**Chapter 70: Catch Them (8)**

In an instant, my vision changed.

The floor was damp. Instead of the stone tiles that surrounded me on all sides of the second floor, I could feel the damp, wet earth.

Reflexively, I tried to use my perception to check my surroundings, but a terrible headache hit me and my entire body went limp.

I quickly closed my eyes and stopped perceiving.

-Poof!

I nearly fell to the floor, landing on a damp, fluffy bed.

What the hell. It's transparent, but the dampness feels strangely familiar.

This must be what it feels like to lie on a bed of pudding.

[Aldente LV.28]

[Aldente's current Blessings and Curses: 2]

[◆ Curse of the Slime]

- Your body turns to slime. It's slimy.

- Stamina +10 Wisdom-5 Finesse-5

"Are you okay?"

"Ah, yes⋯ I'm fine."

Aldente had transformed her slime arm into a bed.

It was fascinating. She could transform her body freely.

Ain. Those who were once human but were cursed to become monsters.

I don't know much about them, as they are far fewer in number than humans.

I've heard that some are forced to carry the curse because they can't afford to remove it, while others have embraced the life of an Ain out of necessity.

Slime Ain Aldente seemed to be the latter. Ten stamina points is a lot for a tank to ignore.

I looked at Aldente's arm as it reverted from its bed form, thanked her, and stood still, contemplating my condition.

‘Did I push myself too hard?

My head still aches slightly from the intense focus of the crisis, but not to the point of collapse from exhaustion like this.

‘Perhaps it's magic.’

For the first time, I felt like I hadn't realized the extent of my power and had just used it.

On top of that, I wondered if I had maximized my cognition, and that's why my body couldn't hold on for a moment.

"Balkan. Is that axe⋯an artifact?"

"Ah, yes. I got one this time."

"Then you're drained. That's what you get for growing an axe bigger than a streetlight. I'm more surprised that you didn't destroy your artifact after all that foolishness. Must be something good, huh?"

Mage Lammel informed me that I was suffering from mana exhaustion.

She explained that it can be accompanied by anemia-like symptoms, as well as sudden dizziness and loss of stamina, so I knew I should refrain from overextending myself as much as possible.

"Time is the key to curing mana exhaustion. Get some rest. You've worked hard."

"That's right, Balkan. You've bought us a lot of time, since you took the outlaw down to the eighth floor with you."

After opening my mouth and eating together a few times, Lammel and Jubeel, who had become slightly sweeter, took care of me.

 Immediately, a white powder fell on my head. It was a priest's miracle.

"I've cast a miracle to speed up your recovery, and you'll be well on your way to feeling better."

Hitolis also gave me a miracle.

As I began to feel my body slowly recovering from the emptiness, I noticed someone in worse shape than I was.

"Ugh!"

I stifled a laugh.

"Gellan! Gellan, get a grip!"

The cleric and wizard of Gellan's party looked on in dismay as Gellan rolled around on the ground, swaying from side to side.

Direct hit⋯ by a male corruption beam from the shaman hobgoblin's staff.

Technically, I was hit and it was deflected by Serif's blessing, but there was no one here brilliant enough to see it. The situation was too urgent.

Anyway,

As a result, Gellan became an idiot.

He was an idiot before, but now he was an idiot beyond redemption.

"⋯⋯"

Aldente didn't say anything, but her expression was quite bitter.

It couldn't be helped, since his formerly unharmed teammate had turned into an idiot in less than ten seconds of combat.

'The pink glow emitted by Shaman Hobgoblin's staff is the magical embodiment of the beast's male corruption pheromone.’

Whether you are a high level explorer or a low level explorer, if you're hit by a monster and exposed to its male corruption pheromones, you'll simply become a bio-dildo for the monster.

‘No man has ever been able to overcome the male corruption pheromone.’

I've heard that various studies are underway to try to cure them, but nothing has worked yet, which means the odds of Gellan ever returning to his original form are pretty much zero.

"Put it in the bag and go."

Still, he was an idiot, not dead, so we decided to keep him in a bag from a humanitarian standpoint.

If it had been a party of subhuman trash or a party of rehabilitated explorers, he'd have been immediately mauled, used as bait, discarded, or rolled into a limb-amputation bio dildo.

In Gellan's case, he was lucky.

His body was shoved into the lightweight enchanted backpack we carried.

His body somehow fit, but only his head popped out."Crrrrrr! It's fucking heavy, man!"

"Don't freak out, the lightweight magic cuts the weight in half."

Gregor squealed as she was forced to carry another bag, but what the hell. She's a porter, she's supposed to be able to carry a load. Anyway, that was the end of Gellan's handling.

Now I turned my attention to the other side.

"Eighth floor center. We're in luck. If we keep going in a straight line, we'll reach the end of the line in one night."

Joy Hog, with her wounds healed by a healing potion, studied the map to get a sense of where we were and what was happening.

"The Outlaw's Mark is on the western outskirts. It's a little less monster-infested, but the roads are rough and unruly."

"From the way she's moving, she looks like she's quite the explorer. Maybe she knows the way?"

"I can't be sure⋯ but since she's standing right next to a 8th Floor Transition Trap, I can't completely rule it out. We'll have to be very diligent if we want to get to the end first."

On the second floor, it would have been a chase, but since we were on the eighth floor, we only needed to get to the edge of the portal first.

No matter how good Gurmimi's performance was, there were only two of them.

"I don't know about the second floor, but the two of them can't hold off the eighth floor for long. If they want to survive, they'll come to the end of the floor where there's a portal to the upper floors."

"We get to the edge first, ambush them, and when they come, we take them out in one fell swoop. Right?"

"Exactly. Balkan has little common sense, but a lot of brains."

The ending was a bit shitty, but when I thought about it, it wasn't strangely wrong, so I just nodded.

Gellan was retired, but it didn't change the game.

The party's overall damage dealing is slightly lowered, but the other three members of Gellan's party are still strong.

With this much power, the eighth floor shouldn't be too difficult.

We immediately began to make progress on the eighth floor.

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The difficulty of the Labyrinth increases dramatically every four floors.

Just as the goblins on the first floor, which were charging with ignorance at the sight of a man, become hobgoblins with evolved thinking and bodies on the fourth floor and higher.

The eighth floor introduces monsters that are more advanced in every way than the previous tiers.

"Still, that rapid growth is a bit disconcerting."

"Purrrrrrrr!"

A huge fireball began to form in the hands of the Shaman Minotaur.

It raised its arms to the sky, as if gathering energy, and began to increase the size of the fireball.

In response, the four warrior minotaurs guarding the Shaman Minotaur snorted and charged.

-Thud!

Joy Hog shoved one of the minotaurs with her shield to stop it while Aldente stretched out her slime arms and grabbed two of the minotaurs.

"One down!"

The minotaur that had broken through the front line of tanks lunged at me, fists outstretched.

With the priests and mages right behind me, I can't dodge. I swung my axe in time with its outstretched fist.

-Thud, thud, thud!

The axe sliced smoothly through the middle and index fingers of her fist and gently bisected her forearm.

"Purrrrrrrr!"

The minotaur didn't even seem to feel the pain and immediately tried to counterattack with its opposite fist.

But what the hell, I have two weapons.

-Tsk!

"Purrrrr!"

The minotaur let out a short howl as its other arm was equally split.

The axe continued up the minotaur's arm, straight for its head, and soon dropped its neck.

"Purrrrr!"

The Shaman Minotaur, who had just finished crafting the Primal Fireball, shouted. The size of the fireball was unusually large.

"Lammel! Fusilini, are you ready!"

"Alas, I just finished."

Just in time, Lammel and Gellan's mage, Fusilini, finished their response.

The two wizards' fireballs and the shaman minotaur's fireball collided in midair.

There was a tremendous explosion and an intense heat wave.

"Purrrrrrr!"

I bowed my head slightly and crossed my axes to block the hot air.

When I raised my head again, a minotaur, propelled by the intense wind, flew toward me.

I couldn't say, "Yeah, come here," and hug it since it would crush me

I tucked the axe Idelbert had given me into my waistband, picked up Zirnier’s axe with both hands, and started swinging.

Honestly, I felt like a woodsman chopping firewood.

My timing was a little quick and since it would take the minotaur about two seconds to get in front of me, that left a gap.

If I swing first, it'll be a wasted swing.

The Minotaur seems to realize this, and the corners of its mouth twitch upward.

‘But what if I could close the gap?’

The hilt is about a hand's length long and the Axe blade only slightly larger.

"Giant."

The magic power is well controlled, the handle is about the length of a one-handed sword, and the blade is a little bigger.

The blade landed squarely on the minotaur's head.

Zzzzzzzz!!!

I had taken advantage of a slight lapse in defense.

Still feeling like I had the upper hand, I left the minotaur lying on the ground with its skull impaled, and immediately joined the tankers to take care of the minotaurs they were holding.

It was a quick turnaround after the priest's miracle.

The battle ended with a sharp axe blade to the head of the Shaman Minotaur.

The battle ended with no casualties, but it was trickier than expected.

"I guess it's not the same as a party of explorers about to be promoted to Intermediate level after all."

"⋯Well, it's nothing to us. You guys are actually quite impressive, it's hard to believe that you're explorers who usually go to the seventh floor."

"Yeah, that Gellan was missing a monster every now and then and almost got his rear end pierced, but this party has none of that."

At my words, the tank Aldente and mage Fusilini ⋯ Pasta duo from Gellan's party shook their heads.

Despite their considerable skill, they were quite modest.

For explorers, they were unusually unassertive. Did they get gaslighted by Gellan?

Hope, the priest, was about average.

If the Joy Hog party had fallen to the eighth floor alone, the battle would not have ended so cleanly.

“No. Even if I hadn’t been guarding the priest and wizard, I would have finished them all off with just one blow of my sword!”

“Jubeel. Don’t be so cocky. Honestly, we’re not that bad.”

"Ehhh. Joy Hog, are you going to keep doing that? Just admit it."

"That's why you switched places with Balkan and the rear almost got blown up because you couldn't stop the monster in time."

"Uhhhh. Hmph. That's because I, a swordsman, am relatively weak compared to Balkan, a warrior."

"Are you proud that you're weaker than him?"

"⋯Yes. Suddenly, breast milk⋯"

Jubeel’s habitual bravado soon crumbled under Joy Hog's rebuttal. She even ran away, spewing breast milk.

As an aside, since Gellan became an idiot, the conversations between our party and theirs have increased slightly.

"Still, it's not the same as the eighth floor I experienced last time."

"It would have been dangerous if we hadn't used our power to offset the fireballs. Even a shaman minotaur can't make a fireball that big⋯"

The two mages talked amongst themselves, discussing the growth of the Shaman Minotaur.

"Did you feel it too, Hitolis?"

"Yes, in the Shaman Minotaur's shadow⋯"

The priests spoke of the hazy [darkness] that lurked in the shadow of the shaman minotaur.

‘Is the darkness making the monsters stronger?’

"We'll have more definitive information soon enough, now that the temple investigators are out, but for now, let's get on with our work."

It was a matter of personal curiosity, but there was no time to dwell on it.

We resumed our march up the eighth floor, fighting off the fatigue of battle with a brief rest.

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After eleven hours of nonstop walking and nine battles, two glowing portals came into view but the party's faces were not cheerful.

"⋯All hands, prepare for battle."

"What kind of battle preparations are you talking about, asshole?"

Familiar faces stood in front of the portal.

I didn't need to look at the tracking map since Gurmimi, the rabbit-headed outlaw, and the mage who went by the name of Reichem but called herself Talian had arrived at the end of the eighth level before our party.

They even greeted us as if to say hello.

Joy Hog and Jubeel gripped their shields and swords tighter at the unexpected appearance. Jubeel had switched places with Aldente.

"Why didn't you just jump through the portal and run?"

Gurmimi chuckled at Joey Hogg's question.

"I thought about it, but I kept thinking about how he screwed me over."

Gurmimi gently scratched the nape of her own neck with her sword, then extended it and pointed it at Balkan.

The tip of the blade swept from his forehead to his toes. The red rabbit eyes moved in response.

-Gulp. The sound of swallowing as if faced with a tasty prey.

It was a gaze Balkan had grown accustomed to by now, a gaze of immense lust and hostility.

"I'll kill all the others, but I'll enslave you for the rest of your life."

"That's a lot of words."

"⋯What?"

Balkan scratched the back of his neck roughly with his right hand, swinging the axe in his other hand.

"You're a talker, as usual. I thought the stronger ones kept their mouths shut."

"⋯⋯"

Kududududud!

Gurmimi suddenly shut her mouth, either in acceptance of Balkan's words or in defiance.

Her grip on the hilt of her sword tightened to a crushing grip, and she poised herself for a sword strike.

The veins in her forehead pulsed, her face hard.

She looked like she was about to pounce at any moment, and her fierce aura filled the edge of the eighth layer.

The party members stiffened accordingly, each readying themselves for the miracles and magic they had in store.

Joy Hog and Jubeel, at the front of the line, gripped their weapons tightly while Balkan watched in mild admiration.

‘Illusion magic. That's some quality stuff.’

At a lower level, it fooled all the explorers.

[Reichem LV.22]

I looked at Gurmimi's status window, and out of nowhere, Reichem’s status window appeared.

‘She was using illusion magic.’

The Gurmimi next to Reichem doesn't have any status window, so it's an illusion.

The illusion was strangely crude and didn't say or do anything. It seemed to be more precise when it was based on a person.

Balkan immediately turned away from Reichem, who glared at him like she was going to tear him to pieces and glared at the wall to his right.

[Gurmimi LV.36]

It was a plain, featureless wall of the Labyrinth, with nothing but a status window.

"There you are."

Gurmimi flinched.

I raised my axe and spoke, and the illusion magic began to waver uneasily, as if it had been pierced.