**Chapter 102: The Day Before the Storm (4)**

This guy suddenly says something funny.

“Wouldn't you like to take down an outlaw clan, by any chance?”

This was her way of admitting that she had deadly information, and that she might give it to me.

“Hey. You asshole!”

Given the seizure of Gurmimi, who was locked up with her, and Reichem's origins, this was likely information about Clan Blues, a small to medium-sized clan of criminals whose main focus is slave trading and all sorts of dirty, nasty things.

‘It's also where Grumpy was enslaved.’

Two contribution points for one wanted outlaw.

With a clan of this size, there must be at least a dozen of them, and there's a reward for catching the bad guys.

It makes my mouth water but I must not be too greedy since it could be a trap, or she could be using the information against me.

The nervousness in her eyes makes it seem pointless, but it never hurts to be cautious.

“Couldn't you have just called those guards, and why did you single me out to make the offer?”

“If I simply want to blow the whistle and reduce my sentence, I may do so. But I want to give you this information.”

We talked a bit more, and I figured her out.

She's afraid that one day, when her sentence is up and she gets out, I'm going to retaliate.

So she's handing over information that could be used by me, hoping to stay out of my sight rather than get a reduced sentence.

To be honest, I hadn't been paying attention since the commission was completed, but this is a different story.

“You're not afraid of the clan's retaliation? Are you out of your mind?!”

“Ugh. Do you really think the clan can survive in this Labyrinth City for ten years? It’s a good place to make a quick buck, but it’s not a place to stay for ten years.”

“That's-”

Gurmimi and Reichem argued, but Gurmimi couldn't easily refute Reichem's words.

Even Gurmimi, who had risen to a position of leadership, was not convinced that the group would survive for another decade.

“Forget about that outlaw clan,” she says, ”you'd be better off lining up somewhere else.”

Reichem looked at me as she said that.

Apparently, to her, I was that 'line'.

“Before you say anything, I need you to promise me one thing.”

“Promise?”

“It's not much to ask, but when I get out of this prison one day⋯don't trample on me.”

She felt like a convict who had been in prison for 10 years, reformed and improved herself, and was begging for leniency because I would make her life hard when she got out.

There was no reason not to take advantage of the situation when the other person was making her own case.

“I'll judge that after hearing your story.”

Reichem hesitated for a moment before speaking, realizing the implications of my words.

“Clan Blues is a clan whose main business is slave trading. But things haven't been going so well lately.”

Slave trading, and it's not going well.

How does one make a living in a world where the fist is closer than the law?

“That’s why the hobgoblin shaman’s staff was used to mass-produce idiot slaves.”

Though risky, there were plenty of ways to create slaves without going through the legal process.

I glanced at Gurmimi beside me and her fluttering eyes quickly averted my gaze.

The reaction was on point, which means Reichem's confession was true.

“But since we were caught and the staff was taken away soon after, it must be quite difficult for the higher-ups…as the leader, Vesta.”

Yeah, her business is on the rocks, and she must be pretty nervous.

“Also, are you aware that the Academy is having a graduation ceremony soon?”

“Of course.”

I know. I even got the suit tailored to wear yesterday but why did she go from talking about slaves to the Academy?

“⋯Wait. Are you sure?”

“Yes.”

Reichem was silent for a moment, then spoke.

“The Blues Clan might attack on the day of the Academy's graduation.”

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The word ‘Academy’ must have a curse attached to it.

What the hell, getting into so many damn incidents.

“⋯Really, that's what she said?”

“Yes.”

“Huh⋯ Crazy, demented assholes⋯”

When I shared the information I'd gleaned from Reichem, the guard platoon commander scratched her head and looked shocked.

If it was a secret from some outlaw clan, I'd keep it to myself, but this was too dangerous for me to have in my possession.

It was information that directly related to Ellie's safety at the graduation ceremony and could cost the lives of the students.

“Are they out of their mind? Outlaws are targeting Academy students, and at graduation? That's just suicide.”

The Academy is one of the most powerful forces in Labyrinth City. It wasn't a place that a mere outlaw clan could look up to.

“From what I've heard, things are pretty bad over there, too. If they succeed, they'll make a fortune, if they fail, they'll be annihilated.”

“⋯Maybe⋯”

The guard platoon leader muttered quietly.

Might, which means they might not.

Aside from the bravado, Reichem's information was highly subjective.

She seemed to be 100% sure that she was right, but she didn't know how it would look to others.

“Okay, well, I guess I'd better contact the Academy just in case.”

“I guess we should.”

It was always better to be prepared for anything, considering the possible damage.

The guard platoon leader ordered the guards to retrieve the communications artifact.

I've given them the information, so they can communicate with the Academy on their own.

“You've done a great job. What kind of magic did you use?”

“Magic, that's a big word.”

“No! If those guys really do come on the day of the Academy Graduation Ceremony…you’ve really done something big.”

The platoon leader of the guard applauded my efforts and gave me a sideways glance.

It was a suspicious situation, one that might at first glance seem like I was in league with an outlaw group, but this guard platoon leader knew I was working at Diana's inn.

“Even if you say that, I won’t even get a single beer.”

 “Haha, it's us who owe you one, here's your contribution papers.”

“Oh⋯!”

The platoon leader handed me the one-point contribution paper.

I thought I would at most get a few coins, but I never thought I would get contribution points.

I chatted with the guard platoon leader for a bit and left the guardhouse.

There was one month left until the next labyrinth trip so I decided to devote myself to training in the meantime.

Naturally, I turned to the Explorers' Union.

The time for training has arrived.

⋯Although I have a few things to do before then.

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Balkan came to the Explorers' Union, which was bustling as usual.

“Wow. Did you see the holy lady from earlier?”

“Uh. She smiled so fucking benevolently, I almost thought it was the same woman, just a different race.”

“I can't believe she has to stay a virgin for the rest of her life with that face. If it were me, I'd kill myself.”

“I wonder if Mother Earth Order would approve of anal sex?”

“Ugh. You crazy assholes. Will you shut the fuck up? You guys are going to get arrested for heresy.”

‘Did Serif come and go?’

The explorers were talking excitedly to each other about Serif.

‘Speaking of which, I should go to the temple.’

The keyword “temple” reminded me that I needed to pay Serif for the damage.

I was going to get all my errands done today.

I went to the floor for junior explorers and stood in line to register the contribution papers I had received so far.

The teller greeted Balkan with a friendly demeanor.

“What brings you here?” he asked.

“I'm here to settle my contribution papers.”

“Oh, I see!”

The tired employee's complexion brightened at Balkan’s words.

Those who brought contributions were different from the low-level explorers who were just complaining and swearing, the common slobs.

This is because the contribution points were collected by those who are not just undeveloped explorers who live hand to mouth, but rather those who are serious about developing the labyrinth and becoming respectable mid-level explorers.

 At the very least, it meant he was a serious explorer.

'Besides, this guy⋯'

The teller's eyes fell on Balkan's helmet.

A muscular big man in a helmet.

A man who had been mentioned in recent months by several explorers, not to mention the staff of the Explorers' Union.

‘Of course. He is the leader’s disciple.’

 “You can give me the papers!”

At the teller's friendly response, Balkan pulled the papers from his arms and handed them to the man.

Two cards worth 5 points each, two cards worth 2 points each and one card worth 1 point.

“15 contribution points, 15 in total.”

The teller, who had raised his voice for a moment, fell silent again.

The tellers next to him looked at him and the common emotion was surprise.

Of course, a contribution score of 15 was no surprise.

There were plenty of people in the entire population of Explorers who were scrambling for promotions.

However, if a sentence is added before this, the story becomes a little different.

 ‘In less than half a year as an Explorer, he grew to the point where he accumulated 15 contribution points⋯?’

This kind of growth was rare.

“That's insane talent. Does this mean the Alliance Leader didn't take him on as a disciple for nothing? What kind of blessing did he get?”

“If he's already at 15 points, he'll be an intermediate explorer within the year, right?”

“You never know. There are a lot of rookies who start out shining and lose. I heard that Lizard Girl or something quit being an explorer not long ago.”

“But I still have two five-point contribution papers.”

“Oh, yeah. Is that guy still with the party?”

“Who did you run into in the labyrinth the other day, the same party as that crazy breastfeeding bitch?”

“Ugh. Let's go.”

He's talented after all. No, he'll get over it. Should I recruit him to the party?

Several of the Union’s resident explorers have tailored their own plans for Balkan.

“I'm sorry⋯”

“No, no. It’s nothing to apologize for.”

Balkan gestured toward the bowing staff.

‘As much as they care about me, I care about them.’

I don't plan to stay a low-level explorer forever. Nor will I be content to be a mid-level explorer.

I need to look further and higher.

It definitely helps to grow and get more experience, meet more parties, and make more connections.

The more interested they are in me, the faster and more opportunities will come my way.

Of course, some people will be jealous and malicious, like Galen, but I just have to axe them from the front.

While Balkan was thinking this, the teller was processing the contribution papers Balkan handed him and noticed a familiar pattern.

“City, temple issued⋯?”

The teller mumbled, then covered his mouth in disbelief.

One of the places that had issued Balkan's contribution papers was the Mother Earth Order.

The explorers looked at Balkan in disbelief.

“The temple issues contribution papers? I've never heard of that before.”

“Perhaps it's because of your experience, though I've only heard of them issuing one a few years ago.”

Although Balkan was oblivious to the attention of Serif, the temple was an object of love and hate among ordinary explorers.

The presence of priests, blessings, and curse checks made them indispensable⋯ but they knew their value only too well, especially the skyrocketing prices for removing curses.

It's rare for a temple that knows their value to offer a five-point contribution document, even less so for lower-level explorers.

‘What, exactly, did he do for the temple?’

But no matter how much they thought about it, there was no way they could infer why Balkan was rewarded contribution points by the temple.

“Is it over now?”

“Ah, yes, your contributions have been settled, and you have 15 points left for the promotion to Intermediate Explorer.”

The clerk bowed his head in acknowledgment.

With his business done, Balkan stepped into the elevator reserved for the Union Leader with a fluid, natural movement.

“This is so different from when I was a low-level explorer.”

“⋯You're still a low-level explorer. You'll soon realize the barriers of reality after the tenth floor.”

“Arthur. Why are you comparing yourself with a guy who even caught a mutant Minotaur?”

As they watched and discussed the elevator ride from the lobby to the top floor, the explorers felt an odd sense of desolation.

The emotions that filled the silent room were envy, jealousy, and⋯

“⋯Why don't we try to recruit him on our next trip to the Labyrinth?”

It was desire.

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The elevator doors opened, and the view of Idelbert's private training facility came into view.

'Well, I guess I'll be sharing it now.’

With that thought in mind, I walked toward the training room where Idelbert would be training as usual.

“The fifth floor⋯ and the twentieth floor⋯ show signs of being unsealed.”

“I heard that the 5th floor was taken care of by my disciple…The 20th floor…”

 “⋯Wait. Disciple? You don't mean Mr. Balkan-”

It was usually quiet until I arrived, but today, another voice could be heard from inside the training room.

‘⋯Serif?’

Only one person had ever called me Mr. Balkan.

‘Should I open the door or not?’

I hesitated, then knocked.

 “Who is it?”

I knocked on the training room door and immediately heard Idelbert's cold voice.

Suddenly, a chill ran down my spine.

Her tone was similar to the one she usually used to speak to me, but strangely more edgy.

“It’s me, Master. May I enter?”

“Hmm. Yes. Come in.”

Idelbert's voice softened at the identification.

As I opened the door, I saw two figures, a black cat, and a pure white cat.

The black cat had no ears and a black tail, while the white cat had ears and a tail.

Idelbert Adeline, a black cat with a cool demeanor and a large, sturdy body.

Serif Adeline, a white cat with a body that is more worthy of the title of saintly slut than saint.

The female cat sisters were different in many ways, from their colors to their bodies to their moods.

“Ahhhh! Bal, Balkan?!”

Serif's face, which had been expressionless until just before the door opened, suddenly broke into a smile.

“Uh, what a coincidence!”

Immediately afterward, a small crack appeared in her smile as she came closer to me.

A sharp nose seemed to detect a vague, fuzzy odor wafting through the air.

“⋯Breast milk? No, coffee, huh?”

“Ugh.”

 A chuckle from behind her made Serif turn her head.

Idelbert smirked bewitchingly through narrowed eyes and muttered.

“Now you've really done everything but mate.”