Light warrior. Currently missing. Please contact the Adventurers Guild or Jewelry Production if you find him.”

“That’s me, all right... Well, I guess that means the others are safe.”

A wave of relief washed over Nick, causing him to finally relax. The strength he needed to move suddenly dissipated from his body, and he sank down onto the futon.

“See? What did I tell you? I don’t know what you went through, but you need rest,” the woman said.

“...Sorry. I’ll pay you later,” Nick replied.

The mistress told him not to worry about it and left to get him some food. Shortly after, she returned carrying a tray with rice porridge, soup, salt-grilled fish, and pickles so red he wasn’t sure they were edible. Nick didn’t realize how hungry he was until he saw the food.

“This will be a shock to your stomach, so please eat slowly. One more day of rest should be all you’ll need for a full recovery. Now, please, dig in.”

Nick picked up his chopsticks and began to eat. The pickles were so sour, he screwed up his face and his eyes began to water.

Nick was left alone for a while afterward. He hurt all over and hated even the idea of getting up, but he eventually noticed something in the corner of the room. It was the small parcel wrapped in old-fashioned green cloth that Olivia gave him before she died.

“Oh yeah, what is that...?”

He untied the cloth to reveal a dagger with unusual ornamentation. It had a relatively large knuckle guard, and the sheath suggested a slight curvature to the blade. It was precisely the same size and shape as the dagger Nick used, and he thought it looked easy to handle. It also filled him with hope, as there was a jewel characteristic of holy swords embedded in the hilt.

Nick picked up the dagger, and the blade and jewel glowed a light green color.

“Initialization complete. You are Nick, correct?”

“Huh? That voice...”

“Allow me to borrow a small amount of mana...”

The light released from the dagger grew limbs, a head, and green hair. He had witnessed this process many times. Other than the color, this was exactly what it looked like when the Sword of Bonds became Bond.

“Holy crap...Olivia! Why’d you make me worry like that, you moron?! You’re alive! Nice job preparing a trick like this before fighting Argus!” Nick said joyfully, reaching out to pat the girl’s shoulders.

But his hands went right through her. Nick only barely managed to avoid

falling over, and he looked confusedly at the girl who resembled Olivia. He could see through her, like she was a ghost.

“Olivia...what’s wrong with your body?” he asked.

“Oh, um... The name ‘Olivia’ is not mine... And this body is nothing but a projection. It has no physical substance,” the girl said.

“...What’re you talking about?” Nick responded, but he quickly realized everything about her felt off. It wasn’t just the transparency—she wasn’t wearing her usual baggy jacket, her hair was down instead of in a ponytail, and most of all, her expression was wrong. There was no sign of her ever-present grin or the shine in her eyes. She seemed timid, like a rookie adventurer visiting a guild for the first time. Olivia would never have shown this kind of diffidence.

“I am the Sword of Might’s backup, and I have no link to the main body’s personality or memories... Simply put, you could consider me a different person entirely.”

“Huh.”

“I do not have an individual name. You may call me Olivia if you wish, but...if you knew my main body, it would be best if you used a different name. I apologize.”

The girl calling herself the Sword of Might bowed, and Nick’s joy faded. “...So Olivia is dead after all.”

“Communication with my main body has been severed. I cannot give you a definitive answer either way, but I would advise against hope,” the Sword of Might said.

“Okay.”

“H-however! You can count on me! First, let me tell you about the current situa—”

“What was I thinking? I saw her disappear right in front of me. It was delusional to think she might have saved herself,” Nick interrupted. He wasn’t listening at all.

“E-excuse me! Mr. Nick? Would you please listen?”

“Nah, I’m good.”

“Huh?”

“Why should I? You’re not Olivia.”

“B-but I can help you in her place—”

“Like hell you can! Don’t talk about her like an object you can just replace!”

“...I’m sorry.”

Tears dripped down the Sword of Might’s face.

“Oh, uh, sorry,” Nick apologized.

“I was given knowledge of how to interact with people, but this is my first time putting it into practice, and I don’t really understand these feelings... I can’t make people laugh or tell weird stories like Olivia... I knew things would be better off if my turn never came, but if Olivia’s g-gone, that means I have to do my best, and, and...,” the Sword of Might muttered.

“Sorry, I went too far.”

“I—I apologize. I’m not good at controlling my emotions yet...”

The Sword of Might wiped her tears with her hands. She looked lonely, and Nick couldn’t help but feel sympathetic.

“...You were left behind to survive on your own, too, weren’t you?” he asked.

“Yes. Oh, but that was part of my mission, so you do not need to worry about it,” she said.

Nick felt bad for her. This girl standing in front of him didn’t seem particularly strong. She projected very little of the fearsome power that the Sword of Bonds, the Sword of Evolution, and Olivia contained. Even in sword form, she felt no stronger than an extremely high-quality magic sword or magic item.

“My main body gave me information on the Sword of Tasuki and the demon-god worshipper Argus. My mission is to share it with you, answer your questions, and assist you. Please listen to what I have to say,” the Sword of Might requested.

The girl clearly didn’t know what else to do, but that wasn’t what made Nick

relent—it was the promise to answer the questions he had been accumulating for a while. He wanted to know the nature of this terrible, evil conspiracy he had been wrapped up in. He shook off a bit of his fatigue and despair and nodded.

“...If that’s all I have to do, fine,” he said.

“Th-thank you so much!” the Sword of Might exclaimed with a broad smile. “The current strife stems from ancient times, when the Demon God War ended and the holy swords achieved their foremost goal. That is especially the case for the Sword of Tasuki, who defeated the demon god.”

Defeating the demon god was not the only objective given to the holy swords. Civilization had been partially destroyed in the war, and the remaining countries, organizations, and laboratories lost the means to control the holy swords. The Sword of Resonance, who commanded humanity in the war, lost her functionality and fell into a long sleep. The Sword of Evolution was stolen in the postwar confusion, and the Sword of Bonds was locked away for centuries to prevent anyone from misusing him.

The Sword of Might, who had been developed for a time after the war regardless of whether or not humanity lost, was let loose to do as she wished. And then there was the Sword of Tasuki, who was owned not by the hero Setsuna, but by his companion and scout, Callios.

Setsuna had poured his strength into the Sword of Tasuki during the battle against the demon god and lost his physical body. The Sword of Tasuki also absorbed many of his companions in this way, essentially killing them. However, the light warrior Callios survived and began to work with the Sword of Tasuki to accomplish the holy sword’s mission.

“...They were absorbed?” Nick asked.

“Capturing the personalities and skills of dead heroes was the intent behind the Sword of Tasuki and his plan. He has been continuing that effort unbroken since ancient times,” the Sword of Might explained.

“The intent behind him... You mean his mission as a holy sword?”

The Sword of Might nodded. “He had the ability to amass the strength of

multiple people. Several of his limiters were removed to defeat the demon god, however, and his wielder unfortunately ended up stabilized in a state similar to the Sword of Bonds' Union."

"Stabilized? That doesn't sound like a bad thing."

"Hmm, how can I put this...? Essentially, dozens of people were fused with the holy sword itself without the possibility of release. The user was stabilized at a high soul level, giving him total control over his mana and an endless supply of energy."

Her disturbing explanation helped Nick understand what she meant, and it filled him with fear. He always noticed a strange overconfidence in himself when he used Union, thanks to the immense power that state afforded him. He had no idea what would happen to him if he became permanently stuck. The thought alone was terrifying.

"Mr. Nick. How do you think a person in that state would feel?" the Sword of Might asked.

"They would grow confident and arrogant."

"I think so, too. And that arrogance would lead to complete solitude."

"Huh? Why do you say that?"

"With that overflowing power, razor-sharp intellect, and boundless mana, their erstwhile friends and enemies would seem frail, like infants or animals. They would be left with no equals."

"...I see."

"That's when the Sword of Tasuki expanded his purpose from searching for how best to guide people—to creating new, ideal humans."

Nick's expression turned dubious. It was hard to align that lofty mission with the wicked way the Sword of Tasuki had set his White Masks on him, Tiana, and Bond.

"...And doing that will free him from his solitude?" Nick asked.

"He must have a fundamental desire for there to be other people like him... Or at least, that was what we surmised."

“But that doesn’t make sense. Why the hell would he treat people like garbage if what he wants is others like him?” Nick exclaimed, and the Sword of Might whimpered quietly in fear. He noticed the anger and hatred he had allowed into his voice.

“...Sorry, continue,” he said.

“U-umm, I do agree that it looks strange. But the logic works. He does not see the people of this world as his equals,” the Sword of Might explained. “The power of his existence—which we measure with a parameter called ‘soul level’—is significantly higher than the average person’s. That is why he can kill people with as little emotion as a farmer killing livestock for a banquet. He toys with humans the way you might play with a pet. He only feels that childish joy.”

“What are we, animals?”

“To him, yes. That is why forces rose up to resist him. One of those was the school of martial arts founded by my main body, Olivia.”

“Really?!”

According to the Sword of Might, Olivia had been wandering the world to compete with martial arts masters and raise apprentices. Once she began receiving support from various forces that feared the Sword of Tasuki’s plan, however, she founded a dojo and got to work gathering capable survivors of the Demon God War, creating a large faction. Tension grew between the two holy swords as society rebuilt itself from the damage of the Demon God War, and eventually a new war broke out between them.

The Sword of Tasuki imbued suits of holy armor with the strength of the mighty heroes and warriors he had accumulated and controlled to create an unmatched army. Olivia’s peerless apprentices had honed their skills to the highest level, and she gifted them legendary magic items and swords that she had received from her own supporter. Soon, she had created a powerful army of her own.

The current Sword of Might spoke dispassionately, as if the story had nothing to do with her. She delivered the facts with no embellishment, which made Nick feel like he was listening to a serious status report. He was so fascinated that he even forgot about the dire situation he was in right now.

“...Both sides were equal in power, and the war ended in a draw with both sides suffering heavy losses... Actually, it would be more appropriate to say that our side lost. We inflicted serious damage to the Sword of Tasuki but did not succeed in destroying him. By contrast, the majority of the Combat Masters dojos and strongholds were destroyed, and most of the pupils died. Olivia also fell into a long sleep. That was seven hundred years ago,” the Sword of Might said.

However, one thing didn't sit right with Nick.

“...Seven hundred years ago?” he repeated.

“Yes. It was precisely six hundred and ni—” the Sword of Might began, holding up her hand to count, but Nick interrupted her.

“Hold on, that doesn't make sense. Argus is an ordinary human. He's not immortal. He's clearly aged even in the last ten years. And why did he switch sides anyway?”

The Sword of Might responded with a complicated expression. “...Mr. Argus betrayed the Combat Masters school.”

“He betrayed them...?”

“He became the Sword of Tasuki's wielder during the decisive battle, obtaining the skills of ninety-nine instructors and becoming a literal 'combat master' capable of performing one hundred different martial styles.”

Nick had always wondered how Argus had become so skilled. He was best with a greatsword, but he also excelled at archery, hand-to-hand combat, using daggers, katanas, axes, or shields, and was a master scout. Nick had already guessed at the truth because of Argus's connection to the Sword of Tasuki, but the confirmation filled him with sadness.

He had trained so hard to learn those skills from the master, only to find they were corrupted.

“The Sword of Tasuki likely froze him after the battle. He has the ability to preserve souls, so it may be possible for him to freeze a soul and thaw it centuries later,” the Sword of Might postulated.

“...Why did Argus betray Olivia?” Nick asked.

“I do not know the reason, and neither did Olivia. Whether he was threatened, or had another reason, I can’t say,” she said apologetically. It sounded like she knew about Nick’s relationship with Argus. “But I do know why the Sword of Tasuki wanted Mr. Argus: He is partially Awakened.”

“Awakened? What do you mean?”

“‘Awakening’ is what we call it when a person’s soul level increases. People who reach a state similar to Union are called ‘Awakened.’”

“Is that even...,” Nick started before trailing off. He was going to ask if that was possible, but he had already seen examples to support what she described. Argus’s strength was unnatural, to the point where he significantly surpassed Nick and Tiana in their combined state. There were also a handful of S-rank adventurers, like Solo Diner Fifs, whom he was unsure they’d be able to defeat with Union. What she said also coincided with something Olivia had once told him.

“...I bet there are plenty of other people out there who could Awaken. S-rank adventurers come to mind,” Nick said.

“Mr. Fifs is quite famous, but most S-rank adventurers have achieved their position with innate talent or special skills. They don’t align with the Sword of Tasuki’s purpose—or rather, the purpose of the holy swords,” explained the Sword of Might.

“...You mean creating ideal humans?”

“Yes. The Sword of Tasuki believes the next generation of mankind should stem from an ordinary person who trained to reach great heights, rather than someone with special abilities. That’s actually—”

“The Sword of Might’s original concept that Olivia abandoned, right?”

“Yes. It was Olivia’s pursuit of that concept that cost her Argus.”

“And now he’s the Sword of Tasuki’s slave?”

“I think his status as the official wielder gives him more freedom than the Sword of Tasuki’s other contractors, but yes, it is unlikely that he can disobey

orders.”

“...He made it sound like he killed my parents. Is that true?”

“That I do not know... But assassination is one of his principal jobs.”

Nick was growing more and more certain of his hunch, and that was yet another piece of evidence. He hadn't seen his parents get killed. He'd been with them when the bandits attacked; the next thing he knew, his parents and the bandits were dead, and Argus was there to take him in. Argus didn't give any details about his parents' deaths other than that they were killed by bandits. He asked if Nick would be his apprentice, and Nick accepted.

“...Why the hell did he raise me as an apprentice? What was he thinking?” Nick wondered aloud.

The Sword of Might didn't have an answer. “I'm sorry... Olivia might have understood, but I only have the facts.”

“It's okay. I wasn't actually expecting an answer.” He realized how intense his eyes had become and looked away. “Now that I think about it, why did the Sword of Tasuki and Argus become demon-god worshippers? It doesn't sound like they ever lost their objective of killing the demon god.”

“To put it simply, it was to give Argus a trial.”

“A trial? Are you saying he wants to resurrect the demon god just to have one of his followers defeat them?”

“Yes. I believe he thinks it will stimulate Argus's Awakening. The demon god's resurrection and the potential destruction of civilization from another war are trivial compared to the immense benefit of the Awakening and birth of a new form of human.”

“Immense benefit? Really?” Nick said, glaring at the Sword of Might.

She vigorously shook her head, realizing he had misconstrued her words. “Oh no, I don't think that way! I was speaking from the point of view of the angels and gods! I know that would be a really bad thing!”

“I sure hope so...”

“Did you know the Originators from the super-ancient civilization created the

current world's gods?"

"Are you talking about mythology? I know the gist."

"The soul level of the Originators far exceeded that of modern people and gods. They shifted to the farthest ends of the universe where not even the gods could observe them, and all gods share a desire for their return. The gods would see a human's Awakening as a blessing, so I think that if Callios achieves his goals, he will escape divine judgment. The gods have such differing ideologies that I can't say so for sure, but...that is probably why he decided his plans might succeed."

"Hang on, even the gods are against us...?" Nick said, his jaw dropping in astonishment.

The Sword of Might's serious expression did not waver. "Whether or not the gods are allies of humanity is a difficult question. Even the definition of what constitutes a person differs from god to god."

Nick realized with fear that he was deep into dangerous territory, and even asking questions here was a risk. However, his curiosity got the better of him.

"...Okay, that makes sense. Keep going. You said he wants to resurrect the demon god to give Argus a trial. Does he really have to go that far to get him to Awaken?"

"Yes. Argus has achieved the upper limits of human capability, but I believe he has run out of monsters he could fight to push him to the next level. He needs to go through a difficult trial on the level of heroes from the era of the gods, such as fighting the demon god."

Nick had a lot of doubts, but deep down, he accepted what the Sword of Might said. He had felt it firsthand fighting Argus. Physically, Argus was an ordinary human, but someone could become like him only by truly mastering human movement, and it was impossible to imagine a more skilled fighter. Anyone who surpassed him could hardly be considered human at all.

Nick was feeling two things now: contempt toward the enemy for causing all this chaos in the pursuit of such a trivial goal, and despair toward himself for being unable to defeat them.

“I think I get it. So all of this—the plot to endanger Labyrinth City, start a Stampede, and resurrect the demon god, as well as turning the Combat Masters members into White Masks and having them sow dissent through acts of terrorism—all of that was just preparation to help Argus grow stronger? Like a veteran adventurer taking a newbie into a labyrinth or training them at a dojo?”

“Precisely!” the Sword of Might said, smiling as if impressed. That was exactly what she had been trying to say.

But she hadn’t foreseen how it would make Nick feel.

“*This* is why Nargava was given the power for revenge and ended up dying?” Nick said.

“Huh? Nargava... Is that a person’s name?” the Sword of Might asked.

“*This* is what Garos was working to prepare behind the scenes before he was discarded like a tool?”

“Ah...”

“This stupid, trivial goal is why Karan was injured and can’t continue working as an adventurer?”

“Umm, I don’t know much about those people, but it sounds like many have fallen victim to the Sword of Tasuki’s plans... But there is hope!” the Sword of Might declared.

“Hope? Really?” Nick sneered, but the Sword of Might plunged ahead without noticing his attitude.

“Olivia mutated after her first decisive battle against the Sword of Tasuki and quit running her dojo or recruiting apprentices. She traveled the world teaching self-defense techniques to those too weak to fight and searching for any of the Sword of Tasuki’s followers who might have been in hiding, and she ended up settling down as a magazine editor in Labyrinth City.”

“...How the heck is that where she ended up? I fail to see the through line.”

“I can’t tell you. Or rather, I wasn’t given those memories, so I don’t know.”

Nick was about to ask why she’d brought that up, but then he realized. *Lemuria Monthly* wasn’t just an entertainment magazine that reported idle

gossip; Olivia had been using it to leave some kind of code.

“You’re telling me to look in the back issues again, aren’t you?” Nick asked. There was certain information the Sword of Might couldn’t tell him here. Given what he had learned, it was easy enough to figure out why. “The Sword of Tasuki can use Fold Space to listen in on conversations near his followers. And we have no idea where his followers could be.”

“Exactly. The members of Combat Masters—aside from you—are his ground troops. He must also have followers hiding in Labyrinth City and noncombatants he has forced into submission, though it is not certain how many. However, judging from the fact that Olivia chose to operate entirely under the radar as a magazine reporter...,” the Sword of Might said, trailing off.

“...The Sword of Tasuki can kill as many people as he wants free of divine judgment, and he has the ability to execute his plans. Olivia spent her time encoding the key to stopping him and leaving it in her magazines,” Nick finished.

“Yes! So...let’s save the world together!”

“Not happening.”

“Great! ...Wait, what?”

“The strongest man alive and the holy sword that defeated the demon god teamed up and started a Stampede, and they have followers hidden throughout Labyrinth City. They’re free to kill as many people as they want without drawing the ire of the gods. You do realize that telling me to oppose them is as good as ordering me to my death, right?”

“U-umm, no, that wasn’t my—”

“They’re doing some messed-up stuff, but large-scale Stampedes are an inevitability of nature. It would’ve happened eventually. Argus’ll take care of it with the Sword of Tasuki’s help. Or who knows, maybe a hero will appear from out of nowhere and fix everything... The city and the country might be destroyed in the process, but we can just run as far away as we can. I’m sure everything will calm down in a year or so.”

“Uh, well, that might be true, but...think of all the monsters that will be let

loose into the world! There will be nowhere safe to run!”

“Maybe we’ll die, then. That’s life. Do you even hate the enemy? Do they make your blood boil? Do you have any real reason to want to kill them?”

“Huh...?”

“If the gods won’t hold the Sword of Tasuki accountable, why should you? Olivia became pretty human after she mutated, but...you don’t give off that vibe.”

“Oh, yes. I am a copy imbued with the Sword of Might’s original functionality. This body is nothing but a temporary image, which means I lack the muscle and combat experience of the main body. I won’t be able to help in a fight... However, as a holy sword, I must aid the hero!”

“You and Bond keep going on and on about saving the world and serving the hero, but those words mean nothing. Do you actually have the will or the desire to kill the demon lord? Or smash the Sword of Tasuki to pieces?”

“Uh, well...no, but...as a fellow holy sword, it is my duty to stop him—”

“Forget about your duty. You haven’t killed anybody, and you haven’t helped the Sword of Tasuki. Stop saying this situation is your responsibility to fix when you don’t actually give a damn about any of it.”

Nick watched as the Sword of Might hemmed and hawed, and he breathed a deep sigh. He thought she was going to scold him, but instead she just started trembling, which only increased his irritation.

“...Just so you know, I’m not saying I don’t want to fight. I can’t leave things like this. I hate the Sword of Tasuki, and I hate Argus. I’m gonna make them regret what they’ve done. I’ve gotta save Karan, too. So it’s good a way to die as any,” he continued.

“Oh! Then you should work with m—”

“But I don’t give a damn about the world, the gods, or the demon god. Society can burn for all I care,” Nick said.

A brief flicker of joy had passed across the Sword of Might’s face, before his utter indifference brought her back to earth.

“Umm... I don’t know what to say...,” she said.

“...Sorry. I’m tired, so I’m gonna sleep some more. I’ll be leaving as soon as I get up, so you should get some rest, too,” Nick said before rolling over in bed.

The Sword of Might watched Nick idly as he slept. His lonely expression made her think of a wolf trying to endure a blizzard.

Afterward, the Sword of Might returned to her sword form. She requested that Nick at least take her with him, and he put her in his bag. It seemed like she knew that explaining her human form to the people who worked at the restaurant would have been difficult.

“Thanks for everything. I’ll come back after I withdraw some money,” Nick said. He was back on his feet after a day of lazing around and sleeping, and he had decided to leave after eating breakfast.

“Don’t worry about paying me. I wish you would stay and rest a little longer,” the mistress said.

“You still don’t look great, man,” the male employee added.

“I can’t keep eating your food for free,” Nick replied.

“I took this man in when he was living on the streets with one foot in the grave, and I gave him a job when he got down on his knees and begged. I can handle providing for another employee or two,” she told him.

“Don’t tell him that, mistress,” the man complained.

According to the mistress, the man who now worked for her had been addicted to gambling and lost his bar due to poor management. No other restaurants would hire him, and he was barely staying afloat when she happened to find him collapsed from hunger in the street. She hired him after he begged for a job. Nick was curt with the man—but privately found him to be surprisingly earnest.

“You never know what life will throw at you. The city’s in bad shape right now, but good luck out there,” the man said.

“I know. You should seriously consider closing up shop. I imagine the situation’s gonna get a whole lot worse,” Nick warned. The man gave him a sour

look, clearly not wanting to lose his job, but the mistress seemed unconcerned.

“It will take more than a Stampede to make me run,” she said nonchalantly.

Nick admired her gumption, but he was also plagued by a sense of inferiority. This noncombatant was much braver than him.

“...Okay. Well, staying here will probably be safer than trying to relocate.” And with that, Nick left the restaurant.

He reached a familiar street after a few minutes of walking and realized he had already forgotten the direction he’d come from. That was the barrier’s effect on his mind, and although he’d been disoriented, he collected himself and continued walking.

There hadn’t been any rubble when he walked down this street a month before. It all felt like a dream now—the wealthy nobles and merchants wearing order-made jackets, magic academy students wearing new robes, idols practicing happily...

“Hold it, you. Are you an adventurer?”

The idiots threatening passersby with knives were also new.

“Let’s see here... You pro’ly don’t got any money, but we could sell your weapons ’n’ armor. Drop ’em on the ground.”

A group of five unsavory men surrounded Nick—thieves, taking advantage of the confusion to prey on people in the street. They wielded crude knives and swords, but they seemed accustomed to threatening and hurting others. They could probably handle amateurs and novice adventurers without issue.

Nick ignored them and walked right through a small gap in their formation.

“Huh? Hey! Don’t ignore us!” one of the men said, grabbing Nick’s shoulder.

That flared Nick’s anger. It wasn’t how rough the man had been with him that pissed him off but his lack of skill. Compared to what he’d just gone through with Argus and the White Masks, the man was like a cat pawing at him. Nick couldn’t believe such pathetic men had the audacity to act tough and assault people in the street.

Just by casting Heavy Body and slightly twisting his legs, Nick sent an impact

through his shoulder and into the thug's hand.

"Gah!" the man grunted, soaring backward through the air as if punched.

"You're a mage?! Why the hell're you dressed like that?!" another thug said.

Without understanding what had just happened, the gang launched themselves at Nick.

Nick promptly broke one thug's knife wrist, broke another's knees, and knocked out another with a blow to the chin. The one remaining thug stared at him in dumbstruck confusion. It had taken less than five seconds to immobilize them all.

Nick had never felt more skilled as a fighter. His showdown with much more talented fighters than these men had been engraved into his mind, and the near-death experience had sharpened him like a knife.

"Are you the leader?" he asked.

"Whuh?" the thug said.

"If you are, then you need to answer for your actions," Nick said, punching him.

"S-sorr—"

"Keep your apology. I'm telling you to take responsibility for what you've done. You pulled a knife on me, so now it's either kill or be killed. Which will it be?"

Nick punched the man again, causing blood to spurt from his nose, and then again, knocking loose a tooth. The man fell backward to the ground, and Nick straddled him and kept on punching. The man's cries for mercy only irritated him further.

"P-please forgive me... I've got no job, I'm all outta options... Just let me go..."

"M-Mr. Nick? You have already immobilized him...," the Sword of Might said telepathically.

"Yep," Nick responded flippantly.

"Then why...?"

“This is what it means to make someone fight. That ‘Might’ in your name is just a fancy word for violence. Fighting hurts. It’s hard. It makes you want to cry and run. But your opponent won’t let you escape. They might kill you or give you a fate much worse than death.”

“B-but to defeat bad people and save the world, you must fight.”

“This man’s a bad person. He attacks people in the street. He’s probably killed children and assaulted helpless women. Killing him would make the world a slightly better place.”

“I haven’t attacked any women or children! I swear!” the man shouted.

“Really? Can you promise you never will?” Nick asked.

The other thugs were abandoning their leader, who watched them scramble away with despair.

“Please...just let me go...,” he whimpered.

The demon within Nick told him coolly to keep up the pressure. He raised his fist, and someone grabbed it from behind.

“That is enough,” said a man’s voice.

Nick almost twisted the intruder’s arm to lock the joint—but then realized whose voice it was and relaxed. The leader of the thugs turned his pleas to the new arrival.

“S-save me! I know I messed up! I’ll never rob anyone again!” he yelled.

“Throw down your blade and run,” the man told him. He was wearing black priestly robes but lacked the medal that priests wore to show their denomination. It was Zem, and Bond was standing behind him. They watched Nick with pained expressions, paying the thug no mind as he crawled away on all fours.

“Hey there. Looks like you’re both okay,” Nick said.

“How can you act so casually! We were worried sick!” Bond yelled, pounding Nick’s chest. Nick chose to ignore the tears in Bond’s eyes.

“Sorry,” he told them.

“...There is much I want to say, but I am relieved to see you are okay, too,” Zem said. He studied Nick from head to toe and sighed with relief.

“Yep. I survived. Can’t say I deserved to, though.”

“Do not speak like that,” Zem chided.

“How’s Tiana?” Nick asked.

“She was over-exhausted from the battle and is still resting. She will not be on her feet for another few days, but her life is not in danger,” Zem said.

Nick felt guilty hearing that. “She took much of the exhaustion when we disbanded Union, didn’t she?”

“...Yes. I abandoned you to get Tiana to safety,” Bond responded meekly.

“Don’t be stupid. I chose to stay behind. I was in much better shape.”

“Anyway...where were you? I tried to follow your mana and find you, but I could not sense you until now. Were you hiding in a vacant building?” Bond asked.

“A person near here took me in and sheltered me until I recovered,” Nick explained, keeping the details vague.

“You do not appear seriously hurt, so we should go ahead and return,” said Zem.

Nick did not move. “...I can’t face everyone,” he said.

Zem smiled bitterly. “...I know that expression well. I’m sure I was wearing a similar one when we first met.”

“You were also drunk and smelled of women’s makeup,” Nick said.

“Yes, but when is that not the case?” Zem responded with a wry smile, causing Nick’s intense expression to soften a little. But he didn’t say what Zem would have hoped to hear.

“Sorry, but I’m really not going back to Diamond. She’ll end up stopping me.”

Zem watched Nick warily. “...What do you intend on doing?”

“I’m gonna enter the Colosseum of Carnage to fight Argus and the Sword of

Tasuki.”

“Huh? P-please wait! We need to investigate the articles Olivia left behind!” the Sword of Might entreated.

“Do you realize how hard that’ll be? We should leave that to an expert. It would be great if we could decipher her code in time, but what if Argus and the Sword of Tasuki execute their plan while we’re sitting around waiting?” Nick responded bluntly.

“Was that Olivia’s voice?” Bond asked.

“...Not quite,” Nick said. He took the Sword of Might out of his bag and showed Zem and Bond.

Recognition flashed across Bond’s face. “That must be a copy she prepared as a backup. Which means that her main body...”

“Yeah. Olivia is gone,” Nick said, looking down. Zem didn’t understand at first, but Nick’s behavior made the truth clear enough. “...There’s someone I want to talk to about all this. I’ll explain everything there.”

“Where are we going?” asked Zem.

“To see the Sun Knights.”

The Order of the Sun Knights had multiple stations throughout Labyrinth City. Each one was operated by a different unit named after a weapon or piece of armor: Helmet, Breastplate, Shield, Bow, Sword, Staff, and Gauntlet, which was the unit that Alice led.

The Gauntlet unit’s station was littered with Sun Knight corpses. At least, that was how it felt; none of the men were actually dead. Some were injured and lying on the floor, and others were sleeping in chairs, looking completely spent. The knights who were up and working either had the glazed eyes of dead men walking, or they were strangely wound up, as if they had inhaled some sort of illegal substance.

“...I see. So their goal is the Awakening of mankind. Talk about an unwelcome favor,” said Alice, who looked more exhausted than anyone there. Her attitude was a remarkable contrast to her usual energy.

Zem and Bond were shocked by Nick's story, too, and taken aback by the state of the Sun Knight station. This all was unprecedented.

"First a large-scale Stampede, now the Awakening of mankind..." Zem reiterated, dumbfounded. Bond remained silent with an unusually sullen expression. Nick normally would've been considerate of their feelings as he spoke, but he ignored them and barreled on.

"I'm gonna kill Argus. I want you to help me. Not sure if you have the strength to spare, though."

"We're as busy as we've ever been, but...taking out Argus would be very beneficial. Helping you would be worth it," Alice responded.

"...It sounds like this is new information to you. How much did you know?" Nick asked.

"You're starting to sound like a Sun Knight."

"Is that your way of telling me my attitude's gotten worse?"

Alice told him sweetly that she quite liked it, eliciting a self-deprecating smile from Nick before she continued.

"...I knew the adventurers' party called Combat Masters was made up of demon-god worshippers. Or at least, that Argus himself was one. His origin is shrouded in mystery. The Adventurers Guild enacts a kind of immigration policy by giving people from other lands a place to work, but it's unusual for a person's background to be this much of an unknown. But if he appeared in our era after being born centuries ago...that would actually explain a lot."

"That can't be all you know," Nick said, giving her a ruthless glare.

Alice calmly gazed back at him. "I'm fine with sharing, but...it relates to your parents. Do you want to talk about this outside, where you can get some fresh air?"

"That'd be a waste of time. Just tell me."

Alice asked with a look if she should clear the room, and Nick shook his head.

"...Okay," Alice said, sounding hesitant. There was a rare gravity in her voice. "I'm currently investigating an incident from ten years ago. A family of peddlers

was attacked by thieves, and only one child survived. The thieves were all killed by an adventurer who was known by the family.”

“You’re talking about my parents,” Nick said.

“Yes, I am. Argus slaughtered the thieves to avenge his friends. There was only circumstantial evidence of that, but it was all believable. The thieves were all notorious enough to have bounties on their heads, after all. Argus was penalized publicly for his excessive retribution, but he was celebrated among adventurers. He didn’t even spend long in prison.”

Nick did his best to repress his anger as he listened.

“There was a recent development, however,” Alice continued. “The knight who handled the investigation just died.”

“...What happened?” Nick asked.

“He had just been promoted to serve as an assistant for the commander of the Northwest Company, but one day a hole suddenly opened up in his body. A stake from an ancient spell called Curse Stake shot out of the hole, stabbing the commander. This incident exposed the man with the hole in his body as a traitor, and he was killed by other Sun Knights after resisting arrest.”

Nick’s breath caught in his throat. Alice’s story had reminded him of the disaster on the Starmine Hall stage.

“That sounds like what happened with Garos and Karan,” he said.

“Karan should be commended for stopping that stake. Two people have already died from being pierced by it, and another two are in a coma after being inflicted with the star curse,” Alice told them.

“...More people were stabbed?”

“The commanders of all four companies in the city—the Northwest, Northeast, Southwest, and Southeast—were all stabbed by cursed stakes. We have enough evidence to investigate Argus, but the Order of the Sun Knights has been completely paralyzed as an organization.”

“You’re kidding...”

The situation was much more serious than Nick had expected. Alice—and

every other Sun Knight in Labyrinth City for that matter—was in dire straits. The entire order could end up collapsing.

“...Contractors of the Sword of Tasuki must have infiltrated the Sun Knights. They helped him kill leaders of the order by acting as relay points for Fold Space. A few of those contractors were sacrificed for these attacks, but there’s no guarantee there aren’t more in the organization,” Nick added.

“Exactly. We’re in the middle of hunting for spies and reorganizing. A number of self-reliant squads are working to preserve order and kill any surviving monsters, but the Order of the Sun Knights is only operating at about thirty...no, twenty percent of its usual ability,” Alice said. “An adventurers’ party is currently exploring the Colosseum of Carnage, but it sounds like they’re having a hard time.”

“Who is it?”

“The Fanged Fiends.”

Nick grimaced at that name. The Fanged Fiends were a B-rank party that, just like Combat Masters, relied mostly on martial arts. What set it apart was that it was made up entirely of beastmen. None of the members were as skilled as Argus, but they were more versatile because fangs, claws, and breath allowed for a wide variety of techniques. They also had nearly thirty members and usually split into two forces.

The Fanged Fiends saw Combat Masters as a rival party and often harassed them, so Nick didn’t have fond memories of the group. Still, he knew their strength was legitimate.

“But...do you think they can handle the labyrinth themselves? What’s the Adventurers Guild doing?” Nick asked.

“They have their hands full dealing with the Stampede. They’re currently working their way through Goblin Forest, Martial Triffid Forest, and the Five-Ringed Mountains. Those labyrinths are actually a greater threat than the Colosseum of Carnage in terms of the strength and numbers of their monsters. It’s honestly a relief they were even able to spare the Fanged Fiends,” Alice said.

“Do you think they’ll be enough?” Nick asked.

Alice sighed wearily. “No. The situation is really bad. It’s not just the Sun Knights who are being overwhelmed right now—it’s everyone. And I don’t like this silence in the city. The Sword of Tasuki is probably using the time to prepare something. It’s possible the Stampede from the surrounding labyrinths is just a diversion to distract us from the Colosseum of Carnage. But...”

“But what?”

“A giant behemoth standing over a hundred meters tall spawned in the Five-Ringed Mountains. The Adventurers Guild doesn’t have any strength to spare while great monsters straight out of fairy tales and fantasy novels are popping up everywhere. You can see Fifs battling the behemoth from the telescope on the roof of this building. He was seen stopping a meteor with some kind of eruption attack.”

“It’s the end of the world...,” Nick muttered dejectedly.

“The S-and A-rank adventurers are doing their best to hold out, but they might have to flee. It would be best to assault the Colosseum of Carnage while they’re still fighting; it’s just... Do you know the characteristics of that labyrinth?” Alice asked.

“Oh yeah, I saw it in the newspaper. It said something about people being unable to use magic in there.”

“And there are no knights or adventurers who can defeat Argus without relying on magic.”

“Why don’t you just order people in there anyway?”

“I can’t do that. We Sun Knights have a reputation for being cold-blooded, and it’s not untrue. That said, I don’t want to die in that labyrinth without accomplishing anything, and I don’t want to send my subordinates in there, either.”

“Then you’ll have to search for adventurers who can handle Argus. If only you knew one who was itching to try,” Nick said with an air of arrogance.

Alice smiled. “It sounds like you’ve brought me a wonderful present.”

“I have a plan. It could be enough to get to the bottom floor of the Colosseum

of Carnage, kill Argus, and break the Sword of Tasuki.”

Nick explained his proposal. The others were astonished—and not because they thought it was stupid. It actually seemed a decent chance of success, and they were also frightened by how dangerous it was.

“...Interesting. So you want to make the Sword of Evolution the linchpin of the operation?” said Alice.

“Argus has a thorough understanding of the structure of the human body and can observe his opponent’s breathing to predict what they’re gonna do. He might be unbeatable against a human opponent, but there are some S-rank adventurers who are better than him at fighting monsters. Fifs is one of them,” Nick explained.

“So you think it’s possible to get the upper hand on him by becoming an inhuman monster?”

“It’s just an idea... And a pretty crazy one, I know. I can’t prove it’ll work. But at least it’s worth a shot.”

“I agree. We’ll operate under my authority as a captain of the Sun Knights and use the Sword of Evolution. This will invalidate the documents that Redd and Diamond worked so hard to draw up... You realize you’re kind of betraying them, right?” Alice asked.

“I guess I am. Sorry, Diamond,” Nick said, looking away. But he didn’t really mean it.

Alice smiled wryly in response. “This is a really wicked idea, Nick. I’m surprised...”

“Yeah, I guess so. We won’t accomplish anything unless we’re willing to go as far as it takes. You said it before—I’ll only get in the way if I fight without a firm resolve.”

“...I did say that.”

“And you were right. It’s painfully obvious now. I fought Argus holding on to hope that things would work out, and I got crushed. No more hesitating.”

Nick balled his fists tightly. Alice watched him with pity, but she quickly

steeled her expression and continued speaking.

“There are two problems with your plan. First off—this won’t be a big issue if the operation succeeds, but we could end up creating a terrible new enemy. The Sword of Evolution essentially has a criminal record, and we can’t just put him in a collar and force him to serve us like a human. You understand that, don’t you?” Alice asked seriously.

Nick made a troubled expression. “It’s a gamble. I actually wanted to talk that over with you.”

“We might be able to keep the Sword of Evolution in check with spells, magic items, or preventative ritual magic, but there would be no guarantees. Why don’t we ask the holy swords we have here?” Alice said, looking at Bond and the dagger Nick had taken out of his bag.

“...It certainly is risky, but I do not think there is much cause for concern. The Sword of Evolution is not entirely trustworthy, but this operation harkens back to the original mission of the holy swords. There is not much risk of him betraying us during the mission... At least, I hope not. I doubt he would sympathize with the Sword of Tasuki,” Bond said.

“Really? That’s good news,” replied Alice.

“I am more concerned that he might scheme to use this situation to his advantage, but that would be after the threat of the Sword of Tasuki is gone,” Bond said.

“I feel the same way as Bond... I am planning on putting together a training program to help you get through this, Nick,” the Sword of Might said timidly.

Nick was slightly surprised. “You’re gonna help us?”

“I cannot agree with the plan completely. You are deviating greatly from what Olivia envisioned... But protecting my wielder is my mission.”

“...You’d be a real easy target for scammers, you know that? You should go ahead and mutate so you don’t have to spend all your time serving someone,” Nick told her.

“Whuh?! You’re not scamming me now, are you?!” the Sword of Might cried loudly. She sounded almost like Olivia, which brought back the pain of her death. Nick

wondered what she would have said now.

“...What’s the other problem?” he asked Alice, trying to recompose himself.

“It might be wrong to call it a problem, but... If you do manage to beat Argus and the Sword of Tasuki with this plan, what will you do next?”

“Why do you ask?”

“A large-scale Stampede is starting. Defeating the Sword of Tasuki won’t be enough to stop it. The threat to Labyrinth City and the continent isn’t going anywhere,” Alice pointed out.

Nick’s expression hardened. “Large-scale Stampedes are an inevitability of nature. Why is it only up to us in Labyrinth City to deal with it anyway? What about the knights serving in the capital and fighting on the border? What about the racing dragons and the dragons in the capital? They’re humanity’s strongest ally.”

“The racing dragons have already been assigned to dragon knights and sent out to fight monsters. This is going to be much tougher on them than the usual Stampede, though,” Alice said.

“...Tiana’ll be sad to hear that,” Nick commented blithely, still acting as if the Stampede were no concern of his.

“I’m not trying to criticize you. The situation will improve significantly if you take Argus and the Sword of Tasuki out of the picture. I actually feel bad for putting you in a situation where you’re forced to make this decision. Even if you came up with the idea, don’t think of this operation as your responsibility. If you ever become a Sun Knight, you’ll need to learn how to push aside the weight in your heart and save as many people as you can, even if it isn’t everyone. That’s what makes a good knight,” Alice told him.

“It wasn’t that long ago I couldn’t stand you... But I like the sound of that.”

Alice had provided Nick with the metaphorical poison he’d needed to clear the melancholy in his heart—a paralyzing agent that would keep his emotions calm enough that he could work.

“Nick. Are you okay with this plan? Can you say you are truly satisfied with

it?" Zem asked. He was preparing a different kind of poison, but Nick didn't notice. There were some men who were as easy to read as a venomous insect with their warning coloration, but Zem was not one of them.

"If you're not on board, you don't have to come," said Nick. "I'd actually feel better if you stayed with Karan and Tiana."

"Are you saying you don't want us around?" Zem asked.

"Sure. You can take it that way," Nick said, his voice not nearly as flippant as his words. Everyone could tell he was trying to distance his friends to keep them safe.

"...Karan or Tiana probably would have stopped you if they were here. They would have said you're being reckless."

"Yeah, probably."

"That said, simply opposing your plan would accomplish nothing. I suggest an alternative," Zem said, taking a piece of paper from his breast pocket.

"An Adventurers Guild request form?" Nick eyed Zem suspiciously.

"It's an escort job for a carriage traveling from Labyrinth City to a city near the border. The client is a mutual aid association for first-generation and low-ranking nobles. They have the funds and connections to escape, but not to hire adventurers exclusively to guard them. The reward is not a large sum; however, travel expenses and food are provided for. I suppose you could consider it more of an offer to join the caravan than an escort job," Zem explained.

It was then that Nick realized the former priest was telling him to run, and he looked at Zem sadly.

"They can also be persuaded to bring along children or the infirm," Zem added.

"You're telling me to get Karan out of here," Nick said.

"You could also take Bond, Daffodil, and Ares... I am sure the company of three skilled adventurers would make them willing to provide for a few more noncombatants," Zem said, smoothly laying out his plan.

Nick felt himself being drawn in by Zem's kindness, and when he lowered his

guard, Zem put his hands on his shoulders.

“Dormancy.”

The nature of Zem’s poison was a deep sleep.

Nick jumped back instinctively after hearing the spell, but Zem had anticipated that and grabbed him. Nick tried to twist Zem’s arm and lock his elbow, but Bond split into four copies of himself and held back each of his limbs.

Alice casually tidied up the desk and chairs but did not intervene. She was not going to take sides.

“H-how could you...?!” Nick seethed, his face twisting with anger.

Dormancy was a type of battalion spell used by the military and knights, and it differed slightly from normal healing magic. It could be considered a type of hypnotic spell. Targets fell into a deep and dreamless sleep for about half a day, which allowed them to rest while traveling or on the march even if they had nothing but a sleeping bag or blanket. It also had a great healing effect.

Nick had not fully recovered from his exhaustion yet. He might have been able to resist the spell if he were at full strength, but it would be a challenge in his current state.

“...Goddamn it!” he cursed.

Nick lashed out at the four Bonds without moving a muscle. He did it by casting Light Body and Heavy Body in quick succession, cycling his body quickly between different weights to send momentum through his limbs and throw the Bonds across the room, knocking them all out.

“What...?” Zem gasped.

Nick used the moment of confusion to move behind Zem and lock his arms and neck.

“The hell’re you two doing?” he grunted, his voice thick with doubt and caution.

Zem smiled. “I was hoping to put you to sleep and force you into the escort job.”

“If you don’t want to help me, fine. But you didn’t have to do something that drastic,” Nick snapped back.

“I could say the same to you. Your plan does not rely on you. It would work just as well with another skilled fighter in your place. Alice could handle it, I am sure,” Zem said.

“I would be honored to take Nick’s place, but I’ve been saddled with the responsibility of temporarily commanding the northwest branch. I can recommend other knights, though. They may not be as strong as Nick, but they can make up for that with equipment and numbers,” Alice chimed in.

She looked like she was enjoying this. That only made Nick angrier, but he had to admit she was being kind by overlooking this disturbance and even offering her help.

“Tch... There’s no way in hell that would work...!” Nick said, clicking his tongue in frustration.

“In that case, it’s not only your own life you will have to be willing to sacrifice, but those of your friends. Tell us to come with you, and we will. If you tell us to run, we will do that instead. But only with you,” said Zem.

““““Precisely! We will not let you get away with leaving us behind!”““““ echoed the Bonds.

“God, don’t speak with four bodies at once! That’s so loud!” Nick snapped.

““““Very true.”““““

Bond dispelled Parallel, returning to one body. Nick sighed with exasperation, let Zem go, and sat back down.

“...We might really die this time. Tiana and I were lucky to survive the other day,” Nick told them.

“Risking one’s life is part of being an adventurer. And you seem to misunderstand,” Zem chastised.

“What am I misunderstanding?”

“It’s too late to tell us not to come. I want Karan to heal, too. And as our party’s healer, it is frankly pathetic for me to have to resort to hope at all. You

should be blaming me for my inability to help her.”

“Zem, that’s—”

“Do not tell me I’m wrong. What I said is no more wrong than you tormenting yourself and charging to your death... None of us are handling this situation perfectly. Tiana and Karan would not want us to risk our lives. But we cannot stop moving forward. I will follow you to hell if necessary.”

Nick could see that he wouldn’t convince Zem otherwise. He had to admit he would hardly back down if he were in Zem’s position.

“What about you, Bond?” Nick asked.

“You are my wielder. I would be a sorry excuse for a sword if I was more frightened than you,” Bond replied.

“If you’re tagging along because of some dumb mission, then—”

“How dare you! My mission is not the only reason I want to help! I couldn’t care less about that at this point!” Bond yelled, pounding his fist on the table. Nick had never seen him so angry. “I...I’m frustrated! One of my friends was cursed, and not only was Union insufficient to give you a chance against our enemy, but I put you two in danger! And as if that wasn’t bad enough, our enemy is another holy sword!”

“...Yeah. We didn’t stand a chance,” Nick said.

“I wasted centuries slumbering at the bottom of a labyrinth while he was busy working on his schemes. The same goes for the Sword of Evolution. It’s shameful! And now the people who freed me from that place are suffering... Why don’t you want me to help?!” Bond cried, throwing a tantrum like the boy he appeared to be. He rubbed his eyes, tears streaming down his face, and glared at Nick.

Nick was taken aback. “Sorry. I would feel better with you by my side.”

He hugged Bond and comforted him like a child.

“I won’t tell you not to do anything reckless. This entire plan is reckless. But do not even think of going off and dying on your own,” Bond insisted.

“Okay. I don’t plan on dying. And I’m not gonna fight alone,” Nick said.

And so, one boy's cries marked the beginning of a deadly battle.



Siege Defense Is for Ladies



“Why the *hell* aren’t they here?!”

After the fierce battle against Argus, Tiana had been carried unconscious to the hospital beneath Starmine Hall. An entire week in bed followed. She occasionally woke up to eat, but those periods never lasted long before she ran out of energy and fell back to sleep. She’d suffered no serious injuries—the only thing keeping her in bed was extreme exhaustion.

Tiana was in such bad shape because she unconsciously took most of the pain and exhaustion when she and Nick dispelled Union. When a person’s mana was fully drained, they did not regain full consciousness until it was restored.

Once she’d recovered enough to get out of bed, she was hit with the news that Nick, Zem, and Bond had met with Alice of the Sun Knights without her and were now setting off to defeat the Sword of Tasuki.

How could they do something so foolish?

How could they leave her behind?

And how could they not feel guilty for doing this after all the trouble they’d already caused?

“You jerks...! You’ve really gone and done it this time!” Tiana seethed.

“...Yeah. I’m just as angry about it as you are,” Diamond said, her eyebrows twitching. She had explained everything after Tiana woke up, and Diamond was also fuming internally. Actually, there was nothing internal about it—her fury was as visible as Tiana’s.

“Oh, uh, that wasn’t directed at you,” Tiana said.

“No, I know. I understand *exactly* how you feel. I trusted Nick and the others

to stay out of trouble. I get just how badly they want to heal Karan, but I warned them not to do anything rash. Didn't I make myself clear?" Diamond said.

Nick, Zem, and Bond had written down their thoughts and what they had learned, then asked Alice to send it to Diamond. The problem was that Diamond was still technically employing the Survivors. Their leader had ventured into a labyrinth under the patronage of the Sun Knights and had not returned in over a week. To make matters worse, they had done so while the other two party members were hospitalized at Starmine Hall. Their actions were a clear breach of contract and against the adventurer code.

The thought gave Tiana a realization that made her stomach hurt—she couldn't afford to show her anger with Nick with Diamond present. She needed to represent the party in Nick's absence and keep them in their client's good graces.

"I'm so sorry about our leader..."

"I'm not mad at you, Tiana. *You* haven't done anything wrong."

"Umm... Anyway...is there anything I can help you with?"

"No! You need to rest! You're forbidden from leaving the hospital! And don't you *dare* think of teaming up with Nick, Zem, and Bond!"

"Wh-what? Why?!"

"What do you mean, why?" Diamond glared, and Tiana shivered. "You're a mage. It's your job to think about the party's resources and cast the right attack at the right time. Consider that as you answer my next question: What should you be doing right now?"

Diamond jabbed a finger directly in front of Tiana's eyes.

The Sword of Tasuki had greatly weakened the Order of the Sun Knights. The Adventurers Guild had its hands full dealing with the Stampede, and public order in Labyrinth City had crumbled. Refugees had fled to the city after being driven from their homes, and criminals brazenly walked the streets. Ordinary citizens had begun organizing vigilante groups. Nobles and wealthy merchants couldn't go anywhere without guards. No matter how skilled Tiana was, acting

alone would be dangerous.

More importantly, the defining feature of the Colosseum of Carnage was that it rendered ordinary magic ineffective. Strengthening and healing spells that were cast with a touch of the hand worked, as well as advanced magic items such as holy swords, but any mana that was shot into the air dissipated immediately. Tiana wouldn't be able to fight in this place.

Unbeknownst to Tiana, the Colosseum of Carnage had originally been built by the Sword of Tasuki as a type of training facility to stimulate the Awakening of physical fighters like Argus.

Setting those factors aside, there was one simple truth that Tiana had to acknowledge—even if she tried to join Nick and the others, it was too late to catch up to them.

“...There's nothing to even think about. I'm grateful to you for lending me a bed. There's Karan to worry about, too,” Tiana said dejectedly.

Diamond lowered her finger and spoke gently. “I know this situation is tough on you. But you need to stay here and wait it out.”

“I know.”

“I promise you I'm not doing nothing. I am working on a way to fight back—that's why I'm using Starmine Hall as a stronghold. I want you to continue protecting this place. Read these when you have the time.”

Diamond gave Tiana a stack of papers.

“Are these...blueprints?” Tiana asked.

“Yes. Blueprints for the entire Starmine Hall, including the underground. There are explanations for how each part of the facility functions, too. This place could be attacked, so make sure to look them over,” Diamond said ominously.

“...Attacked? You don't mean by monsters, do you?” Tiana asked.

“Do you think all humans are on the same side?” Diamond responded, answering Tiana's question with a question.

“Huh? What do you—”

“Once you recover, I’m gonna work you to the bone to make up for the absence of your party members. So do what you’re told and stay put!” Diamond commanded, leaving the room in an angry huff.

That conversation only gave Tiana more to think about, but she got back in bed. Actually, it might be more accurate to say she *collapsed* into bed. Her anger and the effort of thinking had sapped her energy.

It took three more days for her to fully recover.

Tiana spent a few more days tossing and turning in bed—angrily cursing Nick’s name all the while—and around the time when she finally calmed down, she had recovered enough to put on some slippers and take a walk around the hospital.

It wasn’t long before she realized how bored she was. Diamond was busy doing just about everything, including paperwork, giving out orders, and giving pep talks to workers, and she didn’t have time to spend on anyone else. Tiana wanted to ask Diamond to share more of what Nick and the others had learned, but she decided she shouldn’t bother her and walked away from her room dejectedly.

She thought about visiting Karan, but the increased security level meant she couldn’t. Patients who were hospitalized for normal injuries or fatigue like Tiana were treated differently than patients in critical condition like Karan.

So Tiana just wandered the halls, wondering what to do with herself. The underground section of Starmine Hall functioned as a secret base. There was a hospital, a food reserve, a strategy room frequented by knights and detectives, and imposing defensive fortifications.

“...The days of idols happily chatting in the halls feels like a dream,” Tiana murmured to herself. She sat down on a bench in a break room and began to smoke her pipe.

“Yeah, but this place was built as a stronghold. It’s only serving its original purpose,” said a man in a worn-out shirt.

“...Oh, Detective. What do you want?” Tiana responded without even looking at him.

It was Hector, an old acquaintance of Nick's who had gotten himself wrapped up in this situation. Diamond had hired him and seemingly entrusted him with some kind of job, but Tiana found him suspicious. Being a friend of Nick's didn't explain why he was so quick to jump into the maelstrom. She wouldn't have been surprised if he turned out to be a spy for the demon-god worshippers.

"Oh, I'm just taking a break. Am I bothering you?" Hector asked.

"Nope. Be my guest," Tiana replied flatly.

That said, there weren't many smokers in the hospital. In fact, they were the only two. They also had common acquaintances, they were both from the capital, and Hector was even knowledgeable about entertainment in Labyrinth City. They had a surprisingly easy time talking to each other. One of their past conversations flashed through Tiana's mind: *"Casinos in the west part of the city invest more in show business than the games themselves. Diamond's been trying to break into that market, but idols aren't really a good fit. She's having a hard time."*

"I could've told her that. Musicians are the focus there, not dancers. If she can't persuade them to feature idol music, she'll have to adjust."

"Diamond's too stubborn for that. She can get tunnel vision when it comes to spreading her music and genre."

He was a perfect person to talk to, to take her mind off things. But after the last few days of being cooped up in this facility, unable to go outside or join her party members, the idea of having to talk to someone just put her in a bad mood. She sat down in the smoking area and crossed her legs, visibly upset.

"...Do you wanna try a cigarette for a change of pace?" Hector asked, sitting next to the angry Tiana.

"Sorry. It's not your fault, but I'm in a bad mood right now. If you're here to smoke, I'm leaving," she said.

"What has you so upset? Are you getting antsy because you can't go outside?"

"No, that's not it... I'm frustrated because Nick, Zem, and Bond rushed into that labyrinth without me, and because I can't see Karan."

“Are you worried about them?”

“Obviously.”

“...Karan’s a nice girl. She’s brave, and quick-witted, too.”

Hearing those words from Hector filled Tiana with an irrepressible rage. What could a stranger like him possibly know about Karan?

“I know you’re an ally and that you’re doing a lot to help us. But can you stop talking about her like you know her?” Tiana said.

“Ah... My bad. I wasn’t trying to upset you.”

“We need to restore Karan’s strength... Sorry, but if you don’t have any new information to share, I’d rather you not bother me.”

“Not much has changed. She’s recovered enough to manage walking, eating, talking, and reading books.”

“...Okay. That’s good to hear.”

“Is it? Do you really think that’s good enough?”

Hector looked at her inquisitively.

“What do you...? No, obviously. I want to heal her.”

“That’s not what I meant.”

“Then what are you getting at? You’re being really nosy today,” Tiana said, her voice dropping. A part of her realized that she was one step from losing her temper and yelling at him. However, this more reasonable part didn’t seem to have any intention of reining in her angry self.

“Nick and the others went into the labyrinth. You’re in charge of security here. So what do you think Karan should do? I’m sure you’re feeling left out, but she’s in the same boat,” said Hector.

“...Huh?” Tiana responded, thrown off.

“The rest of the Survivors are all working—or trying to, at least. She’s the only one with nothing to do. Don’t you feel bad for her, being ordered to stay in bed all day?”

Both selves within Tiana flared red-hot with anger. She couldn't believe what she'd heard.

"Do you hear yourself right now? Are you saying we should make Karan work in her current condition?" she exclaimed.

"Is there something wrong with that?"

"Do I need to spell it out for you? It's thoughtless and cruel. Is that enough to get it through your thick skull?"

Hector was unfazed by Tiana's provocation. He just shrugged exaggeratedly as if she was the one being an idiot.

"You're missing the point. Curses don't kill people," he told her.

"Sure, but what do you expect her to do in that state?! Karan's a warrior! Are you saying we should make her fight when she can barely get out of bed?! For a fighter, what happened to her is little better than death!" Tiana yelled.

"So you're saying Karan can't do anything other than fight, huh? That's insulting. And you call yourself a friend of hers?"

Tiana considered encasing him in ice but then realized he was hinting at something.

"Are you saying there's something Karan can do? Do you have something in mind?" she asked.

"I only met Karan recently. Nick brought her to my office, and I saw her as a curious if simple-minded girl. But now I know she's more than that."

"...What do you mean?"

"She's good at observing people. Any perceived slowness only comes from a lack of knowledge—she's actually quite a flexible thinker. She has the courage and guts to risk her life for another person. An adventurer like her wouldn't give up even if they lost an arm."

Hector knew exactly what Karan had done at the Hundredth Anniversary Concert, while Tiana did not. He'd even taught Karan how to read the Sun Knight files when she asked him for help. It hadn't been until after the concert that he realized Karan's intentions, but Hector knew better than anyone (other

than Diamond) how hard Karan had worked and what kind of plan she'd come up with.

"That girl doesn't want you all to know how hard she's pushing herself and that she hasn't given up. She knows she'll make Nick and the rest of you worry. That's why she's acting like she's on her best behavior... If you ever have time, take a peek into her room at night," Hector said.

"I'd obviously like to go see her, but I can't!" Tiana replied.

"Oh, right. You have to be careful of security. So much for that, then."

It didn't seem like Hector intended on telling Tiana what he was hinting at. She realized her anger was gone and had been replaced by shame at her ignorance.

"...Sorry. I shouldn't have been so rude toward you," Tiana apologized.

"I don't mind. I didn't choose the most trustworthy profession."

"Speaking of that, I don't see a reason for you to be working so hard. Wouldn't you be better off returning to your home in the capital while you can?"

"Remember my criminal record? I can't go back there. The capital's too boring for me anyway."

His honest words made sense to Tiana.

"You're staying here because it's more fun?" she asked.

"That's right. I have a much better time working for other hopeless bums like me than the rich, stuck-up people in the capital. That said, I could stand for things to slow down a little."

"Is there something else going on that I don't know about? The Stampede has already sent Labyrinth City into a panic. It's like someone's kicked an anthill."

"This might shock you, but...a list of spies is starting to circulate," Hector said, sounding reluctant to bring up the topic.

"Spies?" repeated Tiana, wondering why he'd decided to preface it that way.

"Some of the top Sun Knight leaders have been attacked by aides and

members of their staff. That means that demon-god worshippers and people working with them have infiltrated the organization, so they've started hunting for spies."

Discovering the names of some of the spies should have been progress, but it didn't sound like a good thing at all.

"When the Stampede started, the Sun Knights, the Adventurers Guild, and Lord Vishma's team drafted a list of suspects who could be demon-god worshippers and began investigating them. The demon-god worshippers learned of the list and seem desperate to avoid letting anyone get arrested. They've shown signs of organizing to resist the Sun Knights and the guild," Hector continued.

"Are they stupid?"

"Yeah, but stupid people are dangerous when they're backed into a corner. Some of them are wannabe adventurers who are used to underground work, and others have the strength of A-rank adventurers. There's a secret society called Dead Man's Balloon, who might look like a mess, but don't take them lightly. Their leader is—"

Hector was interrupted when the building shook and people began to scream.

"Ahhh!"

"Where'd that come from? The west gate?"

"We're being attacked! Take cover!"

Tiana's bad feeling grew worse. A concert venue was no place for a disturbance like this.

"Sorry, we'll finish this conversation later!" Tiana told him.

"H-hey, you need to hear this!" Hector said, but Tiana had already taken off running toward the screams.

The chaos in the building only intensified as Tiana headed up to the first floor aboveground. She passed wounded people being carried on stretchers and idols who had still been practicing even with the oncoming Stampede. A familiar voice made an announcement for all noncombatants to evacuate underground.

She ran toward the source of the noise and reached the delivery entrance to Starmine Hall. Diamond had taken command behind a hastily made barricade of building materials and was shouting out orders.

“That’s too weak! Stop holding back your mana! Hit them with everything you’ve got! We’ll have the advantage once the barrier is restored! ...Oh, Tiana! Over here!” Diamond shouted, beckoning her.

Although she’d rather be anywhere else, Tiana ran toward Diamond. “What’s going on?” she asked.

“We’re under attack! They broke through our barrier!”

Diamond pointed toward a thin, oily substance separating Starmine Hall’s grounds from the outside world. It was a defensive barrier. Tremors rippled through the surface responding to the surrounding mana, and it bent light that passed through it. Its thin and transparent appearance didn’t look like much, but it was as hard and durable as steel and nullified magic attacks. It wasn’t something you could brute-force your way through.

And yet there was a large hole in it.

“How?!” Tiana asked.

“The director of the Thunderbolt Corporation betrayed us! There’s a horde coming through! Go fight it back!”

Tiana tried to remember where she had heard the name *Thunderbolt Corporation* before.

“Uh, they’re a magic item maker, right? And what do you mean by ‘horde’?! Are they monsters?!” she asked.

“They’re the company that made our audio equipment! They’re attacking us with an army of dolls! See, it’s Animator Havok’s Mystic Ballerinas!” Diamond exclaimed.

Tiana looked toward the fighting, confused by all the unfamiliar names. There were twenty Starmine Hall guards fighting a horde of...something. It was such a strange sight that she couldn’t figure out what to call them. They were about half as tall as the average person and wore glitzy dresses tailored to their size

that wouldn't have been out of place onstage. Tiana might have even applauded if not for the fact that they were darting around quickly and attacking people with curved blades.

"A-are those really dolls...?" Tiana asked.

She had a hard time seeing them as dolls. Their movements were so fluid that she couldn't tell if they were human children, monsters, or something created by human hands. And there were so many of them—easily over a hundred. Not even in a labyrinth would you encounter a force of enemies this large.

"They look like short people because of their perfect faces and joints, but I guarantee you they're dolls under a person's control," said Diamond.

"You're kidding... Are they using telekinesis? Is such precise control really possible?" Tiana asked.

"Save the analysis for later! Just blast them to smithereens! We're fine right now, but if they get inside, people will die!"

Tiana prepared herself for battle.

"...Got it! Icicle Dance!" she chanted, shooting sharp icicles at the dolls. She skewered six, immobilizing them completely. They looked shockingly human as they were hit. "Ice Shield! Hey, you all! Take cover! I'm gonna hit them with magic!"

"Thanks a lot!" responded one guard.

"Get back in formation! Hold on a little longer!" Tiana shouted.

The guards smiled, and with their morale boosted, they reorganized and dove back into the fray with renewed vigor. The dolls were quick and fought with sharp, precise attacks, but they were too small to resist the weight of human blows for long. Ten of the dolls fell, then ten more.

Relief washed over everyone present. It seemed like they finally had a handle on the situation.

"Hear me, silent puppets. Channel your deeply held grudges and let them expand."

An ominous voice resounded over the battlefield, and some of the collapsed

puppets began to swell. They weren't growing fat—rather, colorful balloons were emerging from within their backs and beginning to inflate. They floated above Tiana and the guards, until the battlefield resembled a carnival.

“...Get down, now!” Tiana yelled as a thunderous boom echoed throughout the area.

“Ahhh!”

“It burns! What the hell is this?!”

The balloons had exploded.

Tiana had gotten out of the way just in time to avoid being hit, but multiple guards had been injured by the explosions. And there were still balloons left. More than ten floated in the air, and the guards watched them with fear.

“Ha-ha-ha! Consider that payback for harming my adorable dolls!”

A woman roared with laughter. Tiana looked toward the voice and saw that the explosions had expanded the hole in the barrier. It had been just large enough for the dolls to fit through before, but now a person could walk through it comfortably.

“Havok! You betrayed us!” Diamond shouted.

A woman in a chic purple dress walked through the hole. Her elegant appearance was spoiled somewhat by her raucous laughter and the intimidating eye patch over her right eye.

“And *you* never told me you were using this concert venue as a stronghold. Is that any way to treat me after I worked so hard to supply you with all your equipment?” the woman responded.

“Well, you’ve attacked us anyway. You don’t seem to be an agent of the demon-god worshippers, though... So what’s your deal?” Diamond asked.

“As if I’d tell you that... Well, I guess you’ll find out soon enough anyway.” Havok snapped her fingers, and a doll emerged from behind her and walked briskly toward Diamond. “Diamond and...Tiana, yes? Have a look at those papers.”

“Huh? Me?” Tiana said, bewildered to hear her name.

Diamond sourly took the papers from the doll and read them. Tiana walked up behind her to look at them herself and was shocked when she realized what they were.

“W-wanted posters?! And they’re for...,” Tiana trailed off.

“Me and Olivia. And all of the Survivors, too,” Diamond finished.

The name *Hibiki Diamond* was on the top of the first page. It described her as a serious criminal who, as the Sword of Distortion, had plunged society into chaos during ancient times. She was also suspected for human trafficking, and the bounty was one hundred million dina.

The second page had information describing Nick as her henchman. Karan was next, followed by Zem, Bond, and finally, Tiana.

“What the hell?! My reward is thirty million dina?!” Tiana exclaimed.

“That’s right. You are all being targeted by members of Dead Man’s Balloon,” Havok said, smiling sadistically like a predator tormenting her prey.

“...You can’t be serious,” Tiana grumbled.

“Hm? Surprised, are we?” Havok asked.

“That’s way too cheap!” Tiana yelled, rendering Havok speechless. The others present stared at her in shock as well. “Do you really think that’s enough money to take my head? That’s absurd! It should be at least a billion dina! The Thunderbolt Corporation must really be strapped for cash if you’re teaming up with the dregs of Labyrinth City for that kind of money!”

Tiana was reminded of her time job hunting in Labyrinth City. She hadn’t known her way around the city at all and had spent all her time sending one application form after another to magic item factories and magic research facilities. She had walked until her legs felt like lead to beg for interviews, only to get rejected again and again. The Thunderbolt Corporation was one of the companies she’d applied to. She vented her anger from that experience as she yelled, and the guards who had been spooked senseless by the exploding balloons fed on it.

“...Yeah, she’s right! That’s not even close to the sales of one idol concert!”

“Your cheap-ass dolls won’t be taking the stage anytime soon!”

“Just go bankrupt already!”

The guards shouted insults at Havok, and her face twisted with anger.

“...You’ve got guts, I’ll give you that. I might have offered you a job if not for this situation.”

“Excuse me?! You refused to even give me an interview! ...No, I’m over that. I have no interest in joining a company with no future,” said Tiana.

“Watch your mouth, you little brat!”

Havok’s one uncovered eye glared murder at Tiana. Tiana grew tense, sensing that fighting was about to resume, when a streak of pale blue light suddenly flashed before her.

“Lightning Bird.”

It was a bird of light. No—it was *mana* shaped like a bird.

“Huh?!” Tiana gasped. Fear and disbelief struck her at the same time.

There existed a school of magic called the Thunderbird style. Practitioners reached the beginner level once they had achieved mastery of wind and water magic and combined them to wield lightning magic. This first stage could be used to form dark clouds that rained down powerful bolts upon the heads of enemies, or fire off blasts of lightning from a staff.

Further mastery of lightning magic granted a mage an intermediate license. Intermediate practitioners could bend lightning to behave in unnatural ways. They could even will it to take the form and weight of a weapon or creature and attack opponents.

“Ngh... Ice Shield!” Tiana shouted, repelling the lightning bird at the last second. The bird was unfazed and began to circle Tiana and the others from above. It behaved with the calm of a hunter that knew it could kill its prey whenever it wished.

“Marvelous. That was an excellent reaction to danger. Hmm-hmm... You have improved, Tiana.”

Someone began to clap. Tiana looked toward the source of the unnatural sound and saw a man walk up slowly from behind Havok. He had dark skin and wore a gentlemanly outfit and a monocle. But his appearance was contrasted by an unsettling air of madness.

“N-no way...,” Tiana gasped, shocked by the familiar face and voice. This was a man she greatly respected and had been worried about for some time.

“I am relieved to see you are doing well. Though I must say, I never thought that scandal would be enough to break you,” the man said.

“...Instructor Bellocchio?!” Tiana said.

Bellocchio had taught Tiana at her aristocratic school in the capital and instructed her in the ways of magic.

“Why are you here, Instructor?” Tiana asked. She dropped her guard for a moment but quickly refocused and held up her staff. There was little doubt Bellocchio had arrived to fight on Havok’s side. She just didn’t know the reason.

“Why, you ask? All eyes throughout the Holy Kingdom of Dineez and the surrounding countries are on Labyrinth City because of the Stampede. Adventurers, bounty hunters, knights—as well as thieves, criminals, and wanted men, for that matter—are flocking here. This is the place to be for anyone who makes a living off of violence, whether they wield a sword or use magic. I am one of those people,” said Bellocchio.

“That doesn’t answer my question,” Tiana responded.

“Havok here is an old friend of mine. We were once in an adventurers’ party together. We reached A rank and delved into some rather difficult labyrinths. That is why I joined up with her.”

“I knew you were an adventurer. I don’t care about your history with that woman, either. That’s not the main issue here.”

Tiana glared at Bellocchio, clearly communicating that she didn’t care about Havok. Her instructor’s smile just widened, which filled the nearby guards with an odd sense of fear.

“Oh, my dear apprentice. Do you really need an explanation?”

“Are you an ally of the demon-god worshippers?” Tiana asked.

“Hmm, I don’t know if ‘ally’ is the right word... I am simply performing a job for Callios and have temporarily hired the rest of the demon-god worshippers as my employees.”

“...You’re leading the demon-god worshippers?”

“I am their manager in name only. Very few demon-god worshippers serve full time, so it is difficult to achieve order among them. Nor does it help that their leader has no interest in organizational management.”

“Their leader... Are you talking about the Sword of Tasuki?”

“Precisely. As you know, he is the current leader of the demon-god worshippers. The rest are essentially sleeper agents.”

“What do you mean?”

“Basically, they are agents who lay low and live ordinary lives until they receive orders... Callios is quite fond of contracts, you see. He likes to give a helping hand by saving adventurers in trouble, lending money to merchants on the verge of bankruptcy, and assisting aristocrats at risk of losing their social standing. He then binds them into an agreement to follow his orders.”

“...Are you one of those people? Were you forced into this position because of me?”

Bellocchio cocked his head in puzzlement before realizing what Tiana was implying.

“Oh, I apologize. I see I gave you the wrong idea. It was during my adventurer days that Callios saved my life and bound me to his contract. Being forced to quit my job as a magic instructor would hardly have driven me to a point of such desperation. My honorary post would only have been a burden considering the threat of the Stampede to our nation anyway. This position allows me much more freedom... The ancients used to say that fate works in mysterious ways, and I can see now that they were right,” Bellocchio said, chuckling.

Tiana had seen him like this many times while watching over her at the

aristocratic school.

“I never would have thought that you were still worried about me. I am doing just fine, Tiana,” he said.

Bellocchio hadn't changed at all. He was the same man she'd seen immersing himself in his laboratory. Still the detached scholar who watched his apprentices with kindness in his eyes.

“...I started an enterprise recently. It's a secret society called Dead Man's Balloon. Callios ordered me to organize his sleeper agents so they could act as an organization, so I decided I may as well form them into a company. The sleepers themselves brainstormed a way to make this work, and we came up with bounties as a last-resort measure to raise morale. I will take your feedback into account and adjust the amounts.”

That meant he'd been this kind of person all along. He wasn't being threatened or manipulated. He was a man who could order terrible acts of violence while in his right mind.

Tiana wasn't actually too surprised. She had always thought he was a little dangerous. But she'd also trusted there were lines he would never cross.

“...I've heard enough. I don't see you as my instructor any longer,” she told him.

“Hmm. An apprentice achieving independence is a wonderful thing. You should walk your own path and crush any who stand in your way,” Bellocchio said.

“How kind. I'm afraid I can't offer the same support for the path you've chosen.”

“I wouldn't have it any other way... Now, how about we step up our efforts?” Bellocchio said, before abruptly turning around and talking to someone.

Tiana's stomach dropped. According to Hector, Dead Man's Balloon consisted of more than just Bellocchio and Havok. It was an organization of hidden demon-god worshippers. It would be best to assume they had a lot of capable fighters.

A deafening roar rang out.

“Ngh...!” Tiana grunted.

Dozens of magic attacks flew at the barrier from behind Bellocchio and were repelled. Their impact, however, shook Starmine Hall, and Tiana took it as an ill-mannered attempt to threaten them. Bellocchio was prioritizing noise and impact when he likely had more effective methods for breaking the barrier.

“This is only a small fraction of our fighting force. If you hand over Diamond and the rest of the wanted criminals, we will not have to get too violent,” Bellocchio said.

A crowd of over thirty people walked up behind him. There were swordsmen and priests in addition to the mages. Tiana thought their numbers were small for a so-called “secret society,” but one thing was for certain—they were all capable fighters. They couldn’t survive as demon-god worshipper henchmen without the skills. They could rout the Starmine Hall guards in their sleep. The amount of chaos that Havok had caused on her own was proof of that.

“Why are you after me?! You should know my plan failed!” Diamond yelled.

“I cannot know the mind of my employer,” Bellocchio replied evenly. “My job is simply to do as he says. But if I were him, I would not leave you alone. Havok of the Thunderbolt Corporation is a brilliant person. She is a match for any entrepreneur or mage... But even she did not know of your true plan. It would not be hard to imagine that you are pretending to have failed while you continue to scheme.”

“Then you should have put a bounty on my head, and mine alone. Why do you want the Survivors, too?”

“I assume he wants to capture all who are connected to a holy sword. He enjoys scouting for capable personnel and gathering them up.”

“So he wants to stockpile our souls using his holy sword ability? How barbaric.”

“I agree with you there... But I have been given a job, and I must carry it out. Shall we resume fighting?” said Bellocchio.

The demon-god worshippers behind Bellocchio—the employees of Dead Man’s Balloon—readied their weapons. Tiana braced herself for a tough fight, but then a large, screaming man flying toward the barrier stole everyone’s attention. She initially thought he was another assailant, but it soon became clear that he had been *thrown* in their direction. He crashed into the barrier with an earsplitting noise that sounded both metallic and strangely moist, and he slid to the ground.

“WANTED CRIMINALS DON’T GET TO HAND OUT BOUNTIES!” a woman yelled from the direction the man had been thrown.

Tiana peered at whoever it was and quickly recognized her.

“H-hey, you’re the Manhunt guild receptionist!” she yelled.

It was a deerian woman, whose job it was to handle the rowdy adventurers of the Adventurers Guild branch called Manhunt on a daily basis. And she wasn’t alone—a crowd of adventurers behind her glared at the members of Dead Man’s Balloon.

“Oh, come on, at least remember my name! It’s June!” the woman shouted.

“Whoops, sorry. You couldn’t have come at a better time!” Tiana called back.

Tiana stared at her wide-eyed; she had no idea the receptionist was this strong. It seemed like she had thrown the man with her one free arm—the other arm was carrying another Dead Man’s Balloon member—which took an impressive amount of muscle.

“How is she so strong? Isn’t she an employee? She’s not an active adventurer, is she?” Diamond asked.

“Most guild employees are former C-rank adventurers or have a degree from a magic academy. We all act laid back and friendly, but we can beat most in a fight,” Tiana explained.

“Really?!” Diamond exclaimed, clearly taken aback by June’s fighting prowess.

The adventurers’ arrival introduced even more chaos to the situation. Havok had summoned more dolls, which were forming an orderly line, and Bellocchio watched Diamond as if enjoying himself.

“Hmm... This has gotten slightly out of hand. Both sides would suffer senseless losses were we to fight now. How about we call it a day?” Bellocchio said, seemingly contradicting himself by raising his staff. A tremendous amount of mana swirled around its tip.

“Bellocchio! What are you doing?!” Tiana shouted.

“Restricted Labyrinth Alteration: Doton,” Bellocchio chanted.

A hole opened in the ground. It was only about two meters wide, much smaller than the coal-mine-like entrance to the Colosseum of Carnage. Even so, the Dead Man’s Balloon members began to jump into it.

“Farewell for now. We will be continuing our assault on Starmine Hall. You are free to hole up and defend it if you wish. You will have the pleasure of our company day and night,” Bellocchio said.

By the time Tiana realized he was escaping, it was too late. The balloons floated around the hole and exploded in succession, keeping back the guards and adventurers. By the time they all exploded, Bellocchio and the rest of Dead Man’s Balloon had disappeared without a trace.

Bellocchio’s full name was Halmi Bellocchio. He was born as the third son in a renowned noble family that was tasked with protecting the eastern edge of the Holy Kingdom of Dineez. He led a free and easy life as a student until a failed attempt to suppress a Stampede near the border resulted in his family’s downfall.

He later arrived in Teran, where he distinguished himself as an adventurer, forming a party called the Wanderers with himself as the leader. The party had many successful quests and achieved A rank, and they also founded a company that developed magic items called the Thunderbolt Corporation. Eventually, a prestigious aristocratic school called Royal Antoniadi Academy offered him a job to teach magic in recognition of his accomplishments.

“He continued in that position until my broken engagement triggered political maneuvering in the school that ended with him getting fired,” Tiana said, wrapping up her story. She sucked on her pipe and blew out smoke, which drifted through the room until it disappeared.

“Okay, I understand your instructor’s background. I can tell that you’ve been through a lot, too,” said June, the deerian woman who had just saved Tiana and everyone else at Starmine Hall, nodding indifferently.

Tiana, June, and the Manhunt adventurers were currently encamped in a Starmine Hall conference room. It was the same room that Diamond had once used to hold meetings with the Survivors. The idol was currently busy racing around the stronghold making arrangements for transporting the wounded to the hospital and deploying personnel.

Tiana thought about helping, but she wasn’t in the right mindset for it. The excitement of battle and her anger had carried her through the situation outside, but once the battle had ended and she’d calmed down, the sadness of her instructor’s betrayal and the fear of him trying to kill her had set in.

There were currently two dominant voices in her head. One was still in disbelief that he would do something like this, and the other said that even if she did resolve to fight him, she had no chance of winning. The two voices were in agreement on one thing though—she was going to die unless she did something.

“But that’s not the main issue. You understand why we’re here, right?” June asked.

Tiana did understand. What she needed right now was to accept reality and search for some small possibility of survival.

“Just so you know, I had no clue my instru—Bellocchio was a demon-god worshipper,” Tiana told them. “I only learned magic from him, nothing more. I’ll tell you all about his special techniques—Lightning Bird is far from his only spell. I’ll oppose him with everything I have... Though if what we just saw is any indication, he has plenty of tricks he never taught his apprentices.”

June rested her chin on her hand and stared at Tiana, looking bored.

“Wh-what? Do you have a problem with that?!” Tiana asked.

“Sheesh... No. You just don’t get it at all, do you? I expected more from a member of the party that’s made such a name for themselves at Manhunt,” June said.

“Wh-what are you talking about?”

June dropped a stack of papers on the table. They were copies of the same wanted posters that the doll had given Diamond.

“The Manhunt adventurers are hardly the most virtuous members of society. They’re dangerous people who take the law into their own hands by wandering the city with their blades out, searching for bounties. They’re plastered by lunchtime, and they waste their time gambling at cards, losing, and then run out before they have to pay up. They’re all hopeless,” June ranted.

The adventurers laughed at her harsh words, and she pounded the table to shut them up.

“But damn it, there’s a moral code shared by anybody who catches villains for a living. We don’t let wanted criminals walk the streets unchallenged, no matter how strong they are. I make sure any bounty hunters who target innocent people for the promise of a reward feel my wrath. And look at Labyrinth City now! The weak are fleeing or hiding indoors, and no one is keeping the dangerous scumbags of the city in check... Aren’t you all ashamed of yourselves?!” June shouted, making the adventurers tremble.

The sight made Tiana realize something—it was June’s strength that kept the rowdy Manhunt adventurers in check.

June continued to heat up. “And to make matters worse, those evil-doing bastards aren’t content with striking fear into the people of our city. Now they have some dumb secret society, and they’re putting out bounties of their own. They’re even targeting valued coworkers of ours.”

“We can’t let them get away with this!”

“Yeah! They’ll pay for thinkin’ they can mess with us!”

“How dare they smear mud on Lady Tiana’s name!”

A few of the adventurers shouted angrily, and June tore up the wanted posters.

“Damn straight! Show those wannabes what it means to be a *real* bounty hunter! They’ll regret stepping on our turf!” she shouted.

The assembled crowd all cheered in response. Among them were adventurers who had picked fights with the Survivors and others who'd taken bets on whether they would succeed at a certain bounty. The members of Manhunt had their own sense of justice, and they might be here to do a job, but it couldn't be denied they had rushed here because they knew the Survivors were in danger. Tiana had to repress the urge to cry.

"I swear... I guess you guys are good for something after all," she said half-insultingly, and the adventurers howled with laughter.

"...By the way, I was surprised to learn you guys were the Lovely Paladin," June said.

"Huh? I—I don't know what you're talking about," Tiana responded, avoiding June's eyes and feigning ignorance.

Not one to be fooled so easily, June laughed. "There's no need to hide it anymore. It's clear now who our friends and our enemies are. That said, Vilma was livid, though."

"...That's too bad," Tiana said.

Vilma was an Adventurers Guild employee, and it was at her request that the Survivors had explored the Labyrinth of Bonds and found the Sword of Bonds inside. The sword they'd given her, however, was an inferior replica. They had no other choice but to admit they'd tricked her.

"Let's talk plans. What are you going to do?" June asked.

"Hmm... I haven't thought about much other than protecting myself because of the bounty. One of our members is sick, too," Tiana said. She explained Karan's situation, and June's face clouded over.

"I see..."

"She's right. We have to get all the people with bounties on their heads and the noncombatants out of here," said Joseph the producer.

"What the—?! Since when were you here?" June asked.

"I work here... I am grateful to you for coming to save us. If you don't mind, however, could you please get your adventurers to calm down a little? I have

prepared a waiting room for them,” he said.

“Oh, sorry about that,” responded June. She left the room to scold the adventurers, who were causing trouble for the guards and remaining idols in Starmine Hall. Joseph breathed a sigh of relief, but he still looked tired.

“You look exhausted,” Tiana said.

“That I am. I have many meetings to attend, and you know the state of Starmine Hall. We were blindsided by the Thunderbolt Corporation’s betrayal. We would actually like to discuss that and a few other matters with you.”

At Joseph’s suggestion, he, Tiana, June, and Diamond sat down for another meeting.

“First of all, I want to thank you on behalf of Jewelry Production. You saved us. You don’t want to become an idol by any chance, do you?” Diamond asked.

“No way. The music’s too gaudy for me,” replied June.

“I’m pretty sure your adventurers would support you, though. You might feel differently once you see them wave their fans and magic glow sticks for you. That’s a view you can only get from onstage.”

“Please, stop. I’d rather do anything else,” June said, the distaste clear on her face. The others laughed a little.

Tiana couldn’t help but respect Diamond for remembering to be an idol and lift people’s spirits even in this difficult situation.

“Anyway, we’re here to work. We’ll accept money anytime, but there’s no need to get sentimental. This is our problem, too,” June told her.

“You’re talking about the bounties, right? They’re offering rewards for me, the Survivors, and... Were there more?” Diamond asked.

June nodded. “All of the Survivors are on the wanted posters, as well as both of you, Diamond and Joseph. There’s also the magazine editor Olivia Taylor, the detective Hector Woods, the dining consultant Samurialie, and Credit King Marde, president of the Dineez Adventurers Credit Union. That’s all for now,” June said.

The rest listened with serious expressions but had grown confused toward the

end.

“Hmm... You lost me with those last couple of names,” Tiana said.

“Isn’t Credit King Marde a historical figure...?” Diamond asked. “I’m not sure why his name is there. June, are there any specific criminal charges on the wanted posters?”

June shook her head. “Marde’s the only poster without a sketch. It only says the name and bounty. I don’t know any more than you,” she said, leaning back with some frustration.

Questions about the bounties weighed on them all until Joseph cleared his throat.

“There is much we don’t know, but we could use these bounties to inform our actions,” he said.

“Oh yeah, good point,” Diamond agreed.

“We may not know why, but the demon-god worshippers see the people on these wanted posters as obstructions to their plans. It may benefit us to take them into custody,” Joseph said.

Tiana started to agree but then shook her head. “That’s true, but only if we can protect them. The Manhunt adventurers are here to help, but would we really be able to hold out against a full-strength attack from Dead Man’s Balloon?”

June grimaced. “Honestly, we may be screwed. Engineer Bellocchio and Animator Havok are a terrifying combination. I don’t know much about them beyond rumors and what I’ve read in reports, though.”

“...I don’t know anything about Havok, either, but I trained closely under Bellocchio at school,” Tiana told them.

“I’d like to hear your view of him,” Diamond said. Tiana began to consider her instructor—her *former* instructor.

“...He’s the strongest mage I’ve ever met. I’ve seen a lot of mages since coming to Labyrinth City, but I still feel that way. Most of the instructors at my aristocratic school knew nothing beyond classroom learning and spent their

time researching nonpractical magic, but Bellocchio was different. His practical ability and academic knowledge are both elite.”

Bellocchio had impressed on Tiana the importance of both classroom learning and fieldwork.

“Lightning magic is his specialty. He performs the spell Lightning Strike with much greater strength and precision than me, and he can also create artificial spirits like Lightning Bird by mixing electricity and mana... But the biggest threat might be his ability to overload magic items that use electromagnetic force,” Tiana continued.

“Overload? What do you mean?” June asked.

“Every magic item has a magic stone at its core that is susceptible to electricity. Sometimes basic friction will create enough of a charge to make the item malfunction,” explained Tiana.

“That’s a remnant of the Originators’ civilization, when people used electricity in their everyday lives. That was also when the fundamentals of magic theory were established and magic stones created. Magic stones were designed with a hole to allow in electricity. Commercial magic items are made to resist electricity, but...” Diamond trailed off, and Tiana continued for her.

“If you intentionally expand that hole, you can cause a magic item to go haywire. Overloading the magic stone will either magnify the items effects many times over or just blow it up. Bellocchio has become an expert on magic items from researching this phenomenon, and he probably has plenty of weapons I don’t know about. He earned the nickname *Engineer* because of his skill and knowledge in that field. He can create new magic items as freely as people did in ancient times.”

“Well, that doesn’t bode well,” June grumbled. “What about Havok? She’s obviously very skilled at using dolls...”

“I can tell you about her,” Diamond said. “She’s the president of the Thunderbolt Corporation and a master magic item and doll maker. She’s called ‘Animator’ because she has such perfect control of her dolls, it’s as if she gives them souls... I didn’t know she was *this* good until today, though.”

“You called her dolls Mystic Ballerinas, right?” Tiana asked.

“Yeah. They were originally developed for stage productions. The Thunderbolt Corporation promoted them as a replacement for background dancers, but it didn’t really work out because of issues with onstage security and their ability to follow choreography. Their costumes are stunning, though, and they move so smoo—”

“That’s enough about the dolls.” June cut her off.

“A-anyway, my point is that no one is better than Havok when it comes to making dolls that move with humanlike fluidity. I never even considered that she would mobilize them into a well-coordinated squad of troops,” Diamond said.

“Yeah. I’ve heard of people using dolls to fight monsters... But these were definitely not made for that purpose,” June said sullenly.

“What do you mean?” Tiana asked.

“Those are meant for killing people. Their short stature makes them difficult to hit, and they’re strong enough to kill with a blade. If they can travel far enough from their puppet master, they’d be perfect for assassination, too,” said June.

“As if that wasn’t bad enough, the Thunderbolt Corporation helped to make our barrier. What a disaster... I’ll make her pay for betraying me,” Diamond said, fire burning in her usually cheerful eyes.

The sight reminded Tiana of how terrifying Diamond could be. At the same time, it was reassuring to have a boss who was practically immortal.

“But what should we do? There’s not much reason to fear a brute force attack from the adventurers who have joined Dead Man’s Balloon, but it’ll be difficult to protect anyone here when there’s a risk of assassination,” said Diamond.

“...We should evacuate everyone who can’t fight,” Tiana suggested.

Diamond nodded. “I agree. I want you to stay and defend this place.”

“Okay... Wait, what?” Tiana said, staring at Diamond. She’d agreed before realizing what had been said.

“I’ll take Karan and the idols away from here, and I’ll look after another one of Dead Man’s Balloon’s targets, too. Can you all hold down the fort here in the meantime?” Diamond asked.

“...Aren’t you really strong?” Tiana asked.

“Not by myself. I’d be more confident in my abilities if I had a barrier and magic tools like the ones from the Thunderbolt Corporation, but now that they’ve turned on us... Anyway, I’m counting on you, my new head of security!”

“You’ve got to be kidding me...”

Tiana’s initial reaction was one of annoyance, but then she realized this plan might work for her. Her main desire was to protect Karan; she wouldn’t have to worry about her if Diamond took her away to hide.

Plus, Tiana should be the one to settle things with Bellocchio.

“...You’ll increase the size of our reward. And once you’ve ensured you’re all safe, send us reinforcements. I don’t want you blaming me if your precious concert hall gets blown to smithereens,” Tiana told her.

“You’ve got it. And don’t worry—we’ll have a chance of winning if you hold out for two weeks,” said Diamond.

“...Two weeks?” repeated Tiana. That was an oddly specific amount of time.

“That’s how long I think it’ll take to finish what I’m working on,” Diamond explained.

“I assume there’s no hope of you sending us any high-ranking adventurers?”

“I’d like to, but I doubt they’ll quell the Stampede in time... I promise I have a card up my sleeve, though.”

“So, in the meantime, we’re helpless here,” Tiana said sourly.

“Please, Tiana? I know I’m asking you to do the impossible!” Diamond pleaded desperately, clinging to her.

“Okay, fine! At least let me complain about it still! And let me go!” Tiana snapped, tearing Diamond off her. “I won’t let this stronghold fall under my watch. I can’t imagine a worse opponent to suffer a siege from, but I was a

straight-A student.”

“What does that have to do with anything?” June asked, confused.

Tiana stuffed a leaf into her pipe and lit it with her igniter as if to announce that she was done with the conversation. The igniter Bellocchio gave her had been broken, and the one she was using now had been given to her by an idol. It wasn’t anything fancy, but she liked the feel of the elegantly simple matte steel in her hands.

“Oh, don’t you know? It’s a noble girl’s duty to know how to defend against a siege,” she said, puffing out smoke and smiling confidently.

Noble girls were expected to learn a number of skills. Manners and etiquette came first and foremost, and young ladies often studied music or dance as well. Essentially, they learned what was required of them to function as wives of the gentry. They left housework to the maids so they could entertain guests their husband brought over, and they hosted soirees to maintain friendly relations with other noble families.

That, however, was their role in peacetime, and an entirely different set of duties was expected of them during wartime. One of these skills was performing healing magic. They also sometimes fought with long-distance magic, or a spear or bow. In ancient times in the Holy Kingdom of Dineez, men fought as knights on horse or dragon back, while women stayed behind to defend the estate or fortress from enemy attack.

Traces of that culture remained in Tiana’s aristocratic school. There was a subject called Siege Defense, which was a five-course curriculum consisting of Introduction to Siege Defense; Siege Defense Theory: Commanding Combat; Siege Defense Theory: Resource Management; Siege Defense Theory: General Management; and Practical Siege Defense.

“Ms. Tiana! The food distribution is ready!”

“Lady Tiana! Our fighters on the west side are almost at their breaking point! They can’t take much more! What should we do?!”

“Their cleric won’t wake up! They’re all outta mana!”

“Take turns eating, starting with Squad A! Eat fast before it gets cold! I’ll send

a construction squad to the west side, so hold out a little longer! Grab building materials from the underground storehouse and drop them on the enemy!" Tiana ordered.

A large whiteboard had replaced the magic item on the stage of Starmine Hall. A map of Starmine Hall and its surrounding area had been drawn in black marker, and different colored magnets had been placed to denote the positions of ally and enemy camps. Tiana was currently busy analyzing and managing information from scouts, regularly updating the whiteboard to reflect the situation, and discussing strategy with Joseph from the agency and guild employees.

"There's a force of dolls hounding us on the southern wall, and failed adventurers are attacking us from the west," Tiana said.

"The western attack may be a diversion. I believe the dolls to be the greater threat," said Joseph.

The adventurers voiced varying opinions. The debate grew heated, but it came to an end when a report arrived announcing that the situation to the south had worsened considerably. Tiana and a group of adventurers left the stage to help repel the dolls.

Not all of the dolls at the southern wall fought with knives. They had also brought a catapult, which took ten to twenty dolls to operate, and they were using it to launch stones, building materials, and even themselves at the barrier.

"Where'd they get one of those?!" one adventurer shouted, seeing the primitive wooden war machine.

"It's a stage prop made as part of an ancient war set! But they're using it for real... It's dangerous," explained an idol who had stayed behind to help carry the wounded.

The sight was a little nostalgic for Tiana. Her school was old, and it had a stock of historical weapons such as catapults and ballistas that weren't used in modern day. She even got to shoot them once and still remembered how much of a blast it had been.

"Make destroying that catapult the first priority! You can disable it by cutting

the ropes beneath it! Do it quickly, or they'll force their way through the barrier!" Tiana commanded.

The adventurers quickly formed a rapid response team and headed outside the wall to follow Tiana's orders to sabotage the catapult. The explosions and screams melded into one as Tiana and the others fought, and they ended up successfully defending the stronghold for another day.

"Listen up, everyone! All injured are to visit the relief squad! That applies to anyone who feels even a little off, not just if you're bleeding! And if any of you try to make a move on the nurses, I'll kill you myself!" Tiana shouted.

The voices around her echoed with laughter and joking complaints about her threat. Tiana's stern voice had a reassuring effect—it made everyone believe that they were okay, that they could continue to hold out.

Tiana's command had been flawless. A troubling number of people had suffered minor injuries, but so far no one had died. The only severe injuries had been from chronic issues worsening.

"You're not half bad. I knew you were a skilled mage, but you're a leader, too. My roughnecks and the idols have all accepted your authority," June said in the makeshift conference room on the stage.

"Gee, thanks," Tiana responded.

"Someone's in a bad mood. Is something bothering you?"

"...The battle is turning in our favor. I don't know how many dolls we've destroyed, but the enemy's resources must be finite."

"Then what's the problem?"

"We're missing the essential ingredient we need to overcome this siege."

"What's that?"

"A rear guard. We can't win without reinforcements, so we have to drag this out until then. It would be much better if we could take the attack to them."

"True. Should we, then?"

"The enemy's trying to bait us into it."

“Are you sure you’re not overthinking this?”

“...How many days has it been since the siege began?”

“Ten.”

June pointed at the whiteboard with her chin as if to say Tiana could’ve checked herself. They had drawn a disorderly schedule and written down information including the amount of supplies remaining and an estimate for how many more days they could hold out.

“Something about this whole situation just feels wrong. They’ve given us nothing but simple problems you learn how to deal with in school or knight training exercises,” Tiana said.

“Maybe it’s all those weird dolls know how to do,” suggested June.

“That’s what’s strange. They’re following textbook siege strategies to the letter. They’re even using ancient weapons you’d only see in a textbook. The demon-god worshippers should have more formidable magic items and weapons for their attack on the city.”

“That’s...a good point. They shouldn’t have any need to patch up and use out-of-date weapons. Then what are they doing?”

“I don’t know.”

“Okay. That’s fine. But we need to figure out how to respond. Do you want to do this according to the textbook, or find a new strategy?”

Tiana was grateful for June’s presence; she always knew just how to respond when Tiana asked her about something. It was clearly no accident that she had gained the respect of the unruly Manhunt adventurers. Tiana also wasn’t always the clearest in her speech; sometimes it was difficult to tell whether she was giving order or simply complaining, but June knew just how to translate to their subordinates and other adventurers.

“What are you doing working at Manhunt?” Tiana asked.

“Where’s this coming from?” June responded.

“You’re clearly comfortable planning and giving orders on a battlefield. Shouldn’t someone as talented as you be able to work your way up to guild

headquarters?”

“Climbing the corporate ladder isn’t all it’s made out to be. Too much work for too little reward.”

“You’re not wrong there.”

June let out an exaggerated sigh, and Tiana let slip a chuckle.

“...Halmi Bellocchio is an eccentric man. Both his magic and his way of thinking are wholly unique. Even the school’s staff seemed to have trouble knowing what to do with him. People always used to say there had to be a more fitting job for him than teaching. They were making fun of him, but they were praising him, too,” Tiana said.

“Well, he turned out to be a demon-god worshipper, so that checks out,” joked June.

“That’s not what I mean. The man’s a true genius. He’s a little crazy in the way that S-rank adventurers are. I know he can come up with nastier siege tactics than this.”

Tiana had received perfect grades in her siege defense classes. She had been boasting about that for the last ten days to play a strong leader and keep up morale, which June understood and supported.

There was something she hadn’t told anyone, however. Back when she was a student, Tiana would often get overexcited by her good grades and challenge Bellocchio to tabletop military simulations, a board game called tabby top in which players fought to take each other’s pieces, and card games. She lost miserably every single time.

She sometimes got so invested in the games that she would forget her studies completely and play until sunset, leading to her getting scolded and sent trudging home with a mountain of homework. They would have a good match every now and then, but Tiana would always realize later that he had guided her into a stalemate.

“...Is he stalling for time? Even though they have a huge advantage as the aggressors?” Tiana wondered aloud.

Bellocchio usually drew her into a tie simply because he wanted to kill time. He would do it while waiting for the results of an experiment that involved filling a plant seed or microbe with mana to see how it reacted over time, or roasting coffee beans for up to two hours and calling it an experiment when he simply wanted coffee. But he never wasted time unless he had something to wait for.

“...He said we would have the pleasure of his company,” Tiana mused.

“Could it be a trap?” June asked, pointing out the obvious.

“Of course,” Tiana said. “But it’s not time to gamble yet. We don’t know what they’re waiting for, but it’s not like we’re sitting here without a plan. Diamond is doing something. We just need to endure for now.”

“Got it. We’re counting on you, boss.”

The Sword of Resonance



She had lost again.

The first defeat she suffered was due to her own foolishness. A series of terrible mistakes led her to collapse and lose consciousness at the bottom of a labyrinth. When she awoke, her skin was drenched in sweat, and her throat was as dry as the sand around her. She had dragged herself to her feet, feeling as if she had become some kind of sand monster, and trudged back to the city, drinking from dirty puddles on the way. She'd only barely made it back alive.

Her fortune turned around after that. She'd made many valuable connections and recovered fully. She thought she had gotten stronger since then, and not just in terms of her monster-killing ability. She also believed she had gained the awareness and wisdom necessary to survive in the human-populated labyrinth that was this city. That was the desire of the person who reached out to her, and it eventually became her desire as well. She knew she had to change if she wanted to protect him.

She didn't have a deep reason for sacrificing herself to protect Diamond. She just felt that if she backed down in that moment, all she had gained would end up meaning nothing. That strength, wisdom, and courage weren't just to make her better than humans.

He would have stood in the way of that attack, too, she was sure. Armed with that knowledge, she had nothing to fear.

"Why, Diamond? Why did this have to happen to her?"

"I'm sorry, Daffodil."

Unfortunately, the cost of her sacrifice was great. She hadn't died, nor had she lost a limb. But the prognosis was not good.

“Ms. Daffodil, Ms. Diamond...I will begin by explaining her condition,” a priest said, interrupting Daffodil and Diamond’s argument.

He said a change in her internal mana would cause her stamina and muscle strength to decline significantly, and she would no longer be able to use her natural dragonian skills such as breathing fire or enveloping her body in flames. Her eyesight would also suffer. She wouldn’t go blind, but she would become terribly nearsighted and struggle to see in the dark, and she would need assistance when going outside.

“That’s probably because dragonian eyes are just as special as their horns and tail. They’re filled with strong mana that allows dragonians to retain their vision in harsh environments,” said Diamond.

“Our eyes consume a tiny amount of our body’s mana to achieve that. If the star curse has cut off her mana, her eyesight will suffer much more than other people’s,” explained Daffodil resignedly.

“Daffodil...”

“Well...this might be for the best. She was always going to get hurt working as an adventurer. She’s lucky that this happened to her before she died... Karan will accept that eventually.”

“You can’t say that, Daffodil. Only Karan can choose to say whether her own injury was ‘for the best.’ We can’t speak for her until we know how she feels.”

“Don’t be ridiculous! No person is that strong! I wouldn’t expect you to understand that!”

Daffodil reached out to tear off the blanket wrapped around Karan.

“What are you doing, Daffodil?!” Diamond yelled.

“I’m taking her back to the countryside. Thank you for looking after her,” Daffodil said.

“Are you just gonna carry a patient halfway across the country?! What about your son?!”

“What do you think? Ares will come with us.”

“That’s even more reckless! You need to calm down!”

"I am calm! Do you have a better idea?!"

"...Shut up. I'm trying to sleep," said the girl on the bed.

Karan had spoken. Just like that, the other two fell silent.

"You were awake...?" Daffodil asked.

"I was drifting in and out. I've been groggy, but I heard what you said," Karan replied before yawning widely. She rubbed her eyes and stretched her stiff upper body. "I'm hungry."

The priest rushed out of the room to get some food.

"Phew, that was good," Karan said.

She'd been given a tray of white bread, thin soup with vegetable scraps and bacon, and a large helping of stewed eggplants and bell peppers. It hadn't taken her long to clean her plate.

"Was that enough food? I'm sure that was nothing compared to the restaurant meals you're used to," Diamond asked.

"It was fine. It had a gentle flavor," Karan said with a satisfied smile. Diamond and Daffodil smiled back, relieved to see her in a good mood.

"So, Karan—" Daffodil began.

"I'm not going back," Karan interrupted, looking away irritably. "I know about my condition. It's my body, after all. I can tell something's not right."

"That'll make this easy, then." Diamond's eyes grew cold. "You have to retire as an adventurer. Your condition will not improve as long as you are afflicted by that curse," she said, speaking the harsh truth.

"Okay," Karan replied, sounding surprisingly indifferent.

"...You accept that?" Diamond asked.

"Diamond, I have a request," Karan said.

"A request? What is it?" Diamond asked, looking taken aback.

"Take me to the bottom floor of the Labyrinth of Bonds. And don't tell anyone about it."

“...Why do you want to go there?” Diamond asked.

“There are replicas of the Sword of Bonds, and it’s where we put the Sword of Ruin.”

Surprise flashed across Diamond’s face, but it was quickly replaced by a mischievous smile. “Nope. Not happening. Rejected. Try again later.”

“...Why not?” Karan asked with a sullen look.

“Because it’s obvious you want to become a holy sword wielder to be able to fight again. Also, Bond has sovereignty over the Labyrinth of Bonds. I can’t break through another holy sword’s security. You’ll have to convince Bond. And your cousin here,” Diamond said.

“I need to do this, Daffodil,” Karan said.

“No you don’t, you idiot!” Daffodil scolded her. “Do you really have no intention of going back home? You’ve done well here. Everyone will praise you for your magnificent adventure. That was a hero’s feat you pulled on that stage.”

Her words were kind even as she fumed with anger. Karan recognized that, but she still shook her head.

“Daffy...thanks. But you’re wrong,” she said.

“What do you mean?” Daffodil asked.

“I know my body is being weakened by the curse. But that’s no reason to give up. The others are definitely going to try to cure me somehow.”

“...Just because your party members think that way doesn’t mean you have to,” Daffodil said, but resignation was creeping into her voice. She’d realized she wasn’t going to convince Karan.

“...Karan. I’m not saying this to hurt you. The Sword of Evolution works by forcibly drawing out the mana and potential hidden within a person’s body. I don’t think he would be able to do much for you with your body’s mana output hampered as it is now,” Diamond told her.

“Huh?” Karan blinked with shock. “Oh... Well, I’ll have to think of something else, then.”

She moved on quickly, however, simply sighing without a hint of despair on her face.

“I see you’re not giving up,” said Diamond.

Karan nodded. “I’ll give up if it becomes clear there’s absolutely no hope. But not until then. You went through the same thing, Diamond. Your strength declined until you were no stronger than an ordinary human. Then you went on adventures with your original wielder, took her name, became an idol like her, and now you’re here.”

“Don’t you think that might’ve had something to do with me being a holy sword?”

“Nope. Holy swords are no different from people. They just get annoying ideas because of how long they live. Some are strong, some are weak, and some spend all their time singing. That’s all,” Karan said, speaking as if that was no big deal.

Karan wasn’t just trying to put on a brave face. She simply thought it was important to never give up. She was beginning to think that was the mark of true strength, something Diamond and the other idols had taught her.

“...Regardless, the odds of recovery are low. Even if you do find another way to gain the strength to fight, there’s no guarantee you’d be able to defeat the enemy. Strength is a cruel thing. Sometimes there are heights a person can’t reach no matter how hard they try,” Diamond said grimly.

“...Okay.”

“That’s why you’re going to fight in your own way.”

“Huh? My own way?”

Karan wasn’t sure what Diamond meant.

“Daffodil. I promise I won’t send Karan into combat. But I can grant her wish.”

“What do you...?” Daffodil began, but she trailed off when she saw the look in Diamond’s eyes. “...Are you saying what I think you’re saying? Have you chosen her?”

“Can I?” Diamond asked pleadingly.

"I thought... Weren't you going to choose one of the idols? But I guess this might be the safest way...", Daffodil said thoughtfully.

"Karan will just try to escape if we leave her like this."

"That's for sure."

"No I won't! And what are you talking about?!" Karan shouted, growing flustered.

She had a really bad feeling about whatever was going on, which only intensified when Diamond dropped her bombshell.

"Karan. Would you be willing to enter a contract with me?"

Karan's mouth fell open. Diamond's words had caught her completely off guard.

"A contract?"

"I'm asking if you want to become my wielder, just like how Nick is Bond's wielder."

"...Didn't you say that it's impossible for a person to wield you?" Karan asked, remembering what Diamond had told them beneath Starmine Hall.

"Yeah. I could perform a transfer of power similar to what other holy swords do with their wielders, but I wasn't able to make an official one-on-one contract. I've also mutated completely from my original design, so even if I could have entered a contract with a wielder, it would have had no effect," Diamond explained.

"Okay," Karan said.

"So I reforged myself. I gave myself a new sword form and function that matches my mutated state."

"...Huh?"

Karan tilted her head in confusion.

"Come with me. I think you're going to like this."

They left the room, Daffodil pushing Karan in a wheelchair, and went to a different room underneath Starmine Hall. Diamond had brought the Survivors

here before, and it was where the holy jewel—Diamond’s true body—was stored.

The holy jewel was gone, replaced by some kind of weapon. It had a pommel and a grip, which was secured to the blade by a series of rivets. The blade itself was unusually thin for the size of the grip, and small bars of metal twisted around the blade in a spiral. It was a sword, but most would wonder if it could be called one at all.

Karan and Daffodil were both bewildered, but they quickly realized what it was. The handle and grip were too familiar.

“What did you do?! That sword was important to me!” Karan shouted.

It was her beloved weapon, the Dragonbone Sword. Or rather, it used to be. Karan was angered by the sight of what had been done to it. She jumped out of her wheelchair but immediately grew dizzy, and Daffodil rushed forward to support her.

“H-hey, Karan! You’re still recovering!”

“B-but...,” Karan stuttered.

“I can see you repaired the sword, Diamond. But...you need to explain yourself. I had heard about some of your plans, but I didn’t know you were going to use this,” said Daffodil.

Both dragonians looked at Diamond reproachfully, and she rushed to explain.

“C-come on, it was shattered. There was a big hole in the middle of the blade. Restoring it to the way it was would’ve been impossible. I did manage to keep its shape to an extent,” Diamond said.

Her words reminded Karan of when Callios attacked her. He had shattered the Dragonbone Sword, just as Diamond said. Karan hung her head sadly, remembering that she had already lost it.

“You still should’ve told us you were repairing it. Is it even a sword anymore?” Daffodil asked uncertainly.

Diamond nodded. “Yeah. And not just any sword—it’s a holy sword. Or I guess I should say I’m about to make it one,” she said, pointing at what used to be the

Dragonbone Sword.

Karan finally realized what Diamond was envisioning.

“You mean...you’re going to make this your body?”

“Yep.”

“And I’m going to wield it?”

“Yep.”

“...Will I be able to fight with it?”

“No.” Diamond calmly shook her head. “It should make up for the stamina you’ve lost and help you protect yourself, as well as reduce the effects of your curse. But it will not heal you, and I did not make it with exploring labyrinths and fighting monsters in mind.”

“Then what can it do?”

“It resonates sound, which will allow you to hear better and give you a way of accomplishing your goals without engaging in combat. That is the only way for you to fight right now.”

“Will I be able to use it?”

“It’s easy to use but difficult to master.”

“Can I use it to save Nick and the others?”

“That depends on you.”

Karan briefly shut her eyes. It didn’t take her long to reach a decision.

“Okay. I know what I want to do. Please become my sword.”

“I will do as you ask. Lend me your soul,” Diamond said, matching Karan’s strong resolve.

“Shouldn’t you both give this a little more thought? This is a big decision to make on the spot,” Daffodil said with a weak smile, but she seemed to have resigned herself to this outcome.

“Sorry, Daffy.”

“Don’t worry. I’ll protect her.”

Diamond reached out and touched the strange new sword. Color-shifting light shone from her body, and she transformed into a jewel that fit into the sword's guard. The remains of the Dragonbone Sword came to life. It floated into the air, then spoke in a resonant voice.

“Young adventurer. You have known love, overcome all manner of lies and schemes, and reached my starlit stage. I recognize you as a champion of love. Know that your affection will illuminate the endless darkness. I grant you a radiance that will steal the gazes of all creatures under the sun.”



Karan rose from her wheelchair. She planted both feet firmly on the floor without Daffodil's support and grabbed the holy sword.

Karan wanted to try out the sword right away, but it had to wait. First came Nick's visit after getting out of prison. It had been a long time since the incident on the stage, and she was so excited to see him that she temporarily forgot about her condition. She planned on cheering him up.

Instead, he ended up scolding her with biting words. She spoke to him kindly, wanting to comfort and encourage him after what had surely been an exhausting stay in prison. In her elation from receiving a holy sword, she had forgotten that her condition had burdened the party and would serve as motivation for them to fight dangerous battles on her behalf.

Nick had told her to consider retirement. He got mad at her for not letting him settle things with Garos. He wasn't actually angry, though—it was clear she had hurt him so badly that he couldn't even blame her for what she'd done.

Karan had been arrogant. She was forced to accept that.

"All right, all right. Don't pout over a little fight," Diamond said, shrugging as Karan buried herself under the covers of her bed, making her look like a baby turtle.

"...I'm not pouting."

"Are you okay with letting him lay into you like that?"

"Nick apologized. And that wasn't a fight."

"There's no greater linguistic weapon than the words *I'm sorry*. You're still a child if you don't know that," Diamond said with a sigh.

"Excuse me?!"

Karan flipped up her covers and glared at Diamond.

Diamond wasn't so easily intimidated. "If you're frustrated by what he said, respond with your actions. You hurt him by trying to save his life. Next time, try saving his heart."

Karan was speechless, unable to believe what she had just heard Diamond

say.

“You shouldn’t need to ask me what to do. You can’t win the heart of the person you love without clashing and coming out the other side,” Diamond said.

“...But it’s true I didn’t trust him. I tried to save the day without telling him anything. Now he’s lost faith in me.”

“So what? You guys literally formed your party because you could relate on one thing: your inability to trust others. You made rules to help yourselves continue living as adventurers even when you start questioning everyone around you. If Nick doesn’t trust you, prove to him that you were in the right. Isn’t that how you all operate?”

“Ah,” Karan gasped.

That was how the Survivors had begun—by dividing responsibilities and establishing rules that would allow them to operate as a party without mutual trust. Hadn’t they made those rules exactly for a time like this?

“I don’t think you were wrong to doubt that Nick could beat Garos. He’s been under a lot of pressure. He could’ve easily died, and it’s possible defeating Garos would have worn him out mentally even more. That’s why you did what you did. It might have been an error of judgment, of course, but it’s perfectly fine to look back on it now and decide there was a different answer. What do you think?” Diamond asked.

“...I didn’t do the right thing. I think I went about it all the wrong way. But I didn’t want Nick to get hurt, and I don’t regret that. There were many things I didn’t know or couldn’t do anything about, and he would’ve been hurt no matter what.”

“Nick is dealing with a lot. His former party members betrayed him, and now his most reliable friend may never work as an adventurer again. There’s a chance that will put his mind in a place where he’s unable to make the right decisions.”

The calm way Diamond said that worried Karan. She had spoken like a doctor delivering a prognosis, which was quite different from her usual personality. It meant something.

“...Nick’s a bit of a mystery, isn’t he?” Karan said.

“How so?” Diamond asked.

“His history with Combat Masters doesn’t make sense. Why did they adopt him, and why did they kick him out? There has to be a reason.”

“I have questions about that, too. Nick doesn’t know anything...though obviously they never would have told him.”

“I want to learn about Nick. And I don’t mean just what he knows about himself—I want to learn about what he doesn’t know, too, including everything related to Combat Masters and what happened at the concert.”

“How about a little quiz?”

Karan looked at Diamond dubiously. “What kind of quiz?”

“Say you wanted to know what Nick and Combat Masters accomplished as a party and what kind of lives they led. What would be the best way to learn about that objectively?” Diamond asked. “Oh, and you can’t ask him directly.”

Karan considered her words.

She couldn’t claim to know everything about Nick. He had a habit of fiddling with the back of his neck with his left hand when he woke up in the morning. After washing his face, he would stretch, starting with his neck and working his way down to his shoulders, elbows, wrists, back, knees, and finally his ankles. He went jogging on sunny days and did strength training in weird poses in his room when it rained. For breakfast he liked brown bread soaked in soup, and sometimes he would cook rice to make rice porridge. When he made Labyrinth Chicken, he would cut the chili peppers in half to throw away the seeds and put in twice as many as there were people. He treasured his quill and knife but went through pieces of armor like they were nothing.

Many other details came to mind, including his favorite foods and fighting styles, but those were all things Karan had seen with her own eyes. There was a lot she didn’t know. She would’ve been ignorant about his complicated feelings toward Garos if he hadn’t opened up to her. There was so much more she wouldn’t know unless she asked him.

What could a person who knew nothing about Nick do to learn about him? Karan brooded on that question until an image of Nick writing with his quill came to mind.

“...The easiest way would be to read his guild records. But that would only show information about his adventures and nothing about his personal life,” she said.

“Then what would you look at next?” Diamond asked.

“His ledger.”

“Why?”

“A ledger is an adventurer’s personal history. If they go on a big adventure and earn a sizable reward, they’ll write that in their earnings book. If the records show hospital fees or that they gave a significant sum to a sanctuary, that would suggest a major failure. All shopping for the party would be recorded there as well.”

“A person can write anything, though. How do you know the adventurer isn’t lying or covering something up? They also could’ve forgotten to get a receipt, or inflated the cost on it so they could pocket some money without anyone knowing.”

“The small lies would add up to create inconsistencies. The money in the safe and the amount on the ledger wouldn’t match. Putting too little money in the safe would make the other party members poor and whoever kept the rest of the money rich.”

“Right. You can say that about anything. Small lies always add up to a major breakdown. You can also start from that breakdown and find the small lies to figure out what they wanted to hide.” Diamond looked pleased by Karan’s answer, but then her expression grew grim. “Oh wait, aren’t you bad with numbers and reading?”

“Yeah. If this kind of research was easy enough for someone like me to do, then Hector would’ve already found Callios. You’re telling me to investigate like him, right?”

“I appreciate your high opinion of me, but there are some things even I can’t

do,” a man said, entering the hospital room.

“Took you long enough,” Diamond said.

“Sorry. I haven’t trained a newbie in a while, so I wasn’t sure where to start,” Hector apologized without an ounce of sincerity.

“Training? What?” Karan said.

“That’s right. I’m about to send you on a crash course. You’re gonna learn about simple civil and adventurer law, how to tail and question people, how to investigate documents. I’ll even teach you a smattering of bookkeeping and library skills.”

Hector smiled wickedly as he watched Karan’s confusion grow. “In other words, I’m going to train you as a detective.”

Karan had never felt so busy in her life.

Every day she woke up, ate breakfast, and spent the rest of the morning studying. Hector told her she was going to learn “basic” law, but the level he was demanding was fairly high. A teacher from a preparatory school for training government officials came on most days to plop down thick textbooks before her and give Karan lessons. An accountant who worked with Jewelry Production would also come to teach her bookkeeping. She occasionally received visits from a history or literature teacher, too. Hector clearly had a good idea of where her education was lacking.

Hector came to her room in the afternoons to teach her tricks for questioning and tailing people. This was significantly easier than her morning curriculum—Karan was already proficient at speaking without drawing suspicion and following someone while staying out of sight.

Consequently, her afternoons also came to be dominated by classroom learning. She spent this time analyzing Hector’s investigation records to study how he looked into different types of people. She read an investigation into a husband’s affair, an investigation into a fiancé’s behavior, a search for a lost pet, and a search for a son who had broken off contact with his family. Hector had even been hired by the Sun Knights to help a man who wanted to leave a gang, and to bring down a factory that was producing contraband. He had made

a career out of the troubles of a great variety of complicated people, and Karan found his records exciting. They broadened her view of the world.

She received support for her physical vision as well in the form of glasses made specially for her. They didn't restore her eyesight to what it was before the curse, but she went from being unsteady on her feet to being able to manage walking in relatively lower light. She couldn't go outside, though, so the glasses were mainly meant for reading.

"I know you're tired, but I've got one more thing for you today," Hector said, spreading out some documents before her. "These are the financial documents of a certain adventurers' party. A lot of them seem to be connected to the demon-god worshippers. I want you to take a look at them and infer what kind of adventures they went on."

"...This handwriting looks familiar," Karan said.

"I'm not surprised. It's Nick's," Hector told her.

Karan looked at the cover of the ledger with surprise. The party's name had undoubtedly been written by Nick. It said, **COMBAT MASTERS**.

"How did you get these?" she asked.

"When Nick was in Combat Masters, I would lend him a corner of my office because the inn was too loud for him to focus on his clerical work. He put the ledger in my safe 'cause he didn't want to lose it at the inn, and it was left there after he got kicked out of the party. The mandatory retention period is long past, but I was too lazy to throw it away or burn it."

"H-huh."

"Read it if you want to help Nick."

Karan looked at Hector hesitantly.

"This isn't just any lost item or journal," he said. "This is an important source of information about Argus and the demon-god worshippers," he told her.

"Really?" Karan asked, looking confused. She had wanted to learn about Nick, but she hadn't expected it would give them a lead on the demon-god worshippers.

“You don’t believe me, do you?” Hector said.

“This was all written by Nick. It will only contain information that he knew.”

“Nick had to work like a maniac to finish these financial statements while also taking care of his other daily duties. He won’t remember everything he wrote. He was always stressed out of his mind around the tax deadline.” Hector shrugged with an amused grin.

“Are you sure...?” Karan asked.

“Nick didn’t perform the final check on these documents. That was Argus. If Nick wasn’t sure how to categorize something, he would ask Argus and follow his orders. Occasionally something didn’t make sense to him, but he’d let it go if it passed inspection,” Hector explained.

Karan looked at the ledger and financial statements again. She turned the pages and noticed that his writing was much rougher than it was now. A lot of the numbers had been erased and written over with red ink. The Nick she knew would occasionally look at his ledger and comment proudly about how neat it was, or state that “this is how a ledger should be written.” She’d thought he was just tooting his own horn, but she now saw where he was coming from.

The ledger showed his party members would give him receipts late or admit they received a reward well after the fact, forcing him to constantly go back and revise what he’d written. Trying to make sure the finances agreed every single time must have been exhausting.

The Survivors were much more responsible. Karan protected the safe, Zem protected the key, and Tiana monitored the ledger and money to make sure they matched. Bond could check the amount and weight of gold and silver coins at a glance, preventing any kind of trickery when money was deposited or withdrawn from the safe.

Nick had been freed from the stress Combat Masters had put him through. Karan found the thought oddly amusing.

“...But why are you giving these to me?” Karan asked.

“I’ve gotta look into the *Lemuria* back issues. They’re apparently hiding some kinda hint, so I don’t have time to analyze these documents... Oh, and just so

you know, the Sun Knights don't know about the ledger yet, so keep it between us. I'll have to tell them about it soon, though, or they'll charge me with concealing evidence."

"Shouldn't you submit it right away, then?" she asked doubtfully.

Hector looked unconcerned. "The Sun Knights are in disarray right now. We can help solve this case faster by analyzing it ourselves. But we can always dump it on them if it's too hard for you or you'd rather not do it. Let me go take it to them right now."

"...No. Don't do that," Karan said. His suggestion was a threat. "This is a record of Nick's adventures. I'll read it."

"That's what I thought. Go ahead. I'd much rather give it to you than that Alice woman."

"Do you not like the Sun Knights?"

"It'd be more accurate to say they don't like me. They always get upset when I beat them to a scene or find evidence before them."

"That's their fault for being slow."

Hector smiled nastily in agreement. "Anyway, we'll split up the work. This is a race against time."

Karan nodded with determination.

Ten days later, Karan had read the entire Combat Masters ledger and absorbed the information like a sponge. She had also devoured any additional files Hector and Diamond had managed to get their hands on.

The ledger was a pain to figure out. It wasn't just the constant revisions. There were also many mysterious expenditures and withdrawals. Sometimes the cost for maintaining weapons would be unreasonably high, or there would be a reward for a guard job that hadn't gone through the guild. Some items Nick had likely been forced to invent to make the ledger match their money during the accounting period. She could see him racking his brain to come up with what to write while scribbling hastily in the notes column.

By contrast, the earnings book—in which Nick recorded their rewards from

the Adventurers Guild—was very impressive. It revealed what labyrinths they'd completed and what other adventures they'd gone on. They had made it through C-rank labyrinths like Pot Snake Cave with no difficulty at all, and they had occasionally ventured into B-rank labyrinths and returned without anyone getting hurt. The handwriting was much more relaxed than in the ledger, and Karan could tell that Nick had been filled with pride as he added each entry.

Karan envisioned the tale of Combat Masters as she read the financial statements, ledger, invoices, receipts, and payment statements for their successful labyrinth adventures.

They detailed Garos's time in the party. He had occasionally spent an unthinkable amount on maintenance fees for his katana, possibly because people who had the expertise were rare in Labyrinth City, and the party members frequently spent their rewards before they even received them, which must have driven Nick crazy.

There were records of an adventurer named Dean. He seemed to be a hunter, and the records suggested he bought materials to make his arrows himself. Karan got the sense he had taken things more seriously than the rest of the party. Either that, or he was an extremely picky person.

There were also records of an adventurer named Berik, a heavy warrior who fought in full armor with a large shield and protected his party members in battle. He took so many hits from monsters that he was frequently replacing his shields or ordering armor repairs. The small amount of money he spent on priests, doctors, and medicine was proof of his prowess. Nick, as a light warrior and scout, probably suffered significantly more injuries that required the attention of a priest. The records indicated Berik was skilled enough to protect the rest of the party.

Although Dean and Berik seemed like serious adventurers, they would occasionally borrow significantly more money than even Garos did in advance of a reward. Karan noticed they did this twice a year—first in the middle of summer and then at the end of the year—and quickly realized what they were doing. Those times aligned with the biggest dragon races of the year—the Estivation Festival Race in the summer and the Dragon King Cup in the winter. In the near decade that the ledger recorded, it looked like they won money only

once, and some years they lost everything they'd borrowed on a single race.

There were also records of an adventurer named Argus. He was Combat Masters' leader and breadwinner. Nearly every record of selling labyrinth boss materials featured the comment "Boss bisected with greatsword. No damage to materials," which proved he was able to kill just about any monster with one stroke. He even defeated monsters in C-rank labyrinths that were many times taller than humans without relying on magic. Nick's straightforward comments conveyed Argus's fearsome strength.

Karan also spotted enormous expenses in the ledger for which Argus was likely to blame. Enormous food and drink expenses were directly deducted from their labyrinth rewards, as if he always decided to treat every adventurer present when they got paid. He was clearly so generous with money to the point of being indifferent about it.

There were also often extra charges tacked on to inn fees and other expenses that probably came from Argus treating others. Karan couldn't believe how quickly he blew their money. He was the biggest reason Combat Masters barely made a profit despite its members being skilled enough to tackle labyrinths without magic or getting injured badly enough to see a priest.

Finally, there were records of an adventurer named Nick. The ledger detailed frequent expenses for adjusting the size of his armor as he grew in height. Many knives had to be bought for him as well, and there were quite a few medical expenses for which they received a child's discount. More money was spent on Nick than any other member of Combat Masters.

The frequency with which Nick needed new weapons and armor diminished significantly after two or three years. He had been only around ten years old when he joined the party, but he gradually added muscle and sharpened his skills as he grew into the man he was today.

Nothing said more about Nick than the ledger, which Karan was studying now. It showed how hard he had worked to control his party members' reckless spending, adjust when they got paid so they didn't run out of money, and carefully reviewed his writing and calculations multiple times to avoid getting in trouble with the tax collector. Oftentimes the tax collector would get angry

anyway and return the ledger for Nick to correct and resubmit. Once he'd finished that process, their next adventure would begin.

Karan thought that was amazing. She had always been bored watching Nick write, thinking that surely reviewing the numbers over and over again wouldn't cause them to suddenly change. Whenever Nick told her she should study as well, Karan would get defensive and tell herself that everyone had their strengths and weaknesses, but she still made an effort to sit at her desk and do as he said.

Nick had to do all this work on his own. If she continued working as an adventurer, she might one day end up in a similar position. Knowing how to keep a ledger was a necessary skill in this line of work.

"Have you noticed anything?" Hector asked.

"...Their rewards are weird. The short-term loans are, too," Karan said.

She felt Nick's kindness from the ledger, but she was filled with a great despair, too. She wondered if she would be able to share the hypothesis she'd come to with him.

"How so?" replied Hector.

"It's hard to explain. It might help if we reproduce a timetable for their cash flow. Help me."

"Urgh, do I have to?" he complained.

"I'm slow at math."

"So your solution is to dump it on me? Oh, fine."

Hector scratched his head and took out a magic abacus. Karan explained what she wanted him to calculate, and Hector started to click the beads of the abacus back and forth. Karan watched him with interest.

"...Why are you helping Nick?" she asked.

"Do you find that strange?" Hector asked, and Karan nodded. "You're not afraid to ask difficult questions. That's a strength of yours."

"...Is it?"

"I'm being serious. You'd be surprised by how many people suffer 'cause they can't do that."

"Are you avoiding my question?"

Karan gave Hector a sullen look, and he chuckled.

"What did you think after reading the ledger?" he asked.

"What do you mean?"

"I see an admirable guy in it."

Karan almost said she saw what Hector meant, but she didn't feel like agreeing with him right away, so she just listened.

"I met him about three years ago. Did I already tell you parts of this story?" Hector asked.

"You said he saved you when you were mugged," Karan said.

"Oh yeah. Nick was the same guy then that he is now. He's rough around the edges, but also annoyingly meticulous. Most young adventurers like him are sloppier and more reckless. You need that recklessness to make it as an adventurer."

"You think Nick isn't reckless? Really?"

"That's not what I mean. He's not like other adventurers who boast about their strength and pick fights with everyone who looks at him wrong. He can handle himself in a scrap, but he's got a prudence most adventurers lack."

"...Yeah."

"I, on the other hand, was a civil official who didn't mind getting his hands dirty with this kind of unsavory work. We had a connection as fellow misfits. There's a bit of an age gap between us, but I think of him as a friend."

"What did you think of the rest of Combat Masters?"

"Argus...kinda scared me. I didn't want anything to do with him. I wouldn't have been surprised to learn he was a major crime lord, and boy, was my gut right. He turned out to be a member of the most terrifying group of all."

"You said you helped Nick when he had problems with Combat Masters. Did

you notice anything then?”

“To be honest, not really. They were totally ordinary adventurers... They got up to some trouble compared to the average citizen, but there was nothing to give them away as demon-god worshippers. I mean, they were able to hide it from Nick, and he was with them the whole time. We never would’ve found out if not for recent events...”

Hector trailed off, his hands freezing on the magic abacus. He then looked at Karan, a hint of fear showing in his eyes.

“Karan. You don’t...suspect me, do you?” he asked.

“I do,” Karan said bluntly.

“Hey, what the hell?!”

“I don’t have anything against you. I appreciate all you’re doing to teach me, but that doesn’t mean I can completely trust you. Don’t you find me suspicious? From your perspective, we’re all weird people who showed up and joined Nick’s party out of nowhere.”

Hector’s tail twitched in shock. He was human and didn’t have a tail, of course, but Karan could still see the gesture in her mind’s eye.

“Now that I think about it, you weren’t too surprised to learn we had a holy sword,” she said.

“That’s ’cause I was overwhelmed by everything Diamond said to react much to Bond.”

“That...makes sense,” Karan replied. Hector breathed a sigh of relief, but her questions didn’t end there. “Still. It’s not weird for you to help Nick. But it is weird for you to help us. You could do one of your background checks on Tiana or Zem or me, and you would find reasons to worry. Why are you placing your trust in us?”

“All right, all right. That’s enough of that,” Diamond’s voice cut in just as Tiana had Hector on the back foot.

“This is an important conversation,” Karan said without sparing a glance for Diamond.

"I'm interested, too. So I'll be even more frank. Who are you, Hector?" she asked.

"Oh," said Karan. She had thought Diamond was trying to play peacemaker, but instead she was pressing Hector further. Karan let the idol talk.

"I-I'm a detective," Hector stuttered, growing more stressed.

"Then who are you working for? And don't say me and Nick; I already know you're doing jobs for us. Who's your biggest client?" Diamond asked.

"What happens if I don't answer?"

"I won't hurt you or mistreat you. But I could hand you to someone considerably less kind. Answering would be in your best interest."

Hector anxiously pulled out a cigarette and almost lit it before stopping. "Oh, whoops. I shouldn't smoke in front of a patient."

"Are you ready to talk?" pressed Diamond.

"...Before I do, let me clarify two things. First, I'm not a demon-god worshipper. Please listen with that in mind."

Karan and Diamond nodded. At the very least, neither of them suspected he was connected to Callios or Argus.

"Okay. And the other thing?" Diamond asked.

"There's a chance you'll be penalized in some way for hearing this. They may disregard it because of the situation, but if not, we're all going down together. Are you okay with that?"

"...What does that mean?" Karan asked, confused. She looked at Diamond, but the idol seemed to understand what Hector was saying. In fact, it seemed she had somehow already inferred what was going on.

"Don't worry. I'll figure something out if it comes to that. You don't need to let it worry you, either, Karan," Diamond said.

Hector and Karan both nodded.

Then the detective spoke hesitantly. "I'm an agent, but not for the demon-god worshippers."

The word *agent* jogged Karan's memory—Olivia had used that word to describe White Mask when they fought him.

"...Huh? Isn't that a demon-god worshipper thing?" Karan asked.

"First of all, there are many different kinds of demon-god worshippers. Some do nothing but pray, while others rise to leadership positions. Even people who don't worship the demon god but have a business relationship with their followers get labeled as demon-god worshippers... Among all those people, some are classified as agents."

"Like White Mask, and probably Argus and the rest of Combat Masters," Diamond said.

"That's right. The truth is, the other gods have a similar organizational structure among their followers," Hector told them.

"They do...?" asked Karan.

"They have worshippers who offer prayer in sanctuaries and full-time priests. They also employ agents."

"So there are agents in the Sanctuary of Medora? I've never heard of that," Karan said.

That was not due to ignorance on her part. There were four gods in this world—Medora, the god of providence; Baer, the god of harvest; Virginie, the god of equilibrium; and Lowell, the god of encounters—and there were sanctuaries that worshipped each of them. Each sect was governed by an archbishop, while bishops managed each region and performed important ceremonies, and chief priests ran each sanctuary. Within sanctuaries, priests were organized into three tiers: high, mid, and low level.

There were also traveling priests who didn't work at a specific sanctuary and adventurer priests whose duty it was to kill monsters and bring about peace. Sanctuaries did not, however, have a position called "agent." Not publicly anyway.

"The existence of agents is known only to a select few who work in sanctuaries. They're pretty much a different organization altogether. Agents aren't employed by sanctuaries, and they occasionally have to work in small

teams with regular worshippers, just like demon-god agents do. But those are rare cases,” Hector explained.

“...Should you be talking about the other gods as if they’re no different from the demon god?” Karan asked, looking at Hector with an accusatory glare.

Hector looked surprised. “I guess I should’ve started my explanation there. Of course there’s no problem talking about them that way. Just don’t do it in a sanctuary. The demon god and the gods were all developed by the Originators, so there’s no need to distinguish between the two when explaining them.”

Karan knew the gods had been born in the era of the Originators. You would be hard pressed to find someone who hadn’t heard that legend. But she found the word “developed” disturbing.

“I feel like that’s something I would’ve been better off not hearing,” she said.

“You’ll be fine. That isn’t enough to put you in danger. Just don’t share it with anyone who can’t keep a secret,” replied Diamond.

“You’ve heard of the Rueful Departure, right, Karan?” asked Hector.

The Rueful Departure was a myth—or perhaps historical event—that was known far and wide as the time when the gods physically left the world.

In the godless world that followed, people founded the ancient civilization and many of the countries that still existed today, and this gave birth to a wide range of cultures and technologies. The story could be considered a creation myth.

“Yeah. That’s when the gods left the earth. According to the stories, the four gods retreated to the heavens...”

“That’s a lie. The gods didn’t leave this world for the heavens willingly—humans forced them out,” said Hector.

“Whuh?!” Karan exclaimed shrilly. She almost told Hector to stop telling dumb lies and get serious. She looked across at Diamond—there was no way she’d fall for this story—but the idol’s face was as serious as could be. Hector had the stoic solemnity of a man in a business meeting. Karan then remembered the strange and dangerous affair she’d been dragged into, and she

gulped.

“The people of the ancient civilization built their societies on what remained from the Originators. At the same time, they decided humanity would never evolve if they just relied on relics from the past... Those relics from the Originators’ civilization are the four gods who are still known to this day,” Hector said.

“...You’re talking about the gods like they’re things,” Karan said.

“I wouldn’t phrase it like that if I were you. They’re no different from Diamond.”

“Yeah, that’s right. You’d better not repeat that around Bond. He’ll be furious,” Diamond agreed. She hadn’t raised a doubt so far about anything Hector had said.

“...Are the gods artifacts like the holy swords?” Karan asked.

“Yeah, pretty much. They’re way stronger and more advanced than us, though. They’re practically gods,” Diamond said.

The way Diamond had said that made it sound as if they weren’t actually deities in the traditional sense. Karan felt a sense of dread at what else she might learn. But fearfully denying what she’d heard wouldn’t change the truth. This situation was rife with questions, mysteries, and intrigue. She needed to be tough and not let the truth faze her.

“B-but...did they really need to force the gods to leave for the heavens?” Karan asked.

“They apparently decided civilization would stagnate as long as people were under the protection of such intelligent and powerful beings. I said they were ‘forced out,’ but some of the gods actually agreed it was for the best. It was then that they went from gods that physically existed in our world who could bless and punish people to religious figures and abstract concepts,” Hector said.

“Abstract...what?” Karan repeated, confused. She was having a hard time following, but she did her best to understand.

Hector continued patiently, “Let me be clear with you. Religion is not an

organization that real gods use to guide people. It's essentially an intermediary agency. They consult the gods for help with various problems, and the gods give answers. Those gods are very powerful, but they're not omnipotent. And the same question might get different answers depending on who you ask."

"Are there no true gods?" Karan asked.

"The beings we perceive as gods were created by the Originators, who left this world for reasons unknown to enter a dimension where neither we nor the gods can observe them. It seems the Originators worshipped gods of their own, as well."

"There are gods even more powerful than the ones we know?"

"I don't know, and it doesn't really matter. The people of the ancient civilization believed the faith and love that the Originators felt toward their gods were necessary for intelligent life. They decided that Lowell, Medora, and the others would make perfect idols for that purpose. You could say that, by this point, they had become real gods. Anyway, the Rueful Departure was this world's beginning. The countries and sanctuaries developed after that... And that brings us to the main point."

Karan braced herself.

"The gods don't spend all their time in the heavens just sleeping. They hire agents through channels unrelated to the sanctuaries to monitor and carry out their will. To an agent, the god who hired them isn't an object of worship, but their boss. I was hired by a god to work as a detective," Hector told them.

"That makes you something like an angel," Karan said wearily.

Hector responded with a strained laugh. "'Angel' is a different position entirely. They're like a god's extension or avatar; they're essentially weapons... On that note, you'd be surprised by how stingy the gods are. They don't bless their agents with unrivaled strength. I really am an ordinary detective. I don't have a holy sword or anything special like that, so I can't fight like you all."

"But you get paid, don't you?" Diamond asked teasingly.

Hector grinned. "I make eight million dina per year, and I have a one-time immunity from arrest I can use if I'm caught on a job. I don't get a lot of hard

tasks, either. It's a lucrative gig."

"R-really?" Karan said. She had thought he was going to turn out to be an unknowable monster, but the more she heard, the more she realized he was still just Hector.

"To be fair, if I was given any kind of special strength, the agent of other gods or hostile forces could sniff me out. Most agents live normal lives as sleepers."

"But you're not a sleeper now, right?" Diamond asked.

"Yeah. My god is observing this situation closely. I need to find out what I can and report back. Things won't get serious enough for the angels to be deployed, though."

"Of course not! I'll be livid if they come down here and destroy us all without giving us a chance!" Diamond shouted.

"...Destroy us all?" Karan repeated. A chill ran down her back.

"That's an extreme example, but if the demon god revives completely, it's possible the angels would descend and burn the world to ashes. Still, that hasn't happened once in the two thousand years since the Rueful Departure," Hector said.

"That's because a twenty-or thirty-percent Awakening has always been enough," Diamond retorted.

"...So it's not the demon god reviving and attacking humanity that would destroy the world, but angels coming down to fight the demon god?" Karan asked.

"Yep. It goes without saying that the demon god could cause a lot of destruction on their own, but we're all working hard to end this before a devastating war breaks out," Diamond explained.

"...My head hurts. This is getting too complicated for me," said Karan.

"I don't blame you. Let's take a break. It's not like I'm going anywhere. Sharing this information put us all in the same boat, and I actually feel pretty good about dragging you guys into this," Hector said.

"...Diamond. I think he's a bad person," complained Karan.

“Agents are allowed to collect data, but they aren’t given any power. He’s essentially a lonely onlooker, so you can’t blame him for turning out a little twisted. If anything, it seems like he was made for the job,” said Diamond.

Hector shrugged as if he couldn’t argue. “Well, this bad person is gonna go have a smoke.”

“Go ahead. I’m gonna take a break, too,” Karan said.

They had just finished talking when Starmine Hall—or rather, all of Labyrinth City—began to shake, heralding the arrival of the Colosseum of Carnage and the beginning of the large-scale Stampede.

Karan’s heart was torn in multiple directions. The news that Olivia had disappeared, that Nick had been miserably defeated, and that he had entered the Colosseum of Carnage under the patronage of the Sun Knights with the Sword of Evolution in hand were one sad blow after another. She admired Nick for his tenacity, given the situation, but she couldn’t shake the feeling they were forgetting something.

That hunch was proved correct when Dead Man’s Balloon began their attack just days later.

“...And that’s why I think we should get out of here, Karan,” Diamond told her.

“Yeah, go.”

“I didn’t expect you to agree to that so easily... I was worried about how I was going to convince you.”

Karan felt no hesitation as she agreed to Diamond’s suggestion.

“We’ll only be a hindrance to Tiana if we stay here. She’ll win if she’s able to focus all her efforts on fighting.”

“Do you really think so? We’re being attacked by her old instructor.”

“If he’s so much stronger than her, why is she still alive?”

“Because backup arrived.”

“Tiana’s instructor still should’ve been able to win. I think he might have let them live. The Manhunt adventurers aren’t weak, but they’re no match for a

mage like him. There's no reason for him to waste time like this, either. He even gave us wanted posters to let us know who the demon-god worshippers want to kill."

"...Are you suggesting he's telling us to protect the people on the wanted posters?" Diamond asked, smiling like an unkind teacher who enjoyed testing her students.

"I don't know what he's thinking, but there are people on those wanted posters who aren't here, right? They need to be protected, too. It's clear what needs to be done," Karan said.

"Yeah, you're right. The problem is who should do it."

"Us, obviously."

Diamond grinned at Karan's strong resolve. "I'll ask one last time," she said. "Are you sure about this? I'm sure you can feel how weak your body has become. This is the last chance you'll have to return home like Daffodil suggested."

"Yes, I'm sure. I'm not going back."

She gripped her pen tightly. The old Karan would have snapped it without even meaning to, but now her shaking hands could only bend it.

"I'm not doing all this work to run away and save myself!" she yelled. "I'm doing it to save Nick, Zem, and Tiana! If I can't do that, then this has all been for nothing!"

Karan sat up in bed, then lost her balance and fell to the floor. Diamond quickly helped her to her feet. Karan walked with a cane when she felt well enough and used a wheelchair when she was tired. Either way, she couldn't get around without support.

She had the strength to read and write. Her stamina had declined, but she could still investigate and study as long as she took breaks. She did not, however, have the strength to stand up on her own.

"It hasn't been for nothing. You're getting stronger, little by little," Diamond said.

"I know. But it's not happening fast enough. Am I still too weak to use your power? How can I get the strength I need? If it's impossible, then tell me, and I'll fight using my own power." Karan looked at Diamond with a strong, defiant gaze. Her eyes were like those of a carnivore; they seemed to say, "I might be weak right now, but I could still bite your head off."

Diamond felt both happy and sad at the sight. No matter what people took from Karan, they couldn't break her spirit.

"...I need to explain something to you. We have entered into a contract for you to be my wielder, but I haven't tried to give you my power yet," Diamond told her.

"...Yeah, that's right," Karan responded.

"The reason for that is because as soon as you use this power, your world and your perceptions will change. I wanted you to obtain the knowledge and wisdom necessary to withstand that. It's not as safe as Union. You can't allow yourself to get overwhelmed by my power or my senses."

"I know. I already have experience wielding Bond."

"Bond's skill is a pure manifestation of strength. He's also nice and probably tries to avoid pushing you all beyond your limits. But I'm different. I won't go easy on you."

"...Do your worst. Let's see if *you* can figure out how to use *me* properly."

Diamond smiled at those words. Then she began to shine and transformed, once again taking the form of the sword that didn't look like a sword.

"Hold my handle. Then chant 'Harmonize,'" Diamond's voice said.

Karan gripped the Sword of Resonance, and it shone with an extraordinary light. That light filled her vision and was so strong, it pierced the walls, but its beauty was even more remarkable.

"Harmonize."

Chief Karan Tsubaki of the Disaster Inspection Office



In the western part of Labyrinth City, set back a short way from the main street, a traditional southern restaurant called Ume Blossom Retreat continued to operate undaunted by the announcement of the Stampede.

Few people, though, knew of the restaurant. It was extremely luxurious and served only high-profile customers who had been referred there. It also had a barrier that prevented anyone without a referral from perceiving it and warded off invasions from thieves or journalists looking for scoops about secret meetings.

However, despite its usual clientele, the restaurant wasn't just a place for the wealthy. The mistress had a habit of sheltering people she found in the streets and even distributed food to the poor in a riverside shack. This made her even more famous in philanthropic circles than among gourmets. There were rumors that she'd recently given an apprenticeship to a chef who had ruined his life with a gambling addiction, and that she had spent the last few days sheltering and nursing a heavily wounded adventurer back to health, which added to her charitable reputation.

"It is unlikely that you will be able to meet with the consultant during your stay... She only graces this establishment on rare and unpredictable occasions," the mistress said, showing a guest to a room.

The guest she was talking to was a beautiful woman in a white suit. In contrast to the color of her clothing, she wore sunglasses that were such a deep shade of black that her guide wondered if she could see anything at all. She had fiery red hair and horns, and the mistress found the woman both pleasant and intimidating.

“Not to worry. I was looking forward to the great honor of meeting Lady Samurialie; however, I was aware it would be difficult without prior arrangement. I would be delighted if you could pass along my name should the opportunity arise,” the beautiful woman said, her speech elegant.

She had arrived alone, with a handwritten letter from a person to whom the mistress was indebted, which meant she couldn't be turned away out of hand. An armed knight or an adventurer would have been asked to leave immediately, but the woman was only carrying a musical instrument case. The mistress had inspected the case to make sure it wasn't concealing a weapon, and she found what looked like a metal percussion instrument.

The woman didn't look like a musician, but even so, the mistress had decided to admit her as a guest.

“Of course, I would be happy to,” the mistress said. “Would you care for something to eat?”

“Please. I have long wished to try the food here,” the beautiful woman said.

“I am flattered to hear you say that. My hired hand is currently out, so I will have to prepare the food on my own. It will take some time... Are there any foods you particularly enjoy or do not care for?”

Ume Blossom Retreat had no menu. Instead, it used the freshest seasonal ingredients to serve courses almost entirely of the chef's choice.

“I believe I smelled ume plums when I walked in. You grow them yourself, correct?”

“Yes, I do. I am still learning, however.”

“That sounds exciting,” the beautiful woman said with a soft smile.

Ume plums were difficult to find in Labyrinth City. They grew on a rare and valuable type of tree that was imported from a country to the south, but cultivation had never really been successful in this region. As Ume Blossom Retreat's name would suggest, however, this restaurant grew and offered its own ume plums. It owned a plot of land outside Labyrinth City where employees planted ume blossom trees and harvested their fruit—being careful not to cross-breed them with other types of plums—then pickled them in salt or

alcohol to serve them in this restaurant's signature style.

"Oh... Have you had these before?" the mistress asked.

"I once encountered them in the wild while traveling. A nearby village had a fondness for ume blossom trees as opposed to cherry blossom trees, and they served me the plums pickled in salt. I was surprised by how sour they were. The ume-flavored foods you find here in Labyrinth City are at least a little sweet, but those were not. Even so, they were quite addictive," the beautiful woman said.

"I am sure that was a surprise."

Ume-flavored items were popular in Labyrinth City and the rest of the continent, despite the fact that few people had tasted the actual fruit. Ume plums had commonly been used as seasonings and flavorings at the time of the ancient civilization, and recipes for "ume-flavored" syrups and jams had been passed down to the modern day even though the actual plums were lost somewhere in the process. Most people in Labyrinth City enjoyed ume-flavored candy and other foods without knowing where it came from.

The mistress enjoyed serving ume-flavored dishes without announcing that she used the real fruit. Customers were always amazed by the taste and smell, which were much stronger than those of the typical ume-flavored sauce, and just when they began to suspect her secret, she would serve one of this restaurant's elaborate signature dishes starring the fruit itself. She was quite fond of this routine.

There was something she had yet to experience, however—serving pickled ume plums to a person who was already familiar with the food.

"I did some work for those fine folk, and they gave me a jar of pickled ume plums as a reward. Sadly, however, I had eaten them all by the time I reached Labyrinth City," the beautiful woman said.

The mistress felt a flutter of nerves. It had been years since she had spoken to a person who had tasted real pickled ume plums. Pickling them in vinegar, salt, or imported miso or spices to add unique aromas was her specialty. However, she had created her dishes by using recipes from ancient documents she found and adapting them to the tastes of Labyrinth City, so she was unsure how they would taste to someone who didn't find them a novelty.

The mistress was dying to ask what village the woman visited and how the pickled ume plums were prepared, but she resisted.

“Please make yourself comfortable,” she said, leaving the guest to her room.

The mistress then started cooking. She always began by serving simple cooked rice, miso soup, and cold fish as appetizers. They were small in volume and light in flavor, and were intended to prepare the diner’s stomach for the main dish. She usually cooked the fish rare, sliced it up, then garnished it with plum vinegar.

This time, however, she served only pickled ume plums and a smattering of sliced pickled daikon and carrots—no fish. Normally she would not have revealed she used real fruit for the plum vinegar, wanting the customer to realize by the time they’d finished the full course that she had not used the fake flavoring common in Labyrinth City; however, this woman was already familiar with pickled ume plums, and she even felt a certain nostalgia for them. The mistress feared that serving them like this might have been too simple and rustic, but she thought it was the right decision.

“Mmm! *Wow*, that’s sour! This really takes me back!” the woman exclaimed. Her sophisticated persona seemed to disappear momentarily, replaced by that of a bright, excited young girl. The sight surprised the mistress, who suddenly couldn’t decide if her guest was in her late twenties or late teens.

“I am happy to hear you say that,” she said.

The woman blushed and collected herself. “If I remember correctly, I was served a ball of rice, pickled ume plums, and...yes, it was green tea. Those plums were just as delightfully firm and shockingly sour as these.”

“I have arranged for some green tea as well. It is adapted from an ancient tea course to suit modern tastes.”

“Ah, I do remember hearing about there being a proper order to eat in. My apologies for forgetting about that.”

“No, there is no need to adhere to such formalities here. Please enjoy the food at your leisure.”

The beautiful woman turned out to be quite a voracious eater. The mistress

sensed that her customer was hungry and served a large portion of the next dish, and the woman wolfed it down. She was also frank and detailed in her appraisal of the food. She behaved like a gourmet, correctly identifying fish that were rare in Labyrinth City and guessing what the mistress had done to flavor each ingredient—and the whole time, she was grinning ear to ear. Any chef would be filled with the desire to feed her as many dishes as they could.

By the time the beautiful woman had finished eating and it was time to pour tea, the mistress was fascinated. She wanted to know who her guest was and why she had come to meet Ume Blossom Retreat's consultant, Samurialie. The woman seemed to sense that and broached the topic again.

"Did you call this restaurant Ume Blossom Retreat in reference to your clan name? Do you cling to your sense of identity as an elf, as a member of the Ume Blossom Clan, and as the mistress of Ume Blossom Retreat as a way of staving off your memory loss? Or possibly as a way of using it?" the beautiful woman asked.

The mistress was visibly bewildered. "Um... I do not know what you're talking about. Were you perhaps drinking before you came here?" she asked, trying to avoid the topic by acting as if she didn't follow what her customer was saying.

"I knew it. You're the culinary researcher Samurialie," the beautiful woman declared.

The mistress sighed and shook her head, clearly troubled. "No, I am not. Lady Samurialie is not here."

"You split your memories into different personalities by having multiple names you use for your job, and you prevent further splitting and deterioration by connecting them all to Ume Blossom Retreat."

The mistress put her head in her hands. She thought the woman was speaking nonsense, but for some reason, her words were starting to feel as if they held a grain of truth.

"Oh, sorry. That was too sudden. Take a moment to catch your breath."

"O-okay...", the mistress responded.

"You're in danger, though, so you need to remember as quickly as possible.

There is a bounty on your head.”

“A-a bounty?”

Her shocking claim scared the mistress, causing her to shiver.

“Technically, the bounty is for a past personality of yours named Samurialie, who is being targeted for what she knows. They want to make sure that what you have forgotten dies with you,” the woman told her.

“I don’t understand. Who are you? Weren’t you referred here by the Teran Lord?” the mistress asked.

“No. I am visiting on their behalf. Oh, forgive me for not introducing myself sooner.”

The woman pulled a card out of her pocket, which read:

TERAN LORD MANOR

ANCIENT CULTURE PRESERVATION DEPARTMENT

DISASTER INSPECTION OFFICE

CHIEF KARAN TSUBAKI

The woman’s gaze flashed back and forth between the card and her guest’s—Karan’s—face. Karan did not look anything like a government official.

“...They’re already here,” Karan said, her face turning grim. A voice then suddenly spoke up from her instrument case.

“Don’t worry. You can only just hear their voices and footsteps, which means they’re not yet close enough to be a threat. This’ll be a cinch.”

Karan opened the case and took out the object inside.

“Now, go ahead and play me. Don’t worry about technique—I’ll handle the tuning. Just follow your heart.”

Karan reluctantly held the instrument—or rather, the Sword of Resonance. It was made of some kind of metal, and it consisted of a disk with a hole in the middle and a single stick. The stick’s long point made it look like a rapier, but it wasn’t a blade; it looked like a giant conductor’s wand stuck onto a sword handle. The disk was made up of a large number of metal bars, which

overlapped one another to form what looked like a folding fan. Suddenly, the metal bars broke off from one another and began to float around Karan, revealing their true form.

“Is that...a piano?” the mistress asked, realizing with relief that it truly was an instrument and not a weapon.

Karan began to run her fingers across the keys, producing a bewitching sound that seemed to resonate directly with the mistress’s heart.

“Is this the place?! Hey! Come on out, Samurialie!” a man shouted roughly from outside.

“Do as we say, or we’ll burn this building to the ground!” threatened another.

The mistress squealed in fear, then instinctively clamped her hand over her mouth to avoid giving herself away.

“Ah...?”

“Those men are from Dead Man’s Balloon. They’re the enemies who are after you,” Karan said.

“But they shouldn’t be able to find this place without a referral letter!”

It was no exaggeration to say that Ume Blossom Retreat was a secret location. The lane leading to the restaurant was surrounded by a barrier to ward off anyone who came too close without an invitation.

“They’ve got magic item professionals. That’s why I’m here to save you,” Karan said.

In the midst of that tense atmosphere, a warm voice reverberated around the room. The sound made the mistress’s eyelids grow heavy. It came from Karan, who held the Sword of Resonance.

“Sleep now. Remember the warmth of the distant homeland you lost. There is nothing here to hurt you,” it said.

As the mistress’s eyes fell shut, she saw a girl who hadn’t been there a moment ago. Her skin was so light, it was almost transparent... In fact, it *was* transparent. The girl’s body had no substance. She put her hands on top of Karan’s, guiding her like a music instructor, and sang. If the mistress had been

more familiar with modern entertainment, she would have recognized the ghostlike girl as the idol Diamond.

“Grk... She’s in this room!”

“Stop that damn noise already... My magic defense isn’t working!”

The door was forced open just as the mistress fell asleep. Two men who looked like adventurers staggered their way in—but they were actually demon-god worshipper henchmen. They reached for Karan, but they were both swiftly knocked unconscious by a blow to the back of the head.

“Phew... That was close. You okay, Chief?”

“Chief, are you hurt?”

Hector and Diamond walked into the room.

“Stop calling me that,” Karan complained.

“These men were probably going after the bounty on their own, but we can’t be sure friends of theirs aren’t on the way. Let’s search the building, then make a break for it,” said Hector.

“Don’t make us sound like thieves,” Karan told him.

Hector picked up the unconscious mistress, and the three of them disappeared into the night.



Diamond—or the Sword of Resonance—had given Karan power. Part of it manifested as cognition armor that looked like ordinary clothing.

“This isn’t what I expected... Is this even armor?” Karan asked.

After using Harmonize in the hospital room, her clothes changed completely. What looked entirely like a women’s white suit replaced her hospital gown, and sunglasses appeared over her eyes. She also had black gloves and black covers over her horns.

“Get up and look at yourself in the mirror. You shouldn’t need any help,” Diamond said in her Sword of Resonance form.

“...Okay,” Karan said.

She timidly prepared to stand up from the bed. Afraid of falling, she slowly touched her right foot to the floor, put her weight on it, and did the same with her left. For the first time since she was cursed, she stood steadily. The fear on her face turned to bafflement, then to joy. She felt able to walk easily again.

“...I can walk. I can walk without stumbling!”

“That’s my physical support feature in action. The clothes are able to sense your body’s movement and help you stay upright. They don’t significantly increase your physical strength, though, so avoid combat when possible.”

“Hmm...”

Karan pinched the sleeves and the hem of her jacket. The fabric was comfortable, and the suit of such high quality that she would have believed it was custom-made by the very best of tailors. She also realized it would be significantly less effective as armor than the clothing the Sword of Bonds produced.

“It defends much more effectively against blades, heat, and shock than the average armor, but don’t overestimate it,” Diamond warned her.

“I know. I can tell this armor isn’t made for combat.”

“What can you see?”

“...I see a nurse walking. She’s alone. She went into a room to change a blanket.”

“Go on.”

“I see a priest drinking coffee in his office. I see adventurers drinking on the landing of a staircase. I see Tiana speaking to someone on a higher floor. The person sounds familiar... Oh, it’s the deerian guild receptionist. I also see—”

“Don’t raise your sensitivity any more than that. Your current level is sufficient.”

“There’s someone to the northwest of the building... They’re keeping watch for us from behind some rubble. We should capture them. Grk...!”

Karan sat down on the bed, sweating.

“I’m surprised you were able to hear that much. That was better than what should have

been possible,” Diamond told her.

“What is this? I can see sound with my eyes...”

A bizarre sight unfurled before Karan. It was a world without color, but there was seemingly no limit to how far she could see. She could still perceive color within her naked eye’s normal range, but it was dull and blurry because of the curse—only the boundaries between the colors were clear.

If she focused, however, she could see farther. What she saw beyond her normal visual range was a black-and-white world made entirely of lines. There were minute differences between those lines. Karan considered what that might mean and quickly realized what the lines were.

The sound of the nurse’s footsteps and breathing. The position and distance of those sounds, and the way they echoed off the walls to create new sounds. That kind of information combined to make Karan’s vision look like a three-dimensional picture.

The minute differences in the lines were produced by sound. If there was a location she couldn’t sense very well, that meant there was no one there or that it was an airtight space that not much sound could escape from.

“It’s not just sound. You can see smells, too. Your cognition armor also combines the incredibly delicate tactile information and mana it senses and projects it into your vision. You’re hardly relying on visual information at all.”

“Wow... This means I can stay at Starmine Hall during the siege,” Karan said, her voice filled with joy and relief.

“Uh, no. We’re leaving.”

“Huh?”

“I have a separate job for you. Rather than helping with the siege defense, we’re gonna focus on raiding and scouting. We’ll entrust the protection of Starmine Hall to everyone else. That’s why I had you gain so much knowledge. Well, I guess you didn’t have time to learn that much, but that stuff is what my power is for.”

While Karan understood Diamond’s point, she still felt anxious. It was true there were better places to use her power than in a siege, but defending a stronghold and the people in it was a simpler, more immediately rewarding job.

She felt confident she and Diamond could protect this place.

“...Huh. Maybe I’m just feeling lonely. This curse has weakened me and separated me from my party members, so I guess I didn’t like the idea of leaving,” Karan admitted.

She had just told Diamond she trusted Tiana, but as soon as Karan had discovered what she could do with her new power, she’d had a desire to go and see her fellow party member.

“That loneliness is nothing to be ashamed of,” Diamond reassured her.

“But you’re right. We have to go,” said Karan.

Protecting this stronghold wasn’t going to solve anything. A part of her already realized that.

“Leave Starmine Hall to Tiana, the Manhunt adventurers, and Daffodil.”

“...I think Tiana really respected her instructor.”

“Yeah.”

“I trust in Tiana’s strength. But will she be okay without any of us by her side?”

“She’s facing Bellocchio, the former president of the Thunderbolt Corporation... Though I suppose his return means it’s not ‘former’ anymore. I know him, too. He was a person worthy of Tiana’s trust, even if he was always an eccentric and rebellious person who cared little for the existing conventions of society.”

“That just makes him sound suspicious.”

“Sure, but it still doesn’t make sense. Bellocchio and Animator Havok aren’t the type of people I’d expect to get roped into joining the demon-god worshippers.”

“...What do you mean?”

“He’s not like Nick’s former party members and the ticket seller Eishu. They all failed to adapt to Labyrinth City after leaving the military, and as rude as it might be to say, they’re the type who are much more likely to work with demon-god worshippers, too used to bloody work. That kind of violent nature can serve a person as an adventurer, but they’ll still stand out.”

Those words angered Karan for a moment. It was people used to violent jobs who killed monsters in labyrinths and kept Labyrinth City safe. She had to

admit, however, that some unruly adventurers threatened the peace of ordinary citizens. Innocent hardworking people occasionally suffered violence at the hands of a select few adventurers and other people who failed to adapt to the city.

But the more adventurers were seen as monsters, the wider the rift between them and ordinary citizens would grow. Was there anything that could be done to prevent such adventurers from going astray?

“Those who get dragged down by the worst, most unfair aspects of society are ill-fated. Teran actually used to be a place where outsiders could gather and live comfortably, but it changed as generations passed. Before I knew it, an obvious disparity had formed between those who lived peacefully on their own land and those who moved here from elsewhere. I hoped I could bring them together with entertainment... But it’s been extremely difficult,” Diamond told her.

She spoke nonchalantly, but Karan detected a genuine feeling of helplessness beneath her words.

“A lot of people look forward to your concerts. There are plenty of other hobbies that don’t involve idols that strangers can enjoy together, too,” said Karan.

“Sure. Those are my rivals, though.”

“I don’t know anything about that, but good luck trying to beat out all the other forms of entertainment people enjoy.”

Diamond giggled in response.

“Thanks... Let’s get back on topic. Bellocchio and his companions became adventurers, achieved a high rank, then founded a company. Bellocchio was originally a noble, but Havok started from nothing and achieved success with her own original magic. It’s not like they were broke adventurers who couldn’t handle Labyrinth City. It doesn’t make sense that they became demon-god worshippers.”

“Do you think demon-god worshippers could have helped them rise in rank or build their company?”

“I don’t think so. Havok is like me; she’s never worked for honor or fame. She’s the type to found a company simply to pursue her own interests. Demon-god worshippers don’t offer anything that meshes with the goals of such a person.”

“They printed wanted posters and formed an organization with a strange name. That to me makes them seem different from other demon-god worshippers.”

“Yes, exactly. The wanted posters are important. We’re going to find and protect the people other than us who are being hunted. I want you to gather information, sort through it, and find the truth. Nick and Tiana are fighting, but they’re only being reactionary. If we fail, their efforts will be for naught.”

Karan nodded meekly in response. Diamond’s claim that the others were being reactionary cut right to her core. Before she joined the Survivors—and even after, for that matter—she only ever stuck to what she was capable of without ever willingly stepping outside of her comfort zone. Every time someone told her she could do something or that she wasn’t an idiot, it was like she couldn’t even hear them.

“Yeah. We’ll keep them safe. There’s someone else I want to approach, too,” Karan said.

“Who’s that?” asked Diamond.

“Someone connected to Combat Masters. I have some questions to ask.”

“That’s fine by me. You should investigate anything you have questions about. So to do that...first we need to practice.”

“Practice?”

“Let’s go catch the guy who’s spying on us.” Diamond sounded like a child who couldn’t wait to try out a new toy.

“...Didn’t you just say we should avoid combat? You also keep warning me I could be overwhelmed by your power.”

“Come on, catching one grunt should be a cinch for you,” Diamond told her, then invited Karan outside.

Karan snuck up to the first floor, being careful to avoid anyone seeing her along the way and scolding her for leaving her room. Starmine Hall was currently on emergency alert. Guards kept watch in shifts all day long to respond to any attacks from Dead Man’s Balloon, and dozens of Manhunt adventurers who came as reinforcements were also stationed throughout the

first floor. She was sure plenty of them knew her.

Once Karan had reached the entrance, she waited until none of the dozens of people around were looking and walked right through. She expected she would be able to do that on instinct, but she wasn't prepared for just how easy it would be. Only then did the realization of what she could do with this power really set in.

"This is amazing...", she said.

"That's just the beginning. Let's go." Diamond spurred her on.

"Yeah... Look at this destruction," Karan muttered after seeing the harrowing state of Starmine Hall. Enemy attacks had blasted holes into the ground and the walls. A fire somewhere scattered ash and soot into the air, and a burnt smell reached her nose. Yet nothing was more conspicuous than the giant tunnel that Dead Man's Balloon had used to withdraw.

"Is there anything in there?" Diamond asked.

"No. It's completely blocked off. I don't think there would be any point to digging," Karan replied.

"That's too bad... Can you tell where it connects to?"

"I can find out if you want."

"No. It's not a good idea to go after people who are on guard for you. It's better to catch people who don't even know they've been noticed."

Karan did as Diamond had suggested and searched for the person watching Starmine Hall. She had been able to see them from her underground hospital room, and now that Karan was closer, she should be able to perceive them in greater detail.

She softly clicked her tongue. It wasn't a sign of frustration, but instead, a way to use the small echoing of the sound to get a complete picture of the surrounding area.

There were three dolls and one man. The man was probably an adventurer—or more likely, a former adventurer. He wore light armor and carried a one-handed sword. His breathing was quiet, but he wasn't as careful as Nick.

“Don’t worry about the dolls. Their movement is stiff. It doesn’t seem like Havok is controlling them; the man was probably given a magic item that can give them simple commands,” Diamond said.

“I think I can sneak up and catch him.”

“Why do you say that?”

“...He’s exhausted. He looks sleepy.”

“Give me more detail. You can feel his rhythm, right?” Diamond pressed, and Karan thought.

“...He’s having trouble sleeping because he’s using the debris for a bed. He also smells and hasn’t bathed in a while. He’s freezing because of a draft. The dolls are a good distance behind him. I think he’s scared of them. He keeps anxiously glancing behind him even though he’s supposed to be watching the hall.”

“You should learn to analyze emotions in greater detail. Your physical analysis is good, though... Okay, now lift me up.”

“Huh? Do you want me to play you here? I don’t know how.”

“Don’t worry about that. I’ll teach you the basics and guide your movement. Practice is the only way to learn. Now, stand a good distance away from the walls. Keep your arms relaxed. The sword’s tip affects the sound, so be careful not to hit anything with it. Steady your breathing and stand up straight!”

Diamond gave her rapid-fire instructions, and Karan realized through her confusion that this was no different from a normal idol lesson.

“Just so you know, I’m not going to become an idol,” Karan said bluntly.

“Sadly, I wouldn’t make anyone debut in this situation. I’d be too worried for their safety.”

Karan was about to say that wasn’t the problem when a vision of Diamond appeared before her. She placed her hands on Karan’s, like a kind teacher instructing a beginner.

“Okay, play.”

Karan activated the Sword of Resonance and made its six keyboards float around her. She moved one of them in front of her and gently pressed her

fingers on the keys, which were made entirely of mana just like the projection of Diamond beside her. The sound produced when she pressed them was not caused by friction, but it wasn't pure mana, either. The resonance was a mixture of both, and it was able to slip through magic defense to reach a person's ears. The fact that it was partially made of mana allowed it to pass through obstacles and eardrums and directly touch a person's soul.

Before Karan knew it, she was singing along with the sound. The timbre of the music made her own soul quiver, and the lyrics came to her naturally, accompanied by a scene from her past. The song was a lullaby her mom used to sing as she held her long ago. Karan didn't know if she was remembering the words correctly, but it didn't matter. A feeling of total peace, as if she truly were being held by her mother, and an assurance that there was nothing here to harm her washed over her, wrapping around her heart.

"The vision you're seeing is probably different from mine. You're vicariously experiencing a memory that matches the tone you're producing, and your heart and my sword then harmonize to become a symphony that moves a person's soul," Diamond explained.

The sound suddenly stopped, and Karan broke out in a sweat, realizing that she had been manipulated into feeling those emotions.

"This...is really dangerous," she said.

"Do you know why?"

"This isn't a trick like illusion or light magic. The sound made those memories surface in my mind naturally."

"Right. All I am capable of doing is using my music to awaken feelings within people. Magic defense is powerless to stop it, though."

Karan gulped. That meant there was no human alive who could resist this. The Sword of Resonance was completely different from other weapons that were designed to overwhelm an opponent physically. All this one did was produce sound that resonated in people's hearts—but that was exactly what made it so terrifying. It might not work against intelligent magic items with undeveloped emotions or monsters with minds that were too different from humans, but any creature that could speak would be at least partially susceptible.

Diamond continued her explanation, almost as if to downplay the fearsome

nature of the power. “It was only so effective this time because the target was completely exhausted. The core of this power does not come from the music, either: Its effectiveness depends on your ability to observe the target’s desires and discover what you can give them. You must learn to affect people’s fickle hearts.”

“Huh...”

“The moment you stop thinking or pursuing knowledge, you and I become helpless. Please keep that in mind... Anyway, let’s go grab the guy you lulled to sleep.”

“Oh, right.”

Karan collected herself and tied up the softly snoring man.

“What do we do next? Interrogate him?” she asked.

“The people at Starmine Hall can handle that. More importantly, you just passed your test. Now we’re gonna go grab your license,” Diamond said.

“License?”

“We’re getting official certification for you to use me.”

Diamond led the baffled Karan by the hand, and they walked through the damaged Labyrinth City in their changed states. The ground felt unfamiliar—and unsteady—beneath Karan’s feet, but she realized as she walked that learning to brave such unfamiliarity was what made for a true adventure.

“I will now perform a simple appointment ceremony! Karan Tsubaki of the fire dragonians and the Labyrinth City Adventurers Guild! I hereby recognize you as an official holy sword wielder and appoint you as chief of the Ancient Culture Preservation Department’s Disaster Inspection Office for Teran Lord Manor!”

Diamond had taken Karan to the most prestigious place in Labyrinth City—a white castle that rose high in the center of the city. There were other buildings that had clearly cost a small fortune to build or were dazzlingly beautiful, but none was as noble as this one: Teran Lord Manor.

“...Chief?” Karan repeated.

She had been led into an office that was ornate even for this castle. They didn’t have to wait at all, so Diamond must have scheduled a meeting. Many people throughout the huge building had been thrown off by Karan’s appearance in her white suit, but that was only because of her beauty and

strength, not because they thought she looked suspicious. Once they had reached the office, the man Diamond brought her here to meet had begun the so-called “appointment ceremony” without explanation.

“All you need to do is sign here,” he said, putting a document down before her. “I understand that you and Ms. Diamond are working to put an end to the current crisis. Though as it was caused in part by Jewelry Production’s failure, I suppose it is only natural that the cleanup should fall to you.”

Karan looked at the paper in front of her, unsure of who this man even was. The words he had just spoken for the ceremony were written on it, below which there was a blank line for her signature. The name and title of the man who approved the document were written on it as well. It said:

REPRESENTATIVE OF THE TERAN LORD

TERAN LORD MANOR

ANCIENT CULTURE PRESERVATION DEPARTMENT

DIRECTOR ROBERT CHRYSANTHEMUM VON TERAN

Karan could tell from his title that he was a noble who far outranked her in society, but that only gave her more questions about him.

“Robert was actually the chief executive of the plan I proposed. The Ancient Culture Preservation Department supported our idol activities and the Teran Distortion Agency, for which the idols were a front. Robert is the director, which makes him my and Joseph’s direct boss,” Diamond explained.

“Why didn’t you tell me that before?!” Karan complained, trying her best not to break out in a sweat. She knew there was no reason for her to feel guilty about Diamond’s failed plan, but she had no response to the man’s harsh words. He was right; they had been totally defeated.

“Don’t worry about him; he’s a close friend. I have a long history with the Teran Lord family line. I first met Robert when he was five. He used to go around telling everyone he was going to marry me. You have no idea how adorable he was!”

“Shut up,” Robert said sternly. “We gave you an enormous amount of money, and all we got was this bizarre magic item that looks more like an instrument than a sword and a public concert hall that’s currently being torn apart by a

siege. You're endangering the order and authority built by generations of Teran Lords and, more importantly, the lives of our people. Get to work with that educational toy of yours and fix this."

"E-educational toy? That's no way to describe a holy sword!" Diamond protested.

Robert ignored her. Karan could tell he was doing his best to hide his embarrassment, but she didn't say anything.

"Karan Tsubaki. Diamond told me about your situation. I am highly skeptical that a cursed and weakened individual such as yourself can accomplish anything meaningful using a toy instrument. If you want to run back home, then now would be the time," he said.

"Huh?" Karan was surprised. He actually seemed like a good man. He was giving her certification and a budget, and also a chance to walk away. "Thank you for your concern," she told him.

Karan once again sensed that Robert was embarrassed. He was also angry at Diamond for her frivolous attitude, but that was significantly outweighed by his concern for her. He was also aware that Karan was a victim who had been roped into this against her will.

"C-concern?! You fool! If I'm concerned about anything, it's the colossal amount of money you all have wasted!"

"I'm sorry that we failed to protect the holy jewel. But this isn't over. There's still a lot I can do as the Sword of Resonance's wielder," Karan said.

Robert snorted, looking bored. "...Then sign here."

"U-umm..."

"Do you not have a pen? Do you really walk around without one?"

Robert passed Karan a pen impatiently as she stared at the document, but Karan shook her head.

"That's not the problem. I want to know what I'm signing first," she told him.

Robert looked fed up. Karan was worried she had overstepped, but then she realized he was angry at Diamond, not her.

“...Ms. Diamond. You should’ve told her what to expect beforehand. This is a bad habit of yours. You just wanted to throw her into the fire and see what she would do, didn’t you?” he asked.

“Whoops, you figured that out?” Diamond said. She was in her Sword of Resonance form, but it sounded like there was a bashful smile across her face.

“Good lord... She’s always been like this. Don’t let her push you around too much. If you have any more questions, ask them now. I’m a busy man.” Robert looked at Karan with concern, as if she were a soldier about to be sent into battle.

Karan responded not with a question, but with a declaration. “I want to protect the people being targeted by Dead Man’s Balloon.”

“Yes. It’s natural for that to be your mission. But it’s not your true goal, is it?”

“We’re going to struggle until we know what Argus of Combat Masters and Callios—the Sword of Tasuki—have been doing until now and what their goals are. I’m going to find out the truth, and if they have bad intentions, I’m going to stop them. I want to save my friends and everyone in Labyrinth City.”

“...Continue.”

“I can’t do that alone. My body has been weakened by this curse. I can’t even walk outside without Diamond’s assistance. I’ve started studying taxes and law, but I haven’t had much time to learn, so I want the help of smart people. I can’t fight, either, so I want people who can be my sword and shield. I want to investigate the city and become able to see what most people turn their eyes from. I’ll need a lot of money, too.”

“So you’re telling me you want power, authority, money...everything, really. Is that why you agreed to protect Diamond?”

“We worked with Diamond because we trusted her. I’m sure you all were the same. One or two failures aren’t enough to make me cut and run. I’ll use everything you give me for this case, and I won’t let anything go to waste.”

“Whoa, careful what you promise. You can’t do a job right without some redundancy. You have to account for some wasted money and time. I’ll pay you for your work, too, of course,” Diamond interjected.

“Keep your comments to yourself. You’re making this difficult,” Robert complained. He cleared his throat and refocused his gaze on Karan. “I recognize you as a holy sword wielder and the chief of the Disaster Inspection Office, and I appoint you as a knight. I grant you authority equivalent to a captain of the Sun Knights to arrest, inspect, and read ancient documents. However...” Robert gave Karan a hard look. “This is a highly unusual measure, so your position will come with great responsibility. Your every action will be observed and reported to me. The Order of the Sun Knights will also be monitoring how you choose to wield your authority. And most importantly, if you don’t produce results, you should expect to be punished accordingly.”

“The Sun Knights? Really?” complained Karan.

“That is nonnegotiable. If you don’t want them to interfere, I recommend you work that out with the Sun Knight assigned to you. And Diamond. Don’t forget that you are being watched, too.”

“Oh, what? No way!” Diamond exclaimed.

“Who’s even going to be left to punish me if the city gets destroyed?” Karan said.

“Order is not so easily broken. Many will die, but the city will stand. You might become a shield upholding public order and die, or fail to do so and be punished; however, once you sign this document, you will no longer be just an adventurer. You will become a part of maintaining that order. I must admit, however, I don’t know what to expect from a country bumpkin with nothing but a recommendation from Diamond.”

Karan responded with a quiet resolve.

“...I’ll protect everyone. Whatever it takes.”

A wooden sign was hung up in a vacant room in the corner of Teran Lord Manor. It read, **ANCIENT CULTURE PRESERVATION DEPARTMENT, DISASTER INSPECTION OFFICE**, in bold brushwork. The room, however, was modest. It was furnished with nothing but a folding chair, a long desk, a whiteboard, and office supplies. One could call the Disaster Inspection Office simple and austere to be kind, or crude and empty to be less so, and the members were currently gathered inside.

“...Oh, it’s you.”

“Is that how you greet people, Karan?”

A Sun Knight had arrived just like Robert said they would, but Karan looked at their selection suspiciously. It was Alice.

“Bold of you to show your face here after poaching three members of our team,” Diamond said.

“Wow, Diamond. You’ve gotten...paler since I last saw you,” Alice responded.

Diamond was projecting an image of her body from the Sword of Resonance and not hiding her displeasure with Alice.

Karan intervened, sensing an argument. “Stop complaining, Diamond. Get back to work.”

“But, Karan! Aren’t you mad about her taking your party members, too?!”

“Nick chose to enter that labyrinth; Alice didn’t take him from us. She’s not our enemy, either. There’s no way she would work with demon-god worshippers.”

“See? Karan gets it,” Alice said, giving Diamond a smug look.

But Karan wasn’t done talking. She took off her sunglasses right in front of Alice and stared at her blankly.

“You may not be an enemy, but I know you’re trying to use them for something. I’m going to find out what that is.”

Alice stepped back, feeling intimidated despite Karan’s weakened state. “... Don’t worry. I have no ulterior motives toward Nick and the others, and I’m not using them as sacrificial pawns, either. I’m betting on them because they actually have a chance of succeeding. They’re making steady progress through the Colosseum of Carnage, and no one’s gotten hurt yet.”

“You said it: ‘yet.’ We still don’t know what the enemy is planning,” said Diamond.

“Nothing ventured, nothing gained. We may not know everything, but that’s not a reason for inaction. Someone needed to go into the Colosseum of Carnage, and they’re as good a bet as anyone... And Nick was in a really difficult spot. There’s no telling what he would’ve done if I didn’t help him.”

Alice's words rang true. The assassination of high-ranking members of the Sun Knights and the betrayal of adventurers who had joined Dead Man's Balloon had left both the Order of the Sun Knights and the Adventurers Guild without any people to spare. Both organizations were having to deal with the Stampede while fearing betrayal from within their own ranks, and they could only maintain order in the city or tackle the Colosseum of Carnage in an extremely limited capacity. Nick had a holy sword and a feasible plan, so it only made sense that he had been able to convince Alice to bet on him. It was also true that Nick and the others were backed into a corner and had to act.

Karan was still frustrated at being left behind, but she understood their actions. That said, she had no intention of dropping her guard around this particular Sun Knight.

"Uhh... Sorry for interrupting, but why am I here? Can I leave?" Hector asked, sounding uncomfortable.

"Absolutely not. What about your investigation of the articles Olivia wrote in that silly gossip magazine? Have you made any progress?" Diamond asked.

"None whatsoever," Hector said with an indifferent shrug.

"Hey, that's not okay! You need to try harder!"

"I dunno what to tell you. I'm stumped. It's clear something is hidden in those *Lemuria Monthly* issues. I used them to learn about you, after all."

"Don't remind me of that."

"No, listen. I was only able to find that information because I used your name as a search term. We won't find any meaning in Olivia's writings until we know what we're looking for."

"Won't 'Sword of Tasuki' work?"

"That's not good enough. We need to figure out what the Sword of Tasuki was after."

"There'd be no need for all this work if we knew that."

"Regardless, we still have a lot to investigate. You're going to help us out," Karan ordered.

Hector called Karan a slave driver under his breath. Naturally, she heard it and grinned. She wouldn't let him escape.

"Eh, fine. With the city in this state, trying to work on my own would be terrifying anyway," Hector grumbled.

"Oh yeah, didn't you take some documents that belonged to Combat Masters? You really got us there," Alice said with a chilly smile.

Hector broke into a sweat, now surrounded by the three terrifying women. They began to argue with him at their center.

"Blame yourself for not finding them first," Karan said.

"Oh-ho. Sounds like the ledger was useful in the end," retorted Alice.

"Combat Masters was borrowing money from the Dineez Adventurers Credit Union. Their repayment schedule doesn't make sense. Argus would withdraw amounts as large as one or two million dina with nothing but an IOU. There are no records or any sort of repayment plan," Karan explained.

"Is that really so strange? Adventurer ranks don't just exist to indicate a party's strength. They're also a measure of trust to show how likely a party is to survive a labyrinth and make money. Combat Masters was C rank, but all the rumors said they were as strong as a B-or A-rank party. Securing a one-or two-million-dina loan shouldn't have been hard for them," Alice commented.

"Even if they were overdue on all their payments?" Karan asked sarcastically, and Alice fell silent. "They just kept borrowing money and contributing some of that to repayments, placing themselves further in debt. Their interest rate was strangely low, too."

"Hmm... Nick said something similar," said Alice. "He claimed Argus was always able to get the party loans, and that he was stressed out by how much their debt ballooned over time."

"Nick wrote the ledger, but Argus performed all of the loan applications."

"...You have some of the loan applications he wrote? Who was the head of the financial institution doing the lending?" asked Alice.

"Marde Blondel of the Dineez Adventurers Credit Union."

Everyone fell silent. That was one of the names on the Dead Man's Balloon wanted posters.

"...Get out of here. Does Marde actually exist? These applications weren't written as a joke, were they?" Hector asked.

"They're real. Oh, close the curtains for me. I'm gonna project the documents," Diamond told the group.

Hector closed the curtains to darken the room, and the Sword of Resonance's gem shone. A holographic image of the ledger Karan had studied so closely appeared above it.

"I'm jealous, Diamond. I wish you'd share that kind of technology with us...," said Alice.

"Convenient, isn't it? But forget about that. Find the documents," Diamond said.

Alice flipped through the thick ledger until she found the IOUs from the Dineez Adventurers Credit Union.

"It's true... It's from the elusive head office, too," Alice commented.

"...Why would a head office be elusive? That doesn't make sense," said Karan, staring at the Sun Knight like she was speaking nonsense.

Alice continued, sounding serious. "No, I called it that for a reason. The head office of the Dineez Adventurers Credit Union is supposed to have been destroyed."

"Huh?"

"The Dineez Adventurers Credit Union amassed great wealth during the Demon God War, opening branches in other countries and becoming the largest armed financial institution on the continent. But seven hundred years ago, the king at the time decided it was dangerous."

"Oh, I've heard of that, too," Hector interjected. "Apparently, it had other interests outside of banking and operated pawn shops for adventurers. It would take magic swords and artifacts as collateral, then keep the items when people defaulted on their loans."

Karan looked troubled; she had never heard that before.

“After that, the Holy Kingdom of Dineez and the Order of the Sun Knights declared war on the Dineez Adventurers Credit Union’s head office and destroyed it. The other branches were left alone because they weren’t armed like the main office, and they all became independent financial institutions. The Dineez Adventurers Credit Union that exists here in Teran also has no relation to the credit unions in other cities... But there is a rumor,” Alice told them.

“About the head office?” Karan speculated.

Alice and Hector both nodded.

“That’s right. The rumor is that the president is a member of a long-lived species and has been on the run ever since the head office was destroyed,” said Alice.

“Is that important somehow?” asked Karan.

“There’s a chance they could have the right to collect the debts that should have been written off when the head office was destroyed.”

“Diamond. You’re not in debt, are you?” Karan looked at her dubiously.

“...I—I don’t think so?” came a weak voice from the Sword of Resonance. “I-I’m probably fine! It’s just...my old partner borrowed a lot of money to hold concerts and build live venues. I inherited everything from her, so I can’t guarantee that any of those debts didn’t get passed on to me...”

“...Anyway, we need to figure out why the name of a bank president from a supposedly destroyed head office is on those wanted posters,” Hector said.

The rest nodded their agreement.

“President Marde’s existence must be a problem for the demon-god worshippers. I don’t see any other way to interpret it.”

“Do you mean that the demon-god worshippers are in debt?” Karan asked skeptically, but then she realized something. All villains needed funds for their schemes. That money could be acquired through illegal activities such as stealing magic items, or it could be borrowed, but it definitely didn’t come from nowhere. A debt to Marde couldn’t be ruled out. “Well, I guess it’s not out of the question.”

“There are other possibilities. If Marde is still alive, he could have information to

blackmail a lot of people. The head office that Marde used to run used special contract magic and appraisal magic to ensure the success of any investment or loan, no matter the recipient. Marde's judgment was so certain that people called him the Credit King," Diamond explained.

"But how do we protect Marde?" asked Alice. "The wanted poster doesn't even have a picture."

"We'll have to save him for later and start with the person we do have a chance of finding," Hector said, pointing at a wanted poster with an enchanting woman sketched on it. She had black-and-red hair braided together and sharp eyes; she gave an almost wasp-like impression.

"Samurialie, the dining consultant... Who's that?" Alice asked, clearly clueless. Hector looked puzzled, too, but Karan recognized the name.

"...I've heard of her. She occasionally writes for gourmet magazines."

"Tell us everything you know about her, Karan. Any detail helps," said Diamond.

"Hmm, I'm pretty sure she's an expert on reviving ancient cuisine... She also supervises some sort of traditional restaurant. She's a consultant now, but she probably used to work as a culinary researcher or chef. I've heard it's rare for her to appear in public."

"Does she actually exist?" Diamond asked.

"I don't know. No one has ever met her. The gourmet magazines apparently have to go through the owner of the restaurant and then wait months to receive her articles," Karan told them.

"She's definitely wrapped in mystery, but we have much better leads for her whereabouts than with Marde," Hector said.

"The restaurant is probably fully booked, though. I've heard that nobles dine there. Ume Blossom Retreat is famous in the gourmet world for serving traditional food from Nozomi," Karan said.

"...I think I've been there before," Diamond told them.

"What, really? That's not fair," Karan whined.

"We should be able to get in if we use Robert's name. We'd normally have to wait

months even then, but I'm sure reservations are being canceled with Labyrinth City in this state. Let's squeeze ourselves onto the reservation list."

"Should we really waste time getting a reservation? If Dead Man's Balloon is after her, it might be better to force our way in," suggested Alice.

"No, we need a reservation. Ume Blossom Retreat has a barrier that prevents people without one from finding it. The restaurant has permission to use one for security because it's certified by the Teran Lord."

"It's just a restaurant. It can't be that hard to break into," Alice said.

"Trust me, no one's getting through it. The barrier spell around Ume Blossom Retreat is called 'Musha Lane,' and the more hostile a potential intruder, the stronger the spell becomes. It's advanced magic."

"Well, that's suspicious. The heck is a restaurant doing with that kind of barrier?" Hector asked.

"It's rumored to have been passed down from the original owner. I never asked about it because I was afraid of offending the mistress and getting banned for life. I've only been two or three times with Robert," Diamond said.

"The barrier was man-made, though. It would be best to assume Bellocchio has a way to break through it. He's a former A-rank adventurer, magic school teacher, and now a leader of the demon-god worshippers," Alice said.

Everyone looked to Karan for instruction. She panicked for a moment, not knowing what to say, and then thought of Nick. What did he always do when they were in a hard spot?

She remembered when Leon had challenged them to bare-knuckle math. When they resolved to catch the Steppingman. And when they took a security job from an idol agency and ended up face-to-face with a dangerous conspiracy.

"...Hector, I want you to look into Samurialie's background. Alice, I want you to monitor Dead Man's Balloon's activity. If they move to capture Samurialie before us, stop them. Diamond, you're going to negotiate with Robert to get us permission to enter the restaurant," Karan commanded smoothly.

The rest nodded in agreement.

"Hector. Do you think the woman on the wanted poster is a member of a

long-lived species?" Karan asked.

"I'd normally reject that suggestion out of hand. Grab a random sample of ten thousand people, and you probably wouldn't have a single one. But these are hardly normal times. What makes you think she is?"

"Instinct," Karan replied.

"Put it into more concrete words. You'll need that skill as a government official," Hector said, his tone strict yet kind. He was clearly trying to help her grow.

"...This restaurant is apparently very strict about manners. Here, they strive to pass down the etiquette and cuisine of a fallen country to future generations. I've also heard they perform conservation of plant species and has been growing real ume plums for centuries, which are extremely rare today. I was impressed by that when I read Samurialie's articles, but I didn't think much of it. If she's sharing ancient culture like Diamond, though...she could be from a long-lived species," Karan explained.

"Interesting... Your gourmet hobby might be surprisingly helpful for this job. Do you remember the names of the magazines her articles and interviews have been printed in?" Hector asked.

Karan wrote all the magazine names she could remember on a piece of paper and handed it to Hector.

"I'll look into these. I had the same feeling about her. If the demon-god worshippers are afraid of long-lived species like holy swords, it makes sense for her to have lived a long time, too," he said.

"What a pain." Diamond sighed.

Karan smiled awkwardly. "As for me..."

"Oh, I have something for you to do," said Diamond before suddenly herding the other two from the room. "All right, you heard the boss! Get to work! This is a race against time! I expect you back here by eight tomorrow morning! Go, go, go!"

"Got it," Hector responded.

"Expect good news. See you tomorrow," Alice said.

They both left. Karan stood up to protest that Diamond hadn't told her what she was doing yet, but her legs gave out. She reflexively grabbed the desk and prevented herself from falling, but she had to push herself up with her arms because her legs couldn't do the job alone.

"You're pushing yourself too hard, Karan. You need to take breaks," Diamond admonished her.

"Diamond...", Karan began, but the holy sword shut her down completely.

"I didn't cut off my physical support feature, just so you know. You have full control of my abilities. If you push past the limits of my support, you'll be unsteady on your feet again."

"But..."

"We need to work quickly, which is exactly why you need to rest. You're getting eight hours of sleep a day, you hear? And you'll take a one-hour break after every three hours of work."

"What?! But—"

"But what? We'll be too slow?"

Karan had no argument.

"...Okay. I'll rest."

"That's what I wanted to hear."

"This is going to take a lot more patience than labyrinth exploration. I guess the enemy isn't working around the clock either, though, so I need to rest up to stay at full strength. Otherwise my friends and I could die."

"That's right. I actually prepared a nap room for you here. I'll keep watch as you eat and sleep. There's no reason to rush anything while you're waiting for your subordinates to report back in."

As soon as Diamond said that, the file cabinet suddenly slid aside to reveal what looked like a luxury hotel room. There was a nice bed and a work desk, and it had a range of magic items from a coffeepot to a refrigerator and all manner of amenities.

"...You spent way too much money. I don't need anything this luxurious," Karan said.

"I thought I showed restraint, personally. Is there anything you're craving?" Diamond asked.

"Labyrinth Chicken would be..." Karan trailed off. She had said the first food that came to mind, but then she shook her head with a conflicted expression. "Actually, never mind. Anything that's easy on the stomach would be fine."

Labyrinth Chicken was a stew that didn't actually have to be made with chicken. Nick and her party members often made it with slightly pungent duck meat, dried tomatoes, and wild grasses on the way home from labyrinths. Karan's only job was to light the impromptu stone stove, which had nothing to do with the actual taste of the food. That was the version of the dish Karan longed to eat, but it was hardly a possibility now.

"I want to work," she said.

She wanted to return to that day. When she had carried Nick on her back while returning from Pot Snake Cave, he had said: "I wanna go home." She felt the same way now, but home for her meant Labyrinth City and adventuring with her party members. She feared that giving voice to the desire, however, would trap those days permanently in the past.

"I'll grant your wish. But first, you need to learn patience," Diamond said.

Encouraged by Diamond, Karan received her meal in silence. She thought about Nick, Zem, and Bond, who were fighting right now, and Tiana, who was surely still holding out at Starmine Hall. Karan swallowed down her guilt, knowing it was in all of their best interests, and went to bed.

"Chief. We've got good news and bad news. Which do you want first?" Hector asked.

Three days later, the members of the Disaster Inspection Office once again gathered at the very edge of Teran Lord Manor. Karan was sitting at her desk in her Sword of Resonance holy armor just like last time. She had stayed in the private room next door for the last few days and rested enough to regain her energy.

"It's always best to start with the good news," Diamond said.

"That's fine with me. Are you okay, Hector? You look tired," commented

Karan.

Hector had bags under his eyes, but he looked satisfied with himself. “She’s definitely a member of a long-lived species. I’m guessing she’s an elf.”

“Did you find her in past magazines like you did with Diamond?” Karan asked.

“Those have been really useful... I can’t believe how careless I was.”

Hector had once used a special ability of his to search his large collection of documents for long-lived species and determine Diamond’s true identity. Diamond wasn’t human—she was a sentient magic item. Her identity, like all magic items, was bound to her name, and once she began to see herself as “Diamond,” it became difficult to call herself anything else. Her public position as an idol meant she couldn’t avoid having her name printed in magazine articles, and Hector had used past issues of *Lemuria* to figure out that she had been alive for a long time.

“Elves physically live anywhere from seven hundred to a thousand years, but their minds don’t last as long. They begin to suffer memory impairment at two or three hundred years old, and enter a long sleep at around five hundred years old. Their body becomes one with nature, and their mind becomes a spirit—a kind of natural or magical phenomenon—that’s incapable of language. Elves themselves don’t necessarily welcome this, though,” Hector explained.

“Oh yeah, don’t they do something to prevent personality disorders?” Karan asked.

“They name their clan at every opportunity to avoid losing their soul and personality. That’s why they always mention their clan and say that they’re the ‘son of so-and-so,’ when they introduce themselves.”

“The way they value their names sounds similar to magic items.”

“The motive is slightly different, though. In the case of magic items or holy swords like me, our features, body, and self-perception are tied directly to our name. Races like elves, on the other hand, don’t undergo physical changes after losing their names or identities, but instead their memories and the ability to think. To put it frankly, they go senile,” Diamond explained.

“...So they forget who they are,” Karan said.

“Yep. That’s why elves and other derivative races value their names so much. Does Samurialie name herself when she writes articles?”

“Not directly. She uses the name of her restaurant,” Hector replied.

“She does?” Karan asked.

“I found an elf from the ‘Ume Blossom Clan’ in a past social register. That’s a clear connection to the restaurant Samurialie currently works with, Ume Blossom Retreat. It’s highly likely she’s using that name to prevent memory loss while keeping her elven identity a secret,” said Hector.

“Restaurants named after ume blossom trees aren’t rare, though. And there’s no way Ume Blossom Retreat has been around for centuries,” Karan argued.

“You’re right about that. It opened twenty years ago.”

“Then—”

“The curtain hanging outside Ume Blossom Retreat goes back much further, though. It’s been getting sold from restaurant to restaurant for three centuries, including places serving ume noodles and ume wine. Look at this. It’s a copy of a seventy-year-old article from *Gourmet Report*.”

The article had a picture of a storefront. It had a red curtain with white letters reading UME BLOSSOM. The restaurant wasn’t Ume Blossom Retreat—the article called the place “Ume Blossom Diner.”

“That’s probably the same curtain she’s using now,” Diamond said.

“Is it okay for her to use her clan name for her restaurant?” Karan asked.

“She might be trying to seal away her memories and personality. Or split them,” said Hector.

“Split? Huh?”

“There’s a chance she uses a restaurant name similar to her clan name to purposely create another identity, like as a dining consultant, while also preventing her memories and personality from becoming too scattered. Elves can forget their real names and clan names while using a pseudonym, but some do it on purpose to become a different person entirely. That’s useful for running from a criminal charge or debt,” Hector said.

“That sounds really risky, though. She could lose herself forever, right?” Alice asked.

“Yeah, that sounds scary,” Karan agreed.

“That’s where a physical object—the curtain—comes in. Slightly changing the name weakens the consistency of its effect, so the curtain compensates for that by strengthening her connection to her name. It’s just like how a king wears a crown or a high priest wears a special robe.”

“Why is she going so far to hide her identity? ...Does she owe money to Marde, too?” Karan asked.

“That I can’t tell you... And everything I’ve just said is guesswork. We won’t know anything for sure until we find her and talk to her. This is all conjecture based on the assumption that she’s lived a long time,” Hector stipulated.

“Hmm, I’d prefer to act on more certain information,” Diamond said.

“Sorry. Anyway, that’s all for my report,” Hector said, motioning for Alice to speak.

Alice began with a strained smile. “Now for the bad news. Dead Man’s Balloon members are hanging around the location in western Labyrinth City where we think Ume Blossom Retreat is located. They’re walking around with weird staves as if they’re surveying the area.”

“They’re probably trying to break the barrier. They’re not wasting any time,” Diamond commented, sounding wary.

“That’s what I figured, too. They could be looking for traces of magic. Fortunately, there are quite a few noble and merchant mansions in that part of the city. It should take them a while to find the exact location of the restaurant,” said Alice.

“So they know where Samurialie is, too?” Karan asked.

“The Thunderbolt Company has developed a wide range of experimental magic items. Their lineup includes products made for idols, kitchen appliances for high-class restaurants, weapons and armor for A-rank adventures and knights, and more. They easily could’ve learned the location of the restaurant from one of their connections.”

“And how are we doing?” Karan asked.

“Reservations are being canceled, so we should be able to slip onto the list. We’re gonna use Vishma’s name, so we’ll have to send a thank-you later,” Diamond said.

“Then give me results,” Karan commanded.

“Getting in as customers is only half the battle, though. Actually learning anything is gonna be tough,” Hector said, sounding concerned.

“What do you mean?” Karan asked.

“This restaurant is famously strict. The mistress apparently gets offended if you don’t follow ancient etiquette from Nozomi,” he said.

“I’ve studied ancient etiquette,” Karan said.

Hector looked surprised. “Seriously? Nozomian manners and rules are very different from Dineezian etiquette. It’s pretty difficult.”

“I really have. I’ve been to a bunch of tea ceremony lessons held in parks and courses on traditional Nozomian cuisine. I also looked through books on etiquette and culinary research to prepare for going to this restaurant,” Karan told him.

“Hmm-hmm, we’ve been working just as hard as you two over the last three days,” Diamond said proudly.

“That said...there will be some difficult aspects of etiquette at Ume Blossom Retreat, like having to eat the food in a certain order and carry yourself in a certain way. I might be too focused on how I’m eating to think about getting information,” Karan said.

“I’ll handle the conversation, then. I can mimic your voice to make it sound like you’re speaking... Ahh, ahh. Testing, testing. Does this sound right?”

The voice coming from the Sword of Resonance suddenly switched from Diamond’s to Karan’s. She replicated Karan’s tone and slight accent perfectly.

“Holy cow, that sounded exactly like her,” Hector said in surprise.

“That’s terrifying...,” added Alice.

They both looked back and forth between Karan and the Sword of Resonance with complicated expressions on their faces.

“...I don’t think you need to sound exactly like me. She doesn’t know my

voice. You should save your real impersonation for later. It might come in handy.”

“Very prudent. Good idea, Chief. I like where your head’s at. All right, let’s head over to Ume Blossom Retreat this evening and see if we can meet Samurialie. Do your best to pay attention to your surroundings as you enjoy the food, Karan,” Diamond instructed.

“...I’m not really in the mood for a leisurely meal,” Karan said dispiritedly, looking out the window.

Every gourmet in Labyrinth City dreamed of eating at Ume Blossom Retreat, and Karan was no exception. However, she would rather have gone under ordinary circumstances than for a job.

“...I understand how you feel. But it might help us on this job if you do have a good time.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean that you can win over the chef if you’re enjoying the food. Anyway, what should Hector and Alice do?”

Karan put a hand to her chin and thought. She arrived at an answer quickly.

“...It’s impossible for them to sneak inside, right? Then it would be best for them to keep watch outside. If Dead Man’s Balloon members find the restaurant and try to get in, I want you to catch them.”

“Got it,” Hector said.

“We’ll take Samurialie into our custody as soon as we find her,” Karan said.

The members of the Disaster Inspection Office got to work.

The job turned out to be rather easy.

Dead Man’s Balloon members found Ume Blossom Retreat less than an hour after Karan arrived. That could have been a problem, but they were former D-rank adventurers, and there were only two of them. They relied on magic items and had no special skills or spells of their own, and they had found the restaurant through luck alone. Alice and Hector easily captured them after the Sword of Resonance’s sound overwhelmed their minds.

Karan left the adventurers to Alice and took the unconscious mistress back to the Disaster Inspection Office.

“Urgh... Where am I?” she muttered, coming awake. The woman had been laid on a couch and given a blanket.

“Oh, you’re up,” Karan said.

“...Huh? Lady Karan? Wait, this isn’t the restaurant!” the mistress said, going pale. She tore at her hair and screamed, and Hector held her down.

“Calm down, lady! We’re not gonna hurt you!” he said.

“T-take me back! I—I need to put away the curtain!” she yelled.

“Don’t worry. We brought it with us. The barrier was broken, so we closed up the restaurant for you,” Karan said to calm her down.

The mistress stopped struggling. She didn’t calm down so much as slow to a complete halt, almost like she was a windup toy whose key had stopped turning.

“...Uh, are you okay?” Karan asked, and the woman’s frozen eyes darted to her.

“Do you speak of the barrier at the entrance? That is of no concern. It is nothing more than a simple barrier I use to distract from the true one,” she said.

Her bearing had changed completely. Only moments earlier, she had been acting like a flustered young girl, but now she was as calm as could be, as if she was no stranger to the rough business she had just been through. Her voice had changed, too, and her speech sounded slightly old-fashioned.

“Daughter of the dragonians. Ask me my name,” she commanded.

“...You don’t want my name first?” Karan asked.

“You must know what I want. I have yet to fully rouse from my slumber.”

“...Who are you?”

“I come from the Ume Blossom Clan, daughter of Patriarch Plantmanlabyrinth. I am the Ume Princess of the Musha Garden, Samuralie.”

Karan realized that was an elven introduction. As soon as Samuralie said her name, streaks of her hair turned red, and her black eyes turned a fiery crimson.

“Yes. Wonderful. It has been long since I last awakened,” Samurialie said.

“You didn’t just change your name to prevent memory loss... You locked away your original memories by creating an entirely new personality. I guess giving your true name is the password for unlocking your real memories and personality,” Diamond said in her Sword of Resonance form.

“I do not need you to recount my actions step by step, strange instrument,” Samurialie chided softly.

“I’m a sword, not an instrument. And I’m sorry,” Diamond said, unfazed.

“Allow me to introduce myself once more. I am Samurialie. Thank you kindly for protecting the mistress.”

“I’m Karan, daughter of the fire dragonian chief.”

“Oh, you are a princess, too, then. Though I am much too old to use that title,” Samurialie said.

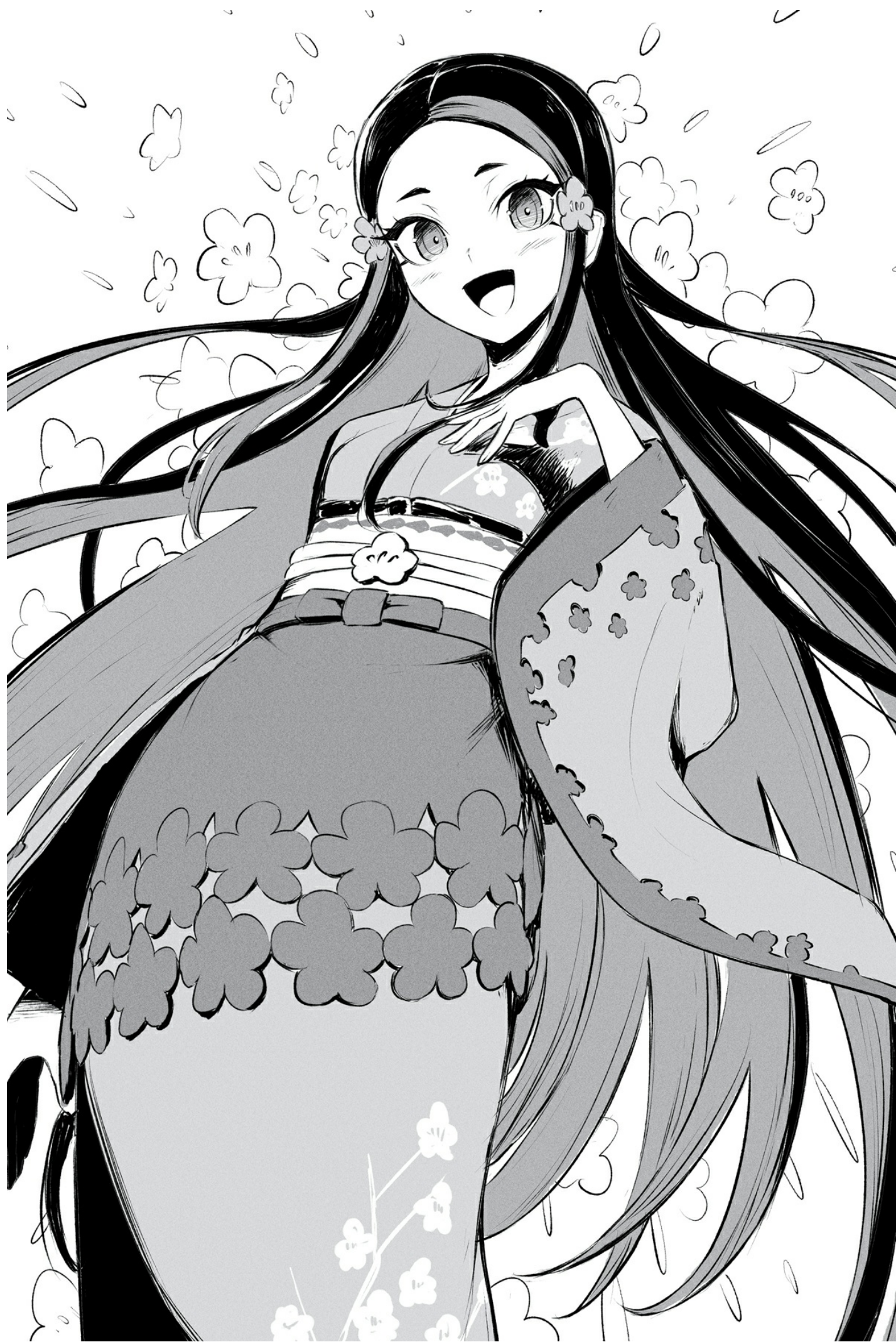
“Really? You’re very pretty,” Karan responded.

“Hmm-hmm, you flatter me. I wish to thank you, but now is not the time. I assume you had your motives for saving me?”

“We did,” Karan confirmed.

“Then I suppose I shall hear you out. Speak,” Samurialie urged. Given the haughtiness of her voice, Karan suspected she would be cut off if Samurialie found her answer uninteresting.

Karan cleared her throat and explained the situation. She told Samurialie that Labyrinth City was in danger of being destroyed by a large-scale Stampede that it had been brought about by the Sword of Tasuki and demon-god worshippers. She said that the Teran Lord, the Order of the Sun Knights, and the Adventurers Guild hadn’t quite joined forces, but they were cooperating to an extent to prevent the Stampede. Finally, she told her that Dead Man’s Balloon had put out bounties, and the members of this office were working to safeguard those targets.



“Oh, how troublesome. Of all the things to wake up to...,” Samurialie muttered.

The elf had grimaced upon mention of the Sword of Tasuki and Credit King Marde, and Karan was now convinced that safeguarding her was the right decision.

“We don’t know why they’re after you,” Karan said.

“I take that to mean you have no idea who I am. Is that correct?” Samurialie asked.

“Yeah. We don’t know who Marde is, either. All we know is that you have multiple titles—dining consultant, owner, mistress, and chef. I’m shocked by how different you are from the mistress,” Karan said.

“Hmm-hmm. The mistress is a good girl, isn’t she? She could stand to be a little more flexible, though,” Samurialie said.

“Her food was delicious... You’re talking about the mistress like she’s a different person,” Karan said.

“She both is me and is not me. It is difficult to explain. We share memories, but... Now that I think about it, your speech has changed, too,” Samurialie pointed out.

“I cheated. I’m not too used to etiquette, so I left the speaking to her,” Karan said, gesturing toward the Sword of Resonance.

“I spoke for her. Oh, but my comments on the food were based on Karan’s feelings,” Diamond said.

“You did not need to trouble yourself so. The reason I only accept customers with referrals is because my staff is limited and I do not wish for anyone to learn of my identity. I do not believe in pretentious food,” Samurialie said.

“I agree. I haven’t had much of an appetite lately, so it made me happy to be able to eat something so good. I was full before I realized how much I’d eaten. Did you pace the course that way intentionally by starting with the plums?” Karan asked.

“Well observed. My goal is typically to encourage customers to be liberal with

their money and enjoy some tea..." Samurialie trailed off, realizing how far off topic they had gotten. "Yet I highly doubt you brought me here to make small talk. Shall we return to the main topic?"

"Aww, but talking about food is more fun," Karan complained.

"...Are you truly a government official? Labyrinth City has indeed changed," Samurialie said, eyeing Karan with a hint of disapproval. Karan smiled, unoffended. "Anyway...the demon-god worshippers are likely after me simply because they want to find Marde, who is in hiding. The demon-god worshippers think I might know something of their whereabouts."

The others tensed.

"...So Marde actually exists?" Karan asked.

"Of course," Samurialie responded, astonished by the question. "I helped Marde hide once when the Sword of Tasuki was after their life. That must have been two hundred years ago. And ever since, he has been after me, too! Much to my annoyance."

Samurialie began to tell her story, her temper flaring. Elves differed from other races such as dragonians, humans, and beastmen in many respects. It wasn't just their long lifespan that set them apart, but that many of them had passed down their unique culture from ancient times. Unfortunately, those traits made it difficult for them to form villages or towns. Rulers feared elves' knowledge and the transcendental power they supposedly held, which led to persecution. That was why most elves hid deep in the mountains or forests, or traveled from town to town without settling down.

"I hail from the Ume Blossom Clan. It is our calling to pass down the culture and tradition of ume plums," Samurialie said.

"The ones I ate were delicious," Karan said.

Samurialie was a typical elf in that way. When she was young, she had spent her time traveling to barren mountains to plant trees, and to regions with wild ume plums to teach people how to preserve and cook them.

"Those were likely planted by me or my father... No, do not distract me. Getting back to my story, elves decided to stay away from rulers and political

administrations and devote their lives to protecting their culture. I am often asked about the past Demon God War, but I know nothing of it. Memories about world events tend to fade when you live as long as I. It is not so different from the haze around your childhood memories.”

“I’ve done my fair share of research,” Diamond said.

“Magic items like holy swords collect data for fun. We elves do not spend time analyzing things with the goal of serving today’s people. It is imperative that we avoid excessively adapting to modern society,” Samurialie said.

“I’m sure. Elves are conservative... I guess you have to be when conservation is your life’s mission. But that’s why I still have doubts.”

“About what?”

“I don’t mean to offend, but the culture you’re passing down would hardly have a major impact on society.”

“...You are not wrong. Most elves with knowledge that would have such an impact were dragged into the fighting, where they perished along with their clans’ traditions. My heart weeps for them.”

“Why would an elf like you form a connection with Marde? It seems risky, considering your life’s mission.”

“I had an account at the credit union, where Marde was the president.”

“There’s more to it, isn’t there?”

Diamond’s eyes shone bewitchingly, but Samurialie smiled and ignored her.

“I can say no more. I have a duty to keep that information confidential. Find Marde. Then I will tell you,” she said.

“We don’t know where Marde is. That’s our problem. He has a bounty on his head, too, so it could be bad if the enemy finds him first,” Karan said.

“If this is the Marde I know, then I am sure they would still be lending money to people,” Samurialie replied.

“Well, I guess that makes the Combat Masters ledger our best lead,” Hector said, speaking up for the first time in a while.

Karan nodded. “Argus should know Marde. Nick might have met him, too,

without knowing it.”

“...So not only is Marde real, but the person in the ledger is actually him. That only gives us more questions, though,” Diamond said.

“Yeah. I thought for sure the person lending Argus money was a demon-god worshipper. You would think Dead Man’s Balloon would know where to find him,” chimed in Karan.

“That is impossible. Show me these documents,” Samurialie requested. The Sword of Resonance projected the ledger and loan receipts. “...There is no doubt about it. That is Marde’s seal.”

“You said the demon-god worshippers are after him, right? Why would he lend money under his real name?” Diamond asked.

“Marde is a debt collector through and through. Being on the run will not stop them from badgering their debtors with requests for repayment,” Samurialie said.

“...Sounds like a nasty person,” Karan commented.

“You are not wrong. However, if you are to fight the Sword of Tasuki, you must find Marde,” Samurialie told them.

“How do we do that?” Karan asked.

“I do not know,” said Samurialie.

“What race is he? How old is he? What does he look like? What about his voice and his way of speaking? Anything you could tell us would help,” Karan said.

“I cannot help you there, either,” Samurialie said stubbornly. They all gave her suspicious looks, and she rushed to explain herself. “D-do not scowl at me so. I know the form Marde used to take, but that would be useless to you now. Marde can easily change their appearance, even down to their gender. I do not wish to send you down the wrong path.”

“They can change what they look like...?” Karan asked, not quite believing.

“Marde is a magic item developed by the ancient civilization, which was originally called the Magic Mirror of Marde. Marde can choose users much

more easily than holy swords. They can switch from one person to the next regardless of their aptitude or talent,” Samurialie explained to the group.

“Oh, I see. They’ve been able to stay hidden by passing themselves from user to user,” the Sword of Resonance said, sounding impressed.

“So Marde’s a real person with a real paper trail. Not a ghost or monster like those bogus articles say,” Karan said.

Samurialie nodded her agreement. “Indeed. They are clearly in this city and leaving hints as to their whereabouts, such as that ledger and those loan receipts. They will not refuse anyone who does their research and finds them. Marde has made moneylending their life’s mission and would never stop looking for new investment opportunities.”

“...I can’t believe anyone would commit their life to moneylending,” Karan said.

“Many do. Moneylending is just as difficult a world as adventuring, for totally different reasons,” Hector said, as if it were obvious.

“We can’t just offer Marde money, can we?” Karan asked.

“They will not be so easily enticed. Marde has a large wealth of dina, madoka, Mars dollars, real estate, magic items, credit, banned magic crystals, and more,” Samurialie said.

Hector put his hand to his chin and thought. “That means they would only approach people who can take a major loan and give them a significant return. That’s what makes Marde the ‘Credit King.’”

“Precisely,” Samurialie agreed. “Marde does not see money as something to be saved or guarded. They are an eccentric individual who derives such immense joy from lending and receiving the eventual return on those investments that they have become an urban legend. Understanding that will help you find them.”

“...An urban legend?” Karan repeated, uncertainty on her face. She gave Hector a questioning look, and he picked up on her meaning.

“What, do you think we’ll find something in *Lemuria Monthly*? I’ve been through those nonsensical articles countless times and haven’t seen Marde’s

name mentioned once. I'm sure I'd remember," Hector said.

"That doesn't make sense. Why wouldn't there be articles about such a suspicious moneylender? Marde's been famous in Labyrinth City for a long time, right?" asked Karan.

Hector groaned, realizing he couldn't argue. "...Fair point. The legend of Marde goes back way further than White Mask, and there are even rumors that they're still alive. You'd think their name would've come up in those gossip articles. Which raises the question... Did Olivia leave out Marde on purpose?"

"Are there any articles that might be related to Marde?" Karan asked.

"I am not familiar with that magazine, but Marde operates by investing in people's ambitions and dreams and then demanding repayment after they achieve success. In other words, they grant wishes for a price. Bankers are not so different from certain types of spirits and devils," Samurialie said.

Comprehension dawned on Hector's face.

"You said you didn't have a search term before, Hector. You found Diamond in *Lemuria Monthly* by searching her name. What if you do the same with Marde, or someone who borrowed money from them?" Karan asked.

"That probably won't lead us to Marde," said Hector, "but it might lead us to one of their debtors. Then if we question them, that should lead us to the Credit King himself."

A Scene of Slaughter



“There are monsters up ahead. I can smell ’em.”

The speaker was tall and slender, with forearms covered in yellow-and-black fur. He had sharp claws and a feline tail, the traits of a tigerian, who were known for their strength. However, it was his rough haircut—something between a human hairstyle and a desperate attempt to tame a beast’s overgrown mane—and his bored, arrogant expression that truly conveyed his personality. He did not seem like the type to fight for peace.

He was currently hunched down on the smooth floor like an animal following the scent of its prey.

“...Walk straight down this corridor, and we’ll get ambushed by monsters on both sides,” he said.

They were on the fifth floor belowground of the Colosseum of Carnage. The difficulty of the labyrinth was unknown, as no one had ever reached the bottom. There was a barrier inside that obstructed all magical attacks cast without physical contact, requiring all who braved its dark depths to stake their lives on their martial might.

Knowing that, the man and the Survivors proceeded with caution.

“How d’you know?” Nick asked.

The man answered without turning around. “There’s a sensor for counting people, but there’s no sign of a physical trap.”

“Does the labyrinth really need to count people?” Nick asked.

“It does. No point in flooding the corridor with monsters if there’s only one or two people in it. A bunch of ’em would end up killin’ each other by accident. If there’s a larger crowd of people, the monsters will know to fight defensively

and win by attrition. Even labyrinths have limited resources.”

“...I didn’t know labyrinths considered things like that.”

“This knowledge isn’t free, Nick. Add that to my reward.”

“Tell that to the knight who hired us if we make it out of here alive, Leon.”

This was Leon, the former leader of the Iron Tiger Troop and current criminal suspect. He had swapped his shabby prisoners’ uniform for light armor, yet somehow his physique was just as impressive as it had been before he was imprisoned in the Law Preservation Center. He had regained his muscular adventurer’s figure.

“Remember, you wouldn’t be back to your old self without the Sword of Might,” Nick said.

“And for that I’m *eternally* grateful,” Leon replied. “Almost enough to forget the fact you’re the reason I got thrown in prison and lost all that weight in the first place.”

“I’m so glad to see you committed to your training program! I’m here to support you as you continue your fitness journey!” the Sword of Might cheered, oblivious to the sarcasm.

“Th-thanks,” Leon responded half-heartedly. “...Nick, what is it about you that attracts all these weird swords?”

“You’re one to talk,” Nick said, observing the tigerian’s blade.

One thing about Leon’s appearance stood out even more than his signature tigerian fur or his burly physique, and that was the ominous greatsword sheathed on his back. The jewel embedded in its guard shone like the eye of a large carnivore. It was the Sword of Evolution, the holy sword Leon had found and the Survivors had sealed away.

“...If anyone here is weird, it is you all. And stop calling me the Sword of Evolution. I am the Sword of Ruin.”

“So dramatic. That title was given to you by others after an adventure. You do not have to use it yourself,” Bond said with a sneer. He and the other holy sword did not see eye to eye.

“Wh-what was that?! How about I call you the Sword of Immorality?! Or even better, the Sword of Idol Stans!” the Sword of Evolution yelled.

“Excuse me?! How dare you insult me like that after I took the time to give you videos and books to help you stave off boredom! So ungrateful!”

“You have terrible taste! How was I supposed to enjoy those immoral works?!”

“Don’t blame me! I got them from my party members! Anyway, you two are temporary Survivors, so you need to follow our way of doing things! And that means not criticizing our hobbies!”

The team making its way through the Colosseum of Carnage consisted of Nick, Zem, and Bond of the Survivors; the Sword of Might, who had gradually come to see Nick as her wielder; and finally, Leon and the Sword of Evolution. This final member of the party was essential to Nick’s plan for defeating Argus and the Sword of Tasuki.

The Sword of Evolution had once fought Nick and Tiana while manipulating Leon, but he had lost that fight. Afterward, the Survivors locked him away on the bottom floor of the Labyrinth of Bonds, where Bond had been sealed away for centuries. Bond had control of the labyrinth’s security, which made it the perfect hiding place. He had lost some control over the labyrinth, as evidenced by the rogue amalgam golem, but he had been sneaking down into its halls ever since to repair the security system. The Adventurers Guild had no more use for the labyrinth—which didn’t even exist on paper—so getting inside undetected was easy. The elevator leading directly to the depths worked, too.

Bond then had the idea to create an isolated room on the bottom floor of the labyrinth for the Sword of Evolution. No one would steal him, and the Adventurers Guild and the Order of the Sun Knights wouldn’t find him there, either. Despite the destruction the Sword of Evolution had caused in the city, however, Bond had felt some sympathy for his fellow weapon. He had been imprisoned in the same way, after all. So he had occasionally snuck into the labyrinth with gifts—orbs with voice recordings of idols, dragon-racing magazines and almanacs from Tiana, and gourmet magazines from Karan. Zem had recommended some books as well, but Bond’s code of ethics had prevented him from sharing those.

When Bond chose to call in a favor for the current crisis, he had trusted that these kindnesses, in addition to the safe hiding place from the Adventurers Guild and the Sun Knights, would be enough. However, unsurprisingly, the Sword of Evolution was complaining every step of the way. He was still upset that they'd locked him away without considering his wishes.

And now Bond and the Sword of Evolution were arguing over every little thing.

"What kind of name is the Survivors anyway?! Was that the first thing that came to mind? You simpletons have no naming sense whatsoever!" the Sword of Evolution said.

"At least we're not trying to be all edgy like you!" Bond fired back.

Leon sighed as they argued. "I'm just glad that I'm outta prison, and you should be, too. I don't give a damn about anything else."

However, the odds of the Sword of Evolution being acquitted were extremely slim. Once he was charged with the crimes of inciting Leon to assault a Sun Knight and destroy a casino, his situation would undoubtedly get much worse. He could even be sentenced to destruction. Fortunately, the Sword of Evolution was far more upset about the Sword of Tasuki's plot than anything else.

The Sword of Evolution saw humans as inferior, and Nick and the others worried that he might side with the Sword of Tasuki. Surprisingly, however, the Sword of Evolution had been furious to hear about the current situation.

"You cannot mean that, Leon. The Sword of Tasuki is dangerous," the Sword of Evolution said.

"...Didn't expect to hear that from you. You see people as little better than animals," replied Leon.

"Don't misunderstand me. I do not wish for human society to be destroyed. I may see no value in protecting the countries of people who have forgotten the virtue of ancient times; however, I find any comparisons to the Sword of Tasuki and his destructive ideals offensive."

While it was true the Sword of Evolution sneered at modern humanity, he had a certain respect for the people of the ancient civilization—who forged the holy swords—and the Originators. It was precisely because he held the past

civilizations in such high esteem that he could not forgive the depravity of humans today. His holy sword ability was revolutionary, but his ideology was as conservative as could be.

The Sword of Evolution would never admit this, but once he realized that the idol culture Bond had shared with him was rooted in ancient times, he could not bring himself to deny it completely. As he watched, he even found himself having opinions: *This is surprisingly artistic*, and *She's getting by on looks alone* and *Her voice is awful*, and *she has no rhythm* and *She'll never make it as an idol*.

In the end, the Sword of Evolution reluctantly agreed to cooperate on one condition: that Leon be brought along.

"You sure didn't seem to care for humanity when you turned me into that monster," Leon said bitterly.

The Sword of Evolution scoffed. "That was nothing. If humans can use swords as tools, why is it wrong for an intelligent sword such as myself to use a human? Especially one driven solely by greed and fear... You made a living manipulating such good-for-nothing fools, did you not?"

"I won't deny it."

"Leon. If you want to be more than my plaything, you need to act with purpose. Inferior beings react on instinct alone; you must fight for more than avoiding pain or fear, and use your wits for more than staving off starvation. Otherwise, you're no better."

"I could say the same to you. You wanna know why you lost to that pipsqueak? It's because you think you're so much better than everybody else. You misjudged the situation and failed to update your knowledge. And yet you call me inferior."

The Sword of Evolution groaned. "...You have me there. I was right to choose you as my wielder."

"We're just stuck with each other. That's all."

Strangely, the Sword of Evolution still acknowledged Leon as his wielder. And despite the sword's manipulation of him, Leon didn't refuse when he received the summons. He simply grimaced in annoyance and went along with it.

“Then give this your all. This is your chance to achieve something far greater than getting back in shape,” Nick said.

“Think I don’t know that?” Leon retorted.

Once Leon was on board, Nick had asked Alice to request a conditional release from the Law Enforcement Center. She bargained for him to be enlisted in the Volunteer Protection Program, which was offered to those who loyally served the Sun Knights. The program offered participants rewards and reductions in their sentence in exchange for taking on dangerous missions such as offering information on criminal organizations they were a part of or infiltrating a group as a spy. Leon’s crimes were not light, however. He never would have been granted this opportunity if not for the disorder in the Sun Knights’ chain of command.

“That’s enough talk. They’re coming,” Leon said, raising his hand to stop the others.

They all quietly drew their weapons and assumed ready positions. The shutter-style door before them rose slowly, revealing strange monsters standing in perfect order.

“Are those ogres wielding swords? There’s other types of monsters, too. What are they?” Nick asked.

There were ogre swordfighters among the monsters, but that wasn’t all. There was also a wolf-headed monster equipped with armor and a sword, an octopus with unnatural legs, a dark vapor monster that assumed a human shape and wore armor, and more—twenty in total. They were all close in height and wore similar equipment, but a variety of species were represented.

“...Those are berserkers—monsters that sharpened their skills over countless battles until the demon god recognized them as warriors and evolved them. They rank far higher than ordinary monsters,” Bond said.

“...Be careful. Only monsters that have survived a great many battles get chosen to become berserkers,” the Sword of Might warned.

The berserkers certainly carried themselves differently than ordinary monsters. Despite their overwhelming numerical advantage, they only watched

the Survivors, and they appeared calm and collected in their determination to kill.

“Are you going to use me, Nick?” Bond asked.

“It’s not your time yet. You should save your strength,” he replied.

“Come on, surely using me a little wouldn’t hurt?”

“No. I don’t need you. I’m gonna rush in and confuse them. I want you to pick them off from the outside. The corridor’s cramped, so be careful.”

“You don’t need to use my power! I just want you to wield me!”

“It is obvious you just want to outshine me. Nick, do not let this diminutive show-off push you around,” the Sword of Evolution said.

“Urgh, I am so sick of you! You’re the one who wants to show off!” Bond fumed. He truly did appear to have a sense of rivalry with the other holy sword.

“Focus, you two. Get your sword under control, Nick,” Leon warned.

“...You’re the last person I want to hear that from, but yeah, sorry. Come on, Bond,” Nick said.

“I know, I know. I’ll get serious. I’m surprised by how calm you two are,” replied Bond.

“You were joking? You should’ve made that clear,” exclaimed Nick.

“I was half serious!” said Bond. He had been trying to lighten the mood to relieve tension, but Nick and Leon were surprisingly calm.

“Are you okay, Mr. Zem?” the Sword of Might asked.

Zem smiled at her concern. “These monsters look quite fearsome. However, do you really believe they have been through a harsher training regimen than yours?”

“Don’t make me laugh. These monsters should be a cakewalk for you all after completing my program. If you struggle with them, you might as well go home and pack your bags... At least, I think Olivia would have said something like that.”

The berserkers brandished their weapons as if provoked by her words. They moved with perfect coordination that would normally be impossible for

monsters. Even an order of knights would have been impressed by their discipline and fighting spirit.

“Let’s do this. I’ll run ahead and disturb their formation,” Nick said. He stretched, showing no fear in the face of the approaching monsters.

Their first battle in the Colosseum of Carnage was about to begin.

The monsters couldn’t believe what happened next. One moment Nick was standing before them, and the next, he was behind the whole pack, and blood was spurting from the necks of multiple berserkers.

“Graaaaaah!”

Nick had slipped through the monsters, his movement as untraceable as a ghost’s, slashing their necks as he passed. He was all the way on the other side of them before the monsters even processed what had happened.

“Take that!”

“Parallel!”

Leon swung his broad-bladed sword, and Bond split into five copies of himself, each wielding a one-handed sword and using it to toy with the monsters. The berserkers’ front line was already crumbling. They couldn’t restrain Nick behind them, and they couldn’t withstand Leon and Bond’s furious frontal assault, either.

A monster moved to attack Leon, and Nick immediately beheaded it. Five more moved to stand in Nick’s way, acting as shields in the cramped corridor to let the rest of the berserkers regroup.

“Warden’s Chains, bind these sinners.”

Chains slithered across the floor like snakes and wrapped around the monsters. They were a magic item called Warden’s Chains—the very same weapon that Nargava used. They could be moved freely with mana to tie up enemies or wrap around the user’s body and serve as armor, making them incredibly convenient.

Alice had given the chains to the party almost as an afterthought when she released Leon. Neither Nick nor Leon had the ability to make good use of them,

however. A lot of practice was required to learn how to wrap them around pillars and protrusions and swing around like Nargava did. That wasn't actually their intended use—according to Alice, Warden's Chains were typically provided to knights for capturing criminals and bandits. Nargava himself had been a knight before becoming a priest, so he may have acquired them through a past connection before coming to Labyrinth City.

Given the chains' intended use of capturing enemies, Zem was the fittest to wield them. All that was needed was the ability to send mana into the chains and direct them toward the intended target.

"Woo-hoo, you just earned a passing grade! Your training in my Supreme Strength Program is clearly paying off!" the Sword of Might praised them all excitedly.

Nick, Zem, and Leon had all gotten stronger thanks to the Sword of Might's abilities.

"Yeah. I can tell the difference after training in that imaginary world," Nick said.

"I can also perform spells I learned in there without any difficulty," agreed Zem.

"...I don't *ever* wanna go through that again, though," Leon spat with a thousand-yard stare. Nick and Zem nodded in full agreement.

The Supreme Strength Program was an ancient training method and ritual spell. The Sword of Might used it to invite trainees into a mental world of her creation and put their bodies and souls through an intensive workout. She appeared in the world with a mental body to offer training exercises, which included fighting off a relentless horde of Swords of Might, re-challenging strong foes from the participant's past, and more harsh trials.

Time held little meaning in that world. A person could train for a night, a week, or a month with little time passing in the real world; however, training for a year or more wasn't recommended because of the imbalance it could create between the person's soul and body. Despite that danger, Nick, Zem, and Leon had all trained for about one year.

To put it in other terms, they had each spent a year repeatedly fighting and

dying brutally at the hands of Argus and White Mask.

“You all were so amazing. Most people would have given up before they finished the program,” the Sword of Might said.

“...Olivia probably would’ve chained our necks to prevent us from running. She was a real dumbass, but she didn’t take it easy on trainees,” Nick said, a hint of nostalgia creeping into his voice despite the insult.

“Oh...,” said the Sword of Might, feeling inferior after hearing Nick’s comment.

“...Sorry. I’m not complaining about your training. You did great,” he assured her.

“But...if I had been able to help you all grow even stronger...”

“If you couldn’t do it, no one could.”

In truth, Nick and the rest of the party hadn’t defeated the imaginary Argus once during their training—something the Sword of Might still regretted.

“We gotta face the facts, though. Do you think this plan will work?” Leon asked.

“You worry too much. Do you doubt my abilities?” the Sword of Evolution responded.

“I wasn’t asking you,” Leon replied. “Your power all depends on whether the person using you can draw it out.”

“What a timid mindset,” the Sword of Evolution sniffed, but he seemed to have no further comment.

“What do you think, Nick?” Leon asked.

“...We can’t beat them in a fair fight. But we’ll find a way to win,” Nick answered resolutely.

It was impossible to imagine a worse situation or a stronger foe, but Nick and the others still believed they had a chance of success.

The party pressed on, and each room brought new monsters and challenges. One floor required them to fight a horde like the one from earlier, while the next required them to watch their step and deactivate traps. On another floor,

they had to defeat monsters while arrows and stones shot at them out of the walls—they got through it by having Zem and Bond block the projectiles while Nick and Leon fought back the monsters. They also worked their way down a pitch-black floor; Nick used Magic Sense to guide them as they fought there, too.

But all that was nothing compared to the scare they experienced next.

“Hey... D-do something, now!” Leon wheezed.

“Don’t talk... You’ll pass out... Crap!” Nick cursed.

“Ngh... Celestial Resistance!” chanted Zem.

They had encountered a vicious trap that deprived them of oxygen, and Zem cast a newly learned spell to save them.

“This spell will last five minutes! Hurry!” he yelled.

“Okay... There should be an orb around here that produces air! Look for it!” Nick shouted.

“Mr. Nick, cast Magic Sense as soon as you catch your breath!” said the Sword of Might.

“Already did! Bond, it’s below the floor! Hold off the monsters until I rip it out!”

“Must you be so hard on me...?! Arrrgghh!” Bond screamed, charging at the monsters.

Once they’d completed the tenth floor, the party took a short breather. They were yet to face any truly close calls, but their fatigue was starting to show.

“You’re not the scrawny pushover I thought you were, priest,” Leon said, sitting on the floor after they had deactivated all the traps.

“My role may be to support you all from the rear, but I cannot be a weak link. Especially in a place as brutal as this,” Zem said.

“Don’t call yourself that... Is what that old man said still bothering you?” Nick asked, concerned.

Zem smiled self-deprecatingly. Nick was talking about Nargava, who had

gotten the upper hand against the Survivors by relentlessly targeting Zem and calling him the party's weak link.

"...Yes. Those words were painful for me to hear. I cannot allow myself to fall. I fully trust you to defend me, but that does not mean I can leave myself defenseless," he said.

"Got it. Just be careful," replied Nick.

"I will. That said, I am more worried about you all than myself. You're pushing yourselves incredibly hard. You try to act normal, but I feel it when we fight," Zem said.

"I don't—" Nick began to argue, but he stopped when he saw the serious look on Zem's face.

"This may be an irresponsible thing to say, but do not think of this as a battle we cannot afford to lose. We should consider returning to the surface to regroup and try again in the event of something unexpected. Pressing on when we are struggling could invite disaster."

"That might work for you guys, but my freedom is ridin' on this. I might get a reduction on my indemnities, too. I wouldn't jump to the conclusion that we don't have a time limit, either. There's a Stampede up there, and you're soft in the head if you think we're gettin' any extra support," Leon argued angrily.

Zem continued, unoffended by the tigerian's rudeness. "...Are you really only fighting for yourself and for money?"

"What was that?" responded Leon.

"You're working very hard. It's reassuring," said Zem.

"You wouldn't know it from how much he's complaining," Nick argued.

Zem chuckled. "Most adventurers are prone to a little foul language. But I don't know if you will be able to maintain your motivation for the long haul, Leon. I won't say anything about risking your life in the heat of battle, but we are still far from the bottom floor. We are not even certain of how many days this will take."

"Worried I'll burn myself out? Hah, don't compare me to an amateur like

yourself, priest.”

“I wouldn’t dream of it,” said Zem, unbothered by his insult. “But I want to hear your reason for fighting before we move on.”

“I don’t gotta tell you anything,” the tigerian grunted, stone-faced.

“Perhaps not, but we are all in the same boat here. I want us to eliminate all doubts about each other sooner rather than later. You shouldn’t hesitate to ask us any questions, either. It is dangerous to be ignorant of your comrades on a life-or-death mission such as this.”

“‘All in the same boat,’ my ass. Did you forget about this collar, priest?” Leon jabbed his thumb at his thick neck in annoyance. There was a silver ring and lock around it. It symbolized his wish to join the Volunteer Protection Program, but it looked and functioned entirely like a collar. It was meant to show that he stood below the rest of the party.

People assigned to supervise a prisoner in Leon’s position were given an orb by the Sun Knights. The orb could be used to tighten the collar around the prisoner’s neck when they disobeyed orders or acted rebelliously. The collar was configured so it wouldn’t choke the prisoner to death, but it did immediately immobilize them. It was a tool to stamp out all thoughts of freedom or resistance.

“How about we destroy it?” Zem suggested. “It makes me terribly uncomfortable as well.”

“...Huh? Did I hear that right?” Leon responded, astonished. He instinctively covered the keyhole with his hand when he realized Zem was serious.

“Your hand is in the way,” Zem said bluntly.

“Th-the hell’re you doing? What idiot would free a criminal?!”

“That collar is doing nothing anyway. Only magic tools as powerful as holy swords or ancient relics function down here. I suspect we would have to be close enough to feel your breath for the orb’s signal to reach the collar.”

Zem approached Leon, leaning in close enough to indeed feel the other man’s breath.

“You guys’re gonna be punished for this, too!” Leon protested.

“All we have to do is put it back on when we’re done. There is also no small chance that there won’t even be an Order of the Sun Knights by then. We ourselves might not make it back alive. If the collar will be a distraction in the deadly battles to come, it would be best to remove it.”

Nick and Bond watched, knowing not to interfere when Zem got like this.

“He’s serious, Leon,” Nick assured him.

“That’s right. Zem does not mess around,” Bond said.

“Then don’t just stand there!” Leon shouted, stepping back.

“To be honest, I did not like you,” Zem told the tigerian. “I hated you, even. Deceiving a gambling addict is a wicked thing to do. You saw weakness in his heart and used it for your own gain. If you had made a living off of your eloquence and acting skills, you would still be a free man.”

He was referring to Leon’s past, before he was arrested and before he made a mess of the casino. Leon had convinced the owner of a bar called Sparrow Port to accompany him to a gambling parlor, where he had cheated and bled the man dry.

“Heh, I made a lotta money off him... Donny, I mean. He spoke of all these grand dreams, but he had no work ethic at all. He thought he was workin’ hard and that he would be rewarded for it one day, but he didn’t know his incompetence was the cause of all his problems. He was the perfect mark. All he needed was a little push to go tumblin’ down the slope,” said Leon.

“Just like what happened to you?” Zem asked.

“...Yeah. That’s right.”

“Did you want to prove that all people are the same beneath the surface?”

“Are you tryin’ to say you guys’re different from me? That’s what that Tiana girl said.”

Zem shook his head. “I find myself overcome with kindness whenever I find someone just as depraved as I am. I sympathize with people who struggle to stay afloat after getting swept away by the polluted waters of society, and my

heart hurts for those who give up and let themselves sink. The people I can't stand are the ones who never get their feet wet and go through life entirely clean. I prefer ordinary people who have to make the best of unstable situations."

A bead of sweat ran down Leon's face.

"You remember the name of the man you deceived. You feel a little different than the last time I saw you," Zem told him.

"Prison changes a man."

"Yes, I know just what you mean. You emerge as an entirely different person."

"Hah, what could you possibly know? Do you understand what it feels like to be locked in a cramped, dirty room? This loser's the only visitor I ever get. Otherwise it's me and the shitty guards."

"I understand it well. There is very little to see in a cell. Your sensitivity to sound grows over time."

"Yeah..."

"The guards' constant mockery and threats are torture, but it is almost preferable to the times when they ignore you for weeks on end and occasionally forget to deliver your two daily meals."

"...Th-that's true."

"Your voice reverberates off the walls of your tiny cell when you speak. You know it's just an echo, but you feel comforted by that fleeting reminder you're still alive. Do that for long enough, and you start hearing voices that are not your own, which fills you with a fleeting ecstasy at finally having someone to talk to. That is not possible, of course. The guards have forgotten about you and gone to bed. Either that, or they're playing cards far enough away that they can't hear you."

"...I haven't gone that far off the deep end," Leon said. He looked to Nick for help, but the other man didn't have any idea, either, how to stop Zem when he got going like this.

"That is why I feel a strange sympathy toward you. What is your goal here?"

Zem asked. He had a knack for finding the keyhole to other people's hearts. He was especially sensitive to others like him. Many such people lived in disorderly worlds such as the red-light district and the Garbage Heap. Something about Leon's aura reminded him of himself.

"...I was once in a party called the Silver Tiger Troop," said Leon. "I told you a little about that, Nick."

"I did some investigating afterward. It was your first party," Nick said.

"Yeah. We made a bit of a name for ourselves, but it all came crashing down when my party members killed each other over some treasure. It was an embarrassing end."

The Silver Tiger Troop had been an adventurers' party led by Leon's now deceased older brother. He was an expert on ruins and deciphering ancient texts, and the party was well known for conquering many difficult trap-filled labyrinths. But as Leon had said, a rift formed between the party members over how to allocate valuable magic items they found in a difficult B-rank labyrinth called Mechanical Moon Facility, and they all killed each other.

In a strange coincidence, Leon had met a certain man just before the Silver Tiger Troop self-destructed.

"You all were tricked by Callios...er, the Sword of Tasuki."

"Yep. He called himself a magic item merchant, but that was bullshit. He lied about his background to appear like an honest merchant and gave us a fake offer for the magic items. The deal sounded way too good to be true, but I think he might've said some things to inspire distrust among my party members, or he deceived them with a bewitching spell."

"...So he lied about his background. That checks out with what I've heard," Nick said.

"I couldn't tell you exactly how he operates. But he vanishes like smoke once a job is done, leaving only his name," Leon told him.

Nick nodded, thinking back to Karan's story.

"I've had my doubts about that. Why would he operate under the name

Callios? Magic item brokers need name recognition to be successful, but he could've easily used a fake one," Leon continued.

"He could be bound by his name like Olivia and Diamond. He's a holy sword, after all," reasoned Nick.

"Probably. That's why I'm not really after *Callios*'s head. It's not revenge I want," Leon told them.

"Huh?" Nick responded.

"Really?" Zem asked.

They both looked surprised.

"The truth is my old party members were all idiots for letting that scumbag deceive them. I can't deny that, and I can't hide what I've done, either. We made mistakes, and I've sure made a mess of things since," Leon said.

"...Then what do you want?" Nick asked.

"There's a good chance the Colosseum of Carnage is tougher than an A-rank labyrinth. The monsters we've fought so far were just the beginning. The monsters and traps are only gonna get worse from here on out."

"For sure."

"If we get through this place and reach the truth, I can prove my strength as the sole survivor of the Silver Tiger Troop. I don't care about clearing our name. We may live in infamy forever. But this accomplishment would connect my party to something that matters. Then my old comrades might be able to rest in peace."

Adventurers were vain people. They could make a hundred mistakes, but at the end of the day, all they cared about was how strong they were. No matter how foolish, or how much of an outcast they were, it was their one small source of pride. Neither Nick nor Zem could deny that.

"Anyway...there's somethin' I'm dyin' to see," Leon added with a grin.

"What's that?" asked Nick.

"The fact that *Callios* is operatin' openly and on such a large scale means the

demon-god worshippers are in the final stage of their plans. We're in a tight spot, but this is also our chance to corner them. It's not too late for all his carefully laid plans to come tumblin' down. Don't you wanna see that smug-faced bastard cry?"

"Hell yeah," Nick said.

"I do indeed," Zem agreed.

"I think that is in poor taste, but I won't deny it," commented Bond.

"I have the same wish," said the Sword of Evolution.

"H-huh..." The Sword of Might was the only one not to emphatically agree.

The others laughed maliciously, their voices echoing off the walls of the labyrinth.

"Priest. Take off the collar," Leon said.

"Are you sure?" asked Zem.

"I'm not just asking 'cause I want to be free. We're gonna need full use of my senses from here on, and this'll only get in the way."

"...Understood."

Zem nodded to Nick, who swung the Sword of Might lightly at the metal ring. The lock clanged to the floor, cut neatly in half.

"Phew... Didn't expect that to feel so good," Leon said.

"We're all accomplices now. Don't screw this up," Nick warned him.

"Watch who you're talkin' to, amateur."

Nick and Leon clashed, but their attitudes weren't nearly as hostile as their words, and the tigerian even accepted the suggestion that they consider temporarily withdrawing.

The party spent the next two weeks working their way through the labyrinth, taking regular breaks on the way down. They developed a sense for the labyrinth's idiosyncrasies and structure over time, and they guessed they were about halfway to the bottom.

Nothing, however, could have prepared them for the shocking sight they found on the next floor. The monsters had already been slaughtered, and even more disturbingly, the room was strewn with the corpses of adventurers and knights.

“What the hell...? I thought this guy was supposed to be on the bottom floor,” Leon said, breaking out in a cold sweat.

“I see you’ve added a new face. Not that it’ll do much good once it’s severed from his shoulders,” a large man said.

He rushed at Leon with a speed that was astounding for his size and swung his sword with perfect grace. Leon hurriedly blocked the blow with his own sword, visibly surprising the man.

“So this is the real deal... I hope the Sword of Might didn’t go easy on us.”

The man standing before them was Argus.



*

The room was a large, open space. It was markedly inorganic, in the style of the ancient civilization and was reminiscent of the bottom floor of the Labyrinth of Bonds. That floor, however, had not been filled with corpses.

“...Aren’t these guys from the Fanged Fiends?” Leon asked with a shudder, and Nick nodded. Only Zem didn’t seem to understand, so Leon explained. “They’re a martial arts school that became an adventurers’ party, just like Combat Masters. Their leader was a qilinian, which are even rarer than dragonians. He was a master spearman and one of the strongest adventurers alive. He was supposed to be a match for Argus.”

“I see... So the guild sent them, and Argus defeated them all,” Zem surmised.

Argus sighed. “They were skilled, but not enough to handle my natural strength. None of them were fit to be sacrifices.”

“Is that what you’re looking for? A sacrifice to feed to the Sword of Tasuki? What’ll you gain from helping him accomplish his goals? Are his ideals really so wonderful?” asked Nick.

“I don’t know,” replied Argus.

“What?”

“I told you, Combat Masters was only meant for assassination. Olivia founded it to efficiently kill the Sword of Tasuki’s wielders and contractors. Practitioners of this style do not choose their prey. It is not meant for training the mind and bettering the self, either. It is not our business to know our employer’s thoughts.”

Nick had wanted to ask Argus something before they fought: Why had Argus betrayed humanity to ally with the Sword of Tasuki? But watching Argus now, he knew that asking would be naive. He was urging Nick to approach him with the resolve to kill, or accept death. Nick scolded himself, remembering that he had come here to answer that challenge.

“Let’s do this, guys,” Nick said.

Argus was the first to move. He struck with no warning or windup

whatsoever, almost as if they'd had the misfortune of being struck by lightning. Leon just barely blocked his blow and escaped.

"...Don't panic! This is good for us! Zem!" yelled Nick.

"Okay!"

""Union!"" they shouted together, transforming into Nick/Zem and charging at Argus.

""You know what to do, right, Leon?!"" they asked.

"Of course! Let's go, Sword of Evolution!" he shouted.

"O lost moonlight! I beseech you, manifest now to burn away the old ways and instigate change! Evolution!" the Sword of Evolution chanted, shining with a golden light.

Leon's fur grew, his muscles swelled, and his face turned bestial as his body settled somewhere between tiger and human. He dashed around the room, kicking off the floor, the walls, and the ceiling, with beastlike movements that were more natural than what Light Body allowed.

"...What?!" Argus gasped—his first real expression of shock.

"His physique is certainly impressive, but that is all. I struggle to understand why the Sword of Tasuki has become so fixated on him... Okay, Leon! Show him your almighty strength!" the Sword of Evolution encouraged him.

Argus braced himself.

Leon's body swelled even larger until he was over three times his ordinary height. His fur grew longer and hardened until he resembled a giant hedgehog. Then he charged straight at Argus.

"Grk...!"

Argus swung his greatsword to cleave through Leon, but Nick/Zem got in his way with a palm strike as fast as a crossbow bolt. This was a combo move they and Leon had devised in the Sword of Might's simulations. Leon continued charging at Argus head-on, his entire body equipped for both defense and offense.

"Not good enough!" Argus yelled. He sidestepped Nick/Zem's strike, then

slashed his sword like the Grim Reaper's scythe and cut off Leon's head. But Leon didn't stop charging.

"Ha. Do you expect to harm him with a little haircut?"

The head Argus had severed was a fake made of hardened, needlelike fur. Leon's hair hid his real head like armor, cleverly hiding his most vulnerable point.

Leon wrapped his body around Argus, tightly binding him with his wiry fur.

""Here's one more!""

Nick/Zem swung at Argus to hit him with all their might while he was restrained. Before they made contact, Argus ripped Leon off with his incredible arm strength and swung him around like a ball and chain.

""Gah...!"" Nick/Zem gasped as Argus threw Leon's body at them. Whether the battle was skill against skill or strength against strength, Argus was indomitable.

"What the hell?! He's far stronger than the simulation!" Leon shouted.

""We knew that going in. We need to regroup!"" Nick/Zem responded.

Nick/Zem activated Stepping and challenged Argus to a fistfight. Both of their punches landed with inhumanly heavy impact sounds, and the metal floor cracked radially around them. Argus withstood the constant blows by continually casting healing spells and countering with punches of his own.

Next, Leon constructed a new body and intervened. He clashed with Argus again and again, creating a spectacle so bizarre, onlookers would never have known it was a fight between two people. Still, Argus steadily adapted to his assault. The movement of Leon's Evolution-altered body was unique compared to humans and mutated monsters but definitely not random.

"That's enough. I've discerned your skill and techniques. You cannot defeat me with bodies grown artificially by the Sword of Might. That holy sword... doesn't seem very strong either," Argus said, his voice rich with disappointment.

Argus wasn't uninjured, but the party was nowhere close to killing him. Continuing the fight in this manner would lead only to their defeat.

““...Give us your worst,”” Nick/Zem responded, resuming their fighting stance. The Swords of Bonds, who had yet to speak, then began to shine. Particles of light emerged from the handle, the guard, and the blade, filling the area around them.

“Hmph... Healing magic...?” asked Argus.

““It is a healing barrier that prevents people within it from being harmed or killed. It instantaneously purifies and heals injuries.””

Nick/Zem's and Leon's wounds disappeared, but so did the damage they had worked so hard to inflict on Argus. Confusion flashed across Argus's face, but he quickly realized their intentions.

“...I see. You're healing the body parts I severed as well, essentially using the spell as puppet magic,” he said.

Leon's fake head, as well as the fur and skin Argus had cut off his body, combined and morphed into a human shape, creating a puppet clone of Leon. The clone began to squirm.

“That was just a warmup. You're talking as if this is over, which means we've seen your full capabilities,” said the Sword of Evolution.

“Say that after you've won,” responded Argus.

He raised his greatsword, and another turbulent battle began. The clone tried to coil around Argus, but he cut it down. It re-formed and tried again, and Argus smashed it to pieces with a punch. Simply adding one more party member wasn't enough to restrain him.

Argus then grabbed one of the clone's arms and ripped it off.

“Got you.”

What looked like an arm had actually been the Sword of Evolution's sheath, cleverly disguised as part of the clone's body.

“I invite you to evolution’s ultimate destination! O moonglade, warp your image! Irrational Moonlight!” the Sword of Evolution chanted, releasing a strange light.

“Wh-what...? No!” Argus yelled.

He tried to drop the sword, but an arm grew out of his waist and grabbed it. He then tried to break the blade with his fist, but another new hand restrained his arm. His eyes became bloodshot, horns sprouted from his forehead, and his skin color changed with dizzying speed. It almost looked as if he was turning into a monster. Argus’s Evolution was much more twisted and dramatic than Leon’s.

““You dumbass! Did you really think we’d try to beat you in a fair fight?!”” Nick/Zem sneered. That had come from Nick’s mind, and his heart wept as he said it. They punched Argus while casting the spell Restoration to make sure their ploy worked.

This had been Nick’s plan. Argus couldn’t use magic, and he didn’t have any special abilities despite being the Sword of Tasuki’s wielder. He likely received his skill from the Sword of Tasuki, but he relied on nothing but his ordinary human body to use it. With decades of training, Nick could theoretically reach Argus’s level of skill.

Argus lacked the natural toughness of a beastman or a dragonian. He wasn’t even blessed with mana as some humans were. That was precisely why the Sword of Tasuki chose him—he wanted to use him to explore human potential. That had given Nick an idea—he could ruin the Sword of Tasuki’s plans by distorting Argus’s body so he was no longer human.

The Sword of Evolution had a dramatic effect on the body of his wielder. Leon had been thoroughly exhausted after allowing himself to be used by the sword with no regard for his safety. This time, however, Nick/Zem used their healing barrier to prevent that exhaustion in Argus and accelerate the evolution. It was a drastic move, but a clever one.

Argus could no longer Awaken at the peak of ordinary human potential. Nick had racked his brain for a way to ruin Argus and the Sword of Tasuki’s plans, and this was the dirty move he’d come up with.

““This evolution will affect your mind as it progresses. You’ll no longer be yourself. There’s no guarantee that the final result of your evolution will be a creature with a sentient mind. This is good-bye,”” Nick/Zem said, glaring at Argus with both love and hate in their eyes.

They had no idea what Argus was thinking in that moment. Or at least they tried to convince themselves of that.

“...Run,” Argus grunted.

The truth was that they saw genuine concern in his eyes.

““Got something else up your sleeve? Go ahead and try it.””

“I...failed. This was my limit.”

““That’s right. You’re finished.””

“I thought that if my soul had to be trapped by the Sword of Tasuki...I may as well make it my duty to kill him myself... But that was an error of judgment...”

Nick tried to ask him what he was going on about, but Zem stopped him, urging him to listen. Leon watched quietly, too, but for a different reason. He was tense, overcome by a sense of foreboding that one wrong move could spell disaster.

“If you elevate your soul any further...the Sword of Tasuki will want to make you...or one of your comrades...his next wielder... He’s always looking for potential...”

““Potential...?””

“You’ve become much stronger than I thought... I even feel...proud...”

Nick’s heart pounded in his chest. He had always wanted to hear those words from Argus. All his hard work and training had paid off.

But Nick had never expected to hear it after he had abandoned all his hopes and affection for his mentor.

“Get out, while you can... The Sword of Tasuki...will ensnare you... He’ll stop at

nothing...to Awaken humanity...," Argus wheezed.

"I-is that true...?! This is really bad! We need to retreat at once!" the Sword of Might, who had been very quiet up until now, suddenly screamed. That got everyone's attention. Nick/Zem were about to ask for an explanation when...

"Well, this is a problem."

...A sinister voice echoed around the room, sending harrowing shivers through all of them. It was hard to tell if it was coming from the ceiling or the floor.

"...Shit, he's here," Leon said with a shudder. He had put down the Sword of Evolution and returned to his normal form.

They soon realized where the voice was coming from. A black hole had opened in the chest of the still-evolving Argus. If Karan had been here, she would have had one single, overwhelming thought: *This looked just like what happened with Garos.*

"“You use your contractors as relay points, just as we were told,”" Nick/Zem said, glaring into the hole cautiously. The malicious eye in the hole, however, was looking at Leon.

"Who are you again...? Oh yes, I remember. You're Leon from the Silver Tiger Troop. I must congratulate you. You managed to hide the Sword of Evolution from us completely. I knew you must have used some kind of magic item during your outburst at the casino, but it still never crossed my mind. You might've just been lucky, but I'm surprised you escaped my gaze for so long," the Sword of Tasuki said.

"Sorry 'bout that. You want an apology?" Leon asked mockingly.

"No. Giving you that little push was more than worth it. Seeing people grow makes me genuinely happy."

"Excuse me?" Leon responded, his sneer turning to a confused frown.

"The Silver Tiger Troop was a good party. Every member was rich with potential. I gave them a trial, and the man who emerged alive is standing here before me. How could I not be happy to see that?"

The look in the depths of Callios's eye repulsed Leon and Nick/Zem. He

observed human lives with the pure curiosity of a scientist studying a small animal or microbe. The other holy swords were arrogant, but this was on another level entirely.

“Hmph. Someone’s feeling cocky. All you do is absorb the bodies of heroes and abuse their divine blessings and skills. I’ll give you an end fitting for the disgrace to a holy sword that you are,” the Sword of Evolution said.

“The Sword of Evolution. I always thought your power was dull, but I never knew it was this unsightly. Look what you did to my poor wielder,” the Sword of Tasuki said, his voice brimming with a dark anger. That was the first flicker of emotion they had seen him show toward anyone.

“I was a little reluctant about this myself. Altering a person’s soul along with their body is an unsavory use of my power... But it was clearly effective. I don’t know how exactly the Sword of Tasuki bound you, Argus, but you should now be able to oppose him.”

Argus was the Sword of Evolution’s current wielder. The sword was trying to read his mind and incite him to fight.

“I feel fatigue and a bottomless sense of despair within you. I could see it immediately upon facing you. You hate that holy sword, don’t you? What did he do to you? What did he take?” the sword asked.

“Don’t misunderstand. I haven’t taken anything from him. We both consented to our contract.”

“He consented? I find that hard to believe.”

“We are each bound by the other’s actions. It’s only natural for us both to feel some dissatisfaction with the arrangement.”

The Sword of Evolution fell silent. Nick/Zem, Leon, and the Sword of Bonds watched warily. They all had a bad feeling something unforeseen was about to happen.

The Sword of Tasuki broke the silence with a bright voice. “...Oh, I get it now. That’s how you thought of us... I want to clear up a major misunderstanding. Hear me out.”

““A misunderstanding?”” Nick/Zem repeated.

“Argus and I both swore ourselves to secrecy, so I can see how this situation

would be confusing. He's always been so honest and stubborn... That couldn't have been easy on you as his apprentice."

"“Get to the point.””

The Sword of Tasuki shrugged.

"You probably know the gist of this already, but my mission is to research humanity's potential and pursue it. If people do not gain special abilities and realize their potential for versatility and evolution, thereby failing to reach the next stage, they will either find themselves at the whims of the gods or wiped out in a disaster not even the gods can stop, possibly killing the planet itself... That's probably hard for you to understand. Let me put it more simply. I am working for the benefit of the planet and humanity, and Argus agrees with that. Olivia and that other thorn in my side never understood, unfortunately."

"“What does that have to do with anything?””

"...The Sword of Might—Olivia—raised Argus into the ultimate warrior. I still get chills down my spine thinking of the war against Marde. I had the hero Setsuna's skills and all the techniques and weapons we used to oppose the demon god on my side, but I was still no match for Argus and his Combat Masters. I thought I had lost. It turned out, however, they also had no way to defeat me, hence why Argus and I formed a contract."

Nick/Zem listened to the Sword of Tasuki, absorbed by his words.

"I do my best not to kill anyone except for those who have willingly put themselves under my protection. I can guide a person toward death or injure them to an extent, but it is impossible for me to inflict a lethal wound. It's been that way for centuries."

It took a moment for Nick/Zem to process what he had said. They were shocked to learn that this man, who had caused so much destruction already, had actually been holding back.

"The trials and temptations I offer can lead to death. I encourage destruction and incite hostility. I cannot, however, inflict the final blow. I always leave a possibility of survival. Argus is to blame for that—he bound me so that the best I can do is stab someone with a silly cursed stake that does not immediately kill

them. He always demanded proof that my plans and trials did not directly kill anyone. The tiniest violation would bring about a penalty that greatly reduces my power... It was an awful position for me,” the Sword of Tasuki explained.

Nick/Zem were astonished by what they were hearing.

“In exchange for placing these limitations upon me, Argus promised to train his soul to achieve Awakening and fulfill my goals. And if not for your interference, he might have solved everything.”

In other words, the Sword of Tasuki had schemed so extensively only because Argus had forced him into it.

“...Admittedly, though, we were at a bit of a dead end. Argus had a high chance of defeating the demon god, but I’m not certain he would have Awakened. The difficulty necessary for an Awakening trial can’t be objectively measured. The task needs to be so difficult that the challenger’s success would be considered a miracle. I might have let Argus grow too strong,” Callios said, shrugging his shoulders. He spoke with the carefree attitude of someone ripping up a losing betting ticket at a dragon race. “This may have been inevitable. Now’s a good time to revise my plan anyway.”

With those words, the Sword of Tasuki began to glimmer with powerful mana.

“This is bad... The contract relies on Argus’s existence. If he becomes something else, it’s as good as void. The Sword of Tasuki wasn’t holding back—Argus was restraining him.”

A malice they had yet to detect from the Sword of Tasuki swelled from the hole in Argus’s chest. The bonds of the contract were coming undone.

“...Argus. You can’t perform your Combat Masters moves with that body, and you can’t Awaken, either. You also have no hope of defeating me once I am freed from the contract. Thank you, partner... And farewell,” said the Sword of Tasuki.

A desperate battle was about to begin.

Karan the Trickster



There was a rumor in Teran. It claimed that if you prayed for seventy-seven consecutive days at an altar by the entrance to an abandoned drainage tunnel in the eastern district, a demon would appear in the broken mirror on the altar to grant your wish. Many young people took this rumor at face value and climbed over the fence prohibiting entry only to be taken into custody by a Sun Knight. The altar and the staircase leading to it had been left there only because the city had no budget to remove them.

There was another rumor in Teran. It claimed that if someone who desired to pursue knowledge went to the Gaspard Observatory at the Gaspard Advanced Magic Academy, observed a shooting star through a telescope, and whispered their dream, a beautiful demon would appear in the lens of the telescope and give guidance that would open their path to becoming a scholar. Researchers who were at an impasse in their studies often broke the observatory's lock to sneak in at night and seek this guidance, resulting in their arrest for trespassing and destruction of property.

There were many more such rumors. One claimed the existence of an angelic kitchen knife with a mirrorlike sheen that granted chefs' dreams. Another said that idols should rehearse before the small mirror in the third locker from the left before an audition. Yet another said that if you confined yourself to a room in the Garbage Heap meant for helping people break a drug addiction, an angel would appear in an overhead window to heal you.

All these rumors spoke of a being who granted wishes.

Lemuria Monthly had been in publication for over a century. It also released special issues when major events occurred in Labyrinth City and had even existed as a free paper before its first publication. It had been chronicling

uncertain rumors in the city all that time.

Every now and then, a small corner of the op-ed section would be occupied by a rumor about a mysterious wish-granting being. Such stories had existed in folklore since ancient times. There were plenty of similar rumors in the capital, and you could even find them in frontier villages that didn't have a newspaper. It was in these very common gossip articles that Hector picked up on a trend that would have been difficult to notice unless you were looking for it.

Within the last ten years, there had been an increase in rumors about mirrors, clear metal objects, lake surfaces, and anything else that gave off a reflection. People who believed the rumors usually ended up being admonished by a Sun Knight for trespassing or made to pay reparations for the destruction of property, meaning that whether or not the rumors were true, people had been arrested in pursuit of the magic mirror. That gave Karan, Hector, and Diamond a place to begin their investigation.

They thought finding those who had been arrested would be as difficult as scooping gold dust out of a river or finding an oasis in a desert, but it turned out to be remarkably easy. They had all achieved some level of success that made them stand out, or they had recovered from a life of depravity and crime and gone on to find a peaceful existence.

One of them was a man who had turned his life around by rising out of the Labyrinth City slums and becoming one of the top adventurers at the Manhunt guild. He was fighting as hard as he could at Starmine Hall to help defeat Dead Man's Balloon, where he revered "Lady Tiana" and served her loyally.

Another was a mage who was working in Teran Lord Manor to help strategize against the Stampede. He could have quit his job and run, but he chose to evacuate the rest of his family and stay behind. He was now working day and night and sleeping at the castle.

Another was a chef who owned chains throughout Labyrinth City. Just like the mistress at Ume Blossom Retreat, she volunteered by distributing food from her reserves to people with no family.

Another was an idol. She had gone independent from Jewelry Production and was working as a freelancer. In addition to her own idol activities, she also

produced new idols and organized charity concerts. She was a girl of many talents.

Another was a gatekeeper. He had been standing on guard outside the Garbage Heap for nearly a decade. Even with the threat of the Stampede, he had chosen to stay behind to guide those who snuck in toward the proper facilities or kick them out if they could still make it in the outside world.

Some of the people they suspected to have had contact with Marde had died of old age, but most were still alive. What's more, they had all decided to stay in Labyrinth City despite the turbulence caused by the Stampede and the appearance of the labyrinth. Every one of them was bravely continuing to work or taking part in charitable endeavors such as distributing food or safeguarding refugees.

But while finding these people was easy, getting information out of them was not. They had likely all signed contracts with Marde that swore them to silence. They were also careful around anyone who contacted them in case they were a subordinate of Marde's or a demon-god worshipper after Marde's head.

Karan thought long and hard about how best to win them over and get them to share information about Marde, and she came up with a very simple method.

"I brought snacks! There's skewered eel and beer. Don't tell Tiana about this! Hm? Oh, don't worry about it. This is my treat. I can just write it off as a business expense!"

"Hey, mister. You're a scholar at Teran Lord Manor, right? You need to avoid going to dangerous hostess bars like that. The bouncers are gangsters connected to the Garbage Heap. The snack bar across the way is still safe, though. Anyway, you drink too much. I can smell it on your breath. I know work is busy, but you're going to get sick."

"Are you a fan of dragon racing? That one comes from a strong bloodline. It does best in hot and humid weather and is still growing, too. Just watch, it'll win every top prize next summer when it's gotten bigger. Did you hear they're going to establish a new graded race to celebrate our victory once the Stampede is over? I can't wait."

"I see you're writing lyrics. Do you like to read? I heard the Writers League

and some publishing companies teamed up to make a shelter for writers and performers. They're gonna start publishing again once things at the printing companies settle down. Word on the street, though, is that the true purpose of the shelter is to make it into a sweatshop for authors who are past their deadlines. You want to do a charity concert? Don't. Trust me."

"Long time no see! Zem's in the labyrinth. I'll tell him to drop by once he gets back. Do you have enough food? Yeah, you're not alone there. If you're ever running low, let me know, and I'll arrange for some food to be sent to you."

Karan was well-versed in the many pastimes of Labyrinth City. That included Nick, Tiana, Zem, and Bond's hobbies, as well as her own. She had also learned about other hobbies from people while pursuing her gourmet interests. She had directly observed people in all social strata in this manner.

That included country folk who had been clueless about city life before working as adventurers, adventurers who had once been aristocratic ladies or honorable priests, and the leaders who had guided such people.

Weak, low-ranking adventurers who struggled to make ends meet, and strong adventurers who worked alone without the need for a party.

Adventurers who were scammed, and adventurers who scammed others.

Adventurers who hunted bounties instead of monsters, and criminals and ruffians with bounties on their heads.

People who worked in fields far removed from adventuring.

Innocent children, and children who weren't so innocent.

Parents who protected their children, and parents who had been unable to protect their children.

Women who worked at nightclubs. Men, too.

People who devoted their lives to glamorous show business, and people who supported them behind the scenes.

Knights and politicians who protected public order.

Karan had watched them all with her simple perspective. She wasn't free of biases and preconceived notions, but she learned to abandon them and grow as

a person. That ability of hers to grow close to all kinds of different people was in full bloom right now.

“So do you have any problems I can help you with?”

The people Karan reached out to were successful, but they were all currently facing hardships. It was almost as if they were all staying in the city to help people because they had a contractual obligation to. Some accepted it as their mission, while others saw it as a heavy burden. They all felt an indistinct anxiety over the future, and that anxiety grew by the day.

Karan saw that as an opportunity to help them, just as they were helping others, to build relationships of trust, and eventually to extract information from them.

“You’re running out of wheat too quickly because of all the new people in the shelter? I know a restaurant that’s closed down. I’ll ask the owner if they can share any of their stock.”

“You’ve been too anxious to sleep? You need to stop drinking so much. I’ll make it so you have nothing to worry about in the first place.”

“Your kid hasn’t come home? You dummy! Go out and look for them, now!”

“Always remember to eat.”

“I brought meat and booze. Make sure not to drink too much, though.”

“Don’t worry. I’ll figure something out.”

The duty these people had promised to perform in exchange for their loan was simple: When Labyrinth City faces a crisis, stick around and help people. That was all. The debtors understood their duty and were performing it.

Unfortunately, Karan and her team had hit a snag in the investigation—they couldn’t find any personal information about Marde. The existence of documents and money proved that the loans were taking place, and that the debtors were making repayments, but Marde had never appeared before any of these people. The debtors would find a letter or a bill by their pillow or in a drawer and make the repayments through a simple bank transfer. Marde was nowhere to be seen in this process.

The search appeared to be at a dead end. But even so, Karan had come to a conclusion about one thing.

Samurialie had multiple hideouts. Ume Blossom Retreat was one of them, but it was currently unusable. She also had a perfectly ordinary ramen shop in east Labyrinth City, a food wholesaler and a candy store in the southwest, and many more stores under her influence.

The small orchard on the outskirts of Labyrinth City that Karan had just arrived at was another one of Samurialie's hideouts. Karan ignored the sign saying No ENTRY and walked in among the trees.

"These ume blossom trees were planted three hundred years ago," Karan said as she walked down a path through the orchard toward a shed.

Alice was beside her. "So these are the ume blossom trees the elves swore to protect. Three centuries is a long time for humans, but it's nothing for a long-lived species."

"Actually, we're not sure about that."

"About what?"

"We don't know if these are the same ume blossom trees raised in ancient times. It's apparently impossible to protect and raise purebred trees for thousands of years. I've heard that ume blossom trees have been selectively bred since the time of the Originators, and that we don't actually have any idea what the original was like."

"That means these trees are..."

"They're officially called ume blossom trees. But it wouldn't be wrong to call them a plant *similar* to ume blossom trees."

Alice looked uncertain.

"Does something about that not make sense to you?" Karan asked.

"Yeah... Couldn't the elves have preserved the trees by magically freezing seeds and seedlings? That's not magic the average person can use, but I'm sure elves are experts on ancient spells and technology," Alice said.

"Samurialie said that wouldn't preserve their place in human culture."

“What do you mean?”

“When people see an ume flower or hear the word *ume*, they imagine a sour taste. Ume plums are often referenced in ancient songs, too. The elves don’t want to pass down just the trees, fruits, and flowers, but also the image that people associated with ume plums in ancient times.”

“But they can’t grow enough ume plums to put on the market, right?”

“Yeah. They’re difficult to grow compared to other fruits.”

“Oh, so that’s why they make ume-flavored syrup and candies. They’re using those to pass down the image of ume plums and keep the culture alive...”

Alice smiled cynically.

“Does that upset you?” Karan asked.

“I would call that a tragic struggle for survival, but...I definitely ate a lot of ume candy as a kid. It’s a nostalgic flavor for me. I guess that’s exactly what the elves wanted. I have to acknowledge them for pulling that off,” Alice said.

“Yeah. I feel the same way. I think it’s admirable.”

“I doubt you called me here to lecture me about ancient culture. Are the others already here?”

Karan had invited Alice to this orchard under the pretext of a meeting outside the Disaster Inspection Office. They were to meet at the shed at the end of the path, but after a few minutes of walking, it hadn’t gotten any closer. The shed was small—definitely not big enough for the optical illusion that occurred when approaching a large building from a distance.

“Alice. You looked into Combat Masters and Nick, right?” Karan asked when she saw signs of suspicion on Alice’s face.

“...Yeah, I did,” Alice responded.

“Then you found out that Argus killed Nick’s parents, right?”

A breeze too cold for early summer blew. Red light from the evening sun streamed through the trees, illuminating Karan and Alice.

“Nick’s parents were traveling merchants. They were killed while returning to

their inn from a bar, apparently by bandits who caught wind of a deal they made. Argus killed the bandits and saved Nick... That's the official story anyway," Alice said.

"But that's not what happened. Argus killed Nick's parents... Why did he do that?" asked Karan.

"Why ask me? That's something only Argus knows."

"We can investigate the circumstances around the murder. Who exactly were Nick's parents? What was Argus doing at the time? If this was treated as a murder case, plenty of information should have been recorded... That reminds me, the Sun Knight who was in charge of the investigation died. Doesn't that open the door for us to investigate more thoroughly? We could question another knight who worked on the case, for instance."

Alice's easygoing attitude vanished, and she stared at Karan coldly.

"Then you should find one and do just that," she said.

"...You saw the murder scene. The station where you were posted was just around the corner."

They both stopped walking.

Alice silently drew her sword.

"Was it? That was so long ago, I don't really remember... Are you sure you're not mistaken?" Alice asked, her voice flat.

"I gave Hector some documents from back then and had him go through them. It wasn't hard to figure out the district where you worked and that it was close to the crime scene," said Karan.

Alice slashed her sword at Karan, but...

"Ten years ago, you were just a common knight without a special post. Then out of nowhere, you began solving difficult cases and climbing the ranks," Karan said.

...Her sword sliced only air. Karan turned and smiled at Alice—her body was an illusion, and Alice was already under her spell. Karan had blended sound into the wind and activated the Sword of Resonance's power.

“Why did a skilled knight like you fail to realize that Argus was the murderer?”

“All we knew was there were dead bandits, dead peddlers, and an adventurer who was a friend of the peddlers. There was no reason to doubt Argus’s story,” said Alice.

“Were you given some sort of power in exchange for covering it up?”

“You’re entering conspiracy territory here.”

“Here’s one more conspiracy theory for you, then. The Order of the Sun Knights has been questioning people who have received support from Marde. A lot of people have gotten in trouble for trespassing into a closed drainage tunnel and an observatory at night.”

“It’s a knight’s duty to question suspicious people.”

“That’s only been happening for the last ten years. There’s been an increase in articles about an urban legend of a being who grants wishes. Do you know when that began? It was right around the time you started working as a holy knight and Argus killed Nick’s parents. There are people who believe the legend to be true, and there’s a Sun Knight who’s pursuing such people...which gave me an idea: What if the Sun Knight is a demon-god worshipper who’s trying to find Marde?”



A strong breeze swept through, and the scenery changed around them. Flowers bloomed that were out of season, and the lush ume blossom trees were painted white. A tree sprouted from the ground and grew several meters tall, its branches and flowers covering the sky.

“...Magic Sword, Wind Whale!” Alice shouted, drawing and swinging her magic sword. Wind Whale absorbed mana and broke spells. It could be used to erase offensive spells directed at its wielder or illusionary spells cast on the surrounding area.

And yet activating the magic sword did nothing to return her surroundings to normal.

“I’d be careful swinging that sword around, if I were you. You won’t break the illusion, and you’ll end up owing over ten million dina in damages if you cut a tree. This ume blossom orchard is part of the Teran Lord’s Culture Preservation Project,” echoed Diamond’s voice.

“Is that really important right now?!” Alice shouted, before noticing that the fake Karan had disappeared among the trees and flowers.

Diamond had used her Sword of Resonance power to reverberate Karan’s voice and make Alice hear it from all directions at once. Alice had no idea where she was actually speaking from.

A vision of Diamond playing a bewitching tune on the keyboards around the Sword of Resonance appeared and disappeared, making her look like a spirit frolicking in the wind. She was cute, stylish, and mysterious all at once. Her captivating melody written to lure people into a dream penetrated Alice’s mana-proof defense and shook her mind.

“You can’t do all this and not expect me to fight back. Are you ready?” Alice said.

“Of course,” responded Karan.

Alice resolutely gripped her sword amid the sound-induced illusion.

“Wind Whale! Expel the mana you’ve consumed!” Alice shouted, and mana surged from her magic sword in ripples. It wasn’t an attack—the mana didn’t burn or cut the trees. Instead, it rebounded off all obstacles and returned to her

blade. She was using a skill that scanned the user's surroundings in more minute detail than Tiana's Magic Search, allowing Alice to fight without difficulty when her vision was impaired or her opponents were hiding.

"There you are!" she shouted. Now able to tell which trees and flowers were fake and which were real, she leaped toward Karan.

"You shouldn't jump at a sick person like that."

"You? Sick? Don't be ridiculous. You just produced a wide-ranging illusion without mana, and you can block close-range attacks. That's a terrifying ability."

"Oh, there appears to be some sort of misunderstanding. This garden is my territory. This is my barrier spell, Musha Lane. Admiring the flowers is a wonderful pastime, is it not?"

The person Alice had leaped toward wasn't Karan, but Samurialie, who blocked her sword with a large pair of pruning clippers. That was hardly a weapon made for combat, but she had an expression of ease on her face.

"I may not be a professional, but I have dabbled with the sword. I recommend you surrender," she said.

"You're behind this trap?! This is no ordinary illusion!" yelled Alice in shock.

"The culture of admiring flowers is engraved deeply into human hearts. It is easy for a person to look at a branch and see flowers that are not there," said Samurialie. She kicked Alice in the stomach with her leather sandals to break their sword lock. "The essence of illusion magic is imagination. All you need is a little mana to push one's mind in one direction or another. An illusion that relies too heavily on mana to twist one's perception is easy to break."

Samurialie wasn't lying, but she wasn't telling the truth, either. This barrier did not use an insignificant amount of mana. Each and every tree in the orchard had been infused with magic to act as a source for the barrier. Cutting down one tree or robbing it of its mana wouldn't accomplish anything—the other trees would respond by casting healing magic and maintaining the functionality of the entire orchard. Samurialie was just misleading Alice so she didn't figure out how the trap worked.

"...In that case, I see no reason to keep playing along," Alice said.

She sighed and turned her back on Samurialie, then leaped off the ground, kicked off the trunk of a tree, bounded off a branch, and disappeared among the grove. Her movement was even sharper than Nick's when he used Light Body.

"Hmm... That is not Light Body... Is she using the Fool's Gait?!" Samurialie exclaimed.

Fool's Gait was a magical pair of boots with soles that produced shock waves to grant explosive jump strength and instantaneous speed. They granted both offensive and defensive capabilities.

"Take care, Karan! She intends to disturb your sound with shock waves!" Samurialie warned.

"That's no problem... Harmonize: Mirror Sound," Karan chanted.

A raucous song resounded throughout the orchard. It came from an illusion of Diamond, who was singing and playing the keyboard. Her voice layered on top of itself, then split off to sing different parts—and where there had previously been only one Diamond playing all six keyboards, there were now six Diamonds, each playing one of the keyboards and singing. Together, they formed a full band.

The sound penetrated the magic item's shock waves, then passed through Alice's eardrums to rock her nerves, emotions, and memories, ensnaring her in violent emotion.

"Grk...," Alice grunted.

"This is an angry rhythm that freezes you to the bone one moment, then burns you the next. Let's see if you can bear it," said Diamond.

A shock ran through Alice's body. It wasn't from a physical blow; she became violently numb and dizzy, as if she had been poisoned.

"No...way..."

The intense music carried anger, sadness, and pain tied to Karan's memories and transferred those emotions to Alice.

"That's pot snake poison you're feeling. It's awful, isn't it?" Karan asked.

“You’re gonna kill me... Why isn’t my...anti-poison buff working...?” Alice gasped. Her face had become deathly pale.

“You’ll be fine. I only transferred my *memory* of being poisoned. You weren’t actually poisoned, so you won’t be harmed at all. That said, you’re experiencing the memory of my pain, so your own strength is meaningless. You’ll suffer as long as the music is playing, and you’ll be healed as soon as it stops.”

Karan and Diamond stopped performing, and Alice’s face quickly regained its color. She looked at Karan despondently before eventually putting down her sword.

“...Well played. I surrender,” she said.

“So we passed the test?” Karan asked.

Alice nodded with a tired expression. “I would’ve preferred we had a more amicable dialogue, though.”

“You threatened me first. You basically told us to block your escape and corner you.”

“I was just trying to get you motivated.”

Alice sat up, smiling bitterly.

“I also couldn’t discard the possibility of you being in league with Argus and the demon-god worshippers. There are a lot of questions surrounding the deaths of Nick’s parents, so there was no way to know for sure that you hadn’t received support from the demon-god worshippers,” said Karan.

“Yeah. I could’ve been a spy, for all you knew. Confiding in allies can be risky for that reason. I could’ve passed along everything you said to the enemy... Why did you decide to trust me?” Alice asked.

Karan nodded calmly. “...Do you remember the girl who died in the Garbage Heap?”

“Yeah. I remember her well. Nick scolded me for not finding her.”

“That’s not all. You regretted not seeing her yourself. You felt that if you did, you would have been able to identify her and find and stop the fake Steppingman.”

“Huh? Is that your only reason?”

“You’re also kind toward Nick. Like you’re watching over him.”

Alice didn’t say anything. She looked ashamed.

“...It’s time, Alice.”

The voice spoke from out of nowhere. It was a dignified woman’s voice that didn’t belong to anyone present.

“Are you sure, President?” Alice asked.

“There is no point in continuing to hide after they have come this far. You did well.”

“I lost in the end, though.”

“This isn’t about winning and losing, child. I told you to test them. I admit I did not expect this sequence of events, however.”

“Show yourself. And talk to us. No one will hear you here,” Karan said.

“That is right. We are within my barrier, Musha Lane. No magic detection spells or tracing will function here. I guarantee you that the Sword of Tasuki will hear nothing,” Samurialie added.

Alice answered by reaching into her pocket and pulling something out.

“A mirror...?” Karan said.

“This is the person you—and the demon-god worshippers—are searching for. Her name is Marde, and she’s the president of the Dineez Adventurers Credit Union. Her official name is the Magic Mirror of Marde,” Alice said.

“Oh, you’re a magic mirror. That makes sense...,” said Diamond.

The mirror had a distinct oval shape, resembling a small window on a traditional brick building. It was about twice as big as a hand mirror and had a silver rim with a matte finish.

The glass shone, and someone appeared within it.

“Magic mirrors look like ordinary mirrors at first glance, but the reflection is intentionally distorted. A hidden image will appear when it reflects light. She’s probably projecting her image magically now, though,” Diamond said.

“Your knowledge is impressive. This is our first audience, Sword of Distortion.”

That “someone” was a young woman. She had dark skin and long golden hair, and her sharp eyes appeared sorrowful. It was hard to imagine she had such a bad reputation from her current calm demeanor.

“That name... You were made before the Demon God War, weren’t you?” Diamond asked.

“Yes. We never spoke because I wasn’t yet sentient at the time. There is much I would like to discuss with you as a fellow long-lived being, but...my business is not with you.”

Everyone’s eyes fell on Karan.

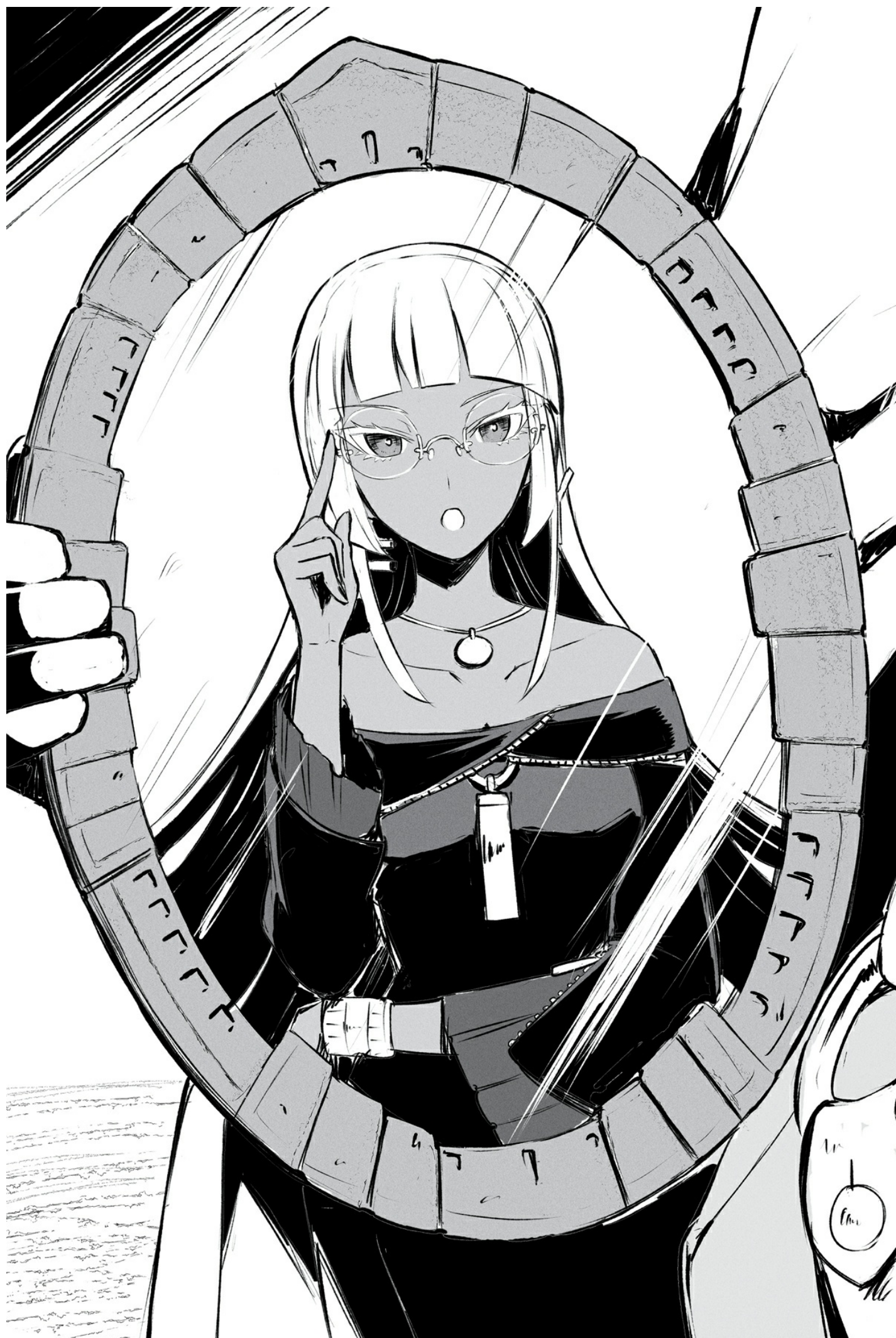
“Yeah. I don’t know what you want, but I have business with you, too,” Karan said, looking directly at the figure in the mirror.

“Karan Tsubaki. You have reached the truth. You also satisfied my conditions and welcomed me to this place. As such, I have decided to show myself and give you my name. I am Marde, president of the Dineez Adventurers Credit Union.”

Marde said she would start by answering questions, and began to speak of the past. First, she spoke frankly about why Argus had killed Nick’s parents and how Alice came to possess her magic mirror.

“Nick’s parents—Richard and Robin—were merchants. Do you know what kind of business they dealt with?” Marde asked.

“They sold trade goods, right? Like thread, oil, and food?” said Karan.



“That was only their side business. They mainly sold financial instruments.”

Karan almost asked her what the heck she was talking about, but then she stopped herself. It took only a little thought to realize why they would do such business.

“...Nick’s parents worked for the Dineez Adventurers Credit Union,” she surmised.

“That’s correct.”

Marde had been transferring herself from user to user since ancient times as she performed her moneylending business. As Karan and the rest had previously learned, Marde searched for people who were beneficial to society, invested in them, and demanded repayment with interest once they became successful. She had apparently been doing that all this time.

“I was originally a magic item created for using the ancient spells Analyze and Item Box. I physically guarded and preserved wealth in preparation for unusual circumstances... But when those unusual circumstances came, they resulted in me losing my owner. That was when I discovered a job I could perform.”

Analyze was a spell that appraised people, monsters, or items. It could be used to discover their strength, characteristics, value, and potential for growth. Item Box was just as the name implied—an ancient spell that accessed a subspace with infinite room for storage.

“Those abilities were devised for heroes, but I guess they’re perfect for banking, too,” Diamond commented.

Marde nodded in agreement. “Protecting the wealth of others requires me to avoid dealing with criminals and others who would do harm to humanity. And in order to protect financial value, I first needed to establish an economic infrastructure and grow it. That is why I invest in people.”

“You have a *bit* of a bad reputation, though... What did you do to earn that?”

Marde grimaced. “...I suppose I have been a little too aggressive in growing my wealth. That has drawn some ire. But I do nothing that is grossly immoral. I work with people when they go bankrupt, and I never forcibly withdraw credit. I did admittedly accumulate a large collection of pawned weapons and magic items, but that is all.”

“Alice got Wind Whale and the Fool’s Gait from you, didn’t she? Those are kinda difficult

to miss.”

“Ah-ha-ha, they’re really useful,” Alice said.

“Anyway, back to Richard and Robin,” Marde said, clearing her throat. “They both had an eye for profit and a chivalrous heart. Nick was also a good and bright boy, and I looked forward to him inheriting me... I had fun traveling together, just the four of us.”

Those words gave Karan a mental image of Nick working as a traveling merchant. He would have been an entirely different person from who he was now, but a part of her would have liked to see that.

“Is lending money really that fun?” Karan asked.

“Call it investment. And yes, it is fun. Helping others achieve their dreams is rewarding work... Many investments do not work out, however,” Marde answered gloomily.

“...Why did Argus kill Nick’s parents? Did they not realize who he was?”

“They did, actually. And they even knew he was the Sword of Tasuki’s wielder. We could have ended this all if they had been able to win him over.”

“Win him over...?”

“They were headhunting Argus to get him to quit as the Sword of Tasuki’s wielder and defect to our side. Argus was shrouded in mystery, but we could tell he had a reason for working with the holy sword. I thought they might be able to get to him.”

“But they failed... Or did they?”

“So you noticed.”

There were a number of inexplicable things about Argus’s actions. Why did he raise Nick as an adventurer? Why was Marde unharmed after trying to win him over? And why was he accepting loans from Marde?

“I don’t know why he left Nick unharmed, either. Argus and Nick’s parents negotiated under the condition that their superiors would hear nothing of what they said. I was temporarily sealed away as they spoke, and I learned nothing about what happened until Alice found me. Alice and I then came to work together.”

Alice nodded gravely. “By the time I raced to the scene from my station, Nick’s parents and the bandits were already dead. Argus was the only survivor, and he adopted Nick and left as soon as we questioned him. He didn’t even look through Nick’s parents’ possessions... I searched the carriage thoroughly later

and found the president, who had been sealed by a talisman.”

“I hired Alice as a new employee of the Dineez Adventurers Credit Union. I helped her solve Sun Knight cases, and in exchange she carried out my credit union business and monitored Combat Masters. Argus eventually realized Alice was watching him and demonstrated that he meant us no harm. I offered him a loan, and he accepted. By doing so, he communicated that he would not always be the Sword of Tasuki’s ally.”

Karan had closed her eyes as she listened and now thought quietly. After a few seconds, she opened her eyes and looked at Marde.

“I understand. But why is the Sword of Tasuki after you?” she asked.

“Because I could Analyze him to detect the number of souls he possesses and their abilities. Analyzing someone shows me the essence of their soul. It would be of particular use on the Sword of Tasuki, who collects souls.”

That answer gave Karan a sliver of hope. They’d been on the defensive so far, but this was a chance to turn things around.

“I do not have any attack capabilities, however. Break me, and I am finished. But we might be able to block his attacks with Samurialie’s barrier magic. At the least, that would completely prevent him from using his wielder as a relay point to perform a long-distance attack.”

“...Will you fight with us?” Karan asked.

“Unlike the Teran Lord’s agencies and the Sun Knights, I am nothing but a financial institution,” Marde said.

“Then can we make a deal?” Karan asked.

Marde smiled as if that was just what she had been waiting for. “I won’t turn down any project that will be profitable and benefit society. Truthfully, I have been investing in many people over the last ten years.”

“Did you have Alice monitor them? Is that why everyone who receives a loan from you gets arrested by a holy knight—by Alice, probably—for trespassing?”

“Yes. While I wanted to act in secrecy, I needed to leave circumstantial evidence. I used Samurialie’s barrier and waited for the arrival of someone the debtors could trust... And Olivia picked up on my intentions and executed them without needing any explanation from me.”

Sadness crept into Marde’s voice as she said Olivia’s name. They were only

here now because of the information she had left. Olivia had felt like the kind of adventurer you couldn't kill even if you tried, and Karan missed her dearly as well.

"...So are you to blame for *Lemuria Monthly*?" Karan asked.

"Heavens, no. That was all Olivia. I was consistently baffled by the contents of that magazine," Marde said.

"Huh...," Karan said, unsure how to react.

"I kinda liked *Lemuria*, personally. It served its purpose while conveying the charm of the ancient civilization to modern society. I think it deserves nothing but praise," chimed in Diamond.

"I didn't dislike it. Her writing reflected the vices and virtues of this city," said Marde.

"...What do you think of Labyrinth City? Does it serve its people well?"

Marde snorted in response. "It's a city of depravity. Public order and morals have crumbled, and it has become infested with villains. The weak are beaten, and the foolish are scammed. Worst of all, it's the city that killed my employees and robbed me of the child I wanted to lovingly raise. I hate it."

The anger in Marde's voice was palpable. She was seething over what had been taken from her.

"I see why people called you the Credit King. You're a harsh critic," commented Diamond.

"That said... a culture is blossoming here that is a blend of the old and the new. The city accepts those who are stuck in mud, and there's a general energy of trying to achieve a better tomorrow. Some are fighting as hard as they can to protect the city. They do not deserve to have their lives destroyed," Marde said, looking at Karan and the rest. "I would not have taken issue with the demon god's revival if it was the natural course of events. However, I won't tolerate destruction at the hands of a schemer like the Sword of Tasuki. I lost valuable employees. I cannot sit back and let him do as he wishes."

"...You've been really careful, though," Karan said.

"I couldn't let resentment consume me. That would be a good way to get myself destroyed. I was also observing you carefully to make sure you could control yourself as well," Marde said.

Karan looked shocked. “You were watching me...? Is that because of my connection to Nick?”

“President Marde and I have been watching Nick all along to decide if we should take him away from Argus or offer our help,” Alice explained.

“Please help us. We can’t defeat Dead Man’s Balloon, Argus, and Callios...the Sword of Tasuki without you,” Karan said.

“...I will not help you defeat them,” Marde said, and an uncomfortable silence descended. The others knew exactly what Marde was implying, and they didn’t think it was possible.

“Are you...telling us to solve things peacefully?” Karan asked.

“Precisely. You should know negotiation is the only way to fight in this case. Our opponent has absorbed the power of many heroes and has a variety of magic items and spells. Surely you can see you have little chance of obtaining the strength to beat him overnight.”

“That’s a reason to look for allies, not to avoid fighting,” Karan said.

“If I was looking for a warrior, I would have chosen someone else... You’re strong, Karan. You could one day become an S-rank adventurer on the level of Fifs. If you and Nick master the Sword of Bonds further, you could become the strongest warrior alive. But that is not who you are now. I know you understand that.”

“...Yeah.”

“You lost your strength, but you didn’t let that keep you down. You didn’t give up on the power of talking to people. That is the quality I am looking for.”

Marde was giving high praise, but Karan was reluctant to accept it.

“...I have given up on talking things out before,” she said.

“Why?” Marde asked.

“Because I thought I could settle things more cleanly another way. I tried to kill Garos in Nick’s place.”

“...Yes, you did. Considering what happened, it wouldn’t be unfair to say that you did kill Garos.”

Diamond objected to that. “The Sword of Tasuki disposed of Garos. And I had responsibility over the stage where the attack occurred. Karan didn’t kill him.”

“You misunderstand. I am not asking her to take responsibility. I just don’t agree with her actions,” Marde said.

“This might be an excuse. But Garos was a true soldier and assassin. I thought trying to befriend him instead of killing him would have been not only impossible, but an insult,” said Karan.

“You chose to respect your opponent’s pride. That is virtuous, but not always ethical,” responded Marde.

“You’ve never been a fan of soldierly people, President,” Alice commented.

“Of course not. Those who attain great strength should work for the good of society, not to inflict pain,” Marde said emphatically.

Alice shrugged from behind the mirror. Marde’s irritated tone reminded Karan of someone.

“Hmm? What? Did I say something funny?” Marde asked.

“You remind me of Nick. You really did spend time with him,” said Karan.

“...That was a long time ago. I was unsure if I should reach out to help or not. I can hardly pretend to be his guardian when it’s been years since I’ve spoken to him.”

“But you lent him money.”

“I contacted Argus through Alice. Our negotiations broke down, but we did enter a ceasefire. Argus promised not to tell the Sword of Tasuki about me and swore to raise and protect Nick. I lent him money in exchange.”

“...Can you really trust that Argus won’t tell the Sword of Tasuki about you?” Karan asked in an accusatory tone. She couldn’t believe Marde had negotiated with the man who’d killed her employees.

“Are you questioning my integrity?”

“Yeah.”

“One must put their principles aside during negotiations. You won’t gain your opponent’s trust unless you’re willing to show some moderation. Go too far in that direction, however, and you’ll never achieve your goals or reach an agreement.”

“But Argus ambushed Nick’s parents. Why would you trust him?”

“He didn’t harm Nick. He even chose to raise him and kicked him out of his party for his

own safety... I never thought Nick would have to face the truth as a holy sword wielder, though."

"...That's why you lent Argus money? To help Nick?"

"Indeed. It was also a test to see if Argus still wished to oppose me...and a way to provoke the Sword of Tasuki."

"You wanted to send the message that you were still alive despite his efforts and that you were even lending money to his wielder," Diamond said, exasperation creeping into her voice.

Marde smiled darkly. "I needed to hint at my activity and keep him in check. He had much to do to achieve his goals, so I wanted to disperse his strength by putting him on edge."

Karan was in awe of how persistently Marde had watched over Nick and the situation. Nick had spent ten years training in Combat Masters, and Marde had spent that time displaying remarkable patience.

"Karan. How would you have dealt with Garos today?" Marde asked.

"Hmm... I would want to trap him with my magic, but I think he would have had a way to avoid that," replied Karan.

"Likely. From what I know of what happened, he probably used Dormancy."

"What's that?"

"It's an advanced version of Light Body that limits the body's movement as much as possible. It adapts a person's body temperature to their surroundings, reduces mana to the bare minimum, and slows their heart to a beat a minute. His body would have reacted sluggishly to noise in that state. It's unlikely your current abilities would have worked on him. Dormancy does leave one highly vulnerable, however."

"Then...we could have intentionally left a hole in our security. He would've seen the blueprints and known we were sending a message inviting him to slip through and talk to us."

"Are you sure you could have gotten him to go for it?"

"He was obsessed with Nick. We could have used that to lure him. I did lure him, actually."

"Yes. You have that ability. Then why are you choosing to fight?"

Karan considered that and shook her head. "I think it's too late for Dead Man's Balloon and Argus."

"Why?"

"They've already outed themselves as demon-god worshippers, and they have bounties on their heads. Some of them will probably get the death penalty. Those people have no option but to keep fighting as demon-god worshippers. I don't think they can be reasoned with."

"I see."

"The demon-god worshippers have killed people and burned down stores and homes. Can we really just ignore their victims and forgive them? It's far too late to talk and resolve things peacefully... I think believing otherwise would be naive."

"We don't have to forgive anyone. We could settle things amicably, get them to cooperate, and then arrest them in the end anyway to preserve order. There are extenuating circumstances to take into account, but I'm not saying we should erase their crimes."

"Huh...?"

Karan couldn't believe what she'd heard.

"To give an extreme example, would it really matter if we promised someone a reduced sentence and then broke our word? The dead can't complain," Marde reasoned.

"Th-that's unfair..."

"You're the one who called me naive. People will cease to believe you if you repeatedly break your promises, but you could pull it off if you simply broke them all at once... Oh, don't worry. I'm half joking. Breaking promises should be avoided for moral reasons, of course."

"I don't think you could get people to trust you if you spoke with that intention. You have to show that you're willing to keep your word first."

Karan had learned the truth of that after starting to work at the Disaster Inspection Office, and it was something she had come to realize during her time with the Survivors as well.

"That's right. Establish that trust, however, and there's room for negotiation with anyone,

no matter how hopeless their situation. Don't you agree?"

"That's..."

She was going to say it was impossible, but then she realized that wasn't exactly true. She wouldn't be here today if Nick hadn't convinced her to trust him, after all.

"All people are fated to die and get what they deserve eventually. Knowing that, however, does not cause everyone to grow desperate and act solely in pursuit of their own desires."

"...So you'll help if I try to negotiate with the enemy?"

"At the very least, I think we should try to find the truth before resorting to violence. I cannot fight anyway, and even if I could, all that lies down that road is destruction on a citywide or perhaps even continental scale. You want to avoid that, don't you?"

"Finding common ground feels pretty far-fetched, though. Dead Man's Balloon is assaulting my fortress as we speak. I dunno if we can just slip in there and ask for a ceasefire..." Diamond interjected.

"I am aware it will be difficult," said Marde.

Diamond grumbled that she was asking the impossible; however, Karan was thinking about something else. She looked so out of it that the others began to wonder if she was listening at all, but then she spoke up slowly.

"...I just had an idea," she said.

"What is it, Karan?" asked Diamond.

"What if we could convince the souls the Sword of Tasuki stole?"

Marde fell silent. Neither Alice, Diamond, nor Samurialie said a word, either. Just when Karan began to wonder if what she'd said was nonsensical, Marde spoke up.

"Incredible. Normally, I would say that's not even worth considering... But possessing multiple holy swords gives us many options. There's a small chance it could work."

"...It's worth considering. Karan and I might be able to do it. It'll be really hard, though," Diamond said.

"I know," Karan responded, unbothered by how daunting a challenge it would be. She nodded calmly, not letting the pressure get to her.

“Your task is to speak to those fearful souls who have abandoned all hope and trust, and convince them to lay down their arms. Karan Tsubaki. Rejoin with your fellow Survivors and save the many disillusioned adventurers who call Labyrinth City home. Doing so will save this city and, by extension, the world,” decreed Marde.

Karan laughed at her overly serious tone. “I’ll do my best, just like I always do.”

She smiled. Despite her words, her expression was brimming with hope and confidence.

Hector’s stress reached new levels when Karan filled him in that night. Their task was so difficult—nigh impossible, in fact—that he knew they couldn’t take it on without having come to terms with the possibility of death.

Even so, he felt a sliver of hope. That girl and the Survivors might just be able to pull it off.

Hector then remembered his main job and sat down to write a report for his boss—Medora, the god of providence. He knew he was letting his subjectivity and wishful thinking influence his message, but he felt proud as he wrote on the parchment.

Once he had finished writing, Hector performed the ritual only agents could perform to communicate with their god. He placed his report on the altar given to him by Medora, offered a prayer, and burned it.

The parchment turned to ash and smoke as the words were sent to the heavens. Hector ended his report with the following: *Apparently, disillusioned adventurers will save the world.*



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