**Chapter 76: Bath and Purify (1)**

It all started two weeks ago, when I encountered Nate Elin at the fountain.

"What the hell, horrible⋯"

“Uww, wooweeek⋯”

The Temple's investigators, who had followed Nate Elin, recovered the bodies of the slain Paladins and Priests from the fifth floor.

They gagged or squeezed their eyes shut at the sight of the carnage.

Those left on the fifth floor would be weaker than the elite that had followed Nate Elin, but they were still not worthy of death on the fifth floor.

"Can you explain to me what the hell happened here?"

Nate Elin's face grew serious as she asked for the truth of the matter.

We told her everything we had seen and experienced.

The investigators looked as if they were possessed or brainwashed by something and were hugging a mysterious black egg.

The inscrutable abomination that hatched from that egg was a very unpleasant darkness.

Hitolis, Hope, and the Paladins at my back, were going mad, as if possessed by the creature.

"I, indeed. I lost my mind in an instant⋯"

"I don't remember exactly⋯ but I'm sure, I wasn't me. As if I was possessed by another personality⋯"

Hitolis and Hope chimed in, frowning as if the mere recollection of the moment was painful.

"How could that be⋯"

Nate Elin's expression hardened as if she had heard something unbelievable.

"Brainwashing⋯ black eggs⋯ reluctant aura⋯ no way⋯"

She tapped her chin as if remembering something.

"By any chance, do you have a theory about that black egg?"

"⋯⋯No. I'm not sure. Thanks for the trouble."

Hearing my question, Nate Elin hastily ended the conversation.

She glared at the injured party members and then at me.

Her gaze, which had begun to scan my head, slowed slightly at the lower crown of my helmet, and then locked completely on the belly of my leather armor, which was riddled with holes.

Nate Elin stared at my stomach and muttered quietly.

"⋯Certainly, the Paladins' divinity."

Jubeel and Joy Hog, who were watching Nate Elin from behind, muttered quietly.

"That bitch. Just looking at a man's stomach in the open?"

"Jubeel. Please shut up. She's a Paladin of the Temple. There's no way she's looking at a man's stomach. She's just checking out the truth."

"Is that so?"

"Yes."

"Hmmm."

Nate Elin, who coughed loudly at the sound of the voice, looked at us and said.

"Although it was an inscrutable disaster, caused by a mistake of the temple, I promise to compensate you for this damage in the name of Paladin Nate Elin."

Damage done in the Labyrinth can rarely be compensated.

When you enter the Labyrinth, you don't know what will happen, and you take full responsibility for everything that happens.

So everyone's faces lit up when Nate Elin confirmed that she would compensate them.

Physical injuries aside, the damage was enormous.

My helmet and leather armor, my most valuable equipment, were smashed, and the handle of Zirnier's axe was slightly tarnished.

The axe that Idelbert had gifted me was snapped in half, broken when it entered the creature's mouth.

All that remained of my equipment were my gaiters.

Nate Elin, surveying the delighted faces of the party, turned to me.

"Since you were directly harmed by the Paladin, the temple will compensate you."

"You're going to compensate me for what?"

"What do you want?"

"Hmm⋯"

It was a bold statement. She knew what I wanted.

"⋯No. I shouldn't have said that. I'll compensate you accordingly."

"I see."

Seeing my expression, Nate Elin must have felt cheap, because she quickly changed the subject.

‘A few gold coins would be satisfactory. Money is one of the biggest reasons explorers come into the Labyrinth.’

"Investigations are suspended. Everyone prepare to return to the surface."

"What?! But we still have 12 floors to go⋯"

"We've had enough of the harvest. All investigators, retreat."

Nate Elin ordered the group to retreat.

"Let us join you.”

"Okay, but don't use that weird language."

"Yeah."

We joined the ranks.

With their gear and bodies in tatters, the party didn't look like they'd make it safely from the fifth floor to the ground.

Looking more like streetwalkers than explorers, we blended in with the survey crew and made it back to the surface in five days.

"Yuck!"

"The light! The sun is so blinding!"

"It's warm⋯"

The sun was high in the sky over the Labyrinth city of Valerus.

The party was happy to see the sun shining down on them.

Our time in the labyrinth had been shorter than our previous journey, but it had been dense.

We had practically walked on death's doorstep.

The natural light was so refreshing, so warm, after all the hardships of the dark, musty labyrinth.

Tsk!

"⋯!"

"⋯!"

At the same time, a strange sensation swept through my body. Joy Hogg, Jubeel, and I shuddered violently.

Hitolis and Hope shuddered as well.

I instinctively knew the cause of the sudden tremors.

"Stop, no!"

"Ah, yes. This sensation!"

[Current Blessings and Curses: 4]

Palpitations.

Heart pounding.

Question mark blessing. Blessing of Hard-fought Battle. Blessing of Brilliance.

The total number of blessings increased by one.

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“The damage compensation and the promised contribution will be paid within a week. Hope, Hitolis, and Balkan, follow us.”

Nate Elin snapped at me.

"You will go to the purification chamber of the temple. Even you, Balkan, have been eaten by it, so we need to cleanse you of any evil energy you may have."

I nodded, knowing she had a good reason.

I didn't feel anything wrong with my body, but there could be something else I wasn't aware of.

"Then we should part ways here. We should turn these guys over to the guards and get some rest."

"I'm frantically wondering if this is a blessing or a curse, but I'm so tired. I think I'm going to get some wine and milk first⋯"

Joy Hog and Jubeel pounded on Gregor's pack.

Gurmimi and Reichem's heads bobbed up and down.

"Gellan⋯"

“I’m going crazy!!”

Gellan's party's wizard, Fusilini, stared at the dumbfounded Gellan with Baby Aldente on her head.

In truth, their party had done more damage than Joy Hog's.

A party that was so close to becoming a mid-level explorer had fallen like that.

After all, in the Labyrinth, no one is immune.

I set up a settlement date with Joy Hog's party and saw them off.

"Recover well, Balkan!"

"Go and rest, everyone."

Jubeel, carrying the still unconscious Lammel on her back, gestured as Joy Hog trotted off with them.

Despite the bump in the road at the end, this trip to the Labyrinth had ended well enough.

They've even gotten blessings, which was quite a relief to their bitter hearts.

'Now, let's get cleaned up in the temple's purification chamber, Diana and ⋯'

I remembered the promise I had made before entering the Labyrinth.

I didn't know if it would be a sign of trust, but I promised myself to have a heart-to-heart conversation with Diana face-to-face.

A smile formed on my face as I imagined the moments when I would share a drink with Diana and have various conversations with her.

I could only imagine the relaxation after the bloody labyrinth.

"⋯⋯"

Suddenly, the surroundings became quiet. I snapped out of it and looked around.

Nate Elin and the other Paladins and priests were staring at me blankly.

Gulp.

One of the Paladins swallowed loudly. At the same time, I heard an anguished gasp from somewhere.

My hand unconsciously went up to my helmet.

The lower part of the helmet was slightly chipped, revealing the corner of his mouth and left cheek.

I touched the softly raised corners of my mouth and my skin.

-gulp.

Then, once again, the Paladins gulped.

They were a group of confirmed virgins, so it was hard to tell if they swallowed at the sight of a man.

"Crack, crack! Kaak!"

Gellan growled at me, his face full of hostility.

I wondered why this asshole had to be like this.

I quickly ignored him and turned to Nate Elin, the leader of the lifelong virginity affirmation group.

"What, is something wrong?"

"⋯Hmmm. Nope. Nothing. We have a long way to go. We'll leave for the temple quickly. Get ready, everyone."

"Yes, yes! Prepare to return!"

“I, I. I need to go to the bathroom quickly⋯”

I followed Nate Elin, who shook her head awkwardly, and the Paladins, who gulped in a strangely sweetened breath, to the temple.

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"That's it. Serif."

Nate Elin knelt down to one knee before Serif Adeline and reported the rough results of the Labyrinth investigation.

Serif's face was emotionless as she received the report.

There was no trace of her usual manufactured smile, just a stony expression.

"It seems that the omen that came after a decade has caused more repercussions than expected. I never thought the seal would be broken."

"Yes. Perhaps, given the circumstances, the other floors have been affected as well⋯"

"⋯We'll have to circulate the Fountain Transition Scrolls more vigorously. Perhaps the Labyrinth will be closed soon."

Calmly analyzing the report, Serif formed a natural smile and looked at Nate Elin.

"You've done a good job, Nate Elin. Now go back and get some rest."

"⋯⋯"

The congratulations didn't deter Nate Elin but there was something she hadn't reported yet.

Balkan had been grievously wounded on this journey and he had been brought to the temple to make amends and purify his body.

‘Should I tell her?’

Serif looked at Balkan with a different gaze than the others.

Her expression, which had been forced and colorless, was transformed into something more beautiful in front of him.

Nate didn't want to see Serif, who was so warm and consistently kind to everyone, treating only one person with special treatment.

‘⋯⋯hah.’

Nate Elin hesitated for a moment before reporting what had happened to Balkan.

"⋯What did you just say?"

As if on cue, the white cat's tail and ears perked up.

“Oh, no, it was not someone else, but the sword of the city, of the temple…that stabbed him?”

"⋯Yes."

Balkan's leather armor was covered in holy sword marks. He had obviously been struck by the Paladins.

Upon hearing this, Serif's face turned pale.

The cat's tail, which had once stood up so high, gradually dropped downward, as if it were in exhaustion.

"How could you have made such a mistake, Nate Elin!"

The next words sounded like a frightened cat screaming.

It was something she'd never seen from Serif, who had always shrugged off any mistake with a mechanical smile.

Nate Elin was quite shocked to see her human side, something she had never seen in all her years as Serif's bodyguard.

"Uh, what to do⋯ what to do⋯ Da, I have to go ask for forgiveness right now⋯"

As Serif nervously bit her nails, Nate Elin continued her report.

"⋯He's in the cleansing chamber now, though I did bring him in just in case."

"He's in the cleansing chamber?! Now?!"

"Oh, he hasn't gone in yet, he's just waiting."

The purification chamber is a kind of bathroom.

Before or after an important ritual like a pacification ceremony or entering a labyrinth you have to bathe in holy water to cleanse the body and mind of defilement.

Higher ranking priests, such as Serif, would have their own private purification chambers.

-Gulp.

Serif swallowed hard, having had a brilliant idea.

"⋯Then... this is really⋯ unavoidable."

She muttered in a very small voice.

"⋯Yes, this is really, really unavoidable.

The Temple's sword was pointed at him.

Oh, the pain and suffering.

This was the most effective way to apologize to him, to make amends.

'The faithful service of a high-ranking priest, whose face even nobles line up to see.’

This would be enough for him to recognize her sincerity.

I mean it. It was not something personal.

"Bring Mr. Balkan to my private purification chamber, at once."

"Serif!"

Nate Elin's eyes widened at the words. But Serif's demeanor was steadfast.

-Gulp.

Serif swallowed the saliva that kept trickling down her throat, trying to control the uncontrollable wagging of her tail.

"Come on!"

"Yes!"

Nate Elin immediately ran out of the audience room.

 -Boo-boo-boo-boo.

"HEEEEEEEE!"

Serif flinched momentarily from the vibration of the necklace on his chest.

Serif had gotten used to the vigorous vibrations by now, and she swallowed back a sweet moan.

The heat was too much but it didn't matter.

Anyway, she’s going to take it off soon.

 -Tsk. Tsk.

Her white cat ears twitched in anticipation.