**Chapter 77: Bath and Purify (2)**

"You can change into these."

I, Hitolis, and Hope were given bathrobes by the priest guarding the purification chamber.

The bathrobes were soft and plush.

The material felt luxurious to the touch, unlike anything I'd ever felt on Earth, let alone in this world.

"This is a ceremonial bathrobe made of Arachne's thread. It stretches freely, so please feel free to wear it."

"Ah, Arachne⋯"

I'd heard that she was a natural disaster in the Middle Floors, but a robe made from her threads?

"This is the most luxurious robe I've ever received in my life."

"Me, too. The robes we usually get are just ordinary robes⋯"

Hitolis and Hope felt awkward in their current situation.

From what they heard, they usually just give them plain cotton bathrobes.

"⋯Could it be because of Mr. Balkan?"

"I think so."

“Maybe they’re paying more attention to me because of what I’ve been through.”

I shrugged and grabbed Arachne's bathrobe.

"The locker room is this way."

Hope and I changed into our bathrobes in the men's locker room.  
*TLN: Looks like Hope is a man. Because of the name I thought he was a woman.*

As I removed my tattered leather armor, a pool of congealed blood dripped to the floor. It was a sign of injury.

From my pants pocket, I pulled out the Abomination Soul stone.

"Be still."

[]

"Answer."

[⋯]

I dabbed a bit of Radiant Blessing into the Abomination Soul stone, and it whimpered in understanding.

I slipped it into my backpack, then stripped off my t-shirt, pants, and panties and stuffed them into the backpack as well.

"⋯⋯⋯ and ⋯⋯⋯"

Hope, who was getting dressed next to me, looked at my body and let out a stunned, envious voice.

"How can a man have a body like this, oh my god."

"Don't admire me."

"Oh, I'm sorry."

I felt a little dirty at the shitty reaction, but with a big heart, I understood.

Men in this world were, on average, meager and impractical, so it wasn't strange for them to look at me in wonder at my body, which was completely different from theirs.

I thought to myself, "How could they not criticize me as soon as they saw me, like some retarded asshole?”

I thought to myself as I put on my bathrobe.

"Oh."

It was definitely a little small when I received it, but as soon as I slipped one arm in, the Arachne silk stretched to fit my frame perfectly.

I casually opened the front and buttoned it up. I was in awe of the luxurious material.

In just a robe, I felt like a beggar on the street and the youngest son of a tycoon living the high life.

If only I had a wine glass in my hand, I would be perfect.

"And the helm."

Hope's eyes traveled to the right side of the face wrapped in the Great Helm.

"⋯Hmm. I suppose it doesn't matter, since many Paladins like to clean their swords and armor with holy water."

"Then let's go."

After changing our clothes, we headed to the purification chamber.

Like medieval public baths, the purification chambers were divided into gender-specific areas, like the men's and women's baths.

As a man, I headed for the men's bath.

Chaaaah!

-Ack! The holy water is too hot! Pour me lukewarm holy water!

From inside, the male priests could be heard taking care of their own baths.

"⋯What is going on in there?"

"It's the usual bathing ritual."

Hope's flat voice sounded slightly frightening.

I'm too afraid to open the purification chamber door and step inside. I can already feel my vision diminishing.

I squeeze my eyes shut and cover my ears with my hands to block out the sound.

I subconsciously shut down the awareness that was trying to unfold. Any awareness there would be traumatizing.

Then Hope, who was next to me, glanced at me and said.

"Now, I'm going to show you how to measure your bath-"

"Balkan, here you are!"

Nate Elin, who had come running, panting, in a moment of crisis, found me.

"Kaaaak!"

Hope squealed in horror, hastily covering his high liver and stomach.

I thought to myself, "What kind of reaction is that, when I'm wearing a robe and nothing to show for it?”

Is that normal in this world?

For a moment, I was confused, but then I accepted it.

Just because men in this world reacted that way didn't mean I had to act that way.

I was proud of my healthy body and the muscles I had built up.

"Is something wrong?"

"Th-that-"

Nate Elin's eyes swept over my body for a moment as I opened my mouth to speak.

It was an instinctive, if not selfless, move as a woman of this world.

-Mmph!

Nate Elin chewed on her tongue.

"How dare you take the opportunity to show yourself in front of Serif! Kwak, you bastard!"

"Eh?"

"Huh⋯ no. Serif is in urgent need of you."

"Uh⋯ you mean right now?"

"Yep. You've just changed into your robe. She wants to give you a bath, so come with me."

Serif is going to give me a bath?

"Serif will give Mr. Balkan a bath?!"

Hope was more surprised than I was.

His eyes widened as if he had heard something unbelievable.

"That's just too good to be true!"

"Uh⋯ is that a good thing?"

A woman washing a man?

That seemed a little out of place by this world's standards.

"Of course! Any other woman would be a deadly bitch, but it's Serif, and no one else! To have the holy and pure one, filled with divinity, personally instructing you in the art of bathing⋯! What an honor for a worshiper of Mother Earth! I'm sure you're the first to do this, and I envy you⋯!"

The man, Hope, looked at me with genuine envy as he spoke.

I felt like he was looking at Serif as an object of faith, not reason.

Nate Elin, a woman, had a similar reaction, though not as loud.

‘Even though she is not a bishop, she is a pure person who can be called a saint… Should I think of it as an honor?’

I was a little confused.

"I'm going upstairs, follow me."

At that moment, Nate Elin started walking ahead of me.

“Go ahead!⋯”

Hope, who looked on with envy, waved me off.

I sneaked a glance toward the men's cleansing room.

-Ahhh, Father, the holy water is flowing into my body⋯! My mind and body are being purified⋯!

I quickly turned my head away.

Anywhere would be better than there.

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"I'll be right back with Miss Serif. Stay here."

Nate Elin carefully closed the door behind him and left.

Balkan looked around dazedly.

A dim, humid, steamy space.

He'd been told on the way up that the cleansing chamber was for Serif only, but it was slightly smaller than the men's public cleansing chamber he'd seen earlier.

This meant that the space used by one person was comparable in size to one used by dozens of people.

Even this one was half as small as it used to be at Serif's request.

-Chirp.

Hot, lukewarm water flowed from the carvings on the walls.

It was submerged beneath them, like a bathtub in a bathhouse.

This was no ordinary water.

It was water with a faint glow, pale in comparison to the Blessing of Radiance, a liquid the people of the temple called holy water.

Balkan quickly pulled his bathrobe up to his armpits and dipped his arms into the tub.

"⋯What, nothing too special?"

Most of his wounds had been healed by the healing water on the fifth floor, and dipping his arm in the holy water hadn't made any difference.

As I was checking the temperature of the water, I heard a knock on the door.

"Se, it's Serif Adeline. Do you mind if I come in?"

-Gulp.

I could hear her swallow as she finished speaking.

"Yes."

Serif must be the owner of this space, but somehow I felt like the roles were reversed.

The door opened almost before I could finish my sentence.

Immediately, I saw snow-white hair and red eyes.

Then white cat ears that perked up nervously, and a cat tail that wagged softly and gently.

A white bathrobe wrapped preciously around her pale skin.

Not as big as her older sister Idelbert, but a vibrating cross necklace resting on a pouch of divine power large enough to keep a baby from starving.

In more ways than one, she was a saint.

Serif's red eyes met Balkan's.

"⋯.

His muscular body, wrapped in a bathrobe with a helmet over his head, came into view.

'When I see other male priests dressed in robes for rituals, I don't feel the slightest stirring.’

Was it the overwhelming difference in physical specs?

Or was it simply because the man standing before her was special?

Serif's face heated up.

-Gulp.

Swallowing hard, Serif's mouth slowly opened.

"Then let us begin our⋯ service."

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The bathing ritual it’s a sacred ritual to cleanse the body and mind of dirt before an important event, or after a big day.

"How are you feeling⋯? Do you feel anything wrong⋯?"

"Oh, yes, yes⋯"

"Good, that's good, now try the other arm⋯"

I submerged myself in the bathtub of holy water and stuck my arm out of the tub.

Then I saw Serif kneeling by the side of the tub, wiping my forearm with a cloth towel soaked in holy water.

Her expression was unmoved and her eyes serious.

Her calm and pure gaze, devoid of lust, was nailed to my forearm.

-snap!

A white cat's tail, full of steam, slapped the ground in front of me⋯ but that's a physiological reaction.

A cloth towel slid up from my wrists to my elbows.

As the hot, soaked washcloth's tactile sensation glided across my arms, I felt my muscles and joints relax.

Serif's holy water massage it's like a merciless muscle massage from Idelbert, soothing and relaxing.

Up until now, I had only wiped my body with a wet towel because I couldn't afford to go to a public bath, but this was the first time I had soaked in hot water in a long time.

"Hmph!"

"⋯Hmph, are you okay?"

"Ah⋯ yes⋯ really, good⋯"

"⋯⋯⋯⋯"

Serif's face became much more serious as she went back to the bath.

‘Did I misunderstand her all this time?’

I thought she was a strange person when she wore the vibrating necklace, but now I could call her a virtuous saintly maiden who diligently tended to her patients.

I glanced over and saw Serif's bathrobe soaked in the warm steam of the purification chamber.

A single bead of sweat trickled down between her breast bones, dampening the sternum of her robe.

"⋯⋯”

My brain froze for a moment at the sight.

Instinctively, I clamped down on the thickening bulge.

I had been through many trials and tribulations with Diana every day.

Now, with a little concentration, I could control this much⋯

Tsk-!

Suddenly, I felt a strangely intense gaze on me, and I looked back at Serif.

She was still wiping her arms with a serious expression.

‘⋯Was it my mood?’

I scratched the back of my head with my other arm, embarrassed that I had misunderstood, and Serif spoke up cautiously.

"⋯I heard you had some trouble in the Labyrinth this time."

"Ah⋯yes."

Something had happened. I was stabbed by Paladins and eaten by an abomination.

I instinctively clutched at my abdomen where the Paladin's sword had stabbed me.

Then Serif's eyes fluttered wide.

"Shi, for the wrong done by the Temple's sword, I apologize on behalf of the Temple."

Serif's head shook as she bowed.

It was unlikely, but she seemed to be shaking with fear that her apology would not be accepted.

"It's okay now, they didn't do it on purpose. Besides, you've agreed to compensate them for the damages⋯"

"Damage compensation⋯!"

Serif's head snapped up at that. Her red eyes, slightly watery, looked up at me.

"I, I don't know what I can give you that will make you feel better, Balkan. Ho, if there's anything you want, just let me know, and I'll do whatever it takes to get it!"

Serif said urgently. Her tone was so urgent that she even gasped slightly.

I looked at her and the question I'd had before came back to me.

‘This is too much.’

I didn't understand since this was only my fourth encounter with Serif.

The first encounter was when I had just entered the labyrinth, and saw Serif accompanying the beastgirl party.  
*TLN: I used beastgirl instead of beastmen because this is a gender reversed novel.*

The second time, she suddenly changed her demeanor and offered to perform the blessing and curse tests that other explorers pay a few silver coins for, but only for me, for free.

In the third encounter, I was granted the miracle of mental protection, which was enough to deflect even the hobgoblin staff's magic.

Before this trip, I was also told by Nate Elin that Serif was worried about me.

And now, on our fourth meeting, I'm being treated to a bathing regimen that has the other priests, and even my escort paladin, drooling with envy.

She was too kind.

[◆ Blessing of ???]

And all of this attention came after our second meeting, when I confirmed my blessing.

At this point, I was convinced.

'Serif is aware of the existence of my question mark blessing.’

"Serif. You once told me that if I came to your temple, you would test me for blessings and curses."

"Oh, yes, of course, and it's still in effect!"

Red eyes looked up at me with eagerness.

"It just so happens that I got a blessing on this trip to the Labyrinth⋯"

"Oh, really?! Congratulations!"

I wondered if that wide smile was the real Serif, or if it was just a mask she had created.

Should I trust her completely, or should I keep my distance and be wary⋯

"Yes. Would you mind checking the blessings I received last time as well?"

This time, I'll be sure to do it.

"Honestly."

-Gulp.

Serif's red eyes fluttered open.