**Chapter 104: The Day Before the Storm (6)**

“Tsk. Go get some bread.”

That was the first thing Idelbert said when she saw Serif's free pass.

But Serif merely snorted and did nothing.

-Rumbling.

My stomach growled at the keyword bread.

Training with Idelbert is very intense.

Today's session was only half as long as usual, but I had already burned quite a few calories.

I checked Diana’s wristwatch and it was already four o'clock.

I hadn't eaten lunch since I had to go to the guard post, and I was still hungry from the hearty breakfast Diana had prepared for me.

-Ugh.

Serif's gaze fell on me. Or, more precisely, the [Free Pass] she handed me.

“Ms. Serif, do you have any bread-”

I stopped in mid-sentence, interrupted by Idelbert's comment. I snapped back to reality.

‘Is it right to ask the saint of the temple to buy some bread?’

It couldn't be.

Just as I was about to hastily retract my remark, Serif pulled something out of thin air.

It was a simple lunchbox with ciabatta bread, a few slices of jamon, and a dressed salad.

“Are you hungry? It’s for a diet, so the portion isn’t much, but… it’ll be enough.”

“Uh⋯thank you.”

“You're welcome, and you don't have to use your free pass for just this, it's the least I can do in honor of the goddess.”

Serif wagged her white cat tail gently as she said that.

‘⋯This is a bit difficult.’

I mean, it says 'free pass', but I can't really do anything with it.

Serif isn't some street beggar or outlaw.

Given her status and position, there are clear limits to this [free pass].

As a very extreme example, what would happen if I used it to say, “Spread your legs?”

Would she immediately say, “Yes Balkan,” and spread her legs wide and wag her white cat tail seductively?

Nope. Not in this crazy world.

Moreover, Serif is a devout member of the Mother Earth Order, which emphasizes virginity and is very strict about sexuality.

The moment I asked for such a 'crossing the line' kind of favor, the mace of Mother Earth Order could fall on my head.

So, in order to use [the free pass] properly, I had to walk a fine line.

‘I have to take advantage of them without hurting their feelings too much, but at a level that allows me to maintain a proper relationship.’

Asking for food seemed to fall into the “barely there” category.

I took a quick bite from the bento Serif had provided and spoke again.

“By any chance, would you be able to grant me a miracle before my next trip to the Labyrinth? The miracle I received from Serif last time was very helpful, and I think it would be quite a relief.”

I received the miracle from a level 50 priest haphazardly and by accident last time⋯ but now I know its value.

It's a great way to shrug off the effects of Hobgoblin Staff.

A literal miracle that many people come to her with wads of money, hoping for it, but none but the chosen few can receive.

“Sure, I can give you one, but like I said, I can always grant you a miracle if you're Balkan, so you don't have to use your free pass.”

Serif smiled, accepting this as no big deal.

‘You're taking this so lightly?’

I almost pouted for a moment at her unquestioning, yes-man-like behavior.

“Apprentice, are you entering the Labyrinth this week?”

Idelbert's serious tone brought me back to my senses.

“Ellie's academy graduation is coming up soon, so the next Labyrinth will probably be in a month.”

“Ah. Speaking of which, her graduation is also coming up soon. That's bad luck.”

Idelbert clicked her tongue in disappointment and I raised a question mark at the look.

“Is something wrong?”

“Mmm⋯ nothing major, just that when the Labyrinth opens next week, I think I'll be entering.”

“You will?”

My ears perked up at the unexpected news: Idelbert herself would be entering the Labyrinth.

“It shouldn't take long. At most, I'll only be able to explore the 20th floor and the safe zone, Eden.”

Eden was on the 15th floor.

When she spoke with the nuances of going for a walk in such a place, I suddenly realized the gap between master and pupil.

“So, you'll be away for a while?”

“The Deputy Alliance Leader will be back soon, so she'll be acting Alliance Leader for a while.”

A faint smile crosses Idelbert's face.

“The corners of your mouth are twitching at the thought of not training.”

“Haha. It's all for my own good, anyway. I'll continue to train hard while you're away.”

Although I said this, I laughed heartily inside.

While it was unfortunate that I would not be able to gain combat experience through dueling, it was good news that I had avoided the basic physical training that would stretch me to the limit.

My laughter brought a faint smile to Idelbert's face again.

“It pleases me as a master to see my pupil improve through his own efforts without the whip. Your efforts have been rewarded. Here's another gift for you.”

I clasped my hands together like Pavlov's dog at the word gift.

Idelbert pulled another object from the void and placed it in my hand.

Four gravity artifacts with eight times gravity.

 “Kaaaagh!”

I resisted the gravity that suddenly crushed my body.

“Are you holding on for dear life?”

Idelbert chuckled, attaching gravity artifacts to my limbs.

Damn. I'd been outmaneuvered by the sneaky black cat.

“You can only become stronger beyond your limits if you make training your daily routine. In other words, if you make your daily routine your training, you will grow faster.”

“Yi, are you telling me to wear the gravity artifacts from now on⋯?”

“I'm glad you understand so quickly, you're my student after all.”

I'm supposed to go about my daily life wearing this thing? I don't understand.

-Bang! Pow!

I resisted the urge to tug on the black cat's tail, which was wagging gleefully, and chew on it with my lips to educate her.

‘A gentleman’s revenge is not too late even if it takes ten years.’

Those who rage now will be subdued in an instant.

It will not be too late to repay them when I am stronger than Idelbert.

I made a mental note of the humiliation I'd suffered today on my 'Idelbert's List' and pushed myself up against gravity.

-Grrrr.

As I stood up, I saw Idelbert's shadow on the floor.

“Niaoong-”

And out of that shadow, a black cat leapt out and stood in front of me with a swagger.

It was the same black cat I had seen during my first meeting with Idelbert.

“If anything happens while I'm gone, Shuding will help you.”

“Is this cat named Shuding?”

“Yes. Isn't she wonderful, she can even use a little magic.”

“Yeah⋯what⋯”

Idelbert's sense of naming was incomprehensible, but the cat itself, named Shuding, stood with a dignified and regal demeanor, just like Idelbert.

“Come here.”

I didn't hate these creatures.

Unlike humans, they aren’t hostile or envious of me, and I often find them soothing to watch, so I suppose I should say I like them.

Perhaps sensing my feelings, Shuding approached me with a bold stride.

Without thinking, I held out my hand to her and spoke in a low voice.

“Hand.”

-Poof.

Idelbert put her hand over my helmet.

“⋯?”

“⋯⋯⋯⋯?”

I looked up, bewildered by the suddenness of the situation, to see Idelbert staring down at me, her face even more bewildered than mine.

“Uh⋯ I⋯ was talking to Shuding, Master.”

Idelbert quickly removed her hand at that.

“⋯⋯Ah. Um. That, yes. Hmm. I knew it. ⋯⋯It's true. I was just trying to show her that this is how it's done, in case she didn't know.”

“Niao-”

She stammered in an uncommonly panicked voice, but Shuding wasn't even looking at Idelbert.

She was just resting her front paws in my palm.

“Pfft, for a female cat⋯ she's pretty compliant.”

Serif choked back a laugh and looked back and forth between Idelbert and Shuding.

Her narrowed eyes seemed to mock Idelbert.

‘I see you're a female, too.’

 “⋯Hmm. I see. She approached you on her own. She's definitely a good follower-hmmm!”

Idelbert, who had been speaking casually, took a step back in surprise.

The black cat's tail twitched as if startled.

The timing coincided with my fingers gently tickling Shuding's chin.

I must reward her because she immediately understood my words and raised her hand.

“Miaoo⋯⋯⋯”

Shuding, who was standing in a defiant manner, purred as if asking for more.

“Hmph, hmph, hmph?”

Idelbert shuddered as Shuding rubbed her chin against my finger.

“Shu, Shuding seems to be a bit tired.”

“Miao-!”

Idelbert waved her hand, and Shuding leapt into my shadow with a piercing squeal.

Was it a blessing? It was a mysterious phenomenon that was hard to believe even after seeing it.

“⋯Don't call her unless it's a real emergency.”

“Yes.”

“⋯But you should still feed her occasionally. She's gentle, so she can go in the water, so she's often washed.”

I nodded at Idelbert's list of precautions and checked the time.

Before I knew it, the evening opening time was approaching. It was time to return to work at the inn.

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After exchanging pleasantries with Idelbert, who was about to go to the labyrinth, and making a promise with Serif to go to the temple to receive a miracle soon, we parted ways.

Time passed quickly.

Wearing the gravity artifact every day was never easy, but I'd grown accustomed to it, now that I wore it until I went to sleep.

As much as I wanted to take a break, I didn't skip training.

I have to work hard now so I won't regret it later.

“I heard you're going in the Labyrinth yourself, how long has it been?”

“It's going to be a bit of a ruckus for a while.”

“I hope the bastards who've been peeking around don't go on a rampage⋯ it's best to stay out of the Outlaw Zone for a while, just in case.”

“We'll have to clean up the Reformed Explorers, too.”

“And the Deputy Commander, too.”

Idelbert entered the Labyrinth as soon as the portal to the Labyrinth opened this week.

She was accompanied by three high-ranking explorers from the Alliance.

Explorers were the primary clientele of the Diana Tavern, and Idelbert's story was never far from the conversation whenever patrons gathered at the bar.

As an employee, I listened to their tales until I had scabs on my ears.

Days passed again.

“That's enough reading for today.”

I closed the [Weakness Detection] Spellbook, pressing my brow tightly against the overwhelming fatigue.

I could see why Idelbert had said it was important to 'finish reading'.

It was no small feat to read a book that was much thicker than most encyclopedias or major texts without missing a single word.

But after more than a week of eating, pooping, training, reading, and sleeping, I'm already more than halfway through.

I keep the spellbook on my desk in my room.

Having two books in my room made me feel like an intellectual, which made me feel proud.

‘I should read that one too.’

It was a fairy tale book with the grandiose name [Mother Earth and the Myth of Light].

I had borrowed it from the temple for half a silver coin, but I hadn't read a single chapter yet because I was busy with various things.

'Maybe I'll read it once I finish the spellbook.’

-Hmph.

I yawned deeply and unwrapped the bundle that had been shoved deep in the closet.

The skull of his girlfriend that Jeremy had left behind caught my eye. She was supposed to be enchanted to prevent decay⋯ and she still wasn't.

I splashed some water on it and covered it again. It was gruesome and I didn't want to look at it as often as possible.

I went back to sleep, and the next morning the academy graduation dawned.

Just in case, I washed myself thoroughly in the temple baths yesterday, shedding months of grime.

It was quite a sight to behold, looking my best and wearing a neatly pressed suit.

If I do say so myself, I look like a dandy gentleman.

Add a helmet to the mix and you have a man who looks like a strange mix of modern politeness and medieval savagery in the mirror.

As I came down to the tavern fully prepared, Diana, carrying a handbag, greeted me.

She was wearing a beautiful dress, as I was in a suit.

“Are you ready to go, Balkan?”

“⋯Yes.”

I couldn't take my eyes off her in her dress.

If it weren't for the tongue-biting shock therapy, I could have stared at her for hours.

'Thank you, Silanes.'

 I sent a heartfelt thank you to the owner of Arachne's Miracle Tailors, who had made this dress for her.

Fixing her handbag, Diana offered me her hand.

I shyly took her hand and climbed into the carriage she had waiting in front of the inn.

Purrrrr-

With a grinding sound, the carriage made its way to the nobles' quarters.