**Chapter 65: Catch him (3)**

"Come to think of it, Balkan doesn't know what happened back then."

Joy Hog filled me in on the issue.

“I received a request from Arpo, one of the academy professors and a labyrinth ecologist. To be exact, it was through the assistant who acted on behalf of Master Arpo.”

When I had fallen into the fifth-floor transference trap, the Joey Hog Party had been tasked by Professor Arpo's assistant to get the staff of the shaman Hobgoblin.

"Quite a few explorers had tried and failed before we did. There are a lot of hobgoblins in the village on the fifth floor."

‘I remember finding a map in the Hobgoblin Village on the fifth floor that said, 'Objective: Shaman Hobgoblin Staff!’’

Perhaps the map was a remnant of the explorers who were commissioned before Joy Hog's party.

"Besides, hobgoblin shaman staff is the best and most exploitable staff you can get in the upper levels of the Labyrinth."

I know the power of the Hobgoblin Staff intuitively.

Ugh, my head twitches with a spinal cord reflex and I remember a memory I shouldn't have.

Alas, memories of the terrible Hobgoblins! Thou horrible thing that turns men into cunt-hungry sperm-sack slaves!

"Even without that coveted ⋯ no, nefarious ⋯ enchantment, the staff itself is quite magically efficient."

"The Explorers' Alliance that arranged the commission accepted it, trusting that a professor or something wouldn't use it for 'such' purposes, so we handed the staff over to the assistant and took the commission."

"Well, isn't that where it ends?"

You've gotten what you were asked to get, you've handed it over to the assistant who's representing the professor, you've gotten paid, and that's it, right?

What more is there to say?

Jubeel and Joy Hog nodded at my words.

"That's right. It should have ended there."

"However, the teaching assistant was attacked by outlaws and disappeared."

Hmm.

I straightened my posture. This was going to be a pretty serious story.

Lammel looked alarmed.

"Attacked? Those crazy outlaws attacked an Academy professor's assistant?"

"I don't believe it either, but that's what the guards say. The carriage the assistant was returning in was abandoned in an alleyway near the noble district. It was smashed to pieces."

"Huh."

The Labyrinth City of Valerus has a complex power structure, and the Academy is one of the largest factions in the sprawling city.

The professors of the academy, though there are variations, are usually of high rank.

A lowly explorer or outlaw would not be allowed to meet them even if they wanted to.

Such a professor's research slaves⋯ No, assistants and students, are not to be messed with.

If you mess with them, you'll be going against their master⋯ the professor.

But these crazy outlaw bastards didn't just mess with her, they got rid of her.

"Why did they do that?"

"I don't know why but they didn't find the Hobgoblin staff in the wrecked carriage, either. I'm guessing the outlaws stole it."

Hitolis tilted her head at Joy Hog's reply.

"I've heard from a priest I know that there's been an increase in the number of men with pink tattoos and disfigured faces like they've been attacked by monsters around the Outlaw District lately. Some have even gone missing. I wonder why."

"That's right, that theory."

Jubeel nodded, understanding the situation.

"Outlaw bastards hijacked the Hobgoblin staff and are using it on the men for their own pleasure, those lucky bastards. Pfft-!"

Joey Hogg, who'd just given Jubeel a honey balm, wringed her hands and looked at us.

"Well, this isn't really our problem. We've only fulfilled a request from the Explorers' Alliance, and what happened afterward is out of our hands."

Exactly. The job ended when you collected the money and parted ways with the assistant.

There's no reason for an explorer to protect an assistant, unless the assignment involves stopping an outlaw raid.

Common sense dictates that what happens in the Labyrinth is handled by the explorers, and what happens on the ground is handled by the guards.

However, stating something so obvious to everyone means that⋯.

"Something's happened again, the commission has fallen through, right?"

"Bingo."

In response to my answer, Joy Hog smirked and pulled out two scrolls.

The scene was eerily familiar. They were the ones Joy Hog had gotten from the guard yesterday.

-Chirp.

The scrolls unfolded to reveal a map and two montages.

The map was a map with a location tracking function, like the one held by the teaching assistants when we received the Academy request, and the montage was...

"A map of the two most likely suspects in this case and their locations."

The location on the map was the second floor of the Labyrinth. This can only mean one thing.

‘An outlaw has fled into the Labyrinth.’

Anything with a long tail will get caught.

Either they’re waiting for things to blow over, hoping the guards won’t catch up with them, or they have another purpose for entering the Labyrinth.

"The Guards and Professor Arpo gave us the job to capture the outlaws and bring back the staff. The Guards are paying us five contribution points and Professor Arpo is paying us one gold coin."

One gold coin. That's quite tempting.

The Academy pays so well, normally I'd have to bow down and beg for a favor.

"They're giving five contribution points for capturing two outlaws?"

But the other party members were more interested in the contribution points than the gold coins.

"What are contribution points, anyway?"

I asked Lammel, the only intelligent one in the group, and she immediately looked alarmed.

"Balkan. You have no common sense⋯ hmmm. It's nothing, just listen without putting your hand on the axe."

Lammel explained the contribution points.

"It's a score that must be raised in order to move up to a higher level explorer. No matter how good you are, if your contribution is low, you won't even be able to move up to a mid-level explorer."

I nodded as she explained that every time I accepted a task that benefited the Labyrinth City, or a sudden summons, my contribution would increase.

‘I guess I'll have to do it at some point.’

"She's the reason they're giving contribution points."

Joy Hog pointed to the montage to his right. A female rabbit, with eyes so sinister you'd think she was in heat.

"Gurmimi, an executive of the outlaw Clan Blues. She's a rape socialist. She's fucked a hundred people, men and women alike. The record is years old, but the highest floor she's ever reached is the tenth floor."

‘Blues?’

A medium-sized outlaw clan that Grumpy used to slave for, said to do all sorts of dirty work.

"So they'd turn men into idiots and sell them as sex slaves with the staff of the shaman Hobgoblin."

"That's the most likely explanation."

"But who is this woman?"

Hitolis pointed to the opposite montage.

It was an ordinary woman. A featureless woman who looked like there could be hundreds of them on the street.

"The guards had no information on this one. But from what we've heard from eyewitnesses to the rape, this woman was carrying a staff."

Hmm.

I watched the montage in silence.

"What do you guys think of this assignment? I won't take it if you guys don't like it."

Joy Hog asked with a mischievous look on her face, the look of someone who knows the outcome.

This was a party of ambitious people.

To move on to higher and higher stages, they need high contributions, and if they can make money along with the contributions, so even better.

"If I don't accept these conditions, I'll quit being an explorer."

Jubeel’s words were met with nods from the rest of the party.

And with that our next quest was decided.

‘Capture the Outlaws. And retrieve the staff of the shaman hobgoblin.’

It sounds simple enough, but it won't be easy.

'Tricky business in such a vast labyrinth⋯'

Perhaps the difference between success and failure would depend on how deep these guys descended.

"And just in case they go below the eighth floor, another party has been requested, a party that's very close to being promoted to Intermediate Explorers. I hope you're all aware of that."

I didn't pay much attention, but I was aware of the situation.

We chatted for a while, and then we left.

“Accept customers!! Diana!”

As we were closing for the evening, Zernier burst into the inn.

-Kaaaaaah!

With a helm that emitted a brilliant blue light and an axe in hand.

"⋯Be careful what you wish for. I've just finished fixing the door."

"I don't mind. If I break it, I'll fix it again, with better wood."

"I don't need it."

Diana’s eyes traveled to Zirnier’s hand.

"⋯⋯⋯⋯What's with this helmet and the axe?"

"Oh. This?"

Zirnier exchanged a look with Diana for a moment, then gestured to Balkan, who was clearing a table in the corner.

"Balkan, here I come! I thought you were going to pour me drinks!"

"Ah, you're here, but we're closing in five minutes, aren't we, Ms. Diana?"

Diana scratched her head."⋯How do these two talk so naturally⋯?”

She had felt something was off when Balkan first came to her wearing Zirnier’s helm, but that had to have been a coincidence.

"You can drink one bottle in five minutes, and then two."

"And then it really rots your liver."

"Don't disrespect the liver of a half-dwarf, hiccup."

"You've had a bottle already, I'm pretty tense."

"A bottle when I wake up, five when I work, one when I leave, and that's the life of a dwarf. Well, half, but never mind that. Put on the helmet I got you. I made it just a little wider than your face shape."

‘⋯⋯Balkan face shape? How does Zirnier have that⋯?’

Diana's eyes filled with confusion.

Whether she realized it or not, Zernier continued nonchalantly.

"I'm going to borrow a room for a while, Diana, just in case, but if it doesn't work out, we'll have to go back to the drawing board."

While Diana fumbled and panicked at the suddenness of the situation, Zernier dragged Balkan up to the second floor.

-Boom!

The door slammed shut as Diana quickly followed them upstairs.

"No, are we doing this again? The opening is perfect now, and the view is clear enough."

"We need to accumulate data whenever we get the chance, we might need to make a new helmet later."

The conversation was wholesome on the surface, but it was accompanied by sounds that were unnerving to Diana’s ears.

The sound of something being furiously groped, stroked, fondled, and spanked.

After a few moments, they emerged from the room.

"Diana, how do you like my new helmet?"

Balkan asked, touching the helmet on his head.

His eyes were slightly more visible than before, perhaps because the eye sockets were cut ever so slightly wider.

His pupils were pitch-black, and they held nothing but Diana.

"Ahhh. Yes. It's nice. It suits you."

"It is, isn't it? Hm. I'm glad."

⋯What was he glad for, that she thought it looked good?

Diana felt her heart loosen momentarily at Balkan's casual comment, but she quickly tried to regain her composure.

She smiled softly at Balkan, then turned to look at Zernier, who followed him out the door.

Zirnier made eye contact with Diana and quickly hid her hands behind her back.

"Why, why are you looking at me like that?"

"⋯⋯"

Diana was well aware that Zirnier Besil was a machine, a woman with no interest in the opposite sex.

But the hands she had just seen were⋯⋯⋯

They were not the cold hands of iron and machinery, but red and ripe as if they had felt human heat.

Diana answered her silently and expressionlessly while she thought quietly in her mind.

‘Too many vixens are interested in Balkan these days.’

\*\*\*

Two days later, the portal to the Labyrinth opened.