**Chapter 177: Safe? Zone (6)**

The night before.

Somewhere in the back alleys of the 15th floor, Collie shouted loudly, veins bulging on her forehead.

“It’s all because of that bastard kid and that f\*ingwhemonger!”

Even now, alive by a miracle of miracles, she could not forget the memory of that day.

It was a disaster that struck while she was doing her usual work—capturing men to rape, enslave, and sell.

A lactating female and a man with a thick, monstrous body.

Because of those two bastards, they lost two prime male slave candidates that the party had painstakingly worked to capture. Furthermore...

“Even Perkins lost, and the old hag too⋯”

Even the strongest of the clan’s warriors had fallen.

Bio, the leader of the outlaw clan *Back Alley Enforcers*, furrowed her brows as she listened to Collie’s report.

“Those bastards. Were they strong?”

“⋯From what I saw, they were at least on the level of skilled intermediate explorers. Especially that man—he even pushed Perkins into a quick defeat.”

“Click.”

Bio clicked her tongue and held her throbbing head.

Lately, nothing was going right.

More specifically, ever since that damn Explorer Union Master Idelbert set up shop on the 15th floor, the back alleys that had been peaceful were being ruined one by one.

Those who crossed the line, dealing drugs and other dangerous goods, were the first to lose their heads.

Places with unavoidable demand, like illegal artifact markets, brothels, and slave trades, were half-destroyed.

The *Back Alley Enforcers* also suffered immense damage during that process and were now putting everything into recovery, but⋯ it wasn’t easy.

They had overextended to revitalize their main business, slave trading, and the consequences had hit them full force.

The clan’s situation was spiraling into the worst-case scenario and the wrinkles on Bio’s forehead deepened.

“And you’re saying they all died?”

“Yes, yes. I escaped amidst the chaos and didn’t see much, but most of them were eaten by the sandworm.”

“Phew⋯”

Even their targets for revenge had mostly been eaten. A frustratingly ambiguous situation.

As Bio sighed deeply,

“Ughyak!”

“Kyah!”

“Wh-where is Mr. Balkan? What is this place?! It’s so creepy!”

A familiar voice fell from the air.

It was the Balkan party and Belle.

Collie pointed at the cow beastwoman Jubeel, who was staring blankly around.

“T-That woman! That woman and her group, Bio!”

“Huh?”

“Oh? You’re that⋯”

Jubeel’s eyes darted around as she quickly grasped the situation.

‘A random idiot, a woman who looks like the boss of this random idiot, and⋯ a bunch of small fry scattered around.’

Their abilities seemed evenly matched.

If they fought, it might be possible to hold their own, but this was clearly enemy territory.

There were too many uncertainties.

They were like a hero’s party dropped into a demon king’s castle, trying to return safely to the village.

She had a rough idea of what to do.

She didn’t know where Balkan was, but knowing him, he’d handle things well.

“Everyone!!!”

As the temporary party leader, Jubeel shouted loudly.

“Retreat!!!”

The wind rushed fiercely through the gaps in the eye holes of my helmet.

Clatter, clatter!

I’d never ridden a horse before, but I was surprisingly able to maintain my balance naturally.

Was it because I was riding on the back of a female?

Wait, could I even refer to a centaur as female? I mean, it did have a certain anatomy...

As these idle thoughts ran through my mind while the scenery rapidly changed, a grand structure in the distance came into view.

The fountain built every five floors.

The fountains on the 5th and 10th floors were bizarrely large structures for being inside a labyrinth, but this grand fountain was on an entirely different scale.

A towering fountain the height of a six-story building.

The healing water cascading from its summit was like a waterfall.

The water, falling from such a height and colliding with the calm surface below, created a light mist that seemed to radiate an otherworldly aura.

And yet, my eyes kept drifting to it.

‘You’ll know it’s different from the other fountains at first glance,’ they had said.

I finally understood what Deputy Guildmaster Yonel Freya had meant.

For reasons unknown, the Grand Fountain was distinct from the others.

Clatter! Clatter!

Whirr–

Moreover, as we approached the grand fountain, the Blessing of Radiance, now a part of my strength, began to hum faintly.

That strange vibration made my heart pound.

Trying to calm myself, I took a deep breath and observed the surroundings. Near the fountain, I heard murmuring voices.

“Ah! The Holy Grand Fountain!”

A priest of the Earth Mother cult, with a benevolent face, was weeping bitterly at the sight of the healing water turning milky white.

“Those scars⋯ Could it be?”

“⋯No way. It can’t be. Lately, back alleys have been getting cleaned up one by one. There’s no way they’re still alive–”

“If it’s true⋯ Tch. How unlucky.”

Some explorers were glancing warily at someone.

My gaze naturally followed theirs.

Bubble, bubble, bubble–

Beneath the fountain, where the healing water cascaded like a waterfall,

Jubeel and her party were lying submerged.

The Fusilini party was nowhere to be seen.

I lightly slapped the centaur’s rump.

“That’s enough. Thank you.”

“Puhihihihing!”

Seemingly pleased, she reared up and performed a trick. I ignored her and approached the fountain.

I didn’t enter the fountain. Meeting [it] required more caution.

“Jubeel!”

“Bubble– Pffft, ughhh.”

As I approached Jubeel, who had been submerged in the healing water, she weakly sat up, her face pale.

My gaze naturally drifted to her chest.

From the soaked edges of her shirt, far more milk than usual was leaking out.

“Oh, Balkan. Is that you? I’m glad you’re safe.”

“What’s going on? Why are your party members all lying around like that?”

“They’re resting. Ugh, so much happened. I’m really exhausted.”

Splash!

Muttering that, Jubeel flopped back into the Grand Fountain.

I frowned as I watched her.

Among the smell of milk, a faint metallic scent of blood reached my nose.

“Jubeel.”

“⋯What?”

“Turn around.”

“No.”

“Jubeel.”

“⋯⋯Tch.”

With a hardened expression, Jubeel clicked her tongue and turned her back.

I clenched my fist as I looked at her back.

A sword scar.

A deep wound running from her left shoulder to her right hip, with green magic seeping out as crimson blood dripped down.

“Damn it. Bleeding again. Is it my period? Does this healing water even work? Hahaha!”

Jubeel laughed loudly despite her pale complexion.

“Who did this?”

I suppressed my trembling fist and asked in a calm voice.

“Which bastard turned my party member into this mess?”

“⋯⋯”

Thunk.

Jubeel gave a faint smile at my enraged face, then collapsed into the healing water and closed her eyes.

“⋯She must be exhausted. I’ll explain.”

It was Rubia, lying next to Jubeel, who spoke up.

Now that I looked closely, Rubia’s injuries were even worse than Jubeel’s.

Her heavy armor dress was torn in several places, and her great shield bore the marks of battle. Yet, as a natural-born tank, Rubia had endured better than the frailer Jubeel.

From Rubia, I learned the details of what had happened.

After falling into the lair of the scoundrels they had swindled at the 13th floor, the party was thrust into a dire combat situation.

While my party, including Hitolis and Lammel, managed to escape intact, the depleted Fusilini party was recaptured by those villains.

“And Belle, too?”

“Yes. That child didn’t seem to have any intention of fighting from the beginning.”

—Human, can’t I eat them…?

—Absolutely not.

—Ugh… I understand. Humans are not for eating.

A promise I had made with Belle suddenly came to mind.

Was it possible that she had meekly allowed herself to be captured simply because I told her not to eat humans?

“Their location?”

“⋯You mustn’t go alone. Wait until we recover—”

“No. You won’t recover.”

A sudden voice interrupted, making Rubia and I turn our heads at the same time.

A woman with black hair and an eyepatch, Amel Drexia, sat atop the centaur’s back, puffing on a cigarette. She pointed at Jubeel and Rubia.

“That green magic in your wounds. That’s black magic. Specifically, a type of extreme poison magic from the black magic school. It’s designed to slowly kill its target.”

“You recognize this?”

“Yeah. Not in-depth, but I know enough.”

Amel Drexia shrugged and took another puff of her cigarette in response to my question.

“It’s a pain to deal with since it torments the victim until they die. Unless the caster dispels it, their mana depletes, or the caster is killed, there’s no other way to remove it. Well, unless you’ve got a high-tier mage or priest capable of breaking through to the lower floors.”

Such individuals were, of course, rare. Which meant—

“You won’t last long after stepping out of that healing water.”

Both Jubeel and Rubia couldn’t leave the fountain until the extreme poison magic was undone.

“⋯⋯”

“Rubia.”

I addressed Rubia again, whose face was set in a grim expression of regret.

“The location. Tell me.”

Faced with my serious tone, Rubia reluctantly described the route they had escaped from.

A trail of small blood droplets stretched from the fountain to the path ahead.

I bent down and wiped one of the droplets with my hand. The crimson blood smeared and spread across my fingers.

It was an unpleasant sensation but the solution was simple.

Trash that overreaches itself only understands one thing: fists.

“Ploop. Ploop.”

“Where are you going?”

As I began following the blood trail, the centaur and Drexia trailed behind me. The rat beastman, sensing the gravity of the situation, had already fled.

“You’re coming with me?”

“Oh, so you’ve dropped the formalities now?”

“Sorry, but I’m not in the mood.”

“⋯Well, that’s fine. Considering what happened to your party, it’s understandable. Actually, I prefer it this way.”

*Slap! Slap!*

Amel Drexia smacked the centaur’s thigh as she spoke.

“Hop on. I’ll help you.”

“Why?”

“⋯One of my overly talented colleagues in necromancy is looking for a rather… uh… specific resource from a man. Just a drop.”

“You use that kind of thing for necromancy?”

“It’s for a particularly unique type of necromancy.”

After brief deliberation, I climbed onto the centaur’s back again.

It wasn’t a deal I would lose anything on.

“Doo, doo-doo, dee-dee-da…”

The slime Ain, Aldente, sadly looked down at Fusilini, who was lying battered and bleeding from club strikes.

She had failed to protect them.

These precious companions who had risked their lives to save her—she hadn’t been able to protect them.

“Doo… Daaah…”

“Ugh, ugh…”

The rest of the party was no different.

Their skin bore slave numbers, and they were locked in iron cages, trembling like merchandise.

“Ah, this is it. This is what I live for.”

“See? Fortune favors the diligent.”

“We thought it was all for nothing, but at least we got some spoils. Hah, bastards.”

Collie gazed at the caged prisoners with a satisfied smile.

Then he looked up at the figure above—someone else who was also looking down on them with a contented face.

‘As expected of the clan leader. To easily dispatch a master of swordsmanship like that…’

[Back Alley's Turf] wasn’t a large clan, but it was a mid-tier criminal clan that had long established itself in Eden.

Though the wretched head of the Explorer’s Guild had inflicted near-catastrophic damage on them, this decline would only be temporary.

The clan would rise stronger after enduring this large wound.

“Long live the clan leader! Long live Lord Bio!”

Collie shouted naturally. Other clan members turned to look at her.

“Long live the clan leader! Long live Lord Bio!”

They echoed her cheer.

The cries grew louder, spreading like wildfire and inspiring the others to join in.

“Long live the clan leader! Long live Lord Bio!”

On the third cheer, applause and shouts erupted.

Collie, her face contorted with mania, clapped her hands and looked up at the clan leader once more.

“⋯Huh?”

The figure of the clan leader.

No, the world itself.

The world had turned upside down.

The inverted, spinning view was filled with light.

The dazzling light reflected off an unusually massive axe blade.

*Splatter!*

The sensation of her neck being severed and her spine snapping, was followed by a ringing sound in her ears.

Collie’s severed head hit the ground and was crushed.

The other clan members of [Back Alley’s Turf] turned their eyes to the wooden wall, which the centaur had burst through.

More specifically, at the man perched atop the centaur, resting a massive axe on his shoulder.

*Squelch!*

As the axe-wielding man swung his weapon, Collie’s blood splattered in every direction.

The sound that marked the end of Collie’s life wasn’t one of joy and applause but rather the cold thud of flesh being cleaved and a man’s chilling voice.

Swallowing hard, the clan members nervously grabbed their weapons. The man, surveying them with an icy gaze, muttered in a voice dripping with fury and killing intent.

“Who’s proficient in extreme poison magic? Come here.”

Extreme poison magic. There was only one person in the clan capable of wielding such magic.

Instinctively, the members’ eyes turned toward their clan leader.

“Haha.”

Balkan, too, raised his head to look at her with a cold smile.

“It’s you, isn’t it?”

The short sentence was brimming with wrath and murderous intent.