**Chapter 118: Ego Axe Bunny (2)**

After a hearty breakfast as a mother-daughter trio, Ellie and I headed straight to the Explorers' Union.

I was going there to claim the reward Professor Mankostil had sent me.

“But Ellie. Why are you following me?”

“Hmph. I'm bored, I don't have to go to the Academy for classes anymore, and I have the next two months off.”

Last night, in the carriage ride back to the inn, Ellie had decided on her own path and told me and Diana.

She was going to be a royal mage.

Considering that most mages make it their lifelong goal to become a noble vassal, let alone a royal mage, Ellie was literally off the starting line.

After agreeing to be scouted by the royal family, Ellie was given a two-month break.

In other words, she's just a bored idler for now.

“If you don't want to, I'll just stay at the inn.”

“I don't mean no, I'm just curious. Do you want to come with me?”

“⋯Hihihi. Yes!”

She was in a state of panic mode when she saw my dick in the morning and ran out in surprise but when I asked her if she wanted to come with me, she was back to positive mode.

She gingerly grabbed my arm and trotted after me.

As soon as we entered the Explorers' Union, I saw a lot of people struggling with the morning.

“Are all of them explorers?”

“Mostly? Not all, but there are a lot of clients. Well, most of them are low-level or mid-level.”

From what I'd heard at Diana's tavern, most high-level Explorers who were serious about tackling the Labyrinth stayed in Eden, a safe zone on the 15th floor.

‘I heard there's an Explorers' Union branch there.’

That's why it's rare to see high-level Explorers in the Explorers' Union branches on the ground.

Well, that's one thing.

“Junior Explorer Balkan. We've got you, please take your package to the right.”

I went to the window, verified my identity, and took the package.

I don't know what was inside, but it was lighter than I expected.

“It's from the professor, so it must be something magical, right?”

“I don't know. She said she'd send me something to help me explore the Labyrinth.”

I wondered. What could it be?

We sat down at a suitable table and carefully opened the package.

What we found was.

“It's a backpack.”

“⋯Backpack.”

It was a very ordinary-looking bag.

A very lightweight backpack, not too big, not too small.

“This is it?”

A wave of resentment washed over me.

This is what she gives me as a reward? She didn't even give me an Outlaw Slayer's Certificate to hide the fact that outlaws had infiltrated the Academy?

I opened the backpack and stuck my arm in, wondering if this was it.

-Swoosh.

My arm went right in. I stuck my arm through the backpack, but my hand didn't even touch the bottom of the backpack.

“What the hell, Balkan, is that a subspace backpack?!!”

That's when I heard a voice behind me.

I turned around to see Jubeel and Joy Hog approaching the table we were sitting at.

Seeing them, Ellie whispered quietly to me.

“⋯Who are they?”

“My party. That cow over there is Jubeel, and the dwarf is Joy Hog.”

“Oppa coworkers⋯? Oh, hi, I'm Ellie, and I'm, uh, a wizard, uh, um. I'm especially good with fire elemental magic!”

Ellie jumped to her feet and smiled broadly at them both.

“Uhhh. An earwig? Well, you must be a nice earwig, seeing as you're next to Balkan. I'm Joy Hog.”

“I’m Jubeel. My specialty is shooting breast milk far away. My hobby is developing mammary glands. When I wake up in the morning, I always drink my breast milk to wake up. If I drink the fresh breast milk that I pumped first thing every morning, I can tell what my condition will be like that day.”

“⋯⋯⋯ah. Yes⋯”

Ellie nodded dazedly, her face a mask of confusion.

I knew that sensation all too well, because it made me feel frazzled just being around her.

“What's going on with you two all of a sudden?”

“I’ve been resting for a month, so I’m feeling a bit bored. I came here to see if there was any commission I could take on. Anyway, is that a subspace backpack?!”

Joy Hog and Jubeel gawked at the backpack Professor Mankostil had sent me.

“What's so great about this?”

“It's a scarce artifact! I've been scouring the black market in the shopping districts and Outlaw District for months, and the listings have dried up!”

"Compared to the personal subspace used by the real pros, it has a lot of limitations, but still, it's something, right? Whenever one comes out, it gets auctioned off at the highest bid right away. The most recent one sold for 30 gold coins, I think? It had a capacity of 20 kg."

The artifact backpack was worth 30 gold coins.

That was the true value of this backpack.

'My whole life's savings is worth 5 gold coins⋯'

As expected of the professor. The gift it’s a bit overwhelming, but so what?

According to her, it's a fair reward for my hard work.

I apologized for calling her old and looked at my subspace backpack.

“If you aim for the middle floor or higher, there are a lot of things you have to bring with you. Hehe. I’m jealous.”

“I'm tired of packing before I even start fighting monsters.”

The two joined the table and talked casually.

“Soon we'll have to decide where to go next.”

“I honestly think the twelfth floor is a possibility.”

I frowned slightly at Joy Hog's words.

The Labyrinth had a total of 34 floors.

If the first through eleventh floors were the upper levels, used by low-level explorers.

The twelfth floor is where the lowest of the mid-level explorers operate, in other words, the gateway to the middle tier.

This isn't to say that low-level Explorers shouldn't go there, but rather that on average, you should be an intermediate level Explorer to be able to act on the 12th floor.

“Isn't this a bit too fast, we went to the 8th floor last time?”

“That's because we went to the eighth floor. The only thing that changes from level 8 to level 11 are the monsters and terrain, but the overall exploration difficulty is the same.”

“Gellan's party, who were close to being mid-level explorers, reached the 12th floor.”

Gellan, the man who had accompanied us to the eighth floor last time, was turned into an idiot by outlaws and trolling.

Hearing that he had made it to the 12th floor, I suddenly felt an unexplainable surge of confidence.

‘If he could do it, why can't I?’

But such impulsive overconfidence has always been a danger in the Labyrinth.

I have to be objective about my own and my party's power, and I can't afford to be unnecessarily arrogant.

“So far, our party has gained blessings, changed equipment, fought that abomination to the death, and gained enlightenment. With this level of spec increase, we are ready to challenge the realm of mid-level explorers.”

“Hmph.”

But Joy Hog had a point.

Due to the various events in the Labyrinth, our party had grown even more.

Aside from me, they were originally a party that belonged to the top tier of low-level explorers.

“Moreover. You've officially joined the party. Don't you realize that your level has already surpassed that of a normal low-level explorer?”

“⋯⋯”

“In my three years as an explorer, I've never seen such a monstrous growth rate as yours.”

“That’s right. It seems like it was just yesterday that I saved you on the 5th floor.”

Joy Hog and Jubeel's words reminded me of the battle with the outlaw Kalino.

It was a life-or-death encounter with an outlaw who was the equivalent of a mid-level explorer and I wasn't even wearing my main gear at the time.

Although I couldn't simply compare hand-to-hand combat to fighting monsters, I had done quite well even in that state.

“Hmm.”

While I was pondering, Ellie, who was sitting next to me, quietly snorted as if she wanted us to recognize her.

Jubeel caught it.

“What is it, Ellie? Are you interested in the Labyrinth too?”

“Hmph. Well, I'd be lying if I said I wasn't, wouldn't I?”

“⋯Wait a minute. So, you're that kid from the academy, the one who melted the minotaur?”

Damn. I had underestimated Jubeel's intelligence.

I thought she would have forgotten, but she clearly remembered Ellie's performance.

“Ah, her!”

Jubeel's words seemed to jog Joy Hog's memory as well.

Their eyes changed as they looked at Ellie.

That's the look of someone who wants to recruit a rolling gem.

“Stop moving.”

“What?!”

I grabbed Ellie's shoulders as she slowly tried to pull her hips away, pulling her closer to my body.

“Uhhhh!”

Ellie came hard into my arms. Her face was buried in my pectoralis major.

“You want to take a barely grown kid to the 12th floor? Are you all out of your mind?”

Ellie may be free for the next two months, but she's about to become a royal mage.

Why drag her into the world of explorers, with all its dangers, when she could easily succeed in the open?

Of course, a companion would be a great help, but I was more worried than that.

“Hmmm. Well. I'm not saying we're going to recruit her right away.”

“It's a possibility. Judging by her magic power, she'll be able to take on even mid-tier beasts.”

“Hmph!”

Ellie snorted at their words but my pectoralis major muscle tickled.

Ellie's shoulders shook. Her flapping elf ears slapped the back of her hand.

“Ah. I'm sorry, Ellie.”

I must have hugged her too hard in my haste.

I released my grip on her shoulders, and she slowly slid away from me, her face flushed red.

“Haa.”

Red liquid trickled from Ellie's nose as she breathed out in a daze.

A nosebleed.

In hindsight, I realized that the T-shirt Diana had bought her was also slightly stained with blood.

“Are you okay? Here's a tissue.”

“⋯⋯Ah, no. Thanks for the tissues, oppa.”

I grabbed some tissues from the tissue box on the table and held them up to Ellie's nose.

“Oh, I'll do it⋯ Oooh⋯”

“It's okay, hold still.”

I carefully wiped Ellie's nosebleed and looked at Joy Hog and Jubeel.

“Anyway, I’ll do better, so don’t even think about touching Ellie. I’ll think positively about the 12th floor.”

“Uhhh. Okay.”

I said we'd meet again later and left.

I was thinking of taking Ellie back to the inn because she didn't seem to be feeling well.

“⋯It's like watching a father doting on his daughter.”

“Heh. Papa pang⋯ Baby seed milk⋯ Papa I want to give birth to a child⋯ Papa impregnate your daughter with your cum⋯ Kwah-uh. Ogo-go-go-gogogog⋯”

“Jubeel. Please⋯ please get a grip⋯ I'm so ashamed of myself for going with you⋯”

I pretended not to hear the conversation behind me.

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A few days later, I headed to Zirnier’s workshop.

Last night. The manager of Zirnier's workshop had come to the inn.

—Is it you, Lord Balkan? Lord Zirnier Besil is looking for you.

As a blacksmith, she had only one reason to seek me out.

The armor forged from the Soulstone of [Gluttony] is finally complete.