**Chapter 125: The 12th floor (1)**

A place immersed in deep darkness.

Only a few strands of candlelight illuminated the place where the dank darkness descended.

“The clan you were contracting with disappeared?”

The woman holding the candle frowned, shining her light on the man who jerked his head toward her.

Horns protruded from the top of his head and wings flapped behind his back.

It was the Incubus Ain.

The face that was filled with fear was also revealed, and Incubus Ain opened his mouth again.

“Yes, yes! I went there during the slave tribute period, and all the key executives, including Vesta, the leader, had disappeared.”

“Hmph⋯”

Hearing the woman's low moan, Incubus Ain shuddered even more and quickly recited his report.

“Uh, there are many suspicious circumstances. The last trace was at the Academy, but unless she had lost her mind to some extent, she would not have targeted the Academy⋯”

Incubus Ain clicked his tongue inwardly as he reported to the woman.

He had misjudged.

Vesta, the head of the Blues Clan, had been supplying quality slaves for years for nothing more than power.

He was right that she had made a foolish choice for the sake of greater power, or that she had made a major mistake for fear of not being able to deliver the slaves in time.

But right now, there were more important matters than that.

“So. What about the orb she was carrying?”

“⋯That, and the orb, are gone.”

“⋯⋯”

The woman grinded her teeth.

Hearing that, the Incubus Ain was even more terrified and lowered his head.

[The orb] is a precious item.

It shouldn't be lost so futilely, and it must be recovered.

The woman held the candle closer to the man's eyes.

Tap-tap-tap-tap

Incubus Ain swallowed hard as he watched the candle flicker.

He didn't mind that the fire was about to burst into a huge blaze and engulf him.

He was glad it ended there.

The number of men who have been forever ruined by the woman is well over three digits.

And today, if he made a mistake, he could be one of them.

Fortunately, a look of relief spread across Incubus Ain’s face as he heard the woman’s next words.

“The 'regular meeting' is just around the corner, and now this... it's a bitter pill to swallow, isn't it?”

Incubus Ain immediately understood the woman's intentions.

She wanted him to go and retrieve the orb immediately.

“I'll definitely get it back.”

Fortunately, there was a silver lining.

Before any trace of the Blues Clan's visit to the Academy could be found, the clan's slave house was raided by a group of mysterious figures.

The raiders were a mid-level explorer, Wind Valley's Chirp Chirp, and a nameless maiden with the skills of a top-tier low-level explorer.

The clan's behavior had become more urgent since then, and Incubus Ain surmised that they had probably taken the orb.

“Do you think you can do it alone?”

“I will get it back.”

“It's good that you're so motivated, but I want to be sure.”

The woman stamped her heel on the ground, and a great surge of negative energy rose around Incubus Ain.

Emerging from the nose-pricklingly thick aura were three succubi.

-Hmph!

The incubus man immediately avoided the succubi's gaze.

The succubi's aura was dizzying to look at.

If he were a normal human male, the mere sight of them would have caused his mind to collapse and turn him into an idiot.

Without a massive libido and the physical ability to handle it, it was nearly impossible for anyone, male or female, to survive them.

“Thank you, my lord, for your generous support. O worshiper of the great [Lust].”

“What? You too are one of his followers. Aren’t you one of his kind who walks the same path?”

The woman's expression hardened sharply as she looked at Incubus Ain, speaking benevolently.

“But the price of failure is one you will not fully bear.”

“⋯! Yes, yes!!!”

With a look of horror on his face, incubus Ain rushed out of the room with the succubi the woman had given him.

He followed their trail to the Labyrinth.

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I stretched as soon as I woke up. My early night was worth it and I felt refreshed.

Next to me was the letter from Professor Mankostil that I had fallen asleep reading yesterday.

The letter talked about a strange organization called the Devil Worshippers.

However, the note didn't give much information.

-Beware of those who call themselves fanatics with black orbs.

That was the only message left.

'Still, I hope I'm not being unnecessarily cautious.’

I filed the letter away and set it on my desk.

'The Scroll of Weakness Detection is gone.’

I finished reading the Scroll of Weakness Detection that Idelbert had given me yesterday along with the letter.

Then the magic book transformed into magic and permeated my body.

 'I'll be able to use it whenever I want.’

Since it's called Weakness Detection, I'll be able to use it in battle.

Yawning, I stretched and washed my face with the lukewarm water Ellie had brought me beforehand and gave myself a quick wipe down.

It pained me to think that such simple pleasures as showering and drying off would be denied me in the Labyrinth, but it's something that can't be helped.

As a side note, Ellie was so traumatized by the day she saw my cock when she brought me water that she always brought me face water before I even woke up.

Once I was properly cleaned up, I gathered my gear.

I put on gaiters made of minotaur hide, iron thigh and arm guards.

All three were quality pieces of equipment that I'd spent a few gold coins on. They weighed a little, but they were safe.

Next, I donned the leather armor Zirnier had handed me and placed my helmet on my head.

The Great Helm, the first of Zirnier’s children, glowed an even more dazzling blue than before, after being repaired by her.

‘It seems to have a slightly increased perceptual range.’

It wasn't a dramatic change, but it was an admirable evolution, considering the relic alloy reinforcements that had made it stronger.

At my waist was a battle axe about the length of my arm. It was also an artifact hatchet with a gigantization feature that Zirnier had repaired for me.

On my back was my Bernie, an oversized axe that measured a massive one meter and eighty centimeters in length.

I paid 50 silver coins to the harpy wizard Lammel for an enchantment that allows me to strap the weapon to my back, which seems to be quite useful.

All in all, it added weight to my gear, but it wasn't a big deal.

"It's light, it's light."

 This is thanks to my subspace backpack.

Even though it contained daily necessities, various foods, intermediate healing potions, a map, and winter gear, it felt as if it contained nothing.

 ‘It must have weighed at least 20 kilograms.’

Without the weight reduction of the subspace backpack, I might have had to give up a shield or an axe.

It's not easy to march with a backpack for hours, let alone weeks.

All set, I looked in the mirror.

“I look like shit.”

I saw a gaunt man, like the leader of a savage tribe preparing to go to war.

The sight made me feel a bit bittersweet.

I wondered if it was a good thing that I was adapting so well to this savage world.

"That's good. I adapted and didn't lose it."

Feeling a bit bloody, I quickly cleared my head and walked out of the room.

“Hey, Balkan. I'm going to bring you breakfast, but you can stay with Ellie for a while.”

“Balkan. Come on, foster mom is going to make you a milk latte for dessert.”

Immediately, the mother and daughter greeted me with good morning greetings.

It's a happy, laid-back morning that has been repeated over the past few days.

Naturally, my eyes were drawn to Ellie's outfit.

A crisp white shirt and flowing tennis skirt.

Potion bottles tied to a loose belt and a brown robe draped lightly over her shoulders.

She was dressed exactly as she had been when we first met. But this.

“It's the Academy uniform.”

“It may look like it, but it's the finest Arachne silk. It's probably stronger than most leather armor.”

“Is it?”

Then there was no problem. It's not like a mage is going to be on the battlefield. As long as it was Arachne silk, she would be protected.

“You're wearing a hat, too?”

“Hee-hee. What do you think? A wizard looks good in a long-brimmed hat.”

Ellie lifted the brim of her hat with her index finger and gave me a provocative smile.

“That's cute.”

“...”

I laughed and patted her head like a naughty child, and she pressed the brim of her hat down to hide her blush.

“Here you go.”

Diana, who had arrived with the meal, stepped between me and Ellie.

“Thank you as always, Diana.”

“Hoo-hoo. Enjoy.”

On the days we entered the Labyrinth, Diana always made me a special breakfast course.

Thanks to her, I can start the day with a full stomach.

I can only be grateful for her grace.

First I had salad with a refreshing dressing to whet the appetite.

The main course of the day is a thick steak cooked in the confit technique and served with mashed potatoes.

On the side, garnishes such as tomatoes and shallots were served with just a touch of salt and pepper.

The exterior of the meat was nicely seared to the point that when I scratched it lightly with my knife, it made a crispy sound like it was fried.

When I cut into the thick slices, I could see a pink gradient in the center. It was evenly grilled.

I took a big bite and the juices burst in my mouth with every bite.

It was watery, probably because Diana had grilled it.

“What do you think? Is it good? Does it have any flavor?”

I asked Diana, who was watching me eat with a smirk on her face and closed eyes.

“It's perfect, right down to the doneness of the vegetables.”

“Hoo-hoo, I'm glad to hear that. Eat up, Ellie. There's more.”

“Yeah.”

Ellie munched beside me.

Elves are supposed to be vegetarians, but apparently they're not.

When the meal was over, I had a milk latte for dessert.

“Wow. I like how sweet this is.”

“Well, is it?”

I wonder if she has a sweet tooth. Ellie drank her milk latte with a happy face.

I took a sip of my coffee, too. The right amount of caffeine helps to wake me up.

-Gulp.

“...”

I took a sip and lifted my mouth from the cup.

This sweet yet deep flavor, it's something you can't get from ordinary milk.

I didn't milk it myself, so I didn't get any extra stats, but...

I immediately realized that the milk in this latte was not just any milk.

“⋯⋯”

“⋯⋯”

I exchanged a wordless glance with Diana.

Breast milk with no stat bonus.

Was it worth drinking?

‘It’s a reward.’

It's not as if I'm blinded by strength and forcefully squeezing it out.

I just drank it gratefully.

I stare at Diana for a moment, unable to make eye contact, and then shove a full cup of her breast milk coffee down my throat.

-Gulp. Gulp.

Diana's face flushed even deeper as I gulped it down with a deliberate noise.

-Thud!

“Huh.”

“...”

“I drink it well, Diana.”

“Uh, yeah...”

After enjoying a short tea break and chatting for a while, Ellie and I got up to leave.

 “Ellie. I think you'll do well, but you should always be careful and vigilant in the Labyrinth.”

“Yes. Of course.”

“Good. Take care.”

“Neeeeet... Ugh...”

Diana, who had been counseling with a worried face, scooped Ellie into her arms.

Pressed against her adoptive mother's chest, Ellie groaned in pain and hugged Diana tightly.

As I watched the polar bears lose their habitat, I realized that Diana's gaze was directed at me.

Sure enough, she smiled and gently beckoned me over, as if to say, “Welcome. “

I cautiously stepped between the mother and daughter.

“Huh...”

“Hmph...”

I opened my arms wide and hugged both Ellie and Diana tightly at the same time.

I could feel Ellie's warm body heat on my left and Diana's strong female pheromones on my right.

We hugged each other as tightly as if we were real family, sharing our body heat, and then slowly, without warning, we fell apart.

“...Da, I'm going!”

A red-faced Ellie ran out of the inn in a hurry. Diana looked at her and smiled.

Her smile soon turned to me.

“Take care of her, Balkan.”

“Don't worry too much. Even if she looks like that, Ellie can handle herself.”

“Hoo-hoo, right?”

“Of course.”

I grabbed the doorknob to leave the inn.

“Balkan.”

Just before I opened the door, Diana stopped me, gently grabbing my hand.

“......”

She said nothing to me however her hand trembled pitifully and her face flushed, but it was clear what she wanted.

We stared at each other for a moment, then casually leaned our heads closer and locked lips.

It wasn't a passionate mating kiss.

It was a tender, sweet, chaste kiss that promised to return safely.

Gently, I put my hands around her waist and pulled her into a hug.

I felt her touch on my back and then, without realizing it, my tense shoulders relaxed.

It was a hug that we shared every time I entered the labyrinth.

For me, it was now a sacred ritual.

“I'll be back.”

“I'll wait.”

We looked at each other and smiled.

“⋯Come on, oppa.”

-Hmph.

I turned around and saw Ellie, cheeks puffed out, watching me and Diana hug.

We awkwardly giggled and pulled away.

We walked out of the inn, away from Diana, who was waving goodbye, and made our way to the entrance, which was packed with explorers trying to enter the Labyrinth.

 “There you are.”

The party had already arrived, all of them heavily laden with luggage.

Front line tank. Vanguard axe warrior. Two mages. Priest. Rear guard and swordsman.

The party mix couldn't be better.

“Let's go, Ellie.”

“Yes!”

Me, Ellie, and the rest of the Joy Hog party clung to each other without a word.

As we stepped toward the Labyrinth Entrance Portal, the air and surroundings changed with a slight sense of floating.

The air was cool yet cold, unfamiliar yet familiar.

-You're going to the twelfth floor, then this miracle should do the trick.

The previous day, when I went to the temple, the warm miracle I received from Serif pushed away the cold air.

 “Good start, we're near the descent portal.”

Joy Hog briefed, looking around and comparing maps.

“All right, then. Let's go.”

Now that we had a long, well-deserved rest, it was time to get back to fucking work.