**Chapter 74: Get out alive (3)**

The axe, stretched to its limit, slammed into the gaping maw of the darkness.

-Kwaaang!

The impact tore the dark being's head off the ceiling of the Labyrinth as the edge of the fifth floor vibrated violently.

The dust from the ceiling, which had never been wiped, fell in torrents, fogging the surroundings.

The creature seemed unaffected by the impact, even as the Labyrinth vibrated.

-Tsk, tsk, tsk.

If anything, it opened its mouth even wider and lunged slightly toward the fountain.

The axe that held its gills closed wobbled precariously, like a toothpick in the mouth of a snake about to devour its prey.

"Fireball!"

With a terrified scream from behind, two flame-encased spheres shot out.

-Pow!

The rapid-fire spheres struck the creature on the roof of its mouth near the blade of the axe, sending up a blast of hot air and black smoke.

Lammel and Fusilini attacked in unison.

It was a blow so powerful that it even subdued the eighth-floor shaman minotaur whose [Darkness] had sunk into the shadows.

"⋯No way."

"Not even the slightest damage⋯?"

The fireballs scattered meaninglessly, having done no damage to the inscrutable being in front of me that was [Darkness] itself.

I kept my gaze fixed on it and shouted to the party around me.

"Everyone out of the fountain! He's going for the fountain!"

I don't know why, but he's going for the fountain.

Its giant mouth is gaping open, about to swallow the fountain into its abysmally dark belly…and we are in the fountain.

While the giant axe prevents its mouth from closing, I have to climb out of the fountain to survive.

My screams awakened the party from their shock and they began to desperately scramble out of the fountain, each clutching their weapons.

But even that wasn't easy.

The eyes of the two priests, Hitolis and Hope, widened to tears at the sight of the dark entity, and they shuddered, their mouths agape.

As if confronted with something vastly beyond their comprehension, they could do nothing but laugh and go mad.

Joy Hog and Aldente each scooped one of them up and ran.

-Boom, boom, boom!

The surface of the fountain vibrated as they kicked at the healing water and the rippling water signaled the urgency of the situation.

"Balkan, what are you doing? You need to get out here!"

Jubeel, carrying the slow-moving mage Lammel, shouted urgently.

Fuck. Of course I want to run away.

-Kagagak!

But it's dangerous. That thing's teeth were no joke.

Zirnier’s axe rattled.

The relic alloy blade still held, but the handle creaked as if pushed to its limits.

‘If I pull out the axe right now, we’ll all be eaten.’

 If the party was to survive, one of us had to hold onto this axe.

Besides,

[Blessing of Radiance]

- The light of the beginning of time is imbued in you.

- It has an absolute effect on the darkness.

I had a trick up my sleeve.

‘Will it work?’

I'm honestly nervous.

It's not the same as when I fought the Boss Minotaur.

That darkness was more malicious and unpleasant than Diana's curse.

'No. Don't think about it.’

Worry is a luxury. It will happen. I’ll make it so.

I focused on the sensation in my fingertips, drawing up the blessing.

Immediately, my hands were filled with white light, which spread up the handle of the axe and began to bathe the great axe in a white glow.

[!!!!!]

Then an unknown screech pierced my eardrums and something leaked from my ear. Blood, perhaps.

The axe blade, bathed in its full glory, gradually pierced the dark mouth.

The sound of piercing something, something I hadn't heard before, rang out clearly.

Seizing the opportunity, I focused all my nerves on using the blessing.

‘It's a little bit, but it works!’

[!!!!!!!!]

The brilliant light grew in intensity, tormenting the creature, but my damage was not insignificant.

My vision gradually turned red.

The combination of enlargement and the Blessing of Radiance had taken a serious toll on my body but I didn't stop.

Even when my head was pounding and my eyes were popping.

My mouth tasted like vomit and blood.

Drops of blood from my ears and nose dripped down my helmet, staining the fountain's healing waters red.

I willed myself to strike him down.

‘I'm going out!’

Out of this fucking labyrinth! Out of this fucking labyrinth! Out of this fucking labyrinth!

I'm getting out alive!

-Poof.

Then, the sound of piercing flesh echoed through the air.

I jerked my head down, dazed.

A reddened sword protruded, piercing my stomach.

[Worship]

A searing pain boiled up from my back.

[Worship

I could hear the mutterings of the Paladins through my mangled ears.

How could they have been so dumb as to be brainwashed right next to me. No, they're Paladins, so it shouldn't be possible, but at this time, you fucking assholes.

"⋯!"

The Paladin who had stabbed me in the back slashed at my stomach with his blade.

Gritting my teeth and enduring the pain, I kicked him with my right foot.

-Pooh!

[Worship]

Instantly, the blade sank into my side. The sword entered from the left and pierced my right pelvis.

At the same time, I felt nerves burning from my spine to my brain.

The pain was so intense that I lost consciousness for a moment.

 [Worship]

 [Worship]

 [Worship!]

It took less than a second, but the price was high.

Five Paladins' swords sank into my abdomen.

-Thud, thud, thud.

The axe that had lost its luster gradually began to return to its original size.

"--Balkan! Balkan!"

The voices of the party members could be faintly heard in the distance.

Thankfully, they were far away. At least they made it out of the fountain, that's good.

Now I have to run, too.

I'm not feeling strong enough.

I stare up into the air, pierced by the Paladins' swords, as dazed as they are.

The gaping maw of the great snake surrounded by darkness began to close.

I'll die here.

'Just here? So meaninglessly?’

I had accomplished nothing.

I didn’t even find my sister.

I won't even be able to fulfill my promise to Diana that I'll be safe.

"No."

I straightened up.

I will not die for nothing.

I will die in old age, in a warm bed, surrounded by my wife, sons, daughters, and grandchildren.

I cannot close my eyes on the cold, dirty, disgusting, malicious dirt of this labyrinth.

I refocus my attention on the blessing at my fingertips.

As much power as I can muster.

I shoot it at him-

-Quack.

My vision fades into darkness.

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The members of Joy Hog's party stared at the inscrutable creature before them.

It looked like a snake the size of a house, or a blackened mass of fat.

Perhaps because Balkan had blocked it with his axe, the inscrutable creature failed to devour the fountain.

Instead, it stood right in front of the fountain, chewing furiously at its mouth, as if it were trying to swallow something.

The seven investigators and Balkan, who bought the party time to escape were a blur and then they were devoured.

The voices of Hitolis and Hope's frantic screams filled the silent fifth floor.

-Gulp.

Then came the sound of something swallowing. Something slurped down the inscrutable being's torso.

[]

The being let out an unintelligible sound.

They realized that the being before them looked like a beast that had just finished a very satisfying meal.

The creature stared at the fountain for a moment, then turned its attention to them, its next prey.

Joy Hog and the rest of Gellan's party backed away, all pale and breathless.

Even if the fountain was at the end of the fifth floor, it was a long way from the portal.

Even if they run like hell, they'll be caught by that thing.

"⋯Balkan sacrificed himself for us."

Having made her decision, Jubeel raised her sword.

The sword's blackened hilt pointed at the inscrutable being.

The tip of the blade trembled as it failed to point clearly at the enemy.

Joy Hog's eyes narrowed as she watched.

After a moment's hesitation, she swallowed hard.

"⋯Yes. We'll have to do something."

Joy Hog gripped her shield tightly and behind her, Lammel raised her staff.

"Are you guys serious?"

Aldente muttered to herself as she watched them.

By her standards, this situation was impossible.

If you're going to make a sacrifice, you should think about running away. Why fight back, especially in front of something like that?

"Fuck! We're fucking tired, too, by the way."

Jubeel shouted, exasperated.

There wasn't a single sane person in this place right now.

In all her years as an explorer, she'd never heard or seen anything like this, much less experienced it.

‘It's frightening. I don't understand it. I feel like I'm going to lose my mind. I feel like I'm going to pee right now. I want to run away.’

But more than those unpleasant, gross feelings.

"It's even worse to have lost a party member helplessly."

The Inscrutable One watched their resolve impassively.

It almost seemed to sneer in response.

Then, the darkness stirred.

I'm floating in the darkness.

Am I dead?

Is this the afterlife I've heard about?

I feel like I'm swimming in the excrement of unpleasant emotions.

It's dark. It's cold. It's stifling, unpleasant. I can't even move my body, like I'm being held down by scissors.

I start to lose consciousness, like sinking deeper and deeper into the ocean.

Deeper and deeper.

Deeper and deeper into the darkness.

As I continued to sink, a strange sensation made me slowly open my eyes.

"⋯?”

There was a tiny hole in the deep darkness and through it, a tiny ray of light was shining.

I swam toward it, mesmerized. It was instinctive.

Immediately, the darkness grabbed my body.

The darkness transformed into a human arm, a bird's wing, a snake's tail, and many other forms as it struggled to hold on to me.

I desperately shook it off, pushing myself toward the light.

My efforts were not in vain. The harder I struggled, the closer I got to the light.

Finally, I reached the light.

A pure white light radiated from a crack no bigger than a finger.

Darkness was rampant in the world.

The light was shining outward through a tiny crack, as if trapped in darkness.

Inside the hole, I saw a woman looking at me, [Her]

A mysterious being bathed in light, who had warned me that multiples of five were dangerous.

[I told you that ■ is ■.]

The woman, looking at me through the gap, sighed heavily, as if she couldn't stop herself.

The light was so intense that I couldn't even recognize it, but I instinctively knew it was a reaction.

Her voice was muffled, but she sounded concerned.

A warm feeling settled strangely in my chest.

[I don't have any miracles left, so]

The woman continued and the emotion seemed to be growing strangely intense.

Immediately, the darkness responded. As if to interfere, it began to enclose the small hole from which the light was emanating.

I reached out toward the darkness so that the light would not be obscured by the darkness…so that I could hear [Her] more.

[Make sure to survive and come to ■■.]

A light pierced through the darkness, and it enveloped me.

\*\*\*

“Ugh, ugh⋯”

Joy Hog looked around, stanching the bleeding from her torn-off right arm.

Jubeel had lost her left arm and sword, and had been thrown into the fountain.

Lammel's right foot and staff had been chewed off and she was losing blood.

Hitolis and Hope are still insane, and Aldente has been reduced to a bloated slime.

Party decimation was a common occurrence in the Labyrinth.

They were all still breathing, but there was no telling when their lives would end.

"Haha."

I laughed out of nowhere. Had I finally gone mad with fear?

‘I guess that's it for me.’

Joy Hog turned her head away from the darkness that was writhing around its massive body and slowly closed her eyes.

She wanted to at least go in peace, to embrace death and reflect on her life so far.

-Zzzzzzzzzz!!!

A terrible scream shook the labyrinth and her eyes snapped open of their own accord.

But then she immediately frowned.

‘Light.’

A blinding light was emanating from the inscrutable being shrouded in darkness.

Or, more precisely⋯on its torso.

‘Axe marks?

-Tsk, tsk, tsk!!!

The sound of flesh being sliced was heard once again.

[keeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeee!!!!]

The inscrutable being let out a scream as its huge body tossed and turned, writhing in pain.

The glare grew stronger as the beam of light emanating from the inscrutable being's body doubled in size.

Another gap had opened up.

-Zzzzzzzzzzzz!!!

When the third blast sounded, Joy Hog gaped in shock at the unbelievable sight she witnessed.

 An axe enveloped in a blinding light that seemed to cover all the darkness in the world cut open the inscrutable creature's torso and faced the world.