**Chapter 67: Catch Them (5)**

It was early in the morning, and the streets were still deserted, even though it was the day of the Labyrinth.

However, as I got closer to the entrance, I began to see more and more explorers. What a diligent bunch.

‘⋯Paladins? Priests? Why are there so many of them?’

There were about twenty of them, dressed in familiar armor and priests' robes.

Judging by the way they were clustered together, they didn't seem to belong to the explorer's party... ⋯ Ah. There was one familiar face.

[Nate Ellyn LV.40]

A paladin in golden armor.

This female paladin was escorting Serif, a senior priest.

‘I don't see Serif, though.’

"You're here, Balkan. But why are you steaming so much? Are you excited? Don't tell me you just did it with the innkeeper?"

Jubeel, who had spotted me as I watched them with questioning eyes, spoke up.

I slipped my hand under my helmet. My face was still warm despite the long walk. My whole body was hot, even in the cool early morning air, almost steaming.

I was in a clear state of excitement and there was only one reason for this to happen.

I thought back to the moment I embraced Diana.

I remembered the moment I hugged her, and how her soft breasts were more important to me than the warmth of her heart.

She had been there for me from the beginning.

I had trusted her all this time, but now I felt like I could really show her the real me.

I steeled myself.

⋯If this trip to the Labyrinth ends well.

‘I'll take off my helmet and talk to Diana’s face to face.’

This was an unreasonable relationship.

I'm grateful to Diana for accepting me when I was faceless and my identity was unclear.

I couldn't let her be wasted on a bunch of sex jokes.

"Jubeel. Watch your mouth, or I'll hook you. Physically."

"Mmm, I'm sorry."

Jubeel apologized. Even if she looks like that, she's quick to recognize her mistakes.

I turned my head and saw the other party members.

Our party members are pretty diligent, too. Every single one of them had arrived, even Gregor the Lizardgirl, our porter.

I greeted them briefly, then pointed to the temple people and asked.

"What are all those people doing here?"

"They're here to investigate the Labyrinth this time because the Labyrinth has changed a bit since the Omen."

Hitolis explained, shaking her head as if a bad memory had come back to her.

"In addition to new traps and monsters, there have been a few beasts with an off-putting aura, and I think that's what prompted them to investigate⋯"

The darkness that lurked in the shadows of some of the monsters we saw last time.

‘The leader, Boss Minotaur, even wrapped itself in it before it died.’

The other explorers didn't seem to notice it.

For some reason, only I and the priests of the Temple were highly sensitive to the darkness, feeling an inexplicable repulsion.

Hitolis seemed to assume that the Temple's investigators had come to investigate the mysterious phenomenon.

"I'm only a low-level priest, so I don't know the details, but I heard a rumor from a senior priest that they're spreading their power out to the 12th floor, and the majority of the investigators are mid-level priests and paladins⋯."

Hmm. I made a mental note of that.

Mid-level Priests and Paladins aren't the kind of people we'd worry about at our level.

They have nothing to do with us, we just want to catch two outlaws quickly.

"What, you're here too? Of course you are, you're an explorer."

Just as I was thinking this, someone spoke to me.

It wasn't a friendly voice, but it wasn't hostile either.

I looked in the direction of the voice, and there was Nate Ellyn, arms crossed, glaring at me.

"Paladin of Serif Adeline, Knight of the Golden Guard, Nate Ellyn!"

The priest, Hitolis, bowed his head at breakneck speed.

The other members of the party glanced over at the intense reaction and greeted Nate Ellyn.

However, she didn't seem to pay any attention to the others, only looking at me with a scowl.

Well. What the hell. Would she say hello to me?

"Long time no see."

"Tsk."

For some reason, Nate Ellyn looked at me and clicked her tongue.

‘That Paladin is a bitch.’

Come to think of it, Nate Ellyn had often given me a bad vibe when I was talking to Serif.

‘Maybe she's jealous of me because I've been granted the miracle of a mental barrier by Serif?’

It was a fairly plausible guess.

I recalled the faint sensation on my fingertips.

The miracle of the mental barrier Serif had given me was still protecting me.

"We should be getting ready to go in," I said, "but if there's anything else you need, please tell me."

"Bar, Mr. Balkan!"

Hitolis tugged gently on my arm as I turned to Nate Ellyn.

She looked at me in disbelief, as if I had no business speaking in front of her.

Nate Ellyn snapped his fingers, stopping Hitolis in her tracks. Then, with her gaze still fixed on me, she said.

"It's not what I wanted to say something, but I've come to give you a warning."

"A warning?"

"Yes. A warning."

Warning may seem like a harsh word at first glance, but its essence lies in the heart of caring for the other person.

"Don't die. I'll be in trouble if you die."

I and this Paladin are not close enough to be concerned for each other's lives.

The trembling in her voice suggests she's not genuinely worried about me.

If she was genuinely worried about me, she wouldn't have used the word headache.

I thought, ‘Why would it bother her if I died?’

Suddenly, I remembered Serif, the white cat with the subtly mechanical yet benevolent smile.

The presumed sister of Idelbert, and a senior priestess of the temple.

"I take it Serif is worried about me?"

"Tsk. Yes. I don't know why she'd worry about a man like you, though."

Nate Ellyn nodded, as if she didn't like the idea of Serif worrying about me.

‘I don't really know Serif that well, actually.’

We've only met twice so far.

Although I received a miracle by chance during our last meeting, I wasn't actually that close with Serif.

I thought, "Well, someone in high places is interested in me. Is that a good thing?”

There's nothing to lose by having good connections.

"I have no intention of dying."

The act of entering the Labyrinth is always fraught with danger.

As a result, the explorers who live and breathe the labyrinth are always at risk.

However, I have no intention of simply dying in frustration.

"That's it."

Nate Ellyn heard my answer and turned to walk away, but stopped short.

"⋯⋯"

She looked like she had something to say, but was very reluctant to say it.

"Is there anything else you'd like to say?"

"⋯Huh. When you're done traveling the Labyrinth, stop by the temple later. Serif would like to meet you."

"Hmph!"

Priest Hitolis clamped her mouth shut with a huff, as if that was such a surprise.

"I'll pay her a visit later."

"Okay."

Hearing my answer, Nate Ellyn immediately joined the group of temple investigators, and they headed straight into the labyrinth.

"Balkan!"

"Why the sudden honorifics, Hitolis."

The party's eyes sparkled as they looked at me, including Hitolis.

"I never thought Saint Serif would be worried about you."

"I've heard of her. She's said to be a very religious, pure, and excellent priest⋯”

"Doesn't that just mean she's a virgin?"

"Jubeel⋯ how could you say that about the saint?"

Apparently, Serif's reputation was better than I thought.

"By any chance, Balkan, if I go to the temple with you, can I expect a free blessing?"

Joy Hog asked, drooling.

“They don't do that anymore?”

"They've been out of the business for a while. I always thought it was odd that they suddenly offered free blessings and curses in the first place."

"That's right. The temple is pretty thorough when it comes to billing."

"It was a bit odd, since they would charge money to read blessings and curses that were new or new, though they did take payment."

"They did act like they were looking for some sort of blessing or curse. Well, it was just speculation anyway, and it's all in the past, right?"

They moved as if they were looking for some kind of blessing or curse⋯

[◆ ???'s blessing]

- ???

- Stamina+10 Strength+10 Agility+10

Joy Hog's casual words caught my eye as I looked at the blessing in the status window.

- Head to the Labyrinth, and grow stronger, that's my personal request.

At the same time, I remembered what Serif had said to me when she read my blessing.

In retrospect, it was a bit of an outlandish request.

Serif hadn't even noticed the question mark blessing when she appraised my blessings.

‘⋯But, what if she did?’

At the time, it was just a vague feeling.

Now, I realize that leveling past 50 is not just a matter of time and effort.

'Couldn't she manage her facial expressions in front of me?'

If she hid it, I wouldn't even notice.

'⋯No way. Serif is⋯'

"Ah. There’s the party we’re going with."

While I was still in the middle of my thoughts, I heard Joy Hog's voice.

I glanced up to see the face of a man I'd seen a few times recently.

"Ha!"

An exasperated sigh escaped me.

Damn. I didn't recognize him from the last tidbit of information.

"Ha. How did I see you here again?"

The pathetic, inferiority-complex, idiot who had been spewing his shit at the Union⋯ was too harsh.

A man who was a bit lacking, the Gellan Party, was approaching this way.

\*\*\*

Human Swordsman Gellan.

Human Priest Hope.

Mage fox Fusilini.

Guide and tank Slime Ain Aldente.

Although the party was a bit small, the balance was good.

The equipment they wore all shone with the color of a mid-level explorer.

'Of course, it's nothing compared to my helmet, axe, and leather armor.’

"This doesn't look like a rattlesnake party, does it?"

"It's too ugly to be a rattlesnake party. That's a man who must have risen through the ranks, or it wouldn't make sense. With a face like that, it's a crime to be weak."

Lammel and Jubeel whispered quietly behind me.

There is a party called Rattlesnake, commonly called Dick Snake. It's like the modern-day equivalent of Queen Bee.

"A bunch of scumbags who ride the life bus, keeping talented people hostage to their dicks. This is why dick is power, and a man can't do that unless he's pretty damn good."

Jubeel spat on the floor, bemoaning the reality.

"⋯?"

I just scratched my ears. Someone is talking about me and it tickled my ears in a weird way.

Anyway, I don't know their personalities, but as an explorer, my first impression of Gellan's party wasn't too bad.

"We'll travel together to the seventh floor and search for the outlaw who escaped. If the outlaw evades us and descends below the eighth floor, we'll split up and only Gellan's party will continue the search."

The Joy Hog Party had somehow managed to survive the previous eight floor, but they hadn't experienced the eighth floor after the Omen.

I've never been above the seventh floor either, even with the added power and there are outlaws to contend with.

I can't be sure of my safety.

That's why after the eighth floor, only Gellan's party, which has experience going up to the eleventh floor, is allowed to search.

“Even in that case, they said they’d give me half the money, so that’s a relief.”

Even if it's half, it's still 50 silver coins and 2.5 contribution points. It's sweet enough.

"We're going to stick to the pre-arranged route, so make sure everyone knows it!"

With that, everyone moved into the pre-planned formation.

Joy Hog and Slime Tank Ain Aldente led the way.

Behind them, axe warrior Balkan and swordsman Gellan.

After that, the priest, the magician, and the porter Gregor stand.

At the end of the line was Jubeel, a sword wielder.

Since there were no more than fifteen of us, we prepared to cross the portal in a single bound, keeping our bodies in contact.

Even Gellan, who seemed like he was going to start a fight, was surprisingly quiet, except for the occasional glare at me.

‘I thought you'd be as shitty as you were in the Union.’

It's not going to be trouble-free, but at least he's serious about the expedition.

‘Hmm.’

I sighed slightly and glared at the Labyrinth portal.

It's hard to get used to this moment, leaving peace behind and heading into battle but I'll get through this.

This is a gateway I will cross dozens of times in the future.

I stepped through the portal, conscious of the twin axes at my belt.