

人間不信の冒険者 世界を救う ようです

たちが

2

〜麗しのパラディン編〜

富士伸太



MF7777

**ADVENTURERS WHO DON'T BELIEVE
IN HUMANITY WILL SAVE THE WORLD**

– Ningen Fushin no Boukenshatachi ga Sekai o Sukuu Youdesu –

- VOLUME 2 -
The Lovely Paladin-

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富士伸太



人間不信の冒険者
世界を救う たちが
ようです

2

～麗しのパラディン編～

レオン

クロディーヌ

ニック

ゼム

カラン

キズナ

ティアナ



「離れてなさい。風邪引くわよ」

そこに突然現れた人間を自撃した者は驚愕きまつがくしていた。突然現れたことに対してではない。その人間の纏う気配に対してだ。気高さと美しさの両立した金色の髪。まるで神話や伝説に語り継がれるような純白よろいの鎧よろい。手にする剣もまた不可思議で、鍔元つぼもとから伸びる光芒こうぼうが刃を形成している。だが、なによりも見る人に強い印象を残すのは顔であった。凛りんとして、一瞬男にも見えるほど研ぎ澄まされた美貌に誰もが見とれた。



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CHAPTER 35

BARE-KNUCKLE ARITHMETIC (1)

Basically, Karan insisted on wanting to live somewhere cheap because she wanted money to buy somewhat nice clothes, to be able to enter restaurants with a dress code... She tried to play it off as something lady-like, but it was 100% due to her gluttony.

But Nick and the others argued that leaving nice clothes in a cheap inn would inevitably lead to them being stolen, and those clothes would be ruined if they started smelling like shady herbs. Eventually, they managed to convince Karan to move.

They went to the post town called 'South Gate', where Nick was staying. The people staying there were vulgar, but most had respectable occupations.

Half were adventurers and half were merchants working away from home, so it was a comfortable place to live if you were used to this sort of thing.

But it wasn't a very friendly place to outsiders. There were a lot of unspoken rules about how to use the rooms, the order in which people could use the well, household items that could be rented, etc. Rent could be low if the tenants followed the rules. It was nothing like East Gate, where people happily loitered around during the daytime.

"So Karan and Bond. Let's go with this inn for now."

"I don't care where I'm staying as long as it's not expensive."

"Do I also need to pay rent? I could just turn back into a sword..."

"It's 1500 dinnar a day, and we're making money so bear with it. And Bond, if turning into a human isn't a burden for you, keep that form as much as possible. People will think it's weird if you keep appearing and disappearing, and we want to avoid making the guild suspicious."

"Alright..."

"We don't have a choice."

The inn they agreed on was an old wooden building.

The sign on the entrance had completely worn-off, but this place was leagues ahead of where Karan had been staying.

“This place is pretty good for its price, but don’t forget that they only rent for three or more days at a time.”

“Hm... So what if it overlaps with days when I’m out adventuring?”

“They’ll return 20% of what you paid if you cancel.”

“What a waste...”

“You have to think about your schedule. And few things get stolen around here, so you can leave your stuff. There’s even a box that’s locked with a magic item.

“...Really!?”

“Really. And most people here are intermediate adventurers, so people that are clearly robbers can’t get inside easily, and they might get beaten up if they try. It might even be safer than some high class inns. What do you think?”

“I-I don’t hate it.”

Karan was thankful for the consideration. Nick didn’t even demand anything in return.

He jokingly said she’d better thank him, but he never demanded anything more from her than things like picking a new inn.

Karan looked at Nick with respect.

If Single Meal Fifth was who she wanted to be, Nick was like an older brother.

“Then let’s go with this one. And Karan, come to my room tonight.”

“...Eh?”

He should be like an older brother, but Karan was shaken by those words.



That night, Karan went to Nick's room just like he asked.

"Yes, that's good."

"L-Like this...?"

"You learn quickly, Karan... Now let's do this."

"I-It's too big... I can't..."

"Come on just try."

"Ahh..."

Karan let out an uneasy sigh.

"I-I am at my limit... Nick..."

"Good grief, alright then. Leave it to me..."

"Y-Yes..."

"It's just like two digit calculations. Listen, first you buy five swords for 9800 dinnar each. It says you get a 5% discount if you buy them all together, but if you take it one step at a time there's no problem. First you add everything..."

Nick sounded very serious as he solved a math problem.

The introductory book he bought in a bookstore was open, and Karan looked as though her head was boiling, as she frantically wrote with her pen.

"Why are you studying so seriously? How dull, how dull."

Grumbled Bond as he watched.



“Shut up. You can cheat to do calculations, so just sit there and be quiet.”

“Cheat!? I have always had this calculation feature!”

“It’s not fair.”

“Even you Karan? Good grief, you can live without knowing how to do calculations, just rely on me.”

Said Bond proudly, but...

“I can’t trust you.”

Karan put a stop to it bluntly.

“Howa!? W-why!?”

“It’s not like it’s just you. If you leave something to someone else because it’s hard, it’s going to come back to bite you one day.

“...Ah, that is what you mean. You scared me.”

“That’s why I asked Nick what to do so I don’t get tricked. And then...”

Karan peeked at Nick.

“Karan wasn’t good with numbers, so I thought I’d teach her when we had the time.”

“...I didn’t think you’d call me to your room all of a sudden though.”

Grumbled Karan with a light blush on her face.

“Ah, did you have plans or something?”

“I-it wasn’t anything like that!”

“Hn? Ah... Sorry.”

Nick didn’t notice that Karan was agitated, and apologized half-heartedly.

Bond, bored by what he was watching, yawned.

“You sure are serious about this. Is arithmetics really that important?”

“There are people that target others that are bad at calculations, because a lot of adventurers come from orphanages or remote villages and can’t study that sort of thing. I used to get tricked a lot too when I was a kid, so if i didn’t buckle down and learn, it would be a matter of life and death.

“There are some evil people out there.”

“We’re all tricked by evil people.”

“Stop speaking like that, it is hurting my heart.”

“I’m getting sad just saying it too... Anyway, this is important.”

“Yes, I understand... Leaving that aside.”

“What?”

“I want to go out somewhere. Take me.”

“So that’s what you really want...”

Nick sighed.

“Yes, yes. We are free today and tomorrow anyway. We are not going on adventures correct?”

“Yes, it looks like it’s going to rain, so we’re taking two or three days off. We just finished a big job too, taking you out of the labyrinth.”

“You also received a nice reward. Do you not feel like going out into the world? I have not been outside in many, many years.”

“Hn, it doesn’t sound like a bad idea... Karan, do you want to take a break?”

“Yes!”

There was a twinkle in Karan's eyes. She was tired of studying.

"Alright. Then let's go out and get something to eat."



By the time the trio left the inn, the sun was setting, and the street was painted red.

The area around them had a lot of taverns aimed at residents of the inns.

Lights were starting to be turned on, and people started stepping outside to try to attract customers.

"All the places around here that try to attract customers are duds, so don't get your hopes up. Well, there aren't any obvious rip-offs either."

"Yes."

"Anything is good. Ah, but I do not like barley or millet porridge. Bread or fried rice is good, but I like to avoid fish with too much salt."

"So not anything then. How about meat?"

Nick walked past the street full of taverns, and headed towards a place in a somewhat quiet spot.

"This place is a day-time café, so there aren't many annoying drunks."

"It's fancy."

The warm light coming from the glass candle holders illuminated the entrance to the brick building. On the door was a blackboard with the day's menu, alongside illustrations drawn with light brushwork.

"It is. After all..."

It was cafe Fromage, the place where Nick used to go on dates with Claudine.

"Ah... It brings back bad memories."

Nick remembered the face of his ex-girlfriend, or rather, the girl that led him on. Looking back, Nick felt so embarrassed about giving so much to such a nasty girl, he could die. Nick even felt slightly irritated just looking at carefree looking girls with blonde hair.

“What’s wrong Nick?”

“Nothing...”

“You are hungry are you not?” Let us go in right away.

As Nick was considering going somewhere else, Bond opened the door, and the bell attached to it rang.

“Welcome.”

“Ah, table for three.”

“Please come this way.”

The waiter led them to a table. Nick used to always see this man when he went on dates with Claudine, but he didn’t seem to be surprised by Nick walking in with another girl.

Nick was thankful for that.

“Houhou, such a rich menu. I will have the soft and creamy demi glace omelet with rice.”

“That was fast... I’m surprised you know so much about this world.”

“I do have knowledge. I tapped into the guild’s communication orb just a little.”

“Don’t over-do it. What about you Karan?”

“Butter roasted beltfish with soy sauce accompanied by couscous. I will leave the wine up to you.”

“...You really are a gourmet aren’t you? What’s beltfish like? I’ve never had that.”

“It’s a white meat, long and narrow fish that lives in the sea. It doesn’t really have a strong taste, but I recommend it if you like cooking from the south. If you don’t, it probably

won't be that interesting.”

“Eh... Wait, you can eat sea fish here?”

Claudine only ate food that looked simple and easy to understand.

Ordering something that was so different than what they used to have back then wasn't a bad way to erase the lingering impression of those days. Nick decided to order the same thing as Karan.

The cafe wasn't very crowded, but they could still hear light conversation.

“Do you like it...?”

Asked Karan after Nick took one bite, with a slight tone of insecurity.

“Why are you so nervous?”

“I-I mean, it's my first time recommending something...”

“Yes, it's good. You have good taste.”

It did have a light taste, but if you took your time eating it, its subtle taste would become more pronounced. When Nick went to that cafe before, he was too busy trying to please the person in front of him to actually enjoy what he was eating. He laughed at himself as he thought about it.

“That's right. I'm a gourmet!”

“Geez. How much do you spend on food...”

Karan's smile cleared away Nick's hazy feelings.

CHAPTER 36

BARE-KNUCKLE ARITHMETIC (2)

A few days after they found a new inn for Karan.

“Hm, that is the Rakshasa correct?”

“Yes, the boss of The Ice Den of the Rakshasa. Don’t let your guard down.”

Survivors were exploring The Ice Den of the Rakshasa again.

They moved while hidden, until they were close enough to see the terrible blue skinned goblin.

It was an opponent Survivors had defeated numerous times, but it was not always the same being. When miasma became thick, new monsters were born.

The Rakshasa that stood before them should have no memories of being defeated by Survivors, but bore an intense fighting spirit.

This also served as a test for their new member.

“Now observe my blade!”

“Ah, idiot! We managed to not make a noise until this point by using <Telepath> to talk!

“Grrrr...!”

Bond ignored Nick’s scolding, and jumped at the Rakshasa in front of him.

There was no hesitation in his step.

“Shah!”

Sharp claws were swung at him, but Bond stopped them with his blade.

He couldn't use his original Sword of Bonds while in human form, so he was using a plain two-handed sword.

But...

"An attack of pure strength and no skill will not work against me."

"Guu...?"

Bond stopped the attack dead in its tracks with the tip of his sword.

It wasn't strength, it was skill that brought about this state.

These movements that were not unlike an old, skilled swordsman's put fear into the Rakshasa's eyes, even if they came from the body of a little girl.

"Guaaaa!!!"

The Rakshasa jumped back, and started to concentrate magic energy in its hand. It was ice magic, but not the same as Tianna's <Icicle Dance>. It was <Ice Bullet>, which shot a big mass of ice.

But still.

"Choyah."

Bond swung his sword, and changed its course.

"Guah!?"

After seeing its secret technique being dealt with so easily, the Rakshasa started to panic, and Bond did not let this opening slip away.

"Tou...!"

In a second, Bond jumped towards the Rakshasa and targeted its neck, but his target was too obvious, and it managed to defend in time.

Steel and claw clashed.

“Guh... Guoooh...?”

“<Parallel>.”

The moment the fight became close, Bond won.

Suddenly, another ‘Bond’ appeared behind the Rakshasa, and swung his sword.

“Guaaaah!!!???”

The Rakshasa screamed as it fell.



“Alright... What do you think?”

“That wasn’t fair...”

Nick whispered in a perplexed state.

This was the true power of <parallel>.

It made it possible to create a human body based on the user of the Sword of Bonds, but it wasn’t restricted to only one body.

“Nick, with your current skill, it is possible to create five bodies. Not bad.”

“You say that, but I’m still kind of tired.”

“Well, that is because I borrow your vitality and magic energy... <Erase>.

Mumbled Bond, as the body that delivered the finishing blow to the Rakshasa disappeared.

“Wow... It’s like single meal Fifth.”

“Ah, I’ve heard about the <Doppelganger> user.”

Single Meal Fifth was one of the few rank S adventurers in the Labyrinth City.

He was a warrior skilled with both sword and magic, but he had a special technique that you could say was synonymous with him, <Doppelganger>.

It was an incredible technique that allowed him to create copies of himself, and become both a vanguard and back-row all by himself.

“There is someone that can use <Doppelganger>? He must be very good.”

“Hn? Is it stronger than <Parallel>?”

“It depends on the situation. <Doppelganger> is magic that manifests various ‘you’ from the inner universe into the outer world. Its nature is completely different from a method of attack like my <Parallel>, and it can be used in a multitude of ways. Above all else, <Doppelganger> consumes more magic energy and allows its user to maintain

its copies for longer. Some can even walk around with their copies for hours.

“Eh... I wonder how long Fifth can do it. Do you know Karan?”

“Probably more than half a day. The other day he was in line to buy cheese cake that was restricted to one per person, but he had five copies in line with him.”

“T-That sounds like a dream crushing sight. That old man is a rank S adventurer right...?”

“Does it? Everyone was laughing.”

“That Single Meal Fifth sounds surprisingly funny.”

“Well, even if I am not a <Doppelganger> user, I am useful, am I not?”

Bond laughed with an air of self satisfaction.

“Yes, all sarcasm aside, you’re pretty good. Not just <Parallel>, but your swordsmanship is better than intermediate adventurers. Where did you learn that?”

“They installed basic sword techniques during my development stage.”

“Instoled?”

Nick was confused by a word he wasn’t used to hearing.

Tianna and Sem didn’t know what it meant either, and shook their heads.

“Basically, the sword skills of my previous owner were put inside me.”

“That’s really not fair.”

“That again you bad-mouthed boy?”

“Now now, I’m just joking. In any case, it’s obvious we can count on you. The vanguard will be me, Karan, and Bond, and we’ll watch each other’s backs to reduce accidents. With a stronger vanguard, the back-row will have to use less magic. Our balance is becoming pretty good.”

“Does that mean we can challenge higher ranking labyrinths?”

Tianna asked full of hope, and Nick happily nodded.

“Yes, with ease, I think.”

“Fufun. And you even have a great special technique do you not?”

Bond proudly laughed, but...

“We can’t use Union so easily.”

Said Nick with a stern expression.

“W-Why!?”

“If we use it, we’re down for the count, so we can’t use it carelessly. And you know...!”

“W-What...?”

“It has a low success rate! When we fail, I feel sick!”

Survivors actually tried to use Union a few times, but even combining with Karan, like Nick did successfully before, wasn’t perfect, and it worked about one out of three times.

Tianna and Sem weren’t successful in using Union even once.

“Y-yes but...! If you practice a little more, you will be able to do it! I guarantee it!”

“It’s fine, just having a trump card is a plus.”

“Yes, is it not?”

“Now, becoming high rank adventurers isn’t just a dream. Thanks Bond.”

“Y-you know, it would be nice if you were always this docile.”

Bond’s face was red as he turned away.

Karan gave him a tap on the back, and for some reason Sem, Tianna, and Nick followed suit.

“Say something! I do not understand the meaning of this if you stay quiet!”

It means we’re counting on you.”



And then, they returned to Fishermen once again.

They were cashing in their materials as always, when they were surrounded by colleagues saying things like ‘hou, nice haul again today’ and ‘Stay here and have a drink once in a while’. Before finally slipping away from the crowd, Nick answered ‘oh be quiet and go out adventuring instead of drinking’.

“See you later.”

Said Nick, and Bond was shocked.

“Eh, is that it!?”

“That’s right.”

“I was sure you were all going to a different place to eat something good...”

“We have a rule to not mess with each other’s interests.”

“I-I know but... Do you not want to go have fun?”

“No...”

Nick didn’t want to bend the rules too much.

Having that said, Nick himself realized how hard it was to completely follow the rule to not interfere with each other’s private lives. He already interfered in Karan’s private life, but he still felt there was a line that shouldn’t be crossed.

“I am not telling you to stay together all the time, but I am unfamiliar with this land, and does it not feel a little lonely to go your own ways with nothing more than a ‘good job everyone’? You are not part-timers in a convenience store or a factory.”

“What does part-timer mean? Sometimes you use some strange ancient words.”

“Regardless! I won’t say you should do it every time, but having a feast to celebrate once in a while would not hurt! That sort of thing is part of being an adventurer!”

“Feast...”

“Look, how about there? That place myself, you, and Karan went to the other day?”

“Ah, Fromage? But that is a cafe and restaurant, it’s not the kind of place to get drunk.

“We do not have drunks here... Correct?”

Bond looked at everyone.

“I like blabbing to women sitting next to me and serving me drinks more than drinking itself.”

“Sem is not opposed... Tianna?”

“I’ll go if there’s sweets or tobacco.”

“I guess there are sweets, but there’s no way they have tobacco... Wait, you smoke?”

“Well, I don’t really do it in front of people. So what now?”

“Hmm... Let’s try it.”

And thus, Survivors decided to go to a restaurant to celebrate.

CHAPTER 37

BARE-KNUCKLE ARITHMETIC (3)

Survivors reached Fromage in the early afternoon. This meant that the lunch time rush had just ended, and they didn't have to wait before being led to a table.

"Oh... You picked a pretty fancy place, Nick."

"What do you think I am?"

"Ah, I'm having a sandwich set. Are all the waiters men? There aren't any girls, ah, I see."

"Sem, please stop trying to find girls you can hit on."

"Omelet with rice! I desire omelet with rice!"

"Nick, this is good. Eat this, you can't go wrong."

"The four of you be quiet and get our order straight! Ah, I'm sorry for the noise mister waiter. Are you all fine with wine? We will be having water too, so I will be leaving it to your discretion."

The waiter lowered his head and took their order.

Maybe their timing was good, because they didn't have to wait for long until their food and wine arrived.

"Here's to a job well done."

""""Cheers!""""

Nick listlessly raised his cup, and everyone followed.

The food was good, and the conversation flowed naturally.

"And you know, that race the other day was amazing. The dragons started fighting and

there was fire and ice flying all over the place..."

"Tianna, do people die in those races?"

"Don't be silly Nick. That's why it's so much fun."

"Sorry, I don't get it."

"I'm kidding. There are walls and magic barriers, so people don't die that often."

"That's a good way of saying that people do die sometimes."

They talked about their interests.

"The idol that's shining the brightest nowadays is Citrine. She can sing and dance, but she's very charismatic, and her talking between songs is a cut above the rest.

It's a little frustrating because my favorite is Agate, but I also have to recognize how disciplined her fans are. Ah, and I met a guy named Willy recently, and he taught me psyllium dance."

"You start talking really fast the moment you start talking about idols."

"Your eyes are scarier than when you were about to hit an ogre."

"We're all like that."

And they talked about their interests.

"Lately, the sandwiches sold by the stalls in parks have been becoming popular. I had fried octo with fried onion, lettuce in between, and I even put chilli tomato sauce, and it's really good. The best one is the one ran by an old lady, close to the entrance of the botanical garden.

"Your topic is the most helpful, Karan."

"Good job Karan."

"I'm going there next time too."

“R-really? Ehehe...”

And they talked about their interests.

“And then I...”

“Hey, Sem?”

“Yes?”

“Let’s not talk about this in front of the girls.”

“Yes.”

“You can tell me when we’re alone.”

“So do you want to come with me Nick? When I tell the girls about my adventures they always ask me to bring along one of my party members along with me next time.”

“Hold on, don’t drag me into this.”

“But maybe the excitement of suddenly taking you to a hostess bar or a girl’s bar would be too much for you. Maybe a calmer snack bar would be better... Or how about a club or a show bar?”

“Sorry, I have no idea what’s the difference.”

And they talked about their interests.

The conversation was very animated, and then a couple sat at the table behind them.

Nick lowered his voice out of politeness, and the others also lowered their tone.

They ate the food that was almost untouched, because they talked most of the time, and the day ended peacefully.

Or at least it would have, had they not listened to the conversation behind them.

“Claudine... This is a birthday present.”

“You remembered! I’m so happy!”

Nick heard a name he recognized and looked back. Sure enough, it was Claudine, the girl that ripped him off, and sitting across from her was a naive looking young man.

“Kyah I’m so happy! This is the one I wanted!”

“I’m glad you like it Claudine...!”

Claudine looked at the necklace she took out of a cosmetics case with a joyful expression, touched the jewel lovingly, and carefully put it back.

“A-aren’t you going to wear it?”

“No way, that’s a waste. It’s so beautiful... I have to store it safely.”

“T-that’s true!”

“But... Sorry, I came here today to tell you something important.”

“What is it? This is sudden...”

“I have to go back to my hometown.”

“Eeh!?”

“My mother is in critical condition, and I was told to go back right away... She doesn’t have long.”

“Oh no!”

The young man raised his voice as his face turned pale.

Claudine then started talking in a passionate manner, as if she was sobbing.

“But it’s really far... It takes about a month to get there by stagecoach, and it’s really expensive... but I really want to repay my debt to my mother, who supported me when I said I wanted to become an adventurer in the Labyrinth City. This is too painful... It feels like my heart is going to shatter into pieces...!”

“Leave it to me... Hn?”

Nick couldn't bear to listen anymore, and before he knew it, he was sitting next to the naive looking young man.”

“Geh, Nick...?”

“Hi Claudine.”

“W-w-what... I'm done with you...!”

Claudine broke into a cold sweat as she glared at Nick, but he didn't care, and started talking.

“When did your mother move so far away? You told me she lived in an inn town about three days away to the east. And a birthday present? I didn't know you could have two birthdays in the same year.”

CHAPTER 38

BARE-KNUCKLE ARITHMETIC (4)

“...W-who are you? Do you know him Claudine?”

The naive looking young man turned to Claudine in a state of total confusion, but she was too busy glaring at Nick to pay him any attention.

“N-nick wait. What are you...!?”

“Take that out.”

“Ah...?”

“That necklace looks pretty expensive.”

“T-that has nothing to do with you.”

“If you take that and sell it, you will be committing fraud. The talisman I gave you was an item for practical use, but this is clearly a high quality item with a written certificate. Do you really think you can gloss over this like you did before?”

“...Albert, let's go. This weird man isn't going to leave us alone.”

“Eh? B-but Claudine, he said your name...”

Albert was flustered as he looked at both Nick and Claudine.

Nick couldn't help but pity him.

“You have to be careful and cover your tracks... Oh? Now that I think about it, the other members of the Steel Tiger Crew aren't here, are they?”

“It's not like we're always together...”

“...Could it be that you're not just trying to cheat this boy, but you're also trying to run

away from Leon? Are you trying to end this before they track you down, now that you've got something valuable on your hands?"

"A-ah!? What are you talking about!?"

"...Give him back the necklace, Claudine."

"...H-hum, do you know each other...?"

Albert had been looking on awkwardly.

He was dressed rather well, and was probably the son of a merchant from a wealthy place, or a noble.

[Cheating a noble, how stupid are you? What will you do when this comes to light?], thought Nick, but he soon realized he was the bigger idiot for falling for such an idiot, and giving her what she wanted.

"L-let's go Albert. This guy is crazy."

"B-but Claudine, he doesn't just know your name, he also knows the name of your party and your leader."

"A-anyone can find that out with a bit of research!"

"Do you plan to take that necklace and run away Claudine? You're going to be wanted for stealing jewelry from that boy. Is that how you want to live?"

Basically, he was threatening her by saying he could report her at any time.

Even if she could cheat and scam one person at a time, if two victims offered their testimony at the same time and they examined Claudine's lies and contradictions, the situation would change.

"...Damn it!"

Claudine, enraged, threw the box with the necklace and ran from the cafe with a stray cat like agility.

"That was close. What if you damaged it?"

Nick safely caught the box, and returned it to Albert.

“Ah, t-thank you... By the way, Nick... Can I call you Nick?”

“Yes, sorry for butting in all of a sudden.”

“I’m Albert, and I have an armor and equipment store. So...”

“What?”

“I was being tricked wasn’t I...?”

“Yes... That’s pretty much it.”

“N-no way...”

“I don’t mind helping you if you want to sue but... I was tricked by her too.”

“G-give me a minute to sort out my feelings...”

“Ah... Yes, alright.”

Albert dropped his shoulders, and looked as though he was about to start crying.

Nick felt sorry for him, but at least he recovered what he had given her.

“Hey Nick!”

As Nick struggled with these complex feelings, Karan roughly grabbed his shoulder.

“Wha, ah, Karan? Sorry about that.”

“Explain what’s going on. What were you thinking starting a fight all of a sudden!?”

“S-sorry...”

Albert stood next to Nick, as he meekly apologized to another member of his party.



“...I see.”

Nick returned to his table, and explained what had just happened. The three of them looked furious as he was explaining.

Bond then asked, “W-what is with you three? I understand that what she did was a despicable crime, but your bloodlust is tremendous.”

“Of course!”

“That’s right!”

“Hell is too good for people that trick someone else and lead them into a trap.”

“Eek.”

Bond asked casually, and the response he received frightened him much more than he was expecting.

The words that came out of the mouth of the usually gentle Sem astonished him the most.

“Everyone here was cheated in some way or another. Well, I’m the idiot for giving anything to someone like that.”

“I should’ve just burned her.”

“Hey hey, you’re gonna start a fire.”

“I’ll do it outside.”

“Jokes aside, if you do want to get back at her, I’ll help.”

“Yes, you can count on me as well.”

“Yes, well... Thanks.”

Their extreme reaction actually made Nick calm down.

If anything, they were so concerned about him, that he didn’t want to take them with

him to some worthless revenge.

Nick decided to forget about that woman for the moment. He threatened her with evidence in hand, so she would surely stop her shabby scams for the time being.

...That was what Nick thought, and that was why he was so surprised the following day.



It happened in the adventurer guild Fishermen.

“I think it’s time to learn how to do collecting quests”.

“Yes.” “Understood.” Alright, let’s make some money.”

Nick and the others sat at a table in the guild, mainly talking about work.

“Basically, there are a lot of plants that only grow in labyrinths, like medicinal herbs and poisonous herbs. Sem knows more about it than me, but most are used in compounds. There are also quests to gather minerals in cave type labyrinths, but if you’re not experienced in that sort of thing or a dwarf that was raised in the mountains and is used to working in mines, it can be very difficult. Then again, the rewards are good too...”

“Ah, so that’s why jewels from labyrinths are so expensive.”

“And that’s also why some adventurers focus only on mining...”

As Nick started explaining, ale started dripping on his head.

“That was my treat Nick, drink all you want. That’s making you look pretty sexy uh?”

Claudine poured an ale bottle on Nick’s head. Next to her stood a large tiger person, vulgarly laughing at Nick.

Karan stood up without saying a word.

“W-wait Karan.”

But Nick stopped her.

“But...”

“Let me talk. Claudine and hum... Leon right?”

“Hey, I’m Leon from Steel Tiger Crew. Looks like you were a little rough on our Claudine yesterday.

Leon had an evil smile, and Claudine smiled while hidden behind him like a shield.

“Yes, I did. Tormenting a frightened little mouse hurt my heart.”

“What did you say...!?”

“What do you mean what? And weren’t you going to steal that necklace and run from Leon?”

“Eh. I guess to an unpopular guy like you, every girl is a villain.”

Nick’s words had no effect on Leon, and he assumed it was because Claudine had already put all sorts of things inside his head.

But there was something more important to be said.

Picking a fight with Leon.

“You villains have been so chummy your senses are numb. Stop drinking so much and start doing honest work.”

“Eh... if you are looking for a fight, then let’s go. Fighting and duels are forbidden in the guild, so come over here. Don’t worry, this time it’s one on one.”

Leon pointed outside with his chin, prompting Nick to go with him, and Nick followed.

“Hey, Nick!”

“Don’t worry, I’m used to fighting.”

Karan called out to Nick with concern, but Nick tapped her shoulder and stood up.

CHAPTER 39

BARE-KNUCKLE ARITHMETIC (5)

There weren't many people in the alley behind the adventurer guild Fishermen.

There was an unwritten rule that, when a fight between adventurers broke out in a guild, the people in question should take it outside, so naturally, they went to this alley. Conversely, people that hung around this place were seen as troublemakers, so adventurers didn't really go there unless they had a reason to. Nick listened carefully to check if there was anyone hiding nearby, lightly clenched his fist and let go, and started getting ready to punch.

Leon walked ten paces ahead of Nick, and turned around.

"This will do."

Said Leon, to which Nick nodded.

But the moment Nick put up his fists...

"No! I'm sorry about what happened! I apologize!"

"...Ahh?"

Leon suddenly lowered his head, and Nick was perplexed.

"I honestly underestimated you. I looked down on you because Claudine said you weren't a big deal, but you created a party right after that and started making money. Getting people together and making them work isn't an easy thing to do is it?"

"Ahh..."

"And you warned me about Claudine too. She's pretty sly, so she'd cheat me too if I wasn't careful."

"...I see."

Leon's evil expression was all but gone, and he approached Nick in a friendly manner to gently pat him on the shoulder.

"So I have a little proposal."

"Proposal?"

"You can take Claudine."

Nick was not expecting this, and was completely taken aback.

"What are you talking about...?"

"Well, she's a good girl, but an even badder girl. Get it? There's a limit to how much you can fool around and work together."

"..."

"She cheated a lot of people, and a lot of people resent her. You're one of them right? I've had a good time partnering up with her, but it's time to let go. I'm thinking about coming clean and handing her over to the people that resent her."

"...So basically, you want me to buy Claudine from you?"

"If you put it in writing that you won't sue me, I'll help you in any way you want. Sounds fun right?"

"...That's stupid, who's going to want to get involved in the slave trade in this day and age? And why would I want a villain that even villains don't want?"

"You can just sell her off to a brothel or something when you're tired of her. And you know..."

"What?"

"You've been going around working with that dragon girl, that girl that looks like a noble, and that ignorant priest. I know what's going on."

"What do you mean?"

“That dragon girl is the idiot that got tricked right? The one they call a survivor?”

“...”

“The other two are country bumpkins that don’t know a lot about this town too right? You’re a bad guy too.”

“What’s your point?”

“Hey hey, don’t play dumb. You’re just like me and Claudine, tricking them so you can profit too right? I get how you feel, after being cheated once, you’re not going to start helping people out of the goodness of your heart.”

“Ah, yes, I get it... Hahaha...”

“Hahaha! Right!?”

“Hahaha! It’s so funny my stomach’s hurting... Haha...”

“So little Nick, let me in on thagebuah.!”

Leon’s was stopped mid sentence when he was hit on the chin, and was sent flying into a wall.

“Say that again you piece of trash.!”

“D-damn you! Is that how you treat a guy that’s being nice to you!?”

Angrily yelled Leon while staggering. His lip was bleeding, and it seemed cut.

“Nice? You’re lying about wanting to sell Claudine aren’t you? You’re just trying to scam me again because you think I’m doing well. It’s plain as day you loser.”

“Eh, huddling up like that because you’re afraid to be cheated is what weaklings do. Haha, your heart as small as the rest of your body.”

“Ha, did you really think I believed you? Even if you were telling the truth about wanting to sell her, it would still feel good to punch you. Are you really a tiger man? You’re way weaker than dragon people.”

That was when Leon saw red, and drew a curved sword.

He lunged at Nick without making a sound. He was fast, and his movements showed clear intent to kill.

“Wha!?”

But Nick quickly drew his short sword and repelled it.

An unpleasant sound echoed when blade clashed against blade.

“Tch, why are your reactions as good as beast people’s... Just stay still and let me hit you...!”

“Do you really think you can beat me one on one?”

“That’s funny coming from some weak boy that was kicked out of his party!”

Right as he finished saying that, Nick kicked Leon in the stomach, but again, the sound of metal hitting metal echoed.

“Dammit, did you put something there on your abdomen?”

“What the hell do you have on your legs...!”

Nick felt steel with the tip of his foot, but it wasn’t chain mail, it was like a metal plate.

Both thought the other was thorough, and both retreated, becoming ten steps apart once again.

“Ahh!”

This time, Nick made the first move.

He lowered his posture, almost like he was crawling.

“Kuh!”

Leon realized he couldn’t stop the short sword, and stepped back, but Nick wrapped himself around his lower body, almost like a snake.

“Wha...!?”

Before Leon knew it, Nick had put away his short sword and both of his hands were free.

Nick used something like a tackle to take him down to the ground, and used his knee to stop the right hand holding the curved sword.

“Sorry, I’m better at grappling.”

“...Eh, I see.”

Leon had an odd smile, and a chill ran down Nick’s spine.

“<Wind Cluster>!”

“Guah!?”

A cluster of compressed wind hit Nick in the back. Nick tried to move sideways to dodge at the last second, but was unsuccessful.

Nick’s balance was thrown off, but he took some distance.

“That was close, I didn’t expect him to mount you like that.”

“Nice timing Beck.”

A sorcerer looking man attacked Nick.

Nick remembered him, he was one of the people that cornered him when Claudine said her farewell.

“Damn you...” Attacking me two on one...!”

Nick was caught completely off guard.

He didn’t have any intention of neglecting his surroundings, but in actuality, an ally appeared

Something cold followed Nick’s back.

“Eh, you’re the idiot for falling for a surprise attack...”

Said Beck, his neck was viciously grabbed.

“What did you say about surprise attacks?”

“...Gu... a... gah...”

It was Karan, with anger burning in her eyes.

She easily lifted the man.

“Karan! Sorry, you saved me!”

“I told you... Geez.”

Karan sighed.

But it was not over. The sorcerer named Beck was done, but the same could not be said for Leon.

At this rate, one of them might have died, and just as that thought was popping into Nick’s head...

“That’s enough you idiots!”

An old lady’s angry roar stopped everyone dead in their tracks.

“Geh, the old woman...!?”

“Didn’t I tell you to call me Wilma you idiot!?”

“Ouch.”

Wilma threw a pen and hit Nick on the forehead.

Nick knew that dodging it would only make her angrier, so he didn’t move.

“Keh, you uncute boy. You saw I’m in a bad mood and didn’t even try to dodge did you?”

“So what am I supposed to do!?”

“Isn’t it obvious? Stand back.”

“...Sorry.”

Nick reluctantly lowered his head and stepped back.

“Leon right? You too. And Karan, let go of that idiot.”

“...Tch.”

Leon glared at Wilma in frustration, but quietly put away his sword.

Nick and Leon both knew very well how much trouble it would be if they made an enemy out of a guild employee.

Karan looked disinterested as she let go of the man’s neck, who immediately went running back to Leon while coughing.

“...So, what are you going to do?”

“Ah? Didn’t you come here to stop us?”

“I came here to stop you from killing each other. If you don’t use weapons and set up some ground rules, I won’t stop you.”

Leon smiled.

“...I see, so you don’t want a fight, you want a duel with rules. Time to learn how people do things here at Fishermen.”

“Do what?”

“Ah, you don’t know, little Nick? I’ll teach you.”

Nick stared at Leon’s grinning face, but he paid no attention and continued.

“Bare-knuckle arithmetic.”

The place became silent.

After a while, an exasperated Nick broke the silence.

“...What kind of nonsense are you sprouting?”

“It really exists!”

Nick was obviously fed up, and Leon responded with irritation.

CHAPTER 40

BARE-KNUCKLE ARITHMETIC (6)

Nick, Leon, and the rest of the Steel Tiger Crew and Survivors were thrown inside a room in the guild.

Everyone looked as though their blood was boiling. The rest of Survivors heard from Nick what Claudine and Leon had been doing, and understood why this situation escalated into a duel.

At the same time, Steel Tiger Crew looked at Nick, the one that hit Leon, like he was their parent's enemy. Claudine seemed to have forgotten that she was ready to betray Leon, and looked at Nick with eyes of resentment.

"I'll explain the rules. I'm sure the Steel Tiger Crew knows, but Survivors don't, right?"

"Of course not. Is this really that famous?"

Asked Nick, to which Wilma emphatically nodded.

"A lot of adventurers are idiots that have nothing more than physical strength. It would be very simple to solve everything with fist fights, but that wouldn't be good for the guild, so we prepared a different method of having a match. Bare-knuckle arithmetic.

"...So basically, as the name implies, it's a competition that combines math with fighting?"

"That's it. It's no joke or prank."

Wilma responded very seriously to Nick's exasperated voice.

"They will alternate between fighting and math. First, the parties decide who is going to duel with their fists. Traditionally, the people that started the duel in the first place are chosen. And then..."

"And then you decide who's going to take a test with a lottery, right?"

Said Leon half laughing, and Wilma nodded.

“Yes, that’s right.”

“Eh? Hold on, we should be able to pick that.”

Nick raised an objection.

“Adventurers can cover for someone that’s weak, but it’s hard to cover for an idiot, or someone that was misjudged in the first place. One miss can lead to everyone dying, and that’s why we chose randomly.”

“It’s not like I don’t get it, but how is that related to a duel?”

“It’s a duel mediated by the guild, so you have to follow the guild’s policy. If you don’t like it, you can grab your blade or whatever and play war all you want. But we’ll have to ask you to leave the guild.”

“I don’t really want to say this, but isn’t there any else...? I want to do something a little more serious.”

“I’m very serious! You adventurers are all reckless idiots anyway. We have to train your minds too!”

“What...”

Nick was at his wit’s end, and Leon sneered.

“Eh? Are you trying to run away now?”

“What did you say?”

Just as a dangerous atmosphere was rising again, a puff of smoke passed in front of everyone’s eyes.

It came from Tianna’s alluring lips.

“Ahh...”

“T-Tianna? Why are you smoking?”

Asked Nick nervously, while Tianna smoked a pipe.

“Hn? Why...? Well...”

Tianna usually didn't do it in front of the other party members, she would always do it in her room, dragon race track, or casinos, but now she was overflowing with the same dangerous air around her that she had when she first met Nick and the others, like she was about to kill someone.

“I can't control myself when I'm facing people I want to smack straight to hell.”

This time, she blew the smoke straight into Leon and his party.

Leon trembled with anger, and there was a visible vein in his forehead.

“You care about your friends uh? You're pretty brave.”

“I just hate guys and girls like you people so much I could die. Just talking to you feels like it's rotting my mouth... Ah, someone get me an ashtray.”

While holding the pipe in her mouth, Tianna put her heels on top of the table with a thud, and crossed her elegant legs covered by black tights. Seeing this girl that looked like a delicate doll act like a gangster made the men in front of her feel a strange pressure, and devilish charm. Even the enraged Leon had to take a step back.

“Mind your manners. And this is your leader's fight right?”

“Oh, excuse me.”

Tianna vocalized an apology, but it seemed there was no real remorse behind it.

“Anyway, I understand the logic behind it, but what do you do if fighting with fists and mind doesn't solve anything? What if it's a tie?”

“We'll keep going until it's solved. First it's a bare-handed duel, then the test, and if that doesn't decide it, we do another bare-handed duel... You get the idea.”

“...I see.”

Nick nodded, but Tianna interjected with a question.

“By the way, what are we betting? Does the loser have to apologize to the winner... That can't be all right? This isn't a children's game.”

“Yes, you're right.”

Leon responded with a smirk.

“Little Nick, you hit me all of a sudden, so I'll be taking at least five hundred thousand dinnar from you.”

“It was because you blurted out all that nonsense.”

“Eh, say what you want, but I have no intention of bending the conditions. So, what are your conditions?”

Nick started thinking, and Tianna interjected.

“Give back everything you stole.”

“What did you say?”

“I said, give it back.”

There was a dark cloud in Tianna's eyes, something you could only see in the eyes of someone that had something important taken away from them.

Eyes of righteous indignation over the unfairness and injustice in this world.

“Tianna, this is Nick's duel so...”

Sem admonished her, but Nick stopped him.

“No, it's fine. It's just like Tianna said.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes, Tianna said what I wanted to say. That's my condition, 'give it back'.”

“...Alright, then the conditions are decided.”

Leon nodded, and Wilma turned to Nick to ask a question.

“So Nick, do you accept this match?”

Nick hesitated. Thanks to Tianna, he had cooled off.

Leon from Steel Tiger Crew proposed this match, and surely had some way to win.

“...Nick.”

“What?”

“We’ll win.” “That’s right.” “Let’s do it.”

Everyone responded strongly, as if to say that they were not weaklings that could do nothing but lose and sit quietly.

Yes, they were Survivors. Adventurers that could stubbornly survive any trap.

“Alright, let’s do it.”



“Nick and Leon will box. As for the written test...”

Wilma looked at two girls.

“Well, this is absurd, but I’ll go along with it.”

Claudine frowned, but her eyes looked as though they were saying ‘I know I’ll win’.

“My heart weeps for a stupid opponent like the dragon person.”

“...Hmph.”

Karan was picked in the lottery.

“Face me! Aren’t you frustrated after so much provocation!?”

Tianna violently screamed at Claudine, who responded with a sneer.

“Hahaha, complain about the results all you want, nothing will change you idiot.”

“Do you talk that lightly because your brain is light too?”

Mumbled Karan, which angered Claudine.

“...At least you can talk trash, if nothing else.”

Karan quietly glared at Claudine.

“The match will take place in one week. We will be setting up a ring on the roof of the guild, so be ready.”

“Yes yes.”

“Got it.”

Claudine and Karan nodded strongly, with fighting spirit bubbling up inside.

CHAPTER 41

BARE-KNUCKLE ARITHMETIC (7)

“I’ve lost count of how many times we’ve done this, but I still don’t get why we have to come to my room every time we have a meeting.”

The five members of Survivors were gathered in Tianna’s room, and...

“Sorry.”

“Eh, no, I didn’t mean to sound so upset.”

Tianna was flustered when Nick got down on his knees and lowered his head.

“I’m not talking about your room, I’m talking about the mess I’ve made with that duel.”

“Ah, that. It’s fine isn’t it?”

“No, I dragged you into my personal fight...”

“Nick...”

Tianna let out a big sigh.

“I don’t know about that Steel Tiger Crew or whatever, but if our leader was the kind of person to bow to those idiot scammers, I wouldn’t be in this party.”

“But still...”

“If anything, I question why they haven’t been hauled off to jail yet. If the guild’s people noticed they could be witnesses too.”

“Well, people say that it takes two to quarrel... Also, if we were going to sue them, we wouldn’t take it to the guild, we would take it to the order of the sun.”

“Order of the sun?”

Repeated Tianna.

“It’s the chivalric order in charge of safeguarding the public order of the Labyrinth City. They’re under the direct control of the lord of the city.”

“Aren’t you going to file a complaint with them?”

“...I’ve thought about it...”

Nick placed his hand on his chin. He could search for other victims like the young man of the armor and equipment store, file a complaint together, and then the chivalric order would start investigating. There was even a chance that they already were, but...

“Who knows how long that would take. They might even ask me to help, and that would leave me with less time to work. That’s why most adventurers tend to not bother dealing with the chivalric order and solve their problems with duels instead...”

The old woman probably realized it would only prolong this problem too.”

In this country, duels had legal binding force.

Whether it was about making someone a slave, a quarrel about about money exceeding a certain amount, etc, solving it by unlawful means would surely not be valid, but as long as it stayed within the limits of the law, no one would complain.

If anything, some people would even praise it as an act of manliness. Adventurers in particular had to display their strength, so they had a very big inclination towards solving their problems in this manner.

“But they could have at least asked what happened.”

“I think that’s what would’ve happened if I didn’t take out my blade too, but I acted on impulse... That’s what turned it into an ‘it takes two to quarrel’ kind of situation.”

“So that’s why they’re telling us to duel?”

“I’m going to the guild again to explain what happened. Maybe they cheated more adventurers, but I’m going to hold off on going to the chivalric order for a while longer.”

“Why?”

“There’s a good chance they’ll cancel the duel. I’ll think about going there after we beat them.”

Tianna and the others smiled broadly.

“If you’re doing it, you better win. I mean, I’m sure we’ll win!”

“Yes! We can’t let them look down on us like that!”

“That’s right, let’s teach them a lesson!”

“T-thanks but... I want to explain exactly how it happened. Still, you guys don’t seem all that surprised that this turned into a duel.”

“Ah, about that...”

Tianna looked at Bond.

“It is because I heard everything.”

“Heard? You weren’t there in the alley were you?”

“I was not.”

“So...”

Nick realized what happened.

“You cheated again didn’t you?”

“It is not cheating!”

Angrily said Bond.

“I told you that my hearing and eyesight are very sharp.”

“So you heard what happened in the alley?”

“Do not tell me it is not good to eavesdrop or anything of the sort. When it became two against one, Karan looked like she was on the verge of tears.”

“Wah wah! I didn’t cry!”

“Ah, well...”

Nick had a strange expression on his face, which Bond found amusing.

“What?”

“Sorry I said you were cheating.”

“Alright then.”

Bond proudly puffed out his chest.

“So, did you call that old woman, I mean, Wilma?”

“I did not. By the time I realized a fight was breaking out, the guild’s people were already on the move”

“Really? I guess someone saw us, or...”

Nick started thinking, and after a while, he slapped his knee and looked at everyone.

“Are they in cahoots with each other?”

Said Tianna while frowning.

“I don’t think so. Maybe if we were talking about high rank adventurers or nobles, but we’re all just intermediate adventurers. If someone has the power and influence to make the guild join their side, they would have no reason to be an intermediate adventurer.”

“That’s true.”

“Anyway, we need a concrete plan. Sorry, but we’re going to have to postpone next week’s adventure.”

“Yes!” “Understood.” “Got it.” “I guess there is no choice, is there?”

“Karan, we need to prepare for the duel.”

“Yes!”

“We really need to drill this stuff into your head, Karan. At this point, Sem and Tianna are related to this as well, so we’re going to need your help too. Is that alright?”

“...Y-yes.”

Karan resisted the urge to step away from Nick’s dangerous look.



“...I see.”

“H-how is it?”

Karan was solving problems in a cafe with private rooms.

She was solving math problems that appeared in other duels in Fishermen. Basic arithmetic operations, distance and time, percentages, geometry problems to pick the shortest route, etc. Numerical calculations related to issues that an adventurer might have encountered while working.

“You answered about 70% correctly.”

“I-I see...”

Karan sighed.

“Well, there’s no need to aim for perfection. Let’s just try to pass without issue.”

Said Sem calmly, after checking Karan’s answers.

The test portion of the duel wasn’t decided by comparing the two and seeing who had the highest score.

A terrible result meant failure, but if both had acceptable results, the match would be decided by the fist-fight.

“...But if I cause Nick trouble...”

“Nick isn’t concerned about that.”

But, depending on the difference in points, there would be a handicap added to the fist-fight.

For that reason, Karan had to beat Claudine.

“Good grief, you really should just rely on me. Are you really that naive?”

Complained Bond as he sat in a chair with his back arched.

There was a way to make sure Karan won, by using the Sword of Bonds’s <Search> and <Telepath> to let Bond solve the problems, it was possible to cheat without getting caught.

Everyone noticed this method when they were talking about the duel, even Nick, who had completely lost his cool.

Nick’s fight with Leon would still be up for grabs, but the math problems would be completely in the bag.

Nick and the others decided not to rely on Bond as much as possible.

If push came to shove, they would disregard the rules to prioritize their own well being, but they didn’t want to rely on foul play before it was actually necessary.

Nick thought this might actually be beneficial to Karan.

There was a reason why the adventurer guild did this. There were actually a lot of people like Karan, who left their hometowns and were deceived upon reaching the city. There was a huge difference between the education in rural areas and cities, and a lot of people couldn’t read and could only do the most basic calculations.

They were perfect targets for people used to life in the Labyrinth City. Their lack of knowledge meant these people didn’t even know how to report or ask for help, and their fate was usually tragic.

For this reason, the adventurer guild would keep an eye on parties that took in people that were clearly from rural areas, and tried to educate and guide them.

That was why they did things such as force math into duels, to try to correct the behavior of people that had a tendency to rely solely on violence.

At that point, they couldn't say that this problem had been completely dealt with.

When Karan was in the party, White Hellan, they didn't let her do anything other than fight, and would even try to avoid letting her have any contact with guild employees.

"Well, it's not like this is meaningless."

"But is it not better to rely on unfair means rather than let yourself be tripped up over something trivial?"

"You do have a point."

Sem didn't raise any objections and just nodded.

"Hm? Then why not use me?"

"Nick says it's better to leave your trump card to the end. And..."

"And?"

"This is just my opinion... No matter how great you are, it's hard to say for sure that no one is going to notice. We can't rule out them knowing what <Telepath> is, and there is always the possibility that they might sense that something isn't right. I agree that you should be our trump card, and that we should get by for now without using you."

"Hmph... Alright."

Bond reluctantly agreed, but Karan whispered with an anxious tone.

"...But Sem."

"What is it Karan?"

"Will I even get to do anything? If Nick defeats Leon then that's the end of that right?"

"...I don't know about that."

“Is that Leon... Really that strong?”

A question mark circled Karan’s head.

There was no way Nick would lose a hand-to-hand fight to just some adventurer.

He went crazy on that ogre when they fought one on one, so there was no way that tiger person named Leon could beat him.

When they fought in the alley, Nick would’ve definitely beat him had it not been for the interference from Leon’s fellow party member.

“I don’t know about strong or weak, but before Nick left, he said you would definitely play a part in the duel, so you should get ready.”

“Well, then I’ll do my best...”

“Karan, do you know what is our objective?”

“To win the duel...?”

“No, that is just a means to an end.”

“Then... Defeating those people, and make sure they can’t do bad things anymore...”

“Yes, those people are just going around doing as they please. We have no reason to hold back do we?”

Sem had a sinister smile on his face.

“In any case, we need you to study so we can thoroughly beat them, so let’s do our best.”

“...Now that I think about it, where are Nick and Tianna?” They said they were going out to train but...”

“They should be reaching the Dark Wolf Cave.”

“Uu... I wanted to go explore a labyrinth too...”

“Let’s take a break after you solve this problem. I’m going out tonight too.”

“I wish I was as carefree as you... Ahh...”

“That’s not it, I have something I have to do as well. In any case, let’s keep going Karan.”

“Yes.”

And then, Karan focused all of her energy on solving problems.

CHAPTER 42

BARE-KNUCKLE ARITHMETIC (8)

The Dark Wolf Cave had a very threatening name, but it was a labyrinth for beginners.

It was a cave with five floors, and it was populated by monsters with good night-vision called dark wolves. Their attack power and stamina were not that great, and they were not as strong as fighting dogs used by tamers.

However, inexperienced adventurers could be caught off guard by their ability to conceal their presence in the shadows and their agility. It was the most difficult labyrinth where G ranked adventurers could enter.

“Sha!”

“Gyain!?”

Nick knocked down a dark wolf with a counter blow, who whined like a pitiful dog.

Two more attacked Nick. One jumped from above, and the other attacked from below, as if it was crawling.

“That was a bad move. When you carelessly jump like that you seal your own moves.”

Nick attacked the dark wolf coming from above with speed matching the wolf itself.

Swinging his leg almost like a scythe, Nick stroke down the wolf with his heel.

“Waoh!?”

The dark wolf was sent flying downwards, and hit another dark wolf.

“Take that!”

And then, Nick hit the remaining one with his fist. The three wolves were dispatched in no time.

“...Not bad. It was like a magic trick.”

“Don’t be silly. Anyone that practices hand-to-hand combat can step behind a dark wolf and attack it from the rear without using magic or anything.”

“Sorry, I don’t know anything about the world of fighting.”

Nick and Tianna were there all by themselves. Nick wanted to polish his fighting intuition before the duel, but he couldn’t enter the labyrinth by himself, so he brought Tianna along, even though he was fighting the wolves by himself.

“Normally, you wouldn’t take them down like that... You’d defend against the first attack, and take them down one at a time.”

“Don’t talk to me about what’s normal.”

“Why?”

“With <Enemy Search> you can find where the wolves are hiding, so it’s possible to attack preemptively. Taking down small fry like that is boring when you’re here.”

“Fufun. It’s nice, isn’t it.”

Tianna smiled proudly.

“Well, it is nice to be safe, but thanks to that, I feel like I’ve gotten a little rusty.”

“That doesn’t mean you have to do this absurd training. Taking down monsters with nothing more than a knuckle guard...”

“What? I kicked too.”

“So... Is Leon really so strong that you need to prepare so intensely?”

“I wouldn’t say strong... It’s a little strange.”

Nick gave a vague answer.

“Strange?”

“Let’s put it like this, I’m pretty confident in my fighting skills. Well, not to the point where I can take down bosses with just hand-to-hand combat.”

“Yes.”

“But Leon lured me into a two on one situation.”

“Well, two on one is pretty bad right?”

“That’s not it, I was sure there was no one around. It’s not like it was an ambush, it was more like his helper came running because he knew Leon was in trouble.”

“Ah, so that’s what’s on your mind.”

“...Now that I think about it, the first time I met Leon was strange too. When I was talking to Claudine, he had no way of knowing that I had been expelled by my party, but the moment we started talking about that, they appeared.

It was like it was transmitted to him instantaneously.”

“...I don’t know what it is, but you’re saying there’s something you need to watch out for, right?”

“Yes.”

“Is that a problem that can be solved by practicing hand-to-hand combat?”

“I have no idea. There so much I don’t understand, so I’m moving my body and my head.”

“Do you have to move your head?”

“That’s up to Karan and Sem, not me. I asked Sem to investigate something for me, and I may have something to ask of you too.”

“Well, if you have an idea then I don’t mind, but what do you want me to do right now?”

“My body is finally warmed up, so I’m going down to the other floor. Stay here and hold down the fort.”

“You’re more of a muscle head than I thought... Be careful!”

Nick waved his hand, and Tianna looked on with an exasperated expression.



“...Ahh, I think it’s time to go back.”

Nick returned after being deep inside the labyrinth.

“You’re dripping with sweat. Here.”

“Thanks.”

“Why are you dressed like that?”

“It was hot so I took it off.”

Tianna threw a towel to Nick, who returned naked from the waist up.

“I took down about thirty of them. That’ll be some nice pocket change.”

“You have some nerve, you did that without using magic too... Wait, your arm is bleeding.”

“Ah, it’s not like I was bitten, I just scratched it on a rock.”

“Sit down, we need to stop that bleeding. And we need to ask Sem to take a look at it when we get back.”

“Yes alright. I’ll take a break and catch my breath.”

“Yes yes.”

Nick sat down on a rock, and Tianna started wrapping bandages with styptic herbs around Nick’s arm. And while she was at it, she handed Nick a canteen.

“Thanks.”

“You’re welcome.”

“I wonder if they’re hard at work studying right now.”

“Karan and Sem? I’m sure they’re fine, Karan is an honest girl.”

“You’re right, but honest is...”

“What?”

“I’m a little worried because she’s too naive.”

“You’re the leader, so that’s on you.”

“Hey hey. Don’t put that responsibility on me.”

Nick shrugged as he used the towel to wipe the sweat.

He didn’t have a thick body like muscular warriors, but his body was lean, with not a lot of fat. He had a lot of scars, as a result of his diligent training and adventuring.

Tianna felt bad about looking, and turned away. Nick wiped the sweat and put on his jacket, as his body was starting to get cold.

That was when Tianna grumbled a question.

“Hum.”

“What?”

“Do you still like that Claudine?”

“Of course not! I’m still pissed!!!”

“Ah, so you’re still mad?”

“She ripped me off and looked down on me, how could I not be mad. I want to erase my past with her altogether... Is it not the same for you, Tianna?”

Tianna had a similar dark past.

The person she saw as her boyfriend got together with another girl, and framed Tianna.

“Hmm... I guess I’m still mad. I don’t know what I would do if he appeared in front of me.”

But Tianna’s eyes showed clear anger, not a never ending obsession.

“But I don’t think I want to erase the past, or follow him to the ends of the earth just to beat him to death or anything.”

Nick thought ‘well that’s normal’, but didn’t say it.

Tianna was speaking seriously.

“I won’t forgive him for setting me up. It wasn’t just me, he caused a lot of trouble for the teachers, and I think one day I’ll absolutely make him regret it.

But I don’t really regret falling in love with someone... Rather...”

“Rather?”

“I have to be engrossed in something. Love, playing, adventures, etc. If I graduated and married Alex... My former ex fiancée, I’d probably get tired of it and run away from home anyway.”

“I can see that. I can’t see you as a young wife at all.”

“Hey, why do you have to say something like that?”

“Eh? You’re the one that said it!”

“You’re supposed to disagree. Seriously though...”

“Y-yes?”

“I don’t like your ex-girlfriend, and I hate the tiger person that’s always grinning next to her.

That’s why I got so angry, it wasn’t for you, I did it because that’s what I felt like doing.”

“Saying that in such a refreshing way actually makes me feel better.”

“Right?”

“If I ever saw your ex-boyfriend I’d probably want to hit him too.”

“You look like you want to do it. So...”

“So?”

“Do what you want to do as well.”

“What I want to do...?”

“Of course, things like hitting nasty people, gambling, and watching an idol’s live show fit into that category, but I’m talking more about a goal in life. Do you have anything like that?”

Nick remembered his former party.

“...A goal in life...”

“Yes.”

“Do you have something, Tianna?”

“Me? Well... I want to be a sage.”

“Sage?”

“When you attain recognition from the sorcerer association as both a sorcerer and a scholar, they bestow upon you the title of sage.”

“Eh... So is that like an S rank adventurer?”

“Yes. Well, it’s not like the country starts paying a salary of anything, so it’s more like an honorary certification, but it would allow me to get a job in any research facility. You also get to talk face-to-face with royalty and nobility, so a lot of people are after this tile.”

“Are you after it?”

“For now, I’ve been thinking about writing essays in between adventuring and gambling. I only have a tiny little chance of being recognized by the sorcerer association so...”

“Wow... That’s out of this world.”

Nick let out a sigh of admiration.

“What? You have a chance to become an S rank adventurer too don’t you?”

Don’t you know? If you get to A rank or beyond, you’re awarded a court rank, so you can become nobility.”

“Yes, I know. There’s no pay attached, but you become kind of like a celebrity here in the Labyrinth City.”

“Oh, so you knew.”

“Yes, but you’d have to be a hero to get to A or S rank.”

“Hero?”

“Usually it just means you’re really strong, like an extension of being D or C rank. But when there’s a big outbreak of miasma, and monsters start overflowing, A or S rank adventurers lead the charge to take them down. Or maybe they capture a dangerous villain with a bounty on their head. Those kinds of adventurers that are respected by everyone in the Labyrinth City truly are heroes.”

“You know a lot about that... Are you actually aiming for A rank?”

Nick dejectedly shook his head.

“...No, not really, but...”

“But?”

“I wanted to raise the rank of my former party. It wouldn’t be an impossible task either, because everyone there was an experienced warrior. They even conquered labyrinths that were said to be impossible for parties without a sorcerer, with raw power alone.”

“Hm...”

“So if they worked diligently they could’ve gone up to A rank, or maybe even S rank. I wanted our leader to get more recognition from the rest of the world.”

Before Nick knew it, his usual vulgar way of speaking was gone.

“My parents were merchants, and traveled from town to town. Ever since I can remember, I walked through all sorts of places with them, but one day, they were killed by thieves. It was Argus who helped take those murderers down, the leader of All Martial Arts.

Afterwards, he took a useless little kid like me and taught me how to fight and how to be an adventurer.”

“Is that so...”

“I wanted to repay my debt to him, and I thought I could compensate compensate for what All Martial Arts was lacking.

No, I really think I was succeeding in doing that, but...”

Nick didn’t finish the sentence.

“...So, do you regret that?”

“Regret?”

“Working so hard for that Argus. Do you think it would’ve been better to not do anything?”

“No... I don’t know about that.”

Nick frowned, and after a while, he shook his head.

“Maybe it was all for my own self-satisfaction, but I don’t know if I didn’t accomplish anything.

We had our disagreements, and in the end, I was expelled, but I think I needed to do something for someone else.”

“I see.”

“Well, now I want to be better than them! I look forward to the day when I make that idiot regret what he did!”

Said Nick with a smile, to which Tianna smiled back.

“That’s nice, I think it’s good to get back at them like that. Become an A or S rank adventurer and show them you were right. It’s really interesting to think about you as a hero of this city.”

“...That sounds good.”

“That’s the spirit.”

“I’m going to need you to work hard without holding anything back too.”

“Yes yes, but this time, it’s all about you. Do your best.”

Nick turned away and scratched his head. It seemed like it had hit a nerve, and Tianna looked on, thinking it was amusing.

CHAPTER 43

BARE-KNUCKLE ARITHMETIC (9)

The night-time red-light district had a surprising amount of information about adventurers.

Being an adventurer was a fickle job. There were days when profits were big, days when they were next to nothing, and moments when a split decision meant the difference between life and death. Because of this, most male adventurers were drawn to the nightlife of the city, to forget about the fleetingness of their line of work.

In this place they would lose the earnings of that day, and maybe let a few secrets slip out.

Sem was well aware of these habits, after all, he could be a representative of such men.

“I see... So there was that.”

“That’s right. There’s actually a lot of men out there that were tricked by that light headed girl.”

It was a hostess bar that Sem frequented, ‘The Spirit of Spring’.

This time, Sem was there at Nick’s request, being poured drinks by Melissa, a women with whom he got along with.

Karan was shocked that he would go to such a place to have fun while she studied, but Sem told her this was an important job, before he walked through the door.

“Are you involved with that Claudine or something, Sem? She uses her male friends like bodyguards and goes around cheating men, you know?”

His job was to look into Claudine’s behavior.

If she was willing to go to her favorite cafe and do something close to marriage fraud, maybe her bad behavior attracted more attention than they thought.

Sem decided to follow up on this idea by going to various places and asking about her, but in the first place he went to, information started pouring out like water from a bucket with a hole.

“There are some awful people out there.”

Said Sem, while holding back a smile.

“No kidding. It’s because of people like her that people doubt totally safe places like ours.”

“Do you know of anyone that has been victimized by her?”

“Ah... This is a secret but... There was this adventurer that stopped by like every weekend named Duffy and...”

“And?”

“Ah, like, I’m so thirsty...”

“Oh alright. Drink whatever you like.”

“Thank you so much! There’s also Koln and Rolls, and a dwarf from the blacksmith street named Jisten.”

“Four people... I see.”

Sem had a grin on the inside as he listened.

The useful information just kept coming.

“Haven’t there been any lawsuits or challenges to a duel?”

“There’s been some duels but, you know, Leon is like really strong, and he wins pretty much everything.”

“I see...”

“Wait, are you trying to like, punish Claudine or something?”

“Who knows...”

“Don’t act all innocent... But be careful, that guy Leon that’s her bodyguard or boyfriend or something, is really strong. And their friend named Beck is creepy.”

“Are they that dangerous?”

“I don’t really know a lot about it, but people say they have like a trump card or something. Apparently that’s how they beat a guy as strong as Duffy...”

“Strong?”

“Duffy is a C rank adventurer, so he’s no pushover. People say that Leon guy has great instincts, like he has eyes on the back of his head.”

“But it’s not just brawls right?”

“Yes, They do weird tests or quizzes or something, but he doesn’t lose that either. It’s not fair that he’s not only strong but has a good mind too. Ah, he’s good at gambling and popular with women too,

But, you know, he’s made a bunch of enemies, so he only willingly approaches weak guys.”

“I see...”

“If you want to know more you have to ask Duffy directly. But watch what you say, because it looks like that whole thing hurt his pride pretty badly.”

“Don’t worry about that, I’m a former priest.”

“A bad priest. But you might be more reliable than the order of the sun.”

Said Melissa with a smile as she poured Sem another drink, who happily drank it.

“About that order of the sun... They protect the peace around here right?”

“They’re, like, a bit pushy and arrogant, so they’re not really well liked... Ah, there are rumors that they’ve been after Leon, but who knows.”

“Hm, I see...”

“The order of the sun doesn’t really want to get involved so they won’t say.”

“No, it’s fine. Thank you very much... Do you want another drink, Melissa?”

“Oh? Like, thanks.”

Melissa prepared another drink for herself, and Sem lost himself in thought.

[I got a lot of useful information out of her, so I’ll go out tomorrow too. I never thought I would become good at this conspiracy stuff...]

Sem laughed at himself, as he thought about how he was doing the same sort of thing as the person that framed him.

Strangely enough, Sem didn’t find this unpleasant. Fighting a conspiracy with a conspiracy was no a bad thing.



Time went by quickly, and soon enough, it was time for the duel.

Nick and the others did all the preparations they could, and headed towards the roof of the adventurer guild Fishermen, where the duel would take place.

There were two venues set up.

One was very simple, it was nothing more than four white lines forming a square, and crude markers marking where the competitors would be out of bounds.

It was not like they would be disqualified or lose points if they stepped outside, but if they did, the audience would be allowed to push them back inside.

It was not possible to get away without giving up, and the lines were there for the sake of this savage rule.

The two competitors were standing-by on two opposite sides.

“It’s been a while little Nick. I’m surprised you didn’t just run away.”

“That’s my line.”

The atmosphere was tense, and it seemed like they were about to come to blows at any second, before the match even started.

This time, they weren’t allowed to wear boots or clothing on their upper bodies, let alone bring equipment or weapons.

Both were naked from the waist up, and burning with fighting spirit.

“Get him!”

“Leon, don’t let that loner act like he owns the place!”

“Nick! Rip the tail right off that cheating cat!”

People that saw Nick’s way of doing things as peculiar and didn’t like his actions sided with Leon. Meanwhile, those that knew what Leon had been doing, cheered for Nick.

There was feverish excitement all around, not just inside the square.

While the men stood in the midst of this violent atmosphere, some had serious expressions on their faces, and were close to two tables and chairs were set up outside the white square, facing each other. Two girls with sat at them.

“...Ahh, just start already. Don’t you think so too?”

“Be quiet.”

One had chestnut-color hair, and was the image of a girlish girl.

She was Claudine of the Steel Tiger Crew, and she sounded bored as she picked a split end of her hair.

The other girl was Karan, and she wasn’t the least bit interested in what Claudine had to say.

She had her eyes closed and was concentrating on what she studied so quickly in the previous days.

“...You’re so serious. Boring...”

“Stop it with those useless provocations. We’ll be starting soon, but the boys go first.”

Wilma’s voice echoed throughout the roof.

The sun was at its highest point, and the boys’s shadows distinctly rose in the ground.

“Attacks to the eyes or below the belt, magic, and weapons are forbidden. The match will be decided by a ten count, fainting, or submission. Obviously, killing is also not allowed.

Other than that, punch, kick, and throw all you want.”

“Alright.” “Ready when you are.”

“...Start!”

Nick stepped forward as soon as he heard Wilma’s commanding voice, and attacked Leon with a viciously fast hook, but...

“Oops! That was close”

Leon dodged as if he was expecting it, and back stepped away.

“...Aren’t you going to attack?”

“What’s the rush? The match just started.”

Leon provoked Nick, who stepped forward once again and delivered a left jab, that Leon strongly guarded against.

Leon wasn’t strong, he devoted his entire attention to deflecting attacks.

“...Tch.”

Nick started attacking with more precise and short blows, but Leon put up his arms to guard, and avoided critical damage.

When Nick’s attack stopped, Leon attacked with a low kick.

“Oops!”

But Nick safely dodged by stepping back.

“You...”

“Eh, what? Do you hate kicks?”

There was a breathing sound, and at that exact moment, Leon targeted Nick’s midsection with a kick.

Beast people’s explosive power easily outclassed regular people’s, and Nick guarded by tightening his midsection.

“Kuh... I knew it.”

“What?”

“You’re just buying time.”

Nick purposefully guarded against this kick, and let his posture falter just a little, to show an opening, but Leon didn’t get close, in fact, he stepped back to survey the situation.

“Am I?”

Leon was probably attacking just enough to not make it obvious that he had no intention to go on the offensive, and was just focusing on guarding and dodging to take the fight to the next round.

This stalemate continued, until Wilma rang the bell, signaling that the time was up.

The direction of the match was now in Karan and Claudine’s hands.

CHAPTER 44

BARE-KNUCKLE ARITHMETIC (10)

Karan's expression stayed the same, even after Nick's match was over.

She had her eyes closed, and was concentrating on reviewing what she had been learning.

The village of dragon people, or rather, most settlements in regions far from cities, didn't think education was very important. On the other hand, places like the Labyrinth City and the royal capital, where vestiges of the ancient civilization remain strong, place a much higher degree of importance in education, and the idea of children going to school is very deeply rooted in society. There was a very clear gap.

Because of this, there were many people that were cheated in the Labyrinth City, like Karan, and many people that cheated others, like Claudine.

There were those that pitied people like Karan, but did so from afar, and never attempted to do something on a fundamental level.

Some also saw being cheated by someone from the city as a rite of passage for people from the countryside, so not many people actually gave them a helping hand.

Very, very few people would get upset and tell them to learn.

"Hey, did you fall asleep?"

"Be quiet."

"Why are you talking like that? I'm just giving you a heads up."

From the other side, she glared at Claudine with her eyes half open, which was enough to make her shut up.

Karan couldn't wrap her head around the fact that Nick fell for this girl and gave her what she wanted.

“Why do you live like that?”

“Ah?”

“Isn’t there anything you like?”

“...Are you picking a fight with me or something?”

“It’s not like that. It’s fine if there’s nothing.”

Said Karan, before she looked away. Claudine’s glare was intense.

“If you wanna fight do it later.”

Wilma approached them.

“The boys’s match ended in a time out, so now it’s your turn.”

“Good.” “Got it.”

“The time limit is the same as the their match, five minutes.

We will start by having you solve basic problems. Most people can probably answer everything correctly, but the more rounds they fight, the harder the questions get.

Get ready... Start!”

Karan and Claudine flipped their question sheets at the same time, and on it, were very simple math problems.

They were only addition or subtraction problems with two or three columns.

[Great. I understand this...]

Karan felt the results of her training.

She had only been learning from Nick and Sem for less than a month, but it was certainly helping. She could do calculations in her head with no problem.

What she could do gradually increased, and now she could put it to the test. She even

forgot about her enmity towards the other person, and just let the pen run through the paper.

“...Alright, time’s up!”

The five minutes went by quickly.

Karan and Claudine wrote down the same exact answers, and naturally, nothing was decided, so the duel carried on with Nick and Leon’s fight.



The stalemate continued for three rounds, but something changed in the fourth round.

“Karan got 90 points, and Claudine 100.”

Wilma said with her cold voice.

A difference of ten points or more meant that a handicap would be added. In this case, it meant that the opponent would be granted a free hit.

Karan clenched her teeth, looking frustrated.

“What are you going to do now? The gap is just going to get wider and wider.”

Claudine sneered at her.

At the same time, Nick and Leon faced each other.

“Now where should I hit...”

“Get it over with.”

“You got it.”

Leon pretended he was going to hit Nick’s face, but attacked his midsection with a hook.

“Guh...”

“Tch...! Are you really a normal person?”

Angrily said Leon, even though it was him who hit Nick.

Nick quietly took the hit, but didn't so much as gasp in pain, because he learned how to tighten his body in an instant to reduce damage.

It definitely did cause damage, but he managed to make it appear as though it did not, although Leon wasn't the reason why he wanted to make it seem like there was no damage done at all.

“Karan!”

“N-Nick!”

“I can take as many hits as this coward can dish out with no problem. Focus on what's in front of you.”

Nick saw that Karan looked as though she was the one being hit, and tried to encourage her.

“...Got it!”

Karan's face was tight, but when she heard Nick, she closed her eyes again, almost as though she was meditating.

“...You sure can talk.”

“Come at me if you want me to shut up.”



“Leon! Why are you running!?! Attack!”

“Nick! Finish him! He's looking down on you!”

It was the sixth round, and the match was in a stalemate once again.

There was once again a point difference in the math test so, just as it happened in the fourth round, Nick was receiving blows before the rounds started.

Still, it didn't seem like Leon was trying to finish it.

By this point, the spectators caught on to the fact that Leon was stalling.

Even when it seemed like he was going on the offensive, it was nothing more than posturing so as to not make it seem like he was sabotaging the match.

"Time's up!"

Leon dodged Nick's fists, and made his way back to his corner with safe footwork, not paying heed to the jeers from the crowd.

Once again, it was Karan and Claudine's turn to fight.

Karan's off the cuff knowledge was bottoming out, but she still held on.

Karan and Claudine finished their tests with near perfect scores, and once again, the ball was in Nick and Leon's court.

It didn't seem like it would end in this round either.

"Hey, do you have a moment?"

Tianna had a feeling that the match would continue to be prolonged.

"What is it, sorcerer from Survivors?"

"It's Tianna. Can you just combine everything?"

"Combine?"

"At this rate this is never going to end. You still have a few rounds of tests right? I'm saying you should combine them."

"Hmm..."

Wilma started thinking, but people in attendance started booing in agreement with Tianna.

"Yes! Finish it already!"

“How long are you going to prolong this!?”

“Quiet! The people dueling decide the rules! Or do you want to brawl too!?”

Wilma’s intense screaming shut down the audience’s complaints.

“...So, what do you think Claudine?”

“Eh, w-well... Fine by me.”

Claudine looked at Karan in disbelief.

Simple questions wouldn’t create a big difference in points, but clearly Claudine would benefit from a rise in difficulty.

She was sure that a dragon person could not beat her when it came to intelligence.

Above all else, Claudine and her party had a trump card.

“What about you?”

Wilma looked at Karan.

“As you wish.”

Karan crossed her arms, and didn’t raise any objections.

“...Alright, then the time limit will be thirty minutes, so solve as many as you can.”

Wilma started getting the question sheets ready and, with a thud, she placed a bundle of paper on their desk.

“I don’t expect you’ll be able to answer them all. You would need to be a graduate of a school for nobles to be able to answer the hardest questions here, so stay calm and answer what you can. Well then, start!”

Wilma rung the bell, and the test was once again underway.

“Eeh!?”

Something surprising happened, and the audience watching Karan started murmuring.

Karan started solving problems with lightning speed.

Her pen ran quickly, the blank paper she was handed to use for calculations filled up with numerical formulas, and the answers were being shot out into the answer sheet.

As if the curtain of a stage was opening, she turned over a new question sheet and steadily continued answering new questions.

“Y-you’re kidding...?”

Claudine instinctively looked at Karan’s face, and saw a serious expression.

The easy going smile was gone from Claudine’s face, and it was replaced by utter shock.

CHAPTER 45

BARE-KNUCKLE ARITHMETIC (11)

“Claudine! This isn’t the time to be looking at your opponent!”

Wilma warned Claudine, who was fixated on Karan.

Claudine frantically looked away towards the question sheet, but she didn’t become any less flustered.

“Kuh... Why...?”

Claudine knew very well that dragon people were not particularly bright, even among people from rural areas.

They were blessed with physical strength and magic energy that permitted them to fight two on one against other kinds of beast people, and many emerged from the war against demons as heroes and were respected, but many were also content to rest on those laurels.

On the other hand, Claudine was a simple human.

She knew she had a nice face, but not the shining beauty of an idol. She was always good with her hands, but didn’t have the strength of a man or the magic energy of a sorcerer.

She didn’t have a house or any assets. Her parents worked as stagecoach personnel, but were fired due to petty embezzlement. When it started to seem like they were going to sell her off to slavery, Claudine ran for her life. She couldn’t rely on her family in the same way that dragon people can rely on their clan.

She knew all too well that she possessed very little tools needed to make it in this world, and she was jealous of people that did, those blessed by the heavens.

Claudine decided to fight back.

It was only natural for people with no skills to rely on underhanded means.

She was actually fully aware that Nick wasn't an adventurer that should be underestimated.

He seemed to not hold himself in high regard, but he had a good eye for equipment and loot, so he had a good head on his shoulders.

He lamented his own lack of raw physical strength, but just the fact that he could keep up with All Martial Arts proved he was not just an average adventurer. At the very least, he was much stronger than an average girl like Claudine.

But when he was kicked out of All Martial Arts, she figured he fell down to her level, or that she was even better than him.

Sneering at Nick felt good.

Yes, people were equal. Eventually, everyone would be brought down to their knees by this cruel world.

Surely, he would drop down to the depths of despair after being betrayed by her, and once he was ready to drop dead, she could offer a little kindness, and give him back one of the things she had stolen. Once he realized how weak people survived in this city filled with vice and immorality, she would guide him.

But Nick proceeded in a completely different way than Claudine expected.

He looked for new partners, did things that surprised even intermediate adventurers, and even helped someone being scammed by her.

She could have just stopped.

She could have simply not gone after someone that was becoming successful, and be content with living in a world where she could become a winner.

Deep down she knew how foolish it was, and she understood that she was being blind to her own shortcomings, but Claudine still thought to get revenge on Nick.

Her plan was to wangle some money out of a merchant's idiot son, betray Leon, and escape the city, but even that was thrown out. She couldn't forgive Nick for joining forces with others and living an honest life.

Leon probably noticed her imminent betrayal, but still went along with her revenge. He probably realized that even though Nick should have hit rock bottom after being cheated and started walking the same path they did, he instead went off to a different place where the sun shined.

“I’m not... Losing to this idiot...!”

Karan heard Claudine’s mumble, but she sighed, as if to say she didn’t care about such scorn.

“I think idiots are the ones that stay idiots, so you’re the only idiot.”

Said Karan with a boring sounding tone, which made Claudine snap.

[...Beck! Trump card!]

[Yes, I’m ready. I have a reference book and an abacus.]

[I’m going to start dictating the problems so go ahead and solve them.]

Claudine sneakily sent magic energy to the orb hidden close to her chest.

She could have stopped.

Claudine didn’t notice that Karan sensed something was happening, but felt pity towards her.

She also didn’t notice that the other members of Survivors, who were supposed to be watching the match intently, were gone.



Beck was a sorcerer from Steel Tiger Crew.

Even though he was a sorcerer, he lived by the principles of ‘not thinking about things too much’ and ‘living a simple life’. He learned new things, performed magic, drank good alcohol, and was waited upon by women simply because he enjoyed it.

He spent his money very liberally, and when he didn’t have any, he borrowed it. It was no wonder a man with such a reckless and pleasure-seeking lifestyle fell into the hell

known as debt.

When a bill collector stripped him of all he had and was about to send him to a mine, he was saved by Leon, who bought him as a slave. Beck thought for sure Leon was a homosexual, but it turned out not to be the case, and Leon simply wanted an underling that could use magic.

And so, Beck's life became a series of dangerous bridges for him to cross.

When Claudine cheated a man, he was there to be her bodyguard, and when Leon swindled other adventurers, he was there to be his partner in crime.

Beck didn't do these things out of his own volition, but he also had no complaints. Leon was a scammer, but he wasn't very stingy when it came to rewards, and he could drink good alcohol as long as he did what was asked of him properly.

If this led to Beck committing evil, then so be it. Beck had gone through a horrible time after being cheated himself, so now it was his turn to do the cheating, and he saw no problem with that. What was the problem with being friendly with scammers like Leon and Claudine?

There was no darkness surrounding Beck like Leon and Claudine, and he didn't even have any interest in such things. He was only interested in his own pleasure, and wouldn't complain about what anyone else was doing, which pleased Leon and Claudine.

[I see, I see... Hold on, let me do some calculations.]

[Hurry up!]

[Yes yes...]

By using a Telepathy Orb, Beck was solving the math problems that Claudine was seeing.

He was no idiot, in fact, his mind worked rather quickly and he had no issue solving problems or looking things up. Simply put, he had endless indifference towards things that didn't interest him.

"Alright. That Claudine sure worries a lot."

Mumbled Beck to himself, as he sipped some coffee.

Beck was currently in the cafe next to Fishermen, with a reference book open and working out the problems he heard using <Telepath>.

Beck felt something was odd. The difficulty level was strangely high, and there was no way the dragon girl could solve them so easily.

“...Ah, damn it, I made a mistake. I have to start over.”

“Hohou, do you find those problems that difficult? I can assist you if you wish.”

“Oh, thanks...?”

Beck was focused on the problems, and was only now noticing someone else had entered his private room.

“Yes, stay still, and take out the orb. There’s no point in trying to break it either. I know that is one of the Telepath Stones from the Labyrinth of Bonds, but it is fine, we will not be rough as long as you behave.”

It was a boy with white hair, with a man that looked like a priest and a sorcerer girl.

They were blocking the exit.

“So? Do you want us to get rough?”

The sorcerer’s alluring smile made Beck lose the will to resist.

CHAPTER 46

BARE-KNUCKLE ARITHMETIC (12)

“H-hey Beck! What happened!? What are you doing over there!?”

She used <Telepath>, but received no response.

Could it be that those problems were too difficult for even Beck to solve?

Claudine certainly hoped that was the case, because she didn't want to think about the worst case scenario.

But as she was thinking this, something a little worse than what she feared was developing.

Claudine thought that even if what she had been doing arouses suspicion, no could would come up with any proof.

There were rarely any Telepath Orbs in the market, and the number of people who knew of its existence was even lower. Claudine thought she could hide her trick forever.

That was until Beck appeared on the roof of the adventurer guild, tied with a rope.

“Sorry Claudine and Leon, I messed up.”

Beck had an innocent smile on his face, and Tianna and Sem walked alongside him, preventing any attempts to escape.

“Referee, they were cheating.”

Tianna tossed the orb to Wilma.

“Is this... A Telepath Orb...?”

“So you know what it is. That makes things simpler.”

“Yes. No doubt about it, someone can cheat as much as they want with something like this.”

Claudine quickly decided her next course of action. She kicked over her table, and rushed straight towards Wilma, but no matter how fast she was, her telegraphed actions were pointless.

A hand grabbed Claudine’s leg with vicious strength.

“Gyah!?”

“Don’t run. The match isn’t over yet.”

Karan knew Claudine would try to run away, and was already on the move.

She then lifted Claudine with one hand.

“W-what match!? You... You were just pretending to solve questions weren’t you...!?”

Claudine angrily protested, and she was correct.

It seemed like Karan was solving questions with an incredible speed, but it was just a bluff to make Claudine impatient and force her to use her trump card.

“It’s a pretty innocent lie compared to all you’ve been doing.”

“Shut up! Let me go!”

“You want me to let you go?”

Said Karan, with Claudine still suspended in the air, who realized what was about to happen and frantically started shaking her head.

She was either going to slam her or drop her, and Claudine was very well aware that a Karan boiling with anger would not go easy on her.

“A-alright, I-I won’t run away...!”

“Then stay still.”

Karan tossed Claudine to the floor of the roof, and with a pitiful shriek, Claudine lost consciousness.

“D-dammit...!”

Only Leon was left, but the adventurers around him would not allow him to escape.

The rule that would not allow the participants to leave the venue came back to bite him.

“Hey Leon.”

“Damn you... You set me up...!”

“I don’t want to hear that from you. Not that it isn’t true though.”

Said an exasperated Nick.

“Leon... You thought you were doing a great job tricking everyone with the Telepath Orb, but most people were already suspicious of you. The whole reason the old woman put this duel together was to smoke you out.”

“Stop calling me an old woman. Well, the only miscalculation was the fact that Survivors noticed what was going on.”

The adventurer guild was in fact in cohorts with a party, but it was the Survivors.

It all started with Sem. As a result of his efforts gathering information during the night, he managed to find several people that were victimized by the Steel Tiger Crew.

Their testimony led to the conclusion that the Steel Tiger Crew was somehow cheating in duels and gambling, and said cheating started ramping up after they explored the Labyrinth of Bonds.

Sem remembered Bond saying that there should have been Telepath Orbs when they were in the Labyrinth of Bonds. The Steel Tiger Crew most likely took the magic items they found while exploring the labyrinth without presenting them to the guild, much like how Survivors hid the Sword of Bonds.

Sem took this circumstantial evidence to Wilma of the adventurer guild, and proposed

the possibility that the Steel Tiger Crew was involved in systematic scamming and cheating.

The adventurer guild also noticed something was strange, but couldn't do anything due to lack of evidence.

The whole mess that led to a duel between the Steel Tiger Crew and Survivors was a godsend to the guild. It was their chance to obtain evidence and expose all the cheating that had been going on.

Sem smiled while saying 'so basically you're just using us', and Wilma dropped any pretense and admitted it. And then, a deal was made.

"We agreed that the adventurer guild would reward us if we could expose the Steel Tiger Crew's cheating... Our dungeon exploration was delayed, so this will be a nice source of income."

Said Sem to Leon while smiling. It seemed momentum was on their side.

The audience became focused on not letting Leon get away. There were probably people among them who were cheated by Leon while gambling.

Shouts of 'Give the money back' started spreading.

"Leon, how about you give up and end it here?"

Said Nick.

"What?"

"I'm telling you to start fighting for real. At least be cool in the end."

"...Dammit!!!"

Leon assaulted Nick with killing intent, but even as it clouded his vision, he did not falter.

He learned techniques that made use of his flexibility, which Nick found sad.

Leon's skill was definitely not bad, in fact, his muscles showed the results of his constant

training.

The way he was stalling before was no easy feat either. It required both the muscles he had been developing, and a strong force of will to not become impatient.

He also needed experience and guts when it came time to attack.

Much like the answer to complicated mathematical equations, there had to be a decisive blow at the end, but...

“Wha...!?”

“Sorry, but it ends here.”

When that was all someone could do, the opponent could figure out the answer when the time came. No matter how great of a blow it was, Nick could easily evade it.

Before Leon knew it, Nick’s fist was buried into his cheek.

CHAPTER 47

THE LEGEND OF THE PALADIN (1)

In the end, the objective was not to win a duel, but to arrest the Steel Tiger Crew.

After all the fraud they committed using the Telepath Stones came to light, it seemed like everything was explained. Not just cheating in duels like that, but also card games in bars, badger games with Claudine, etc, all sorts of suspicions were being dug up one after the other, to the point where the concerned parties realized it was beyond something that could be resolved by the guild. They were handed over to the Order of the Sun and detained, something that Nick and the others considered a huge victory.

But there was a miscalculation. They won, but this story became the talk of the town, which brought about unexpected circumstances.

“Who would’ve thought so many victims would start raising their voices... I don’t know if I’m going to get everything that was taken from me...”

Said Nick with a sigh, in his room.

It was the day after the duel.

“It cannot be helped. If we were the only ones to receive money from them, people would be jealous and that would certainly lead to trouble. We received a reward from the guild, is that not good enough?”

Bond made an excellent point.

“I guess.”

“You earned a solid share. For now, how about you rest like Karan?”

Surely, the most difficult part of this endeavor was Karan continuing to solve math problems until they used the Telepath Stones.

The Steel Tiger Crews’ plan to drag out the match and decisively win in the end backfired,

but Karan was so exhausted after studying around the clock, that she was still sleeping in the room next door.

They thought she would be awake in the morning, but when they knocked, she responded with 'I'm still sleeping'. Even in the evening, she was still resting.

It was the first time this happened. Usually, Karan would wake up first, wake Nick up, and go out all day to eat all sorts of things.

"I think we should get something for her to eat later."

"Yeah, she did study a lot. You should rest as well."

"No, my body isn't all that tired, if anything I'm more mentally fatigued. This whole thing was such a pain."

"You do not seem all that bothered about being hit."

"Sem healed me... I'm going out."

"Out? Where?"

"To check out the park where idols do guerrilla live concerts from time to time."

"You sure like idols a lot..."

"Humans need to be spoiled sometimes. Don't you have anything like that Bond?"

"Hm... When the network infrastructure still lived I did stream videos."

"Videos? What's that?"

"Well, no point in explaining that. More importantly, I want to watch it as well."

"Eh... What a pain..."

"Come on, it will not be a problem. If there is a lively event happening, I want to see it."

"Oh alright..."



There was always a lot of commotion by the fountain in the center of the western park.

It was a place where it was permitted to set up stalls, exhibitions, and all sorts of personal businesses, so it had a lot of foot traffic and a bright atmosphere.

If it was a sunny day that is.

“It sure is raining a lot.”

“Well this is no good.”

The weather was fickle in the Labyrinth City ahead of summer, and sudden rains were not unusual.

Nick and Bond took shelter underneath a nearby tree.

“It is showing no signs of stopping. What should we do?”

“I guess we need to run home even if we get there soaking wet.”

Said an exasperated Nick, before someone else ran to the tree, also seeking shelter.

“Ah geez, I’m dripping wet...”

The girl, whose face Nick and Bond knew very well, shook the water off her robe.

“Oh? Tianna?”

“Nick and Bond? What are you doing here?”

“We came here because of all the guerrilla live shows that happen in this spot but...”

“But the weather is in this state.”

Said Tianna with a dry smile.

“What about you? The usual dragon races?”

“Dragon races don’t stop just because it’s raining. I went out shopping today but...”

“Walking around in the rain isn’t very nice. What a bad day.”

“We’re in the same boat... Ah, I know.”

“Hn? What?”

“How about you come with me for a bit?”



Tianna took Nick and Bond with her as they walked through the rain.

No matter how many times Nick asked where they were going, Tianna would always evade the question and tell him to just keep going.

Before they knew it, they reached an high end area in the border between the shopping district and an high-end residential area, and this was where Tianna stopped. There was a building that looked like a high class hotel, but the sign said otherwise. It was always illuminated by lamps using magic energy, but there were no drunk customers in sight or anything of the sort.

For all its flashiness, it still retained a high class feel.

“Welcome.”

“Ah, yes...”

Nick nodded towards the employee, but felt a little flustered.

It was his first time in such a place.

“It’s their first time here.”

“Should I explain our establishment?”

“I’ll do it.”

“Understood. Please take your time.”

Tianna stepped on the rug and continued walking as though she was in her own mansion.

There was a faint sound of music, but the sounds of coins hitting other coins, and cards being shuffled lightly echoed.

“...It’s my first time in a casino.”

“It’s my treat this time.”

Tianna was given a bucket full of coins in the entrance, which she handed over to Nick.

“Hey hey, I don’t know the rules!”

“You know how to play cards, right?”

“No, I tried not to get into that too much...”

Nick, embarrassed, turned away.

“That’s surprising. Are you scared?”

Tianna snickered, and Nick awkwardly turned away.

“I’m sure they do nothing but fight swindlers. It’s a good thing it was discovered that they were using Telepath Stones, because it’d be trouble otherwise.”

“Don’t be silly, proper casinos like this have counter-measures against magic and magic items. The cards are all made of special paper and ink that makes them difficult to be affected by magic.”

“Then, I’m sure these places are full of incredible people that can do pure tricks that don’t involve magic. When my old party went to places like these, there was always some that go broke. I guess you really can’t beat pros.”

“It’s true. Sometimes people get taken for a ride, and before they notice it they’re penniless...”

“Right?”

“That’s exactly why I need to teach you how to play.”

“Wai, hey!”

“Oh, I’m serious, leave it me. Let’s see if we can find something you can play even if you don’t know the rules...”

Tianna walked forward with no hesitation, and Nick and Bond hurriedly followed her.

She stopped at the bar counter, and the three sat down.

“Bartender, give this boy something sweet.”

The man in the back nodded and started moving briskly.

As Nick watched him, he asked Tianna a question.

“So you do more gambling than just the dragon races?”

“This one really is just for fun. If we add it all up, it’s obvious I’m not making money here.”

“It’d be weird if you were. By the way, do you know the rules Bond?”

“...I am limited by my code of ethics, so I cannot take part in things such as gambling. I will feel sick if I break it.”

Answered Bond while puffing his cheeks.

“Oh... Can’t you close your eyes or something?”

“I can, but it would be too much of a bother. I will stay here and rest.”

Said Bond with a displeased expression, before the bartender placed a plate on the counter. On that plate, was vanilla ice cream with chocolate sauce.

“Ooh you have ice cream! Good good!”

Bond started happily stuffing his cheeks with no trace of his earlier displeasure.

“You self-interested...”

“I am very fond of this civilization’s food, even if not to Karan’s extent. You primitive beings go be swallowed up in the madness of gambling, and be sure to regret it.”

“Oh? Well now we have no choice but to win. Come on Nick.”

“I told you I’m an amateur!”

CHAPTER 48

THE LEGEND OF THE PALADIN (2)

Roulette was a simple but surprisingly deep game.

You threw a ball into a spinning board called a wheel, and tried to guess which round pocket it would fall into. That was all there was to the game, but there were several ways to bet. You could pinpoint the exact number it would fall into, whether it would fall in a red or black pocket, you could even guess it would fall on one of two adjacent numbers.

And...

“Even if the ball is still rolling on the wheel, you can add or change bets until the dealer says it’s over.”

“Well, I understand but...”

Nick had good eyes, good senses to take command of brawls and fistfights, and the stupid courage to face ogres two or three times his size, but he was being completely taken in by the environment.

He placed chips little by little as outside bets, the places with low multipliers. The dealer and customers around him thought it was amusing how obvious it was that Nick was an amateur.

But the cute girl next to him could not hide her irritation.

“Hey! Bet more like wham bang!”

“I can’t just bet other people’s money like an idiot can I?”

“Geez... Maybe I should’ve picked the slots.”

“I told you you shouldn’t drag me into this too much.”

“What? Says the guy that drags me to adventures and duels.”

“Uu... I don't have a response...”

Nick looked away in embarrassment, but Tianna just snickered.

“Just kidding, just kidding. I just wanted to bring you here as a nice distraction.”

“Distraction? Well, if that's the case...”

“The next game is starting. Concentrate.”

“Yes.”

Nick stared at the ball rolling in the rapidly spinning roulette.

The ball's movements were unpredictable, and it kept being sucked into various pockets.

The way to gamble slowly changed.

Nick was not looking at the wheel, but instead, at the dealer's fingers and eyes.

He noticed this was not a battle against physics, but a battle against humans.

“Yes yes, not bad.”

The ball rolled on top of the board.

Nick narrowed down the pockets where the ball was likely to fall, and piled up chips as if to probe the situation.

Nick started thinking this was not unlike fighting. It was a series of fine tactics and bold moves. Think about it all the way through, and end it with a final blow.

The innocent smile on the dealer's face began peeling away, and a sharpness behind his eyes started appearing and disappearing.

The dealer rang the bell signaling there would be no more bets.

“...Alright!”

“Good job!”

Tianna tapped Nick’s back, who had just pocketed thirty five times the chips.

“Congratulations.”

The dealer handed over a pile of chips with a full smile on his face.

He was smiling too much, and it was a little scary. On top of that, Nick could see the frustration peeking from behind his eyes.

But that’s what it meant to play. The real fun was in trying to defeat your opponent completely.



Nick and Tianna were completely immersed in the roulette for a while.

Yes, immersed.

The rational part of their heads flew off somewhere.

“He ripped away all my money!”

“Hahaha, as expected from a pro. At least you made him have to get serious. That’s pretty good!”

“Ahh... This isn’t a good game for amateurs.”

Nick dejectedly dropped his shoulders, but Tianna was laughing and having the time of her life.

She smacked Nick on the back hard enough for it to hurt.

“But it was a nice distraction wasn’t it?”

“I feel like that was a pretty big sacrifice for the sake of a distraction.”

“You can pay me back later.”

“H-hey, didn’t you say it was your treat!?”

“Just kidding, just kidding.”

Tianna laughed loudly, and received a drink from an employee that was passing by.

It was not an alcoholic drink, just juice.

Nick received one as well and tried it, and felt a citrus like refreshing sourness.

“...Tianna.”

“What?”

“Where did the Steek Tiger Crew screw up?”

Suddenly said Nick.

“Why are you bringing that up?”

“I was just thinking that they were said to cheat places like this, so maybe they’ve come here too.”

“...Who knows. It’s not for us to understand.”

“I guess. I just feel like they’re not too different from us.”

“How so?”

“Before Leon and I started fighting, he tried to sell me Claudine.”

“...Ah? Aren’t they partners?”

Tianna was shocked.

“But Claudine was also going to wash her hands of Leon and get away.”

“Now that you mention it...”

“I think they had a good partnership going. They used Telepath Stones but still, they

almost got me.

At the same time, it's like they erected a barrier between them and could never really trust each other."

"...You told us not to trust you too."

"Maybe..."

"What?"

"If we made a mistake along the way, we would have turned out like them."

"Nick."

"Hn?"

Tianna flicked Nick's defenseless forehead.

"Ouch! Don't you know how to hold back!?"

"You deserve it after saying that nonsense. Don't you remember what you said?"

"W-what?"

"I think trust is believing in each other's innocence'. Did you forget that?"

"Ahh..."

"What do you mean 'ahh... '? Geez."

Tianna shrugged her shoulders in an exaggerated manner.

"Don't worry, I'll always doubt whether or not you're thinking something stupid."

"Oh, good."

"If you do something wrong I'll burn the back of your hands with tobacco fire or use magic to make you slip, so don't worry and do what you want."

“Scary.”

Said Nick, but he actually felt awkward.

He beat Leon and Claudine, but wasn't really thrilled about it.

His ex-girlfriend being escorted away left a strange taste in his mouth, and he had some regrets about getting everyone involved.

Tianna most likely noticed this, and Nick really did think she was a frightening girl, but he was glad to have her as a partner.

“We should go get Bond and go home.”

“Oh, really?”

“I had fun, thanks...”

Nick was saying, but was interrupted by a loud sound of metal being crushed, coming from the entrance.

“Uwah!?”

“R-run away!”

Shortly afterwards, people's screams filled the air.

They were voices that probably should not be heard in a heavily guarded casino.

“W-what...!? Robbers...!?”

“Idiot, if it was robbers the casino could deal with them. I feel a monster is here...!?”

“No way!?”

No one could hear Nick's question, as screams echoed throughout the casino.

CHAPTER 49

LEON'S RETROSPECTION (1)

There was once a party named Silver Tiger Crew, but it was a long time ago, about ten years before, and few remember them.

They were a B rank party, so they were all very strong, but at the same time, they were fascinated by the ancient civilization.

“Leon, we’re going to get the secret treasures of the legendary ancient civilization.”

Their leader, Bishot, was Leon’s brother, and he was a few years older than him.

Most Tiger people were rowdy, but Bishot was more of an intellectual. He studied among humans, and could even memorize the ancient civilization’s language.

He was humorous and strong, and gathered a lot of comrades.

Leon respected his brother, and wanted to follow in his footsteps.

The Silver Tiger Crew’s downfall came alongside its success.

The labyrinth ‘Metal Moon Hell’ was a hellish place where magic dolls made by the ancient civilization were turned into monsters by miasma, and fought among themselves.

Only adventurers that were B rank and above could explore it, and it hadn’t been fully explored yet.

Not only were the monsters strong, but it was very mysterious and had a lot of nasty traps, truly befitting of the word labyrinth. It was not the kind of place adventurers could conquer just by being strong, and in a way, it was more difficult than A rank labyrinths.

The Silver Tiger Crew was the first to conquer it, and Bishot was the hero who unraveled its mysteries.

This did not just get them renown, as the Silver Tiger Crew acquired all sorts of artifacts.

Among them were a magic sword named Butterfly Sword, that could manipulate light and sound to unleash bewitching attacks, a staff named False Root Staff, that enabled the user to control the inactivated magic dolls, the treasure of the legendary phantom light race, the Phantom King's Orb, and many more, all with extraordinary abilities.

The offers wouldn't stop coming. 'Name your price and I will pay it', 'there are too many buyers so at least put it up for auction', 'no no if you offer them to the royal palace you will surely be awarded a court rank', people would say.

And then, one comrade succumbed to greed, stole the Butterfly Sword, and sold it.

Bishot was intelligent, but his social status was low, and he lacked the experience to continually carry out tough negotiations with high class merchants and nobles.

It was decided that the merchant guild would handle the sales, even if they did take a considerable commission, but something derailed those plans. Something that would also derail people's character and fate itself.

Leon did not even know who started it, all he remembered was the horrible sight of his older brother and a comrade killing each other.

His brother was killed, their former comrade escaped, and the reputation of the Silver Tiger Crew fell as hard as it could.

The money Bishot had saved from all of their adventures and the residence he had built for their party, everything was taken away by the merchant guild as a penalty for breach of contract. In one night, Leon lost his comrades, family, and assets.

It started that day.

Leon realized he could not trust anyone, and people that were in the same party were nothing more than business partners.

He would never trust again, and would cut down others before they could do it to him.

In this sense, himself and Claudine made the perfect pair. She did not hesitate to frame others and would happily partake in conspiracies. She would not hesitate to betray him if he was careless, and she would sense when he was thinking of betraying her

and warn him about it. She was a good girl, and the idea that humans could not be trusted.

Beck had a good head on his shoulders, but was still an idiot that could not be bothered to think about anything, but he would still happily help Leon with his work. When they were done with their work, he would gladly gulp down alcohol with no weight on his conscience. He was a man with an aptitude for evil.

Leon had other party members, bound by money or threats, but he liked to work with Claudine and Beck the most.

Where did they go wrong?

One problem was obtaining Telepath Stones. They absolutely were useful items, but they also brought about negligence, and their work became sloppier.

Before they acquired the Telepath Stones, they would have never committed blunders like meeting again with someone they had exploited and discarded.

And then, there was the trouble with Nick and his party. At first, Leon didn't understand why Claudine was so fixated on Nick. If anything, Leon was thankful to Nick for warning him about Claudine's plan to run away.

But as they talked, Leon understood.

He understood all too well.

Yes, this guy would not fall to despair.

He was trying to lead an honest life in a city where one misstep would pull the rug out from under you and take everything you had.

Leon was half serious when he attempted to sell Claudine to him.

He would have no regrets as long as he could see something important being distorted. If anything, he wouldn't mind Nick becoming his partner.

But Nick responded with an honest answer, meaning he was nothing more than an enemy to them, and had to be beaten down.

“Your assets will be distributed to the victims.”

In the end, this was the result.

Leon lost the duel, and as a result of his Telepath Stone scam being revealed, many of his other schemes were coming to light. He was taken in by the Order of the Sun, and locked in a stone room.

Leon was being interrogated by knights in a dark, narrow place.

“We confiscated everything you had hidden in your room. It will all be put up for auction but...”

“What?”

There was a pause by the knight, and Leon also stopped talking.

“...Guh.”

The knight’s thick arm was wrapped around Leon’s neck.

“Is that all there is? I know who you are, former member of the Silver Tiger Crew.”

Leon’s blood was boiling.

“You have stolen treasure from that time hidden somewhere don’t you? Even just one of the lost artifacts like the Butterfly Sword, False Root Staff, or Phantom King’s Orb would be enough to compensate every single one of your victims. Give up and confess.”

“...Me.”

“What was that?”

“Don’t screw... With me... I don’t have that!”

“Hmph, are you trying to say they were stolen by another one of your comrades? Who’s going to believe that?”

The knight let go of his neck.

Leon glared at him, but he was not the least bit intimidated. If anything, the knight seemed to find it amusing how pitiful Leon's situation was.

"None of the stolen treasures ended up on the black market. They're not the sort of things someone would keep without selling or using."

"And that means I have them hidden? You're way off the mark."

"That's what we're going to find out..."

"What I have isn't one of those three."

"What?"

Leon started snickering.

There was something that he kept hidden even from Bishot.

He couldn't trust people. After all, he himself had been lying all this time.

He took the greatest treasure of the Metal Moon Hell for himself and kept it hidden, for it was too dangerous to use or even sell.

Until that day.

The knights stepped back, feeling something was not right, and then it happened.

Leon screamed.

"...At this point I have no other choice! Come **【Mad Moon Sword】** !"

CHAPTER 50

LEON'S RETROSPECTION (2) /

THE LEGEND OF THE PALADIN (3)

Metal Moon Hell was originally a research facility built by the ancient civilization.

Its objective was to develop various drastic measures to clear miasma, the source of the outbreak of monsters. These measures included magic items and magic dolls, but the most dangerous item being developed there was the sacred sword 'Sword of Evolution'.

Swords with magic properties were called magic swords, and sacred sword was the term used to describe particularly excellent magic swords. But even sacred swords were separated by quality.

Particularly sacred swords, each had a theme, rather than simply being powerful. They needed to do something else when their incredible power was unleashed.

The Sword of Evolution was forged to quite literally make humans evolve.

There were a lot of different beings in the world, regular humans, beast people, dwarves, elves, etc, but in the end, they were nothing more than undersized mammals. Because of this, it would be advantageous for humans to be able to adapt and evolve further.

No matter how much the miasma spread and how many monsters were spawned, they would not be a threat to beings that could adapt.

The theme of the Sword of Evolution was to evolve its user to adapt them to any situation, and destroy monsters.

But drastic evolution was not that much different than going berserk.

Even if it was temporary, people feared this sword that would forcibly evolve something that was nothing more than a single living being.

Because of the dangerous light and abilities that this sword possessed, it came to be known as the Mad Moon Sword.

“W-what!?”

“A sword!? A sword jumped out all of a sudden!”

As if it had a will of its own, a sword burst inside the Order of the Sun’s interrogation room.

No one was cut, but witnessing this abnormal situation made many people shudder, as they stared at the sword.

“Leon, it has been a while. I see you finally want to use me. Good grief, it took too long.”

“Shut up. I know what happens if I use you.”

“And yet, you have been cornered to the point where you are left with no choice, correct?”

Calmly said the Mad Moon Sword, but Leon felt delight and alertness behind its voice.

“...I don’t care, but I have one condition.”

“What is it?”

“There are people I want to kill, an adventurer named Nick, and one of my former partners from the Silver Tiger crew.”

“I cannot find someone with a name alone... But you remember their smell do you not? Let me sharpen your five senses to put them on par with a beast. That way, you yourself can look for them.”

“Go ahead.”

Leon talked to the sword in front of him.

The knight that was interrogating him had no idea what they were saying, but he sensed danger looming.

These perceptive instincts and diligence became his worst enemy in this situation

though.

“H-hey! Don’t move! Get away from the sword...!”

But the Leon ignored the knight’s warning, and tightly grabbed the sword’s handle.

<Evolution>

As the spell was spun, a golden light started gushing from the sword.

“Gugah!?”

The knight in the heavy armor was blown away, and he lost his consciousness.



“Where... Nick...! I can smell you...!”

A monster that looked like a black tiger was rampaging inside the casino, but it was not like a simple tiger. If a human with tiger ears and tail was a tiger person, this was the opposite. It was as if human characteristics were added to a big tiger.

It stood on two legs, and was holding an aura blade magic sword, but its face was very clearly that of a tiger’s, and above all else, its body was twice the size of a regular human’s. It was clearly a monster.

The casino employees boldly tried to stand against it, as the guests ran away in panic, but the tiger monster was just too strong. It sent big men flying as though it was swatting away insects.

“W-wait, Nick!? What is that!? That thing is calling you!”

“I don’t know anyone that looks like that!”

Tianna and Nick were at a complete loss. But still peeked from under the table under which they were hiding.

For some reason, the tiger not only spoke human words, but it was calling for Nick.

They could not move around carelessly.

“Y-you two! Something a little bad is happening!”

Bond jumped beside them, and Nick complained about their cramped hiding spot.

“Idiot, this is too small! And be quiet...! I don’t need you to tell me this is bad, we need to get out of here.”

“Wait, do not run! That is the same Leon that challenged you to a duel!”

Nick was taken by surprise, and he peeked at the rampaging tiger.

“...No, he clearly looks different, doesn’t he?”

It was not a tiger person, it was a tiger with a body bigger than a wagon.

“I remember this. This is most likely the result of magic called <Evolution>. It has the power to evolve humans into several forms.”

“Evolution...? Are you telling us that thing is a human?”

“Isn’t it pretty much a monster...?”

“No, it is no monster, its soul is without question human... But this magic affected his personality. When a body is changed specifically for battle, violent impulses become stronger, and the instability of a fresh evolution weakens self-control...”

“So it’s pretty much a monster!”

“It is more dangerous than a monster. It has human intelligence, and above all...”

“Nick!!! Where are you!?”

“He becomes a bit of an idiot, and starts rampaging. It is only a matter of time until he finds you, so it is now or never.”

“Seriously...”

Nick whispered with a somber tone.

“Well... It’s not like we don’t have any options.”

“Correct.”

“Eh, so...”

Tianna looked at Nick and Bond.

“Should we do that?”

“I don’t think we have a choice.”

“But we’ve never succeeded... And I’d feel bad for Karan...”

Tianna seemed concerned, and Nick’s face became red.

“D-don’t worry about that sort of thing. Don’t make things awkward.”

“Hurry up!”

Bond spun around and disappeared in an instant, and in his place was the Sword of Bonds.

“Alright then, let’s do it!”

“We have no choice!”

““Union!””

CHAPTER 51

TAVERN SINGER BELLE HUGGINS, ALSO KNOWN AS AGATE THE IDOL

[Ahh... How did it end up like this...]

Belle Huggins cast a sidelong glance at her boyfriend, who was completely entranced in casino card games gambling, and sighed.

“Belle, I’m going to get everything back and double it...!”

“Yes yes... Just don’t over do it.”

Belle’s boyfriend, Donny, was a self-proclaimed gambler, but in actuality, he moved from job to job as a day laborer, and was unemployed on that specific day.

It was not always like this. Donny used to dream of owning his very own restaurant and being the best cook in the Labyrinth City, and he worked tirelessly in a tavern’s kitchen in order to achieve this goal.

Belle wholeheartedly supported him. She would come by the tavern where he worked to help him in any way she could, but she always liked singing, so she would also entertain customers by copying idols.

Those days of poverty were fun, until one day, something happened.

“Do you want to be an idol?”

A scout visited the tavern.

At first, Belle thought it was either a joke or a scam.

The business district didn’t have a great reputation, and there were people claiming to want to hire girls to be idols, but taking them to nasty brothels instead.

But Donny, not really thinking about it, said she should at least hear what he had to say, so she ended up visiting his office.

Who would've guessed it was actually real?

She was called to a place named Jewelry Productions, an actual idol office.

Their line-up included popular Idols like Citrine, who was the number one ranked idol, and Garnet, who went on tours all over the country.

Belle started performing under the name "Agate".

Belle's daily life was suddenly completely different.

She received voice training and dance lessons, was provided soap and scented oils for free, and made new friends, who bonded not over their tragic pasts and licked each other's wounds, but over dreams of a bright future.

Obviously, there was also rivalry between idols, and some people would pick fights with her out of jealousy, but there was a certain element of seriousness about everyone betting it all on the same stage. It was less about lying in bed cursing people you hated, and more about sharpening your blade and cutting the others. It was a fresh kind of pain for Belle, and it only made her devote herself to this path even more, since she hated to lose.

And then, it was time for her to set foot on a real stage. She would be Garnet's opening act on a park stage.

Belle could not remember if she danced or sang well. She had the feeling that she had performed a strange polka, but she was in a trance, and only had vague memories.

All she could remember was the brightness that made her eyes spin and the wild enthusiasm that made her blood boiled with excitement.

After that, she slowly gained more fans, and people started saying her songs were good.

She had confidence in her voice, but not in her dancing. She managed to mitigate this problem by making it part of her on-stage character that she only sang. This actually ended up having a positive effect, as people praised her stoic attitude.

But as she climbed higher, her boyfriend sank deeper.

Shortly after she became an idol, he quit his job in the tavern after an argument with the owner. He bounced around from tavern to tavern, but by the time Belle got on stage, he grew to loathe the restaurant business as a whole.

He used to gamble for fun, but he was getting increasingly absorbed in it.

It was as though he was mirroring Belle's success, and was slowly but surely straying further away from his path.

The amount of money he was borrowing from Belle was also increasing.

[Is it my fault...]

Belle sighed as she watched over Donny.

She couldn't abandon him.

Surely this was the price of her success, she thought, but somewhere deep inside her heart, she noticed something.

Even though she showed nothing short of her full support towards Donny and his dream, he never supported or congratulated her.

"Can we go home Donny...? Forget about the money..."

"What!? I can't back out now!"

"But..."

Belle knew he was just going to end up penniless and lowering his head to her again.

She was becoming increasingly successful as an idol, but her heart felt cold.

'Why did it turn out like this?' She thought.

She liked that man, and she liked his dream that he talked so much about.

"Donny..."

“Quiet! I’m trying to focus here...”

That was when the entire casino shook.

The pianist stopped playing, and Belle heard people murmur in confusion. The reason for this abnormal development soon became clear.

“Guooooooooh...!!!”

A terrifying roar echoed throughout the casino.

“W-what!? A tiger monster!?”

“That’s complete nonsense, we’re in the middle of the city! There’s no miasma here...!”

“R-run!!!”

It was pandemonium from that point forward.

Tables turned over, chairs broken, and people were sent flying.

Belle could not comprehend what was happening, and could only look on in blank amazement.

To Belle, who was seriously thinking about whether or not to reconsider her relationship with her boyfriend, what she was seeing was utterly bizarre.

But finally...

“Ah! We have to get out of here!”

By the time she snapped back to reality and thought this, Donny was already gone.

“Hum, Donny...? Where...?”

Donny had already run away, and left Belle behind.

“Y-you’re kidding...”

Belle fell back, as she watched Donny run.

She wondered why she was there, and why she worked so hard for that man.

“Ah...”

But reality did not allow Belle to wallow in her sorrow.

A hard, ebony table, large enough for ten men was flying through the air, knocked away by the rampaging tiger. It was headed straight towards Belle, and it would surely crush her.

Belle looked at it with a blank expression. That moment that lasted less than a second felt like an eternity.

[It's over... In a place like this...]

[Ah, I know, this is all a dream. All of it, including my success as an idol and my break-up with Donny. I'm going to wake up under a thin blanket in the same old shabby inn, and go to the tavern where Donny works to help him.]

Belle closed her eyes, and said farewell to this world.

““ You know, an idol has to protect her face.””

But someone would not let her give up.

CHAPTER 52

AGATE THE IDOL /

THE LEGEND OF THE PALADIN (4)

“W-what...? It didn’t hurt...?”

Dying was surprisingly painless.

Or at least that was what Belle thought, but she grossly misunderstood what was happening.

““Are you alright?””

“Eh...?”

Belle opened her eyes, and what she saw surprised her.

It was a world of ice.

Walls of ice, clear like glass, were sprouting from the floor.

Even the huge ebony table was completely stopped by the ice pillars that emerged from the floor to protect the panicked guests.

It was magic, <Ice Shield> to be exact.

It was used when monsters appeared on the highway and adventurers took them down. Belle saw it being used once, but it was not as flashy and its scale was much smaller than the one she was currently watching.

It was used to protect against arrows or magic of the opposite attribute, and it should in no way be tough enough to stop a wooden table descending at one hundred kilometers an hour. It was a shield in the first place, and not a wall.

The person that used this incredible magic had a cool look on their face.

Belle forgot about her situation, and even about her occupation, and stared at this mysterious sorcerer.

[How... How beautiful.]

Even Belle, who was used to being around idols, was captivated by this beautiful woman.

Her blonde hair looked sublime and beautiful, her body, while feminine, was as tight as a stretched bow, and above all, her cool facial features were sharp, almost in a manly way.

“T-t-thank... You...?”

““No problem miss Idol.””

But she smiled like a goddess, seemingly overflowing with love.

Belle was suddenly startled when she noticed something. This person knew she was an idol.

““This will be over soon, so stay low for a little longer.””

“Y-yesh!”

This conversation attracted the attention of the being responsible for this atrocity.

“I finally found you. I’d recognize that stench anywhere Nick... Uh?”

““Come on you stubborn tiger.””

“Who the hell are you!?”

Screamed the tiger, but Belle was not afraid, as she could not imagine the sorcerer that protected her losing.



After Nick and Tianna fused, their body was overflowing with tremendous magic energy, which they used to temporarily summon a harsh winter.

This magic, <Ice Age>, did not temporarily create ice and lower temperatures, but rather, it created barriers and allowed the user to control the cold air inside the area at will.

Inside that area, they could use magic like <Ice Shield> anywhere they wanted and in any shape they wanted, for example...

“Guoooh!!!”

Leon jumped at them with tremendous weight and speed, but his huge body was pierced by huge spear-like icicles.

““ <Ice spear>.””

Spears appeared from the ceiling, walls and floor.

It was the superior version of Icicle Dance, and it originally only allowed the user to fire a single ice stake, but Nick/Tianna could freely fire them from wherever they wanted.

“Gugaaaah!? W-what is this magic...!!!?”

“Do not panic Leon. Remember, I am here with you... Now go wild!”

“Uoooooh!!!”

A strange voice echoed, and something surprising happened.

The limbs of the tiger monster started expanding, not like a balloon, rather, his hard muscles became harder and harder.

Leon contracted his muscles, and broke the ice spears. His wounds were also healed as though nothing happened.

“Ahh...”

“That’s right Leon. Now keep using me in that manner.”

“Shut up... Let me do what I want...!”

““Wait, aren’t you alone...?””

Nick/Tianna were puzzled as they watched Leon have a conversation with a strange voice.

The Sword of Bonds interjected.

“That voice... You are the Sword of Evolution, are you not?”

“The Sword of Bonds... It has been a few hundreds of years.”

““Do you know what that is Bond?””

“Y-yes... We were developed around the same time.”

“Owner of the Sword of Bonds, I am the Sword of Evolution, also known as the Mad Moon Sword. I am the one true sacred sword... Or at least that is what I wish I could say, but I was removed from the plan to defeat the demon king in the examination stage. It certainly is a strange twist of fate that I happen to meet another sacred sword in another era.”

Said the Mad Moon Sword with a somewhat cynical tone, to which the Sword of Bonds responded with anger.

“Foolishness! You were disqualified due to not following the regulations long before that! If you keep using that sword you will cease to be human!”

““C-cess to be... Human!?””

Nick/Tianna were shocked.

“Yes, this sword has a function, in the same manner that I have Union. It is called Evolution...”

Just as the Sword of Bonds started explaining...

“Stop jabbering!”

Leon attacked Nick/Tianna once again.

““Listen!””

“None of that matters at this point! I don’t care what I have to do if I can just kill you!!!”

““Kuh, Leon! You were never such a hasty guy! You were more, you know, crafty!”

“Shut up!!!”

The sword that Leon held was shaped with magic energy, just like the Sword of Bonds.

With a moon-like golden shine, the Mad Moon Sword attacked Nick/Tianna.

“It is no use. He is in an excited state due to the Mad Moon Sword, and even though he can speak, your words will not get through to him.”

““That’s awful... Didn’t you say magic swords couldn’t drive people mad?””

“That is precisely why it dropped out of the development competition and was sealed away. Good grief, to rely on such a dangerous thing...”

“Fufun, say what you want. It is my first time facing the Sword of Bonds, but I have to say, I am disappointed. Are you powerless before my Evolution function?”

Whispered the Mad Moon Sword with a sneer.

“...Hmph, that is my line. You do nothing but rely on brute force.”

“Magic attacks will not work, we have you beat in terms of physical strength, and this is far from the full extent of my power. What will you do, Sword of Bonds?”

““Stop jabbering! We’re the ones fighting!!!””

A light that looked like a flash of lightning ran through the swords as they clashed.

“Gugah!?”

““Combining a sword and a staff sure is useful... Should we call this sorcerer sword?””

Something that looked like smoke was coming out of Leon’s body, and his arm was mercilessly burned all over.

He had been struck with a Lightning attack at close range.

Leon stumbled, and was pierced by ice spears once again.

““How’s that!?””

“Skillful... But we can be restored as many times as necessary.”

The Mad Moon Sword started shining again, and once again, Leon’s body was restored, and his wounds were gone.

This time, his muscles became even bigger, as he used Evolution to become stronger as he healed his wounds.

“Fuhahahaha! I am a slow starter, but I remember all the attacks we receive! They will not work again, and there is no way to defeat me!”

““No, well, there’s at least three ways.””

“...Ah?”

““If we can simply destroy you, it will be all over, or we could freeze you instead of trying to damage you.””

“...Ah, you are surprisingly cowardly to be playing around with bluffs. Why do you not try it, if you are so confident in the success of your plans?”

““You’re an important piece of evidence, so if we destroy you, it will be a pain later, and they’re not even done assessing how much Leon needs to pay, let alone actually paying reparations. If he dies, it will trouble all of his victims, so...””

Nick/Tianna, with an alluring smile on their face, picked something up off the ground.

““The kindest option is to make you surrender.””

What Nick/Tianna picked up was something fundamental to any casino.

A stack of cards.

CHAPTER 53

THE LEGEND OF THE PALADIN (5)

Nick/Tianna smiled daringly, as they played with the cards in their hands.

“Ha, and what exactly do you plan on doing with that toy?”

““It has a lot of uses.””

“Do not make me laugh! Leon!”

Leon started moving in response to the Mad Moon Sword, and the golden shine attacked Nick/Tianna.

“Uruaah!”

““Don’t even try to stop it. You pretty much can’t use magic of the opposite element, fire, while <Ice age> is active, unless you can use magic of the same level.””

Leon charged at Leon/Tianna, who attacked once again with Ice Spears.

But...

“Idiots, do not be careless!”

Sharply shouted the Sword of Bonds, as the Mad Moon Sword started emitting an unnerving shine, reminiscent of a full moon.

“Leon, take my full divine protection!”

“Ho...!”

““What!?””

Leon’s arms, legs, and chest region were covered in a shell, much like that of a crustacean, and the rest of his body was covered with white fur.

Basically, he looked like a white bear wearing metal armor.

His appearance was getting further and further away from that of a person.

“You can now move freely in intense cold, and have armor that protects you against ice spears. I wanted to do a little more but... Without using fire magic, this is the optimal way to break through the ice.”

“Eat this!”

After transforming into a different beast, Leon attacked fiercely, easily destroying the ice shield, and ran towards Nick/Tianna.

““Ku...!””

“I do not know what you were scheming, but I believe it is safe to assume it will not work anymore.”

“Yes, what are you doing!?”

They were locked sword to sword, and the cards that Nick/Tianna were playing with became scattered around them.

Leon used his big body to slowly push them back

“...It seems that it’s true that when the user is bathed with the light of the Sword of Evolution, they evolve, or rather, are forced to evolve. That divine protection can also be dangerous.”

Mumbled the Sword of Bonds with an annoyed voice.

“It is misleading to use the word forced, all I do is grant what is necessary. Strong enough muscles to repel attacks for those who were cut by swords, a body that can withstand low temperatures for those who are unable to move due to cold... Can you really not call this a blessing?”

“It is no different than using bait to fish is it?”

“It seems we have different opinions.”

“What is that awkward form in the first place!? All you do I senselessly combine different animals!”

“Interesting, coming from something that can do nothing but combine different people. How foolish you are, to think you can beat me by simply increasing magic energy and using more powerful spells.”

“What did you say?!”

Meanwhile, Nick/Tianna fearlessly smiled.

““We could do without all this arguing. There!””

Nick/Tianna skillfully threw their last remaining card towards Leon. The moisture and ice acted as an adhesive, and it was stuck right on top of Leon’s eye.

“Guh... That’s not fair...!”

““Who cares about fairness at a time like this!?””

Nick/Tianna used this distraction to get close, kick up a sofa that was turned over, and cut it.

The cotton stuffed inside rained upon them like snow.

“I don’t know what you’re doing, but this isn’t a game...!”

Leon peeled off the card stuck to his face and glared at Nick/Tianna, but they paid no heed, and pulled cotton from the sofa to freeze it, and make an ice spear.

“Mu... Leon, this does not look good! Defend!”

““Defend this.””

It was vigorously shot out, much like the ice spears from earlier, the only visible difference being the muddy white color caused by the cotton inside.

But...

“Guah!?”

Unlike the last spears, this one pierced the shell on Leon's arm, and fresh blood started dripping.

““I don't know why, but ice with cotton inside is really tough. It won't break even if you hit it with a hammer. Did you know?””

The cotton fibers become entangled with the ice, and display surprising toughness.

Furthermore, the ice spears created by Nick/Tianna incorporated magic energy in the ice itself, so they maintained incredible low temperatures and hardness.

This synergy made the ice spear strong enough to easily rip apart steel.

“Tch... You savage scraps of the ancient civilization...!”

It was the Mad Moon Sword's turn to mumble in an annoyed manner, to which the Sword of Bonds happily sneered.

“Good grief, it is that condescending attitude that leads you to failure.”

“Quiet! Both the cards and the cotton are but petty tricks that showcase how weak you are! Leon... Harder! Stronger!”

Once again, the Sword of Evolution emitted an enchanting shine, and with an howl, Leon's fiendish evolution advanced further.

But suddenly, the Sword of Evolution said something with a puzzled tone.

“Mu...? What is that on your back Leon?”

“Grrr...!”

There were cards stuck on Leon's back, and not just one or two, there were cards entangled all over his fur.

They were the cards that were scattered when they were locked sword to sword.

“Guoooh!”

Leon showed no signs of stopping, and attacked Nick/Tianna, violently swinging his

sword.

“Kuh... Leon, listen! First we need to understand what the enemy is... Did I raise his combat instincts too far...!?”

““Uops!””

Nick/Tianna, boldly dealt with the attack, using an ice shield with cotton to block Leon’s violent attack.

“Dammit stop moving...! Don’t run...!”

““You’re in no place to say that!””

Nick/Tianna did more than just run.

““ <Leaf Fall>””

Nick/Tianna quietly cast a spell, which was the most elementary of wind spells, and created enough wind to lift fallen leaves and kick up dust.

There weren’t any leaves inside that room, but there were plenty of cards.

“W-what...? What are you planning...?”

More cards clung to Leon’s body, and before he knew it, he was covered in them.

““Continuing to make the skin harder backfired. Having armor like a steel wall that can’t be hurt means his senses aren’t very sharp.””

“Uu... W-what is this...?”

“H-hey! What is the matter Leon!?”

The more cards became stuck to his body, the slower Leon’s movements became.

It was as though his strength was fading.

““Mad Moon Sword correct? You said the moonlight that messes with the user’s body is the power of evolution didn’t you?”

“C-correct, that is my function.”

““Every time the sword shines Leon evolves, so the light is the source of his power, right?””

“W-what are you trying to say...?”

““What if the light can’t reach?””

“Ah.”

The Mad Moon Sword let out a foolish sounding voice.

“N-no, wait! There is no way a paper defense can block moonlight filled with magic energy...!”

““You’d think so right? This is a casino, and the cards use nice paper and ink to prevent cheating. The cards repel magic energy.””

“W-what did you say...!?”

The Mad Moon Sword was shocked.

“W-what is the point of using such a thing for something as trivial as gambling!? Even in the age of the Ancient Civilization, anti-magic ink was a prized item! Do you not find the existence of gambling dens immoral in the first place?”

““Why is something that controls people and makes them go berserk talking about ethics?””

Nick/Tianna shrugged.

“We do have a code of ethics, we cannot gamble or attend sexual related entertainment unless instigated by our users. For all its cunningness, it does seem ignorant about the world around it does it not?”

Said the Sword of Bonds with a sigh.

“I-ignorant... Me...!? Unforgivable...!!!”

The enraged Mad Moon sword intensified its shine, but rather than Leon's body reacting to it, it seemed to shrink further.

What stood before them was no longer a wild beast, but simply Leon, the tiger person.

““Toryah!””

Nick/Tianna approached the weakened Leon and swung their sword upwards, aiming for the Mad Moon Sword's guard.

With a sharp flash, the Mad Moon Sword was sent flying.

““ <Ice Coffin>””

“Guaah!?”

Nick/Tianna's magic sealed the Mad Moon Sword in ice. It was a magic barrier created with ice and magic energy.

Like Ice Age, this was usually very difficult magic that required several people to cast, but Nick/Tianna could perform it on the spot.

““And that's that.””

“Y-yes. To be honest, I did not expect you to be able to do this much...”

The Sword of Bonds was impressed.

““Really? For an artifact, its thinking was very shallow.””

“You say that but... We do not know much outside of the research facilities where we were developed. We did not have any combat experience outside of testing facilities, and...”

““And?””

“The strength of the sword is important, but the strength of the user is much more important.”

““No kidding.””

CHAPTER 54

THE LEGEND OF THE PALADIN (6)

The Order of the Sun rushed to the scene, and Nick and Tianna left the collapsed Leon and the results of his rampage up to them to clean up.

If they were questioned while still in their <Union> form, it might have come to light that they held onto the sacred sword, so they fled the scene.

The casino was left in an awful state, but fortunately, this meant that the Order of the Sun could not afford to chase Nick and Tianna.

There was a lot of damage and chaos, but above all else, the Order of the Sun had to secure Leon, who escaped from their captivity

A week later.

“So you want to visit? Are you alone?”

“Yes.”

The Order of the Sun’s detention facility was always very strict, especially towards adventurers. As Nick walked through the station’s pathway, he could feel the piercing stares.

A lot of adventurers were vulgar, and many made money going after criminals and wanted individuals, which was supposed to be the Order of the Sun’s job. Because of this, the guild and the Order of the Sun were in a constant state of cold war.

“Listen, Leon’s trial isn’t officially over. You’re being given a special pass to meet him because you provided proof of his scams, but if you do anything that interferes with our job, you’ll be thrown out immediately, understood?”

This sort of intimidation was nothing unusual.

“It won’t take long.”

“And there will be someone with you observing. Any suspicious movements and...”

“I understand.”

Nick inserted a silver coin in that person’s sleeve.

“...It is the Order’s duty to treat citizens with kindness, so I suppose we can extend your meeting’s duration, but you cannot remain by yourself.”

“How about some distance?”

“Fine.”

The knight nodded in an exaggerated manner. Nick couldn’t see the knight’s expression due to the helmet with a visor, but the knight didn’t seem very honest.

Nick was led through a damp and gloomy looking stone hallway.

The knight opened a few locked doors, and a metallic sound echoed.

“This is it.”

Nick found himself on a strangely intimidating floor with a low ceiling.

There were six rooms with iron bars and stone walls. They were cells.

Coincidentally, only one room was occupied.

“Oh, it’s you.”

“Hi, you look good”

“Ha, what’s good about this?”

The prisoner was Leon. The knight that accompanied Nick waited by the exit, far enough to not be able to listen, courtesy of what he received in his sleeve.

“...So what do you want? Did you come to look at the guy you beat twice?”

Said Leon in a self-deprecating manner.

“Yes, I’m here to see you.”

“What’s with that? Well, if you want to look then look. Go away when you’re done.”

Leon, perplexed, sighed, but there was no sign of the irritation and anger from the last time they met.

Nick, thinking this was strange, stared at Leon.

“What? Did you seriously only come here to look at my face?”

“N-no, I was just expecting more complaints and insults.”

“Idiot, what if I do that and they start treating me worse?”

“I guess you have a point...”

Nick was thrown off by this, and scratched his head.

“Well, I’m actually here to ask something... But first, I’ll explain what happened afterwards.”

“Ou.”

“The casino, the building itself, suffered quite a bit of damage, but there were no human casualties. I mean, some people were hurt, but no one died. Actually, the ones that were hurt the most were the knights that were with you when you escaped.”

“Hmph.”

“You did a good job holding back, which means you still had some sense left in you right?”

“I dunno.”

“Claudine and Beck were taken away too. They’re being accused of fraud, extortion and marriage fraud, so I’m guessing they’ll be locked up for a while.”

“I guess.”

“The Mad... The Sword of Evolution was sealed away. No one knows where it is.”

Nick said while keeping his voice down, and there was finally some emotion on Leon’s face.

“...So that blonde girl really was you. When did you start dressing like a woman?”

“There was a little change in my mental state. It’s not good for people to let stress pile up without releasing it once in a while.”

“..”

Leon glared at Nick with a frightful expression.

“I’m just kidding, don’t be so mad.”

“Tch... So you had a sacred sword too uh?”

“Yes.”

“Why are you telling me?”

“The real question is why did you keep quiet about it? I know you realized it well before I told you.”

“...I don’t really like the idea of you people being paraded around as heroes.”

Mumbled Leon with a sour expression.

“I guess that’s fine then.”

“But if it causes problems for you I’ll tell everyone that’ll listen.”

“If that time comes, I’ll have my fill of being treated like a hero, just like you said.”

It was just a bluff.

If Leon blabbed about this, Survivors would be in trouble.

One of Nick’s reasons for coming to this place was to see what Leon knew, and what

he intended to do, since he was the only one that knew who the person he fought in the casino was. He was relieved to see that it didn't seem like Leon had any intention of spreading that information.

"You really are an irritating guy."

"Same to you... Let's get into the main point."

"What is it?"

"Where did you find that sword?"

"Like I'd tell you."

"Yeah, I guess you wouldn't."

Nick sighed, and took out a piece of paper from his pocket.

"...What's that?"

"A lawyer's card. He's used to dealing with host club employees and gangsters."

"That's not what I meant."

"I'll introduce him to you if you tell me."

It was quiet for a while, and after a few minutes, Leon spoke.

"What are you going to do if I tell you?"

"Nothing really. Bond... Our sacred sword wants to investigate, and keeps saying he doesn't want the legacy of the ancient civilization to be used by weird people."

"Aren't you personally interested?"

"One annoying little guy is enough for me."

"...Gimme that."

"Here. I'm just going to say it, I'm not paying. You have a lot saved up don't you?"

Nick tossed the paper to Leon, who looked at it for a bit, and put it away inside his clothes.

“And don’t expect too much from a lawyer. You’re definitely not going to be declared innocent, so be ready to count your sentence in years.”

“I get that... I found it on the last floor of Metal Moon Hell.”

“That B ranked one...”

“Yes... a long time ago, a party called Silver Tiger Crew conquered it, but the guild keeps records of what was picked up and how it was conquered. Once the labyrinth’s structure is understood, there’s no artifacts left.”

“Got it.”

“Nick. What happened to the Sword of Evolution?”

“It’s been sealed. I’m not telling you where.”

“No, that’s good, don’t tell anyone, not even the guild or the Order. I won’t tell anyone about your sacred sword either.”

“That’s very nice of you.”

“I guess, but honestly, I’m relieved. Secretly having the Mad Moon Sword was a burden. I thought it’d be a trump card but it’s more like a bomb. I’m giving up on that, and even the idea of eating bad food for a while doesn’t seem so bad in comparison.”

Leon’s expression was surprisingly peaceful.

Nick was surprised. He thought it would be very difficult to get him to talk.

“You’ve changed...”

“Jokes aside Nick, listen.”

Nick felt the pressure of Leon’s serious tone, and quietly listened.

“There are people here in Labyrinth City after the legacy of the ancient civilization.

They're so good at finding out people's weak points that they can even trounce high rank adventurers, and they stop at nothing to get what they want. Thinking back, they were probably the ones that caused the Silver Tiger Crew to collapse."

"Ah? What's this all of a sudden?"

Nick was confused by the sudden shift in the conversation.

"The Silver Tiger Crew successfully conquered Mad Moon Hell and got a hold of some artifacts. Because of this, all sorts of merchants and proxies for nobles approached them wanting to buy them, but among them, there was one person that convinced a member of the party to betray their comrades and sell the artifacts on the black market... Thinking about it now, the sale itself wasn't the objective, it was a means to destroy the party. All to make sure the artifacts were taken."

"Hold on, I'm not following you."

"Go to the guild and look up what happened to the Silver Tiger Crew. You'll know what I mean."

"A-alright."

"When we started making good money with the Steel Tiger Crew, I started looking into what happened back then. The Silver Tiger Crew's member was tricked by a blonde longsword user with a fake name. I still don't know his real name... But I think he goes by Karios nowadays."

CHAPTER 55

THE LEGEND OF THE PALADIN (7)

“Are you...”

“Anyway, you’re keeping that sacred sword a secret right? That’s the right choice, keep doing that and don’t let yourself be targeted. If you have a problem with that, become strong enough to beat anyone that goes after you. It’s not just a matter of physical strength though, it’s also about power and money.”

“Tell me more about those people that might come after me. And did you say Karios?”

“I can tell you but...”

Leon pointed towards Nick’s back with his chin.

Nick looked back, and saw that the knight from the Order of the Sun had gotten up from his chair and was approaching them.

“Time’s up.”

“...Ah, I get it.”

“Bring me something next time you come. Ah, I don’t need booze, but you can bring me some paper rolled tobacco or candy. The food here’s terrible.”

“You can deal with that much. Didn’t you say you were comfortable?”

“I-it’s fine, aside from my eating habits.”

“Geez.”

Nick smacked his lips as he stood up.

He accomplished what he went there for, but felt like an even bigger problem in need of solution was thrust upon him.

Nick let out a sigh of exhaustion as he exited the Order of the Sun's detention facility



"I'm home."

"This isn't your home."

Nick opened the door to Tianna's apartment, and was greeted by an exasperated Tianna.

In the back were Bond, Sem, and Karan, chuckling.

"How about renting a place like a conference room or something? Or renting a big apartment for everyone, or a detached house to be used as both a storage room and conference room?"

Said Nick, but it did not improve Tianna's mood.

"I don't want to take rent money out of our wallet every month! That's why I let you come here in the first place!"

"It's the best option."

"So you better be thankful."

"Yes, yes, I am."

"Good."

Said Tianna with a self-important smile as she crossed her arms.

"So, Nick, how did it go?"

Asked Bond. Nick's party gathered in Tianna's room, waiting for him to come back, as the result of Nick's conversation with Leon could very well dictate their next course of action. Everyone was curious, waiting for Nick to speak, but he looked puzzled.

"You already know don't you? Bond heard everything with Telepath."

"I thought it would be insipid for me to tell everyone so I stayed quiet."

“Hey!”

Everyone glared at Bond, who laughed with a fresh look on his face.

“Come now, this sort of thing should be heard from the man himself.”

Bond looked at Nick meaningfully. It was true that Nick should tell this story directly, and it was too heavy for Bond to relay to everyone else.

“...Oh alright. No one knows, at least for now. He’s not going to tell either.”

“I see, that’s good.”

Sem let out a sigh of relief.

“But...”

It was difficult for Nick to say, and he looked at Karan.”

“What? Want some?”

Karan was wolfing down peeled oranges.

The town market was full of citrus fruits at that time of the year. Karan bought a mountain of fruit and placed them on top of a table.

“You can keep eating, but I have something to say.”

“Y-yes?”

Karan couldn’t see where this was going, and nodded.

Nick started telling everyone about his conversation with Leon, and the softness on Karan’s face slowly faded away.

“Let’s summarize. First, there are strange bandits targeting artifacts, so we need to watch out. Second...”

Nick looked at Karan.

She had the same intense look on her face she had when she faced tough opponents on their adventures.

With that intense look on her face, Karan crushed on orange in her mouth and swallowed.

“Nick.”

“What?”

“...Leave that sort of serious stuff until after I’m done eating.”

“Sorry.”

Karan complained, as her face became a little red.

“Anyway... That’s a clue about Karios isn’t it?”

Whispered Karan, and Nick nodded.

Karios was the name of the leader of the party that led Karan into a trap. His blond hair and him using a longsword also matched Karan’s description.

He took Karan’s Dragon King Orb and ran, and was an enemy that had to be tracked down no matter what.

“Yes, it seems he was active here in the Labyrinth City a few years ago.”

“And Leon’s artifact was stolen?”

“Apparently.”

Nick nodded.

“So, do you think he got away from the Labyrinth city because he managed to get his hand on a huge sum of money?”

The man calling himself Karios stole something very valuable from Leon’s Silver Tiger Crew, and yet, he continued scamming people like how he tricked Karan. So, it seemed logical that those items brought him a tremendous level of wealth.

Karan's guess may have been correct.

"I get what you're trying to say, but we don't actually know where he is right now..."

"Yes, I know, it happened a long time ago anyway. It's the same name, but that means he used that fake name all this time, which is kind of weird."

Karan was calmer than Nick had anticipated.

She had a serious look on her face as she processed what she was hearing, but she did not seem anxious or angry.

"But it's good that we have more clues. Thanks Nick."

"Y-yes."

Nick's face became a little red as he heard such a sincere thank you, and he looked away from Karan.

"...Anyway, I'll look into this Silver Tiger Crew. If they got into trouble because they had artifacts, that also concerns us."

"Yes, we need to brace ourselves."

Said Bond, before once again being the target of everyone's glares.

"Y-you must realize I am a victim as well. I had no way of knowing about artifact robberies while I was sealed away."

"Then start acting like this concerns you."

"Of course. You can rest assured knowing that I will be assisting you."

Bond proudly puffed his chest, to which, Nick only shrugged.

"Anyway, we need to be careful and not rush things, Karan."

"Come on, don't worry about me. Is it really that surprising?"

Said Karan, sounding discontent.

“Don’t be mad, but I was thinking about what I was going to do if you just rushed out of here.”

“Idiot.”

Karan threw an orange at Nick, who caught it with his right hand.

“...I feel like I understand, after that duel with Claudine and Leon.”

“Understand what?”

“Problems can’t be solved just by hitting and being hit.”

“No, we hit each other a lot, and just the other we almost killed each other.”

“That’s not what I mean!”

“I know, I’m joking.”

“Geez... You pick some weird things to joke about.”

Karan cleared her throat.

“Investigate, formulate a strategy, and investigate further to make sure there aren’t any holes... I’ve never done something like that, but I assume it comes naturally to smart people...”

“...Karan.”

“I can’t do that now, at least not by myself, but I need this sort of thing if I’m ever going to find Karios and get my treasure back. That’s why I learned a lot this time.”

“In more ways than one.”

“Yes! I spent so much time solving problems, and when the duel was over, you told me I had more homework to do!”

“It’s important to train every day.”

Nick grinned while Karan complained, but she was making a serious effort, even as

she complained.

Tianna knew this, and pat Karan's head.

This sight felt like a ray of sunshine hitting Nick's heart. He didn't really feel that good after defeating Leon and Claudine, even though he did feel like a bone stuck in his throat had been removed.

He had some lingering bitterness in his heart, but now, he felt as though it was being cleared away.

The way Karan was moving forward and growing step by step gave Nick a real sense of accomplishment.

"...What? Why is everyone laughing?"

"Don't worry about it."

Before she knew it, the other three had joined Nick and were also smiling.

Karan felt a little embarrassed.

"Don't make those weird faces! Listen!"

"Yes?"

"This whole thing finally ended and I'm tired of staying inside studying! I wanna go out!"

Everyone agreed with Karan. Survivors had to concentrate completely on the duel with Leon, and Nick haven't even gone out to watch live shows for a while.

"...Yes, I tried going out to release stress, but it turned into a huge mess."

"That's right. I guess we can finally feel relieved."

"Being holed up inside is bad for your health."

Tianna, Sem, and Bond all cheerfully laughed.

"Right? Nick, first, you need to sit down and rest. You're tired aren't you?"

“Yes. Should we make some tea?”

“Sem, why do you use the teapot in my room like it’s normal?”

“Shouldn’t I? There’s some good medicinal herb tea.”

“It’s fine but... Is medicinal herb tea good?”

Nick thoughtlessly interjected as he looked around the room, “Haven’t you been getting too much stuff for your room Tianna...?”

“You have so many magic books and tools for magic experiments, that your room has a tendency to become dirty.”

“Stop! That goes against the rule to not meddle in others’ private business.!”

“That’s true, sorry.”

“I think this is the part where you are supposed to help her clean.”

“It’s fine like this.”, Tinanna remarked.

Nick sipped the medicinal herb tea that Sem handed to him, and its refreshing taste permeated through his tired body.

CHAPTER 56

KARAN'S CASUAL STROLL THROUGH THE LABYRINTH CITY ~ ROSY CHEEK RASPBERRIES OF MOUNT SABBATH AND SKULL VANILLA ICE CREAM

Karan wanted to eat something sweet, for no particular reason.

Well, there was one. She was very jealous when she heard Bond talk about the ice cream he ate in the casino. [Eh? Isn't that just a little unfair?] she thought, like a child having a tantrum.

She imagined a scene where she was gallantly walking on top of a red carpet as she listens to the sound of a chic piano. She walked to a bar counter, sat down and is presented with beautiful ice cream made by a veteran patissier.

Just imagining this filled Karan's mouth with a sweet taste. Lost in her thought, she started muttering to herself.

"Calm down Karan... You just want to eat something sweet..."

"What did you say, Karan?"

"Ah, n-nothing."

Tianna and Karan were riding one of the stagecoaches that circulated around Labyrinth City.

The casino would be closed for a while, courtesy of Leon's rampage, and other places that served good ice cream were not within walking distance. Even if they were, they would not be good enough to justify their prices.

That was why they decided to head to the northside of the city.

Karan was going by herself, but walking so far north was inconvenient, so Tianna volunteered to be her guide.

“We’re getting off at the next stop. The fare is two hundred dinnar.”

“Yes.”

Most people like them, adventurers, settled down in the south, due to it being easier to travel to labyrinths through the southern gate,

In the northern side however, there weren’t many labyrinths, which meant fewer monster attacks, and with that, a more affluent population.

Tianna had traveled there a few times before, but Karan was new to the area. Not everyone was brave enough to visit such a place with an adventurer’s wallet.

“When you want to eat something sweet, look for sorcerers.”

“Why?”

“When making sweets, you need to closely follow a process and weigh things more precisely than when you’re cooking. You need to use a scale, ice or fire magic, and stuff like that, so people studying magic often switch occupations and become patissier,”

“Eh...”

“That’s why you shouldn’t go near the guild or blacksmith streets when you want something sweet. Ah, and don’t worry, it’s not that expensive.”

Karan didn’t trust Tianna ‘not that expensive’, but could not fight the allure of sweets. The moment she decided to be brave, the conductor announced the next stop with a sluggish voice.

“Next stop Sabbath hill. Sabbath hill.”



Sabbath hill. Despite the dangerous sounding name, it was a stylish place frequented by young people.

It had many schools for children of nobles, including ones exclusively for magic, but it also had a shopping district where high society students could do their shopping and play around.

Young sorcerers with tidy robes with no dirt from traveling, monster blood, or chemical burns from experiments happily talked as they smugly walked around town.

“This way.”

“Yes.”

Tianna quickly walked through Sabbath hill.

The students sensed danger coming from them and moved out of the way, but also looked on with curiosity. Karan started feeling awkward and out of place.”

“Cool.”

“Are they adventurers?”

But despite the curious looks, they were not being mocked, rather, they were drawing attention in a good sense.

It was not like she was not out of place, but it tickled a little.

“The casino is closed, so we had no other choice but to come. Ah, do you want to do a little shopping?”

“Do you come here often?”

“If I have money.”

“Being a sorcerer sounds expensive.”

“That’s quite true. Even if I had more money, I doubt any sum would be enough.”

Tianna let out a strained laugh as she looked at Karan. Tianna was even smaller than the students, but her refined movements and posture, and the quality of her outfit were real.

The students walking opposite to her made way for her, feeling she was not just some nobody.

Obviously, this aura around Tianna was not just for show. She was thrown out of a

noble household, but had the toughness to keep going, and was able to mow down monsters.

Her eyes looked different than Nick and Sem's, and Karan respected her.

"I want to stop by that place."

Tianna pointed towards a mass retailer of magic items.

It only sold consumer products, so obviously, it was not the kind of place where you could find artifacts like the Sword of bonds or Telepath Stones. They were everyday items like candlesticks that did not need oil or magic bottles that boiled water.

"What are you buying?"

"A jar where I can keep meals and bread and stuff like that. The inside is filled with cold air, so food keeps for longer."

"Eh..."

Karan wanted one as well. She liked to eat in restaurants and taverns, but she also liked going to stalls and bringing food home.

"And I want to keep food that Sem or Nick make."

"Ah..."

Sem and Nick were usually in charge of cooking when they were out exploring labyrinths.

Nick was used to labyrinth exploration, and was good at cooking outdoors. He knew how to cook dried meat, or meat from rabbits and birds they hunted with ingredients like wild grass, and how to make dry bread and other preserved foods very tasty.

Sem knew a lot about medical care and medicinal herbs, so he was in charge of everyone's health. He also used to take care of children in the temple, so he was good at cooking for several people.

"Don't you cook for yourself?"

"I can't be bothered."

Tianna shrugged.

“I want to hire a house maid to take care of that sort of thing, but I still don’t have the savings to afford that. What do you usually do Karan?”

“In the morning I eat with Nick in the market. For lunch and dinner... I eat out.”

“So you can’t be bothered either. Ah, this one’s good.”

Tianna grabbed a jar. On the side of this white porcelain jar there was a magic stone, the core to activate this magic item.

It had a simple design without a lot of ornaments, but had flower petals carved around the magic stone.

Magic items were always designed to attract attention to the fact that they were magic items. Karan couldn’t tell a good magic item or household item from a bad one, and envied Tianna’s discerning eye,

And then, a man with a nice physique passed behind Tianna. The store was narrow, and the man forcibly trying to get through, hit Tianna’s back with his elbow.

“Ouch! Hey!”

“Shut up little girl! You’re in the way!”

Tianna almost dropped the jar, but Karan grabbed her, who then glared at the man that bumped into Tianna.

“You’re the one that needs to be careful.”

“Uu...”

A dragon person’s glare was more intimidating than just any man.

Karan was still young as a warrior, but her experiences in the Labyrinth City definitely made her stronger. The merchant man broke out into a cold sweat, and was completely frozen in place.

“...Ahh, I don’t care, just go away.”

“Y-yes.”

The man ran with his tail between his legs, and the employee that heard the commotion apologized.

“I’m very sorry for the trouble.”

“It’s fine, it wasn’t your fault. By the way, how much is this jar?”

“Let me see...”

The employee started negotiating, even as he was scared by Tianna’s bright smile.



“Thanks for that, Karan.”

After finishing Tianna’s shopping, the pair went to a nearby sweets shop to take a break.

The ice cream they were served was even grander than Karan imagined. On a white porcelain plate there were two flavors of ice cream, pink raspberry and pure white vanilla, with wafers.

The menu called it rosy cheek strawberry and skull vanilla ice cream.

The name was a little unsettling, but the menu had an explanation. It’s motif was ‘Even if you wake up with rosy cheeks, your white skull will start showing as the day progresses’, a poem about the listlessness of daily life.

But apparently the patissier that thought of it wanted it to be a positive message to the young people that frequented that place, ‘you never know when you’re going to die, so eat ice cream while you can and enjoy your life’. Most of the menu carried that kind of message.

Whichever way you look at it, it was delicious. The flavor and acidity of the raspberries was very strong, and it felt like it prickled the tongue, but when eaten with the wafers and vanilla, it became surprisingly smooth. Apparently, the rusticity and strong flavor of the raspberries was meant to symbolize life, and the refreshing taste of the vanilla was meant to symbolize death.

Karan felt like she wouldn't get along with this patissier, but he was so good at his job that it could bridge the gap in their ideology.

...Karan was so focused on her ice cream, that it took awhile for her to realize that Tianna was speaking to her.

"Fueh?"

Tianna laughed at this half-hearted reply.

"I'm talking about what happened earlier when I was buying that jar. People look down on me when I'm alone, so I find it hard to stand up for myself."

"...Why?"

Karan didn't understand at first.

She genuinely just wondered if there were idiots out there that didn't realize how great Tianna was.

"Because I'm so short... Nick says he's short and doesn't have muscle, but he's way better off than me. Right?"

Tianna mumbled as she scooped up ice cream and ate it.

This felt much more appropriate for a girl her age than when she smoked and enthusiastically gambled.

"Oh, that."

"What do you mean 'oh that'?"

Karan felt a little inferior to Tianna. There were many things she lacked compared to her, but what Tianna thought about was not that much different than her,

Karan knew that Tianna understood the world around her a lot better than her, but still, she had trivial concerns about her daily life, and desires like wanting to eat something. Everyone was like that, even people that looked at her with antagonistic eyes. No one was perfect, and people with those kinds of weaknesses could be surprisingly strong, like Karan and Tianna.

“Good Tianna.”

Said Karan, as she patted Tianna’s head.

“I don’t really get it but alright.”

“It’s fine. It’s fine.”

Tianna let out an exasperated sigh, but didn’t seem too bothered as she continued to eat her ice cream.

CHAPTER 57

SEM'S RED-LIGHT DISTRICT GUIDE, OR A STORY ABOUT HOW CLOWNFISH CHANGE GENDERS

Nick let out a sigh filled with anguish.

"Ahh..."

"I think all of this was a huge success."

"...I guess."

"There was a reward from the guild, once the trial is over, you'll get back the money that was stolen from you, and above all else, you got closure, right?"

"No doubt about it. Ah, thanks for the lawyer's card. The conversation went smoothly."

"No problem."

"Redd right? Where did you meet him?"

The card that Nick gave to Leon had 'South Gate law firm-Redd Chambers' written on it. Nick thought the name sounded cool, and pictured a really tough guy.

"Lots of ladies want to be friendly with doctors and lawyers. This in turn leads to me meeting and being friendly too."

"Sounds reassuring."

"Then why the grim face?"

Nick put his hand on forehead and sighed again.

"...Two reasons."

"Can I hear them?"

“Yes. First...”

“Yes?”

“It’s true that those places where girls serve drinks are not for me.”

“Yes.”

“But what mental gymnastics led you to choose a transvestite bar because of it?”

Nick and Sem were in a rather eccentric bar, even for the Labyrinth City. It was a transvestite bar named ‘Sea Anemone’, and they were sitting at the back counter.

“Oh? Don’t you like it?”

“That’s not it... It’s not something that I’ve ever thought about liking or disliking...”

Nick glanced at the counter, and saw a man that did not look at all like a man, a mysterious man that could just barely be distinguished from a woman, and a man he thought could stand to gain from trying a little harder.

“Have something to say?”

“Sem... This boy is so cold!”

“But he’s cute. How old are you?”

“Hahaha. Go easy on him, it’s his first time here.”

The employees laughed as they made fun of Nick.

Sem was completely unfazed. Nick almost said that Sem was crazy, but remembered the rule to not interfere in each other’s private lives, and held it back.

“No, I don’t anything to say other than that I want another drink... And can I get something to eat here?”

““““Yes!””””

All the employees had somewhat husky voices, but if you told someone they were

women with deep voices, they would believe it, probably a result of voice training.

“...And just the other day Leon was talking about me liking to dress up like a woman.”

“Do you want to try? They’ll lend you a make-up set if you ask.”

“Why would I?”

Nick then noticed the dubious stares coming from the amused employees on the other side of the counter.

“...Want to try?”

“N-no! Absolutely not!”

“What a shame. Be sure to tell if you change your mind.”

Said the employee while smiling and placing plates in front of Sem and Nick.

On the plate were traveling dove meat, onion, fava beans and mushrooms seasoned and cooked with tomato and chili pepper.

This type of cuisine was brought from another country a long time ago, but people in the Labyrinth City had been eating it for over a hundred years, and it had taken root completely. Many had even forgotten it originally came from somewhere else, and called it Labyrinth stew or Labyrinth chicken.

When they camped out during their adventures, Nick would catch wild birds and make a similar dish. His parents used to make it often, and he remembered how to do it.

The other party members seemed to like it, and Tianna would even take what was left home with her.

“Hmm... It’s pretty good.”

“Right right?”

“Kyah! I’m so happy!”

The employee let out a saccharine voice in response to Nick’s sincere opinion.

“But it’s not better than mine.”

“Nick, why are you competing about that?”

“No, it’s just kind of frustrating.”

It was actually good. It was too spicy to be eaten regularly, but it was perfect for such a bustling place.

“If it was a calmer place, I could really get into it.”

“No, it’s actually pretty calm.”

“Is it? My back is kind of tingling.”

Said Nick, and Sem suddenly smiled.

“I’m scared of girls.”

“...Yes, you’re scared of girls around thirteen years old right?”

Nick remembered Sem’s story very well. A thirteen year old girl accused him of raping her, and as a result, he was expelled from his temple.

“That’s not fear, that’s more like psychological trauma. That’s not it, I’m talking about women in general.”

“I see.”

Nick was surprised, but at the same time, he could understand it.

Sem went to a lot of places with girls. He was set up by a girl, and saved by a girl. It would be one thing if he was just set up or just saved, but having experienced both left a big mark on his heart.

In a way, he felt weak, like he couldn’t win against them.

Even though he was afraid, he still enjoyed trying to overcome this fear. Diving head-first into this fear was probably one of the reasons why he enjoyed going to places where he was served by girls.

“Yes. Girls are so scary.”

“Still, we are girls at heart ufufu.”

“Well if your heart says you’re a girl then that’s fine. There’s species that don’t distinguish between men and women, and beings that fuse and you don’t even know what gender they are. That’s why you have to decide for yourself what you are.”

Said Nick, and the employee’s expressions changed.

“W-what?”

“...I can see why Sem brought you. You show promise. Here’s my business card.”

The mysterious employee that Nick couldn’t tell was a man or a woman sat next to him, pulled out a business card from the chest, and put it close to the mouth, leaving a kiss mark on it before handing it to Nick.

“I’m not going to become a regular or anything...”

“Oh? We’re going to be related through work.”

“Eh?”

A confused Nick looked at the business card, and was taken aback by what he read.

“Lawyer!? Wait, are you...”

It read ‘South Gate law firm-Redd Chambers’.

“Yes. I’ll be handling Leon’s case.”

“Seriously?”

Redd winked, and Nick was at a complete loss as to what to say.

“...Hum, it says South Gate law firm...”

“Yes, it’s this building! The first floor is the bar, and the second floor is the law firm.”

“Is that even allowed?”

“We have permission, so it’s no problem.”

Redd showed the cuffs on his suit as he explained, which had badges sewn on.

They had an abstract design of a scale. This was something that only lawyers recognized by the country could wear.

“I’m Leon’s lawyer, but I’m also in charge of making sure the reparations to you and the other victims goes smoothly. Let’s make sure everyone comes out a winner!”

“Y-yes.”

“You can count on me, but we still have some time until the trial so we can talk more about it later. Today, let’s just have fun.”

Said Redd while going back behind the counter. Nick was in stunned silence.

“What? Are you surprised?”

“Of course I am... I don’t even know what we were talking about.”

“Hum... It was about girls being scary.”

“That’s right. Sem, girls are scary, and transvestites are scary too.”

“That’s true.”

“But you’re scary too, Sem.”

“Eh?”

“You examine and save a lot of people. Lawyers help all kinds of people too, and people with that kind of strong influence are scary.”

Sem looked as though those words hurt him somewhere.

“S-scary?”

“I mean, put yourself in the position of the people you heal or give medicine to. They must think that they can’t upset you or you’ll abandon them, right? Their future probably looks bleak if you stop giving them medicine or stop treating them.”

“No, that’s not my intention...”

Whether or not this could be believed was a different story.

Furthermore, when Sem first got to the Labyrinth City, he realized he could use his healing magic and skills for his own profit, and even used it as a threat against a hostess bar that tried to rip him off.

“...It’s true, it’s scary. People with power are scary, and a lot of people can’t be defied. No matter how pure they seem...”

There was no guarantee that they would not have a change of heart.

Sem and Nick purposefully did not say it.

“But Nick, it’s incredible that you feel that way.”

“Really?”

“I mean, you were tricked by Claudine too right?”

“Don’t talk about that.”

Nick stared at Sem, who smiled and apologized.

“Haha, sorry.”

“But they were probably scared of us. Somehow, I think they attacked us because they were scared.”

“...I see.”

“Am I wrong?”

Asked Nick, and Sem shook his head.

“I don’t know the truth, and you probably know more than me, but what I’m saying is that immediately attacking someone because they’re scary and making them an enemy is way too hasty.”

“That’s true.”

“On the other hand, talking to someone because they’re scary takes courage too. In a way, you could say it’s an unfavorable bet.”

“Well, betting is scary. I’m sure Tianna would disagree though.”

“Who knows, but I think I’ve collected my thoughts. I think I’m like Tianna and like betting.”

“Don’t play with fire too much.”

Said Nick, and Sem grinned.

“This is no good. The idea was to hear your problems, and here I am getting advice.”

“No, I don’t have a lot on my mind.”

“Which means there is something. What is it?”

Nick made a bitter face, and after a few moments of silence, he said what was troubling him, almost like it was forced out of his mouth.

“...Break.”

“Break?”

“My favorite idol, Agate, decided to take a break!”

CHAPTER 58

LEGEND OF THE PALADIN (8)

“We have bought all your debt... Even your verbal promises. We will shoulder everything. You will not be targeted or pressed by debt collectors, and you will be able to walk around freely.”

Three people sat in a small room composed of walls and a thin divider.

A man dressed in black spoke with a plain and monotone voice, but to the man in front of him, what he was saying was extraordinary. His enormous debt would be wiped.

“But...”

The man dressed in black stopped for a moment, before facing the man in front of him once again.

The latter seemed hurt, and his arm was bandaged, but his sad and frustrated expression stood out more.

“Your relation to our agency’s idol ends here. You must never see her again, and not talk to her even if you happen to bump into her accidentally. Also, you must never say anything about her to another person, no matter how trivial you think it is. If you do...”

The injured man shook with fear.

“We will immediately seek reimbursement for your debt, and leave the collection to specialists, of course. We will also seek the appropriate reparations if your actions have negative effects on her career as an idol. Do you understand what all of this means for your life?”

“I-I do...”

The injured man did not try to meet the gaze of the man dressed in black.

He awkwardly turned in his seat, and looked at the third person in the room with a

pitiful expression.

“B-belle, I’m sorry. I didn’t mean for anything bad to happen so...”

“Stop it Donny.”

But the third person, Belle, shook her head.

“I am Agate, not your Belle. That is what I’m going to be from now on, so forget about the past.”

The injured man, Donny dejectedly lowered his head.

Some feelings of pity started welling up inside of Belle’s heart. She did like him at some point, and she supported him from the bottom of her heart.

It pained her to see how far he had fallen.

That day when the mysterious monster attacked the casino and Donny abandoned her, whatever they had between them was lost.

She was ready to die when she was faced with that mysterious monster, but miraculously survived.

Being saved and meeting that person was nothing short of a blessing from god.

She was so elated after leaving the casino, that she carelessly told everything to her producer, including her relationship with Donny, which she kept a secret.

The producer, the man in black, was concerned. Agate being saved by the mysterious sorcerer truly was an epic tale and wonderful good luck, but he was more focused on the bad than the good. Agate not only had a boyfriend, but one whose behavior was shameful. To Belle, who was going to be even more active from then on, he was nothing more than a hindrance, a cancer that had to be removed. The producer proposed that they should break up as soon as possible, and he would even pay for him to go if necessary.

If this incident did not happen, Belle would have been very troubled by her producer’s proposal. Could she really cut ties with her boyfriend for the sake of her career? But now, it was something that was necessary for her to be able to move on. She had no

intention of continuing their relationship the way it was, and wanted to settle things. If anything, she felt bad about her producer giving her his full support in this manner.

“Donny... I wanted to stay with you and help you, but I can’t anymore. Do your best without me, I won’t ask you to cheer me on anymore.”

Said Belle, as she looked directly at Donny, who upon listening to her resolute tone, said nothing more and silently signed the document that the man in black handed him.

It was a contract that consolidated the man in black’s proposal.

This freed Donny from the debt he had accumulated via gambling, and forced him to stay quiet about Belle’s real identity.

From that day forward, they would both move on with their lives, separately.

“...Sorry.”

Donny said as he left the room, so quietly that he did not know if anyone heard it. Belle silently nodded.



Belle let out a sigh of relief after Donny left the office.

She was relieved that the problem she had ignored for so long had come to an end, but there was also a touch of sadness.

Still, this was not the end, it was in fact a new beginning.

“I am so sorry for the trouble I caused you.”

“I do not mind as long as you pay me back with your work.”

The producer remained composed, even as Belle apologized. He was probably upset, but did not show it.

It was all for the sake of Belle’s, or rather, Agate’s activities as an idol, and Belle decided she there was something she had to do.

“So about the next job...”

Said the producer, but was interrupted by Belle.

“Producer, I want to make a new song.”

“Hou.”

“I’m thinking about writing the lyrics too. No, please let me write them.”

Up until that point, Belle had been proactive when it came to training and business activities, but more passive when it came to fundamentals like the course of her activities as an idol, or what songs she sang. It could be said that she was focused only on overcoming the hurdles right in front of her, and not carving out her own image as an idol.

Up until this point.

“Have you decided what you want to sing?”

Songs that idols sang had a theme.

The original troubadours did not sing just for the sake of it. They would travel to various countries and sing about the beautiful scenery they would see in their travels, and talk about the preciousness of love. People would hear their songs and picture the sights they sang about, allowing them to picture places that they would never see and people they would never meet.

They were not just proud of their voices, spreading beauty through their songs was an important job.

But just as important as this, was the choice of theme.

“Yes, I’ve decided.”

Belle nodded strongly.

After this, Belle canceled her planned live events and suspended her activities as an idol.

She spent the next month training to be a songwriter, and her days struggling to be a creator were beginning, as was her path to becoming a true idol.

CHAPTER 59

LEGEND OF THE PALADIN (9)

Agate's silence continued for a while, until she finally re-emerged.

There were many rumors about her mysterious disappearance, and some nasty gossip as well, but few fans left her.

Her fans were ecstatic when a schedule was posted in a park's notice board, and it listed a solo live event from Agate. There were even rumors that she had retired, so it came completely out of left field. Obviously, Nick was one of said fans, and he spent all night in line to purchase a ticket alongside Willy, a fellow adventurer and fan.

Seeing people line up in the middle of the night waiting for tickets to go on sale was unusual, and even a stray dog that wandered in, fled the scene. Eventually, the sun came up, and Karan passed by on her way to go have breakfast. She was a little shocked to see that Nick spend the night there, but was still concerned, and brought him coffee and told him not to catch a cold. Nick was thankful, but felt awkward when people around him gave him very sharp stares, thinking Karan was his girlfriend.

Still, it was almost over. The tickets would go on sale soon.

"Hey, Nick."

Willy suddenly spoke.

"What, Willy?"

"...There's rumors of guys that make their girlfriends lineup because they can't be bothered, and guys that make their girlfriends work as idols so they can sponge off them, so don't worry."

"Don't just toss my name into the bad idol otaku boyfriend championship like that. And she's not even my girlfriend anyway."

"Sorry sorry, just kidding. By the way, do you know that people are saying that the

legendary paladin that protects the Labyrinth city has appeared?”

Nick had no idea what he was talking about, and twisted his head.”

“...What’s that?”

“Apparently there was a time when the city was much more dangerous. Thefts and muggings were common, and people had to be careful when they walked around, even in broad daylight.”

“Hmm.”

“But then, a legendary S rank adventurer started taking down thieves with bounties on their heads left and right. Even though he or she had a pretty face he’d show up, save people, and leave without even saying his name. That person came to be known as the ‘Lovely Paladin’.”

“Eh...”

“What, aren’t you interested?”

“No, it’s just that it’s so sudden that I don’t know what you’re getting at, and I’m way more interested in Agate’s live event.”

“It’s all related. Remember the casino that was attacked the other day? They say the Lovely Paladin was there and saved Agate!”

“Cough.”

Nick gagged.

“Hn? What’s wrong Nick?”

“Ah, nothing!”

“It doesn’t look like nothing...”

“...A-anyway, isn’t that Lovely Paladin from a long time ago? Isn’t that weird?”

Willy smiled as he nodded.

“I dunno, maybe the legendary paladin lives a long time like a high elf or a dark elf.”

“No way.”

“Well, I don’t think it’s true either, it can’t be the real one. But that person has become pretty popular after saving people. To leave the scene without saying their name and not even bothering to receive the casino and chivalric order’s gratitude.”

“E-eh...”

“Also, like I mentioned, no one even knows if it’s a man or a woman, but Agate says she thinks it’s a woman.”

“Hn? She does?”

“It’s just a rumor. People also say that person’s really beautiful, but no one knows for sure.”

Said Willy with a puzzling tone.

Nick was going to ask more about it, but the place where the tickets would be sold opened.

Staying there all night paid off, and they managed to secure seats in the front row.

Nick felt very relieved as he looked at his ticket. He wondered if Agate had been hurt during the battle, or if witnessing such an intense battle up close had scared her.

Basically, he feared that Agate could have stopped her activities as an idol because of him, but now, he was holding a ticket with her name and date.

Surely she would be as lively as ever, and Nick could not wait for the event.

In the end, Nick’s fears were unfounded, in fact, things were moving in the complete opposite direction.



“Good evening everyone!!! Thank you for coming!!!”

“““Good evening!!!”””

The men in the audience responded with their deep voices. Nick knew he was but one of them, but he felt strangely proud to be here.

No one was more worried about her than him, and even though he was a huge fan of hers, his eyes resembled those of a boyfriend.

“I had some little things to take care of in my private life. There were rumors that I had gotten hurt and retired, but as you can see, I’m better than ever!!!”

“Ooh!”

“I was worried!”

“Keep doing your best!”

Agate waved. The shadow that loomed over her in the casino was gone, and she was so full of energy that she looked as though she would burst.

“Thank you! But it’s true that I got roped into some trouble... One wrong move and I could’ve died.”

Everyone in the venue started murmuring, worried about Agate.

“But I was saved by a girl, and thanks to her, I am alive and well.”

Her voice was soft and mellow, and had a different kind of charm than her usual stoic aura.

“She was such a noble person, just like the paladin heard about in legends. It made me want to help and encourage people like that too... That’s why I’m going to sing a song extolling those virtues, not as an idol, but as a troubadour. A new song of course!”

The sudden announcement of a brand new song piqued the audience’s excitement, but Nick looked at Willy before raising his voice in support.

The way he was smiling led Nick to believe that he heard about this new song somewhere. Nick felt a mixture of surprise and jealousy, but what Agate said next would surprise him even more.

“This song includes my heartfelt thank you! “The lovely paladin!”



Belle took a break from her regular activities after breaking up with Donny.

She did not state publicly why she canceled her upcoming live events, which she knew very well would arouse suspicion. People would wonder if she got seriously hurt in the casino, or why she was even there to begin with. She was ready for scandalous speculation to start being fired at her.

She concentrated fully on songwriting, musical composition, and training.

The finished song was wonderful, and completely devoid of noise, but its quality was what sparked debated in the office.

The problem was more than just the quality, but also its theme and direction.

Singing ‘this’ carried a lot of responsibility for troubadours. You could even call it duty. It was very risky for an idol.

It was an epic.

Basically, a glorification of a specific person. For idols, who were supposed to convey their love to thousands of fans, this was close to being considered a taboo, even if she was originally a troubadour.

Some said she should stop, some said the opposite. Many meetings were held, and people with contrasting views debated, but in the end, the president had the final word.

“I think it’s fine, it’s just Yuri.”

And then, the office purposefully started spreading a rumor.

“Apparently there’s a ‘Lovely Paladin’ that protects the citizens of this city from the shadows.”

“And it’s a beautiful woman that can charm anyone.”

“Apparently she saved an idol named Agate.”

These rumors spread among idol otaku, just like the office expected. If a man saved Agate, it would bring about jealousy and envy, so they pushed the idea that it was a woman. As a result, both the new song and the existence of this paladin were well received among idol otaku.

Agate rewrote the song many times until she was satisfied, and picked her phrases very carefully. The first half was about the strength and beauty of the paladin, but the second half was made to encourage and excited people by saying that all those that fight for justice are paladins. The last part in particular struck a chord with adventurers. It was a song that made people want to be respected by Agate in the same way she respected the paladin.

“This type of song is good too, isn’t it?”

“I’m full of energy.”

“Respect.”

“Put your manuscript up for auction. I’ll pay whatever it takes.”

“Let’s go take down bad guys!”

Was the sort of reception it received from idol otaku.

This live event was her biggest success to date, and idol otaku went home more satisfied than ever before.

Except for Nick.

“Why... Why...”

Nick went back to his inn filled with grief, and sat down holding his knees.

“It’s fine isn’t it? She was complimenting you.”

“Yes yes. Having a troubadour sing about your deeds is an honor for an adventurer.”

Karan and Bonds, worried, shrugged.

“It was more about Tianna...! It’s not like I’m not happy but... It’s complicated...!”

“Well, yeah, Tianna is cool.”

“That is true.”

Both agreed, and Nick sunk his face even deeper.

“Why!?”

Nick’s anguish could not reach Agate, because the Lovely Paladin’s true identity was a secret.

Today, Agate encouraged and fascinated another person, somewhere.



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