**Chapter 73: Get out alive (2)**

The mystery of Reichem's name is solved. The motive for the crime was also revealed.

Even I, a low-educated person who came from a background of manual labor, would have risen up in rebellion if I had been slaved under someone for 10 years.

Although the circumstances were understandable, the fact remains that Reichem was complicit in the slaughter and enslavement of innocent men.

When she gets to the surface, she'll get what she deserves.

"Balkan. There you are! I finally found you!"

"You've been working hard."

A day after Gurmimi's confession, Joy Hog and the others found me.

They looked tired, as if they had run nonstop to find me.

"What struggle? It's nothing compared to what you've done."

“But those people⋯”

 The party members gaped at the Temple Investigators near me.

"I was lucky they let me stay the night with them."

Yesterday was indeed lucky.

As expected from a group of wealthy and powerful temple investigators, I was fed hot stew and bread, not preserved food.

I was offered a bowl as well, which I gratefully ate, and when I offered to stand guard, I was told to take it easy.

Not everyone in the temple is this nice.

At least the paladins and priests I've seen so far have the character of good clerics.

“What…?! Cohabitation?! The Holy Mother Earth Church will never tolerate such lewd and sleazy behavior!”

 Several Paladins who were listening to me shouted in anger.

Trembling eyes glanced at my body, and the more they did so, the more furious the Paladins' reactions became.

I wondered if they reacted to the sight of a man's body because they were confirmed virgins for life.

"Balkan, you can't be serious⋯ you're trading your body for safety⋯"

"That's bullshit."

I quickly explained and shared the situation with the party, as they started to get the wrong idea.

"This wizard was⋯ Professor Arpo's assistant?!"

"No, but that doesn't make sense. The face of the assistant we saw when we received the request was different from this one⋯"

"She’s an illusionist, she can change faces at will."

"⋯Now that I think about it."

"Ten years⋯ That's terrible⋯ She could have graduated if she held on a little longer⋯ Why did she do that⋯"

The reactions were colorful.

Joy Hog was left wondering why the assistant's face looked different from the one she saw when she was assigned to get the Hobgoblin staff.

 Fusilini, a wizard from the Gellan party who was said to be from the Academy, looked at Reichem sympathetically.

‘She can change her face.’

I wonder if illusion magic can be used for that.

It's a shame, because it would have been a useful ability.

"Ugh! Loosen this! Loosen this!"

Gurmimi shouted as she awoke to find Joy Hog using a restraining device on her.

All the muscles in her arms and legs had been severed, so she had no way to resist except to scream.

"Kek!"

I struck Gurmimi in the nape of the neck, knocking her out again, and dropped her straight into Gregor's bag.

"Krrrrr, I can't lift it anymore, it's too heavy!"

"Tsk, tsk, tsk."

"⋯⋯"

"⋯⋯"

On the right side of the suitcase, there was still a delirious and idiotic Gellan, in the middle was Reichem with her eyes closed, and on the left, the head of Gurmimi, who had lost consciousness and passed out, was sticking out.

The three heads swayed wildly from side to side as they moved along.

Cerberus the Suitcase, was definitely not an ordinary sight.

"Is the party assembled?"

Nate Elin came over after hearing the commotion.

I bowed my head gravely to her.

"Yep. Thank goodness."

The words slipped out with the nuances of checking out of an inn, but Nate Elin nodded as if she didn't care.

"Okay. So you're going to head up to the surface now?"

"Yes."

Both Gurmimi and Reichem, the targets of the request, had been captured.

We hadn't come in to hunt monsters, so there was no more business in the Labyrinth.

All that remained was to safely ascend the floors and return to the surface.

"In that case, can I ask you a favor before we go?"

What favor?

I haven't forgotten your kindness last night, so there's nothing I can't do for you, but if it's a hard favor to fulfill, I might just forget about it and leave.

"It's nothing."

Nate Elin hands me something in her hand.

It was a hand-sized orb, bathed in a mysterious blue light, with a glow similar to that of the relic alloy armor that Zernier had made.

“This is an artifact that allows communication even in the labyrinth. I would like you to bring this to the remaining investigators on the 5th floor.”

 "You mean to the rest of the investigators on the fifth floor?"

Come to think of it, there were about twenty of them when I saw them at the entrance to the Labyrinth.

Now there are thirteen of them here, with seven vacancies.

There were hints in the conversation I'd overheard earlier. The other Paladins were talking about how they were worried about the remaining investigators on the fifth floor.

"The fifth floor is big, and we have to go all the way to the twelfth floor, so we split up to be efficient."

The fifth floor was a strange floor where five species of monsters live in their own villages.

It's a floor that most explorers skip over in favor of the Fountain Scroll, due to its enormous size, complex terrain, and many monsters.

It seems that a group of investigators sent to check on the changes in the Labyrinth since the Omen found their way into it.

Even with the high difficulty of the fifth floor, the story is told from a low-level explorer's perspective.

'I don't know about low-level explorers, but if there are seven Paladins and priests of the intermediate explorer class, they shouldn't have any trouble on the fifth floor.’

"⋯I don't think it's my place to judge, there are other party members."

In order to fulfill Nate Elin's request to bring the artifact to the investigators on the fifth floor, we need to find a group of investigators who are traveling through the fifth floor.

With our current party strength, this shouldn't be a problem, but it's outside of our normal schedule, so we need to coordinate with our party members.

At that, Nate Elin glanced at the party members who had been listening to the conversation.

"Since you're helping the temple, I'll pay you generously. How about a five-point contribution per person?"

"Five, five points!"

The party members' mouths dropped open at the generous offer.

Fifty contribution points are required to become a mid-level explorer.

Right now, the requests to capture the outlaw clan leader Gurmimi and the crazy graduate student Reichem were worth 5 points, which was no small feat.

"Balkan, you must take it! When else do you get a chance like this!"

"You need to maximize your contributions while you can. Just because you want to, doesn't mean you can!"

Jubeel and Lammel grabbed my arms and shook them. Their eyes were glazed over as they looked for a promotion.

I looked away from them to the rest of the party.

"Joy Hog, Hitolis, what are you going to do?"

"Fifth floor⋯ I don't see why not. Jubeel’s gotten her sword blessing, and we've grown. And you've joined the party. There's definitely more power than there used to be."

"With Aldente, Fusilini, and Hope there, perhaps this is our safest chance?"

In effect, I was asking for a favor but the members of Gellan's party were eager to accompany me.

Even as a mid-level explorer, you have to earn your way up the ranks.

Joy Hog turned the decision over to me.

I closed my eyes for a moment and pondered.

Should I accept the request or not?

‘I don't want to fucking do it.’

Fifth floor? Honestly, with the power I have now, I think it's worth it.

If I could find the investigators on the fifth floor, it wouldn't be too difficult.

Once I find them, I can hand over the artifact and immediately rip off the fountain scroll to escape.

But even aside from the difficulty, there was a strong resistance to the fifth floor.

[The multiplier of 5 is dangerous]

Ever since I interpreted [her words], I've had a strange feeling of dread whenever I pass the fifth floor.

I didn't feel it this time because I went beyond it with a transference trap, but the last time I passed the fifth floor with Ellie, I had the urge to leave it immediately.

‘⋯What should I do?’

Opportunities to get contribution points don't come easily, so should I accept the request?

Or should I trust my intuition and decline the request?

I was deep in thought.

"No, what are you guys talking about?"

I heard Nate Elin's incredulous voice.

"You don't need to go all the way to the fifth floor of the monster village. The investigators are at the fountain right now."

"What?"

What the hell is this?

I thought the Investigation Team was still on the fifth floor, investigating the Labyrinth, wasn't it?

"Look here."

Nate Elin handed me the map. It was a location tracking map of the fifth floor.

At the end of the fifth floor, near the water fountain, there were the markers of seven members of the survey team.

"These guys. I left them to investigate, and they made it all the way to the center of the fifth floor, only to turn back and stay here, unmoving. I don't think they're mortally wounded, so I'm trying to get a communication artifact to understand the situation."

What? Was that it?

I thought it would be a risky request worthy of a five on the merit scale, but no.

It's safe to say that I won't be exploring the 5th floor myself and it was a path I'd have to take to get to the surface anyway.

Five points for contribution when all I had to do was hand over a communication artifact to a group of investigators stuck in the fountain.

It was the kind of bullshit request that would make any other explorer burst into tears and question its fairness.

"Will you do it?"

"Just leave it to me."

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Since the path was the same anyway, our party accompanied the temple investigators as they explored the seventh floor.

"Hmph. That must be the elite Paladins of the temple⋯ they're definitely huge."

"Hmph, hmph. Still, I don't see many sword-wielding kids."

"Keep your eyes open, Jubeel. There's a Paladin over there with a much cleaner sword than you."

Nate Elin slashed the creature's neck with her pure white blade.

Our party stared at the scene in disbelief.

"That's quite a difference."

"She didn't become the direct escort of the Holy Lady's for nothing."

I stared blankly at the sword energy Nate Elin had drawn as I listened to the party's comments.

‘I wonder if I could do something like that.’

My fingertips tingle as the floating pellets of magic energy kept nagging at me.

I was tempted to draw my axe and swing it right now but it would be a waste of energy. The opportunity to catch a bus doesn't come around often.

We breezed through and reached the end of the seventh floor.

“Please take good care of my request.”

 "Leave it to me."

After receiving a communication artifact from Nate Elin along with a location map of the fifth floor, we crossed our respective portals.

The investigators to the eighth floor, us to the sixth.

We reached the edge of the sixth floor in a flash and the portal to the fifth floor stared us in the face.

What was on the fifth floor that made [her] and I feel so repulsed by it?

"Balkan. We're ready."

I put my doubts aside and made physical contact with my party members.

We stepped through the ascension portal, and the familiar feeling of floating returned.

Boom!

"Chop-chop?

I immediately felt my gaiters getting damp. I looked down and saw ankle-deep water.

As soon as I touched the water, my stamina and energy gradually recovered.

There is only one place in the Labyrinth that offers such healing water, the fountain at the end of the fifth floor.

As luck would have it, it was at the end of the fifth floor.

"Heh, what the hell?"

“We saved a silver coin. This is the first time I’ve not used a scroll to transfer to the fountain on the 5th floor.”

The other party members were also surprised. I can't be this lucky.

No, I'm not lucky, because the luck that should have happened on the other floors happened on the fifth floor.

“Hey, seniors?!”

 Just as I was thinking that, I heard Hitolis panicked voice.

Hitolis seniors are the paladins and priests of the temple.

They were also the ones we had to hand over the communication artifact to.

I immediately turned my head toward the source of Hitolis voice.

Five paladins and two priests, dressed in the armor and robes of the temple, sat side by side at the fountain.

My gaze went straight to the Paladin seated in the center or, more accurately, to the thing he was hugging.

A very distasteful, unpleasant and repulsive black egg.

He clutched it dearly, as if it were the greatest treasure in the world.

[]

They gazed up at the top of the fountain with their mouths open in a daze, and spat out an unintelligible sound.

It seemed to be neither a language nor a meaningless breath.

[⋯Hara]

But my ears gradually began to recognize the unknown sound as human language.

A sensation similar to that of hearing [Her] censored voice.

[⋯Doubly so]

The corners of everyone's mouths twitched.

I don't know exactly what's going on, but I do know that they're in a state of immense joy and elation.

"⋯What the hell?"

The bizarre sight threw the party into confusion.

I silently gripped Zirnier’s axe, stroking the communications artifact with my other hand.

Immediately, I heard Nate Elin's voice in my head.

-What, why you⋯

"Nate Elin. I think we're fucked."

-What?

I don't know what the hell is going on but my survival instincts, honed over many crises, are telling me that I’m fucked.

Tsk, tsk!

[Worship]

The black egg that the Paladin held so dearly began to crack.

[Worship!]

I immediately stiffened my legs and gripped the axe hard enough to break it.

Desperately, I scraped the magic around me.

[To ■■■ ■, who will be reborn!]

-Tsk, tsk!

[Worship!]

-Chirp!

Soon, the black egg was completely shattered.

The being enveloped in [darkness] that burst forth from it grew in size until it seemed to swallow the fountain whole.

I was like a small fish, helpless to do anything, being swallowed by the shark's jaws.

Overcoming my helpless senses I said out loud.

"Giant."