**Chapter 103: The Day Before the Storm (5)**

“Gee, seriously⋯?!! What is that!!!”

The virgin Serif, vouched for by Earth Mother, exclaimed, blushing profusely at Idelbert's blunt words.

A look of embarrassment, shame, and bewilderment were mixed together as her white cat tail wagged so hard that it was no longer there.

“Hmph. It's too early for a noble saint to know.”

Idelbert crossed her arms and sneered.

It was not something she should have said, as she was forced to remain a virgin under the Curse of Rejecting Lousy Dicks.

I stared at them for a moment, then turned to Idelbert.

“I think I may have intruded on your conversation without realizing it, I'll come back later.”

“No. That's not necessary. I'm almost done with what I have to say, and you're here to train anyway, so just wait a moment.”

I debated whether or not to open the door, as there was a seriousness in the air, but thankfully Idelbert told me to stay.

I stood for a moment, staring at Serif and Idelbert.

They must be sisters, but it's a strange combination, partly because of the difference in their titles, as a saint of the temple and the head of the Explorers' Union, and partly because of the difference in their personalities.

'Because Serif has a strange dislike for Idelbert.’

I recalled a conversation I'd had with Serif the day before, when I'd been granted a miracle by her in the temple.

-The evil spirit who abandoned the faith, the wicked traitor⋯

Idelbert hadn't said anything about Serif, but Serif had called Idelbert a cunning traitor.

'I wonder what the two people who don't get along well were talking about.’

From the other side of the door, I heard a few key words: fifth floor, twentieth floor, sealed.

When I told her about my encounter with [Gluttony] last time, Idelbert said something similar.

These are secrets about the labyrinth, information only accessible to intermediate or upper-level explorers.

 However, the information about the fifth floor gave me some insight.

’Did something similar happen on the twentieth floor, to what I experienced on the fifth, and did they share information about it?’

The thought stopped there.

“I think I've said all I need to say. Shouldn't you get back to the temple?”

“⋯Uh!”

Idelbert had her arm around my shoulders as she said that.

-Sigh.

A black cat's tail curled around my waist, too.

Serif's puffy eyes automatically traveled to Idelbert's arm and tail.

“Now, as a master, I must 'educate' my one and only pupil.”

Idelbert said, leaning slightly closer to me.

A shiver ran down Serif's spine at the action and the word 'training'.

His white feline ears twitched as if she was thinking of a plan.

“Hmph. I'm afraid I can't do that. I owe him a great debt of gratitude for his service, and until I can repay it, I must stay with him.”

“Hmm. I suppose you can repay him at the temple, or perhaps you could just perform a small miracle for him now.”

“⋯Balkan is a rising star, and I'm personally interested in his growth, so I'd like to watch him train.”

“That's not allowed. As the head of the Explorers' Union, I cannot stand by and watch you steal information from my protégé, who I believe will be a great explorer in the future.”

“⋯⋯”

Sparks flew from the eyes of the two female cat sisters.

Idelbert, the leader of a faction, and Serif, who holds a high position, are arguing over whether to place me in their organization.

 ‘My heart swells with pride.’

Aside from the need to push myself harder, Serif was being played by Idelbert.

Serif's tail and cat ears drooped in defeat as she and Idelbert argued.

“It was nice to talk to you after such a long time. Let’s go too, disciple.”

 Idelbert's grip on my shoulder grew stronger and I was about to follow her naturally.

“⋯⋯⋯⋯sister.”

A crawling voice came from behind.

Idelbert stopped moving while I stood dumbfounded, staring at Idelbert's stone face.

-Hmph.

The corners of Idelbert's mouth twitched.

“⋯?”

She smiled a lopsided smile that didn't seem to match her at all.

It was the kind of expression that a doting father, usually frighteningly cold and expressionless, might wear when he sees his daughter being adorably affectionate.

‘⋯What?’

I rubbed my eyes, closed and opened them a few times, and shook my head wildly before coming to my senses.

In the meantime, Idelbert had returned to her usual expressionless face.

‘Was it a hallucination?’

I thought to myself.

Idelbert's black cat tail wagged so hard it sounded like a whip.

Her tail wagged frantically, an uncontrollable, instinctive emotion, which meant that the look on Idelbert's face was no hallucination.

The cold, emotionless, unresponsive creature that was Idelbert, except for her sex drive, had been disarmed by Serif's soft “Sister”.

“Well, it wouldn’t be so bad to have my ‘younger sister’ watch the sparring. As the ‘big sister, who is like heaven,’ I will allow that much.”

 At Idelbert's words, I could feel Serif's fists clenching behind me.

She seemed to feel quite humiliated that she had used the word 'sister.'

“Hmph.”

I glanced up at Idelbert, who made an amused snort.

“What are you looking at so hard, did I get something on my face?”

“No, no. I'm just, uh, a little surprised.”

I was a little surprised.

‘⋯You can't be that Idelbert, you like your sister so much.’

Something about it felt so out of place, like a gap-moe.

At the same time, I felt a strange sense of identification.

‘The whole reason I'm exploring the labyrinth is to find my sister.’

The sister who hates her sister and the sister who loves her sister too much.

I wondered what happened between them, but I didn't have time to dwell on it.

“Today, we'll start with a fighting match. Guard up.”

The grueling training sessions began.

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“You've grown again.”

I drank Diana’s breast milk and spent my free points.

Idelbert noticed my specs after only a few training sessions.

“I got a little lucky.”

“Hmm. Luck.”

I took Idelbert's offered hand and stood up.

I'm not so exhausted after a few fights anymore. I certainly knew how to allocate my stamina properly.

“Milky, sweet luck again, I suppose.”

“⋯⋯”

Idelbert seemed to recognize the cause but why does she usually speak so bluntly?

No, I wouldn't expect anything less from her, but ⋯⋯ it was crazy.

“Don't take too much of it, it'll take a toll on her too.”

Idelbert had said that even though Diana was retired, she still needed her strength.

“⋯I'll be careful and take what she gives me.”

“That's fair enough. I'm sure she has an idea.”

Among Diana's curses, the most dangerous ones, [Curse of Decadence from the Black Moon] and [Curse of Breast Milk Climax Stat Drain], had to be managed meticulously.

Both have the deadly side effect of leveling down.

I mentally calculated Diana’s libido management log and milking dates.

“Milky clouds⋯? What's that?”

Serif, who was listening to our conversation, shook her head, unable to follow the conversation.

Apparently, her sense of smell and perverted paranoia circuitry were less advanced than Idelbert's.

“There is such a thing. A saint with integrity would never know.”

“⋯Don't make dismissive remarks like that.”

Serif, tongue in cheek, approached me.

The pure white energy from her fingertips permeated my body and my slightly exhausted body was energized.

“Ah. Thank you.”

“Haha. As someone who serves Mother Earth, I did what was expected of me.”

Serif glanced at Idelbert as she said that.

“Even though it's called a duel, isn't the intensity too high for training? Even the Paladins of the Temple don't train this intensely.”

“Don't belittle my apprentice by comparing him to a paladin. He can handle this much.”

“I'm not disrespecting him, I'm just worried about him⋯!”

Serif gestured to me, flustered by Idelbert's words.

I smiled bitterly and observed the two of them.

‘You two get along better than I thought⋯?’

It was quite amusing to see Serif's usually polite and reserved demeanor change to a snarl, and Idelbert's usually stoic demeanor change to a smirk.

“That's enough dueling for today.”

“Already?”

I questioned Idelbert's words.

Usually, my training with Idelbert was a merciless grappling session in which she would squeeze me with all her might until I had no strength left to crawl.

I had so much left in the tank, and it was already over?

“If you lie down because you’re tired, you won’t be able to see this.”

Idelbert pulled an object out of thin air.

I squinted at the blue light emanating from it.

The object, bathed in a mysterious light that could only come from an artifact, was a book almost as thick as an encyclopedia.

“Ugh-”

My head instinctively ached when I saw the book. It was an instinctive rejection of books.

Awww. I, Baby Balkan don't want to read but I'm also intrigued by the artifact in book form.

“Uh, an artifact spellbook?”

The question was answered by Serif's exclamation.

It was an unusual name, to say the least.

“It's an artifact in the form of a spellbook that contains the magic of [Detect Weakness]. It's a rare thing that, if you read it completely, you can use the magic regardless of your talent, learning, and skill.”

All I had to do was read it, what an effect.

Suddenly, a memory came flooding back.

When I was asked to escort the students to the labyrinth they lamented.

-Do you know the lengths mages go to in order to master a single spell? Some of the inexperienced ones take an entire school year to learn a single spell.

-Magic, mana, these assholes are so fucking sensitive, one wrong circuit and it's pointlessly scattered, exploding inside you, exploding outside you, it’s fucking dangerous.

-And we're so busy memorizing theories and laws day and night that we don't have time to do anything else.

“So this is an artifact that replaces all of that in a snap.”

“Yes.”

Idelbert nodded and I voiced my question again.

“But why are you giving it to me?”

Idelbert placed the precious artifact spellbook in my hand.

“Why would I give you a book? I'm giving it to you to read.”

“No, you know that's not what I said.”

“Hmm. Disciple, do you remember what I promised to give you the other day?”

“Ah.”

Before I began training with the hypnotic artifact, when we were talking about Gluttony, Idelbert had promised me one thing.

-It's not much of a reward, but I'll get you something for your efforts as Alliance Leader sooner or later.

This artifact spellbook was the reward she had promised.

“Thank you, master. I will read it carefully.”

I took the book and bowed my head.

It was an artifact that Idelbert herself said was priceless.

I usually hate reading books, but if I could get magic, it was a different story.

Magic. Just repeating the word to myself made my heart flutter like I was back in my childhood.

I've always known about magic, mana, and enchantments, but I'd rarely had the chance to wield them.

Besides, the name of the magic tickled me. “Weakness Detection” must be quite useful in combat.

I couldn't wait to read the book.

Idelbert saw my reaction and smiled slightly in satisfaction.

“Ugh.”

I heard a nervous grunt from behind me and Serif turned to look at me with a worried face.

“The city and the temple also agreed to provide appropriate compensation for the damages incurred last time!”

“Hmm. I gave you a reward for merit, and the temple is giving you a reward for 'damage'.”

“⋯⋯”

Serif, who had fallen silent in a cold sweat at Idelbert's bluster, pulled two small pieces of paper out of thin air and held one out to me.

It was a piece of paper emblazoned with the sigil of the Mother Earth Order.

It was paper, but not of ordinary material. It was much sturdier and finer than the paper I had used to make my slave contract with Grumpy.

“It's a curse-breaking power. You can remove a curse once without paying any cost or price.”

“O⋯”

This was also a pretty good hand.

Because in the Labyrinth, you can get blessings, which can lead to new life and glory, but you can also get curses, which can lead to some very horrible and absurd things.

The curse of becoming a slime, Curse of Decadence from the Black Moon, Curse of Rejecting Lousy Dicks and so on.

The lineup of curses I've seen so far have all been pretty bad, and I'm definitely on edge.

I've been lucky and blessed so far, but as long as I keep entering the Labyrinth, I'm bound to get cursed at some point.

Moreover, the cost of a curse increases with the number of times it is performed.

This means that if I’m cursed and in dire straits, I may run into a financial wall and not be able to lift the curse.

This curse-breaking power would be of great help in the future.

Satisfied, I pocketed the paper and looked at the other slip of paper in Serif's hand.

“What is that?”

Serif shuddered at the simple question, squeezing the paper in his hand even harder.

“I want you to remember that it doesn't mean anything strange, it's just a small token of my gratitude, hmmmmm. It's not for any weird use, and unlike the curse-breaker, it can be used multiple times, so if you ever need it, just let me know⋯”

I wondered what the heck that paper was for.

‘Is it something more powerful than a curse-breaking ticket?’

After more than ten minutes of rambling on about the paper's significance, Serif finally handed it to me.

I stared at the paper in my hand.

Unlike the polished signature on the cursed warrant, the handwriting on this piece of paper was crooked, as if it were cowering in shame.

But it didn't take much to decipher it.

There was only one sentence on the white paper.

[Serif Adeline Free Pass.]

I stared down at it for a long moment.

Then I looked up at Serif, who handed it to me.

“⋯⋯”

Serif, blushing and bowing her head, didn't say anything.

-Bung-bung-bung!

As if to express her emotion, the white cat's tail whirled like a propeller.