**Chapter 126: The 12th floor (2)**

When I first fell into the labyrinth, goblins were a menacing enough foe.

-Tsk!

But in hindsight, it wasn't even on the axis of danger.

It is not easy to conserve stamina when using Bernie from the first floor.

It's also a waste of power to use her on goblins.

I struck the goblin in the neck with the hatchet at my waist and continued through the labyrinth.

“Waaaah!”

I shouldn't have been particularly surprised or reacted, but Ellie, standing behind me, looked at me with a dazed admiration.

It's not every day you see a sight like this, and for good reason.

We reached the edge of the floor at a brisk pace.

The descent portal glowed with blue light.

“Please wait a moment. I need to take a sample of the magic around the portal.”

Ellie pulled out the empty potion vial she kept tied to her belt.

“I see. I'll take a break then.”

“I guess I'll finally get to put my stuff down. Phew.”

The pace of the party slowed slightly, but none of the party members grumbled at Ellie's words.

After all, researching portals was one of the reasons she joined the party in the first place.

No one wanted to offend a mage, who was a valuable resource.

The party took their places and took a short break, keeping a watchful eye on their surroundings.

“Is there anything I can do to help?”

“Oh, oppa, umm, just watch from my side.”

Ellie gingerly touched the magic around the portal.

After the Wisdom stat in the status window went up slightly, I was able to feel the magic a little more clearly.

Still, with no magical knowledge, I couldn't tell exactly what she was doing.

“Magic power changes slightly depending on where it is.”

As if she had noticed, Ellie explained.

“In desert regions, magic holds heat, and in cold regions, it holds cold.”

“You mean it's affected by its surroundings?”

“Yes. That's why mages build up a reservoir of energy within their bodies, and use it to manipulate their magic.”

Following Ellie's guidance, the blue grains that had been lingering near the portal began to slowly flow into the potion bottle.

“The magic I build up in my body through my own efforts is my own magic, unaffected by the world around me, and I can use it to interfere with the magic around me.”

Ellie grinned, as if to say, “I'm pretty amazing.”

“That's right. No ordinary wizard can do something that advanced. They just memorize books, carve out circuits, and spit out cookie-cutter magic.”

Lammel, the harpy mage who had come out to watch Ellie, agreed.

So, that was an advanced technique.

I stared down at my palm.

‘My magic.’

If I could clearly understand that, wouldn't I be able to use something like the sword ki?

I also heard that the basis of sword ki is one's own magical power.

-Pfft.

Ellie carefully capped the potion bottle.

“Are you done?”

“No. I need to go outside and take a closer look with my lab equipment, and take samples from the other floors.”

“We'd better get up, then.”

Like soldiers taking a break in the middle of a march, the party members who had been lying down with their backpacks on grunted and pushed themselves up.

Sure enough, as we headed deeper into the Labyrinth, our packs, even when streamlined as much as possible, seemed quite heavy.

As I strapped on my feather-light subspace backpack, I felt a strange sense of superiority.

“You, Balkan. You're giving me a bad vibe.”

“Hmmm. Come on. Let's go.”

I coughed and went straight to the next floor.

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I spent three days in the labyrinth.

Second floor, then third, then fourth.

The party reached the end of the fourth floor with little difficulty.

“Is it a coincidence? I don’t see any monsters imbued with magi.”

“Yeah, well, there were at least three of them on every level last time we went through the labyrinth.”

Joy Hogg and Lammel talked quietly as they rested.

The magi-clad beasts had been sparse since the Omen.

Since the appearance of the Temple Investigators, or more precisely, since the day Serif and Idelbert met and talked.

For ten years, the darkness of the Labyrinth had been gradually forgotten.

The existence of the Magi began to be known again, even among low- and mid-level explorers.

There are three main characteristics known to the world:

-A monster with magi is stronger than a normal monster.

-Resistant to physical attacks and magic.

-Weak to holy power.

“Well. It's probably best if we don't meet them.”

“That's true.”

As annoying as they are to deal with, it's a good thing we didn't run into any of the magi infused ones on the fourth floor.

“I'm done taking samples.”

Ellie has finished sampling the magic from the up and down portals on the fourth floor.

The party stood back up and prepared to head to the fifth floor.

“Fuck. I'm so fucking tired.”

“⋯⋯Sorta, kinda, kinda scary, hmm⋯”

Lammel and Hitolis held their breath in silence.

The party almost got wiped out on the fifth floor during the last labyrinth.

Lammel lost her leg and was crippled, and Hitolis was somehow tainted and nearly turned into an idiot.

'I was even cursed.’

It was a situation where they were so traumatized that they couldn't take a step forward.

 “Holy shit, Lammel! Hitolis! I like you guys!”

Our party had a mental care machine for great mental defense.

“Eww! Ewww! Joohahahahaha!”

“Ouch, you crazy bitch, you're splashing breast milk on the staff!”

Jubeel lightened the mood by spitting out her breast milk.

In exchange for the foul smell of breast milk, the party came to life.

“Can I help you?”

“⋯⋯⋯khem. Mmm, I'm sorry. I won't take it out again.”

Suddenly revitalized by Ellie's words, Jubeel put her clothes back on and hugged her chest tightly.

Ellie was a surprisingly good counter to Jubeel.

Forming up again, the party crossed the descent portal with their hands on each other's bodies.

-Woof!

The fifth floor was reached with a slight feeling of floating.

Without bothering to look around, we tore through the fountain travel scroll to the edge of the floor.

The multiple-of-5 floors with fountains were convenient because they allowed you to skip the tedious exploration process.

-Wheeeeeeee-!

Ellie glanced behind her as she gathered the samples once more, and heard a strange wind noise.

At the time, it sounded like the wind was whistling through the labyrinth.

-Boo-boo-boo

Bernie on my back rattled as if in resonance with the wind.

It wasn't the wind, but the axe itself that was vibrating after a humiliating tremor, as if helpless with shame.

[⋯subject, over, bastard⋯]

I heard a voice in my head but it didn't come through my ears.

It was a strange sensation, like a direct slap to the brain but the voice was familiar and unfamiliar at the same time.

It was Bernie's voice.

I instinctively pulled Bernie away.

“Go, what the hell, Balkan!”

“Is it an attack?!”

The party looked around quickly at my sudden action, but there was no sign of any explorers coming or going, let alone a beast.

“⋯No. It's not an attack⋯Bernie⋯”

I stood still, staring at Bernie.

The giant, oversized axe rattled as if it were making an announcement.

[I'm going to make you regret doing this to my body⋯ for sure⋯]

The voice slammed into my head like a telepath.

[What the hell are you talking about after keeping your mouth shut all this time?]

I thought to myself, and realized that I could get through to Bernie.

[Hey, you! Use respect when calling this body, not that stupid Bernie name!]

Bernie was still not on the subject of tools.

There's nothing like violence to make someone understand their situation.

I think she needs to be punished.

-Taaak!

[Kkwowow⋯?!]

I hit the golden ornament in the center of the axe, and immediately a pitiful groan echoed in my head.

After a short, sharp groan, Bernie's response faded again.

What the hell.

No way, did she pass out?

After just one night?

“Bernie? The Bernion from that fairy tale?”

“Isn’t that the giant lumberjack and his axe? What a great sense of naming. It suits you well.”

 “No, it's not Bernion, it's Bernie⋯”

“I, I think it suits you well!”

 “⋯⋯”

Maybe the name Bernie was too cute.

The party members and Ellie were already calling Bernie "Bernion" when they saw her.

I sighed and put Bernie back on my back.

Bernie, the talking oversized axe.

Formerly, the Gluttony demon.

I'm sure she's deeply entangled in the Labyrinth, but her pride is still too strong to let her speak.

‘Let's take it one step at a time, surely, without stumbling in our impatience.’

I took a quick breath, cleared my head, and focused on the task at hand: exploring the labyrinth.

And so another week passed.

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Ssshhhhh!!!

A sharp sound ripped through the air.

The ceiling of the labyrinth opened, and a hail of arrows rained down from above.

“Wind Cutter!”

Lammel, who had used all her stored mana, looked to the sky and hastily cast a spell.

“Deep Wind!”

Ellie joined in, casting her wind elemental magic.

Wind blades and dense air stretched out from below to meet the arrow baptism.

-Ting! Ting! Whiz!

A few arrows bounced off the wind, changing their trajectory but the trap on the ninth floor was no joke.

There were still more arrows raining down on us than we had neutralized.

“This way!!! Shields up!!!”

Joy Hog, the forward, shouted as she ran to protect those behind her.

Lammel and Jubeel quickly clustered around her.

Joy Hog's shield glowed blue and grew in size.

It was a defensive artifact but it's small.

-Boom!

The arrow traps that had fallen from the ceiling of the Labyrinth were still raining down.

And there are still three figures who have yet to reach Joy Hog's shield, Hitolis the priest, Ellie the wizard and me.

We’ll be in trouble if they're injured.

“Ellie! Hitolis! Get down!”

I shouted at them both, swinging the Bunny with all my might.

Luckily, Ellie has cast a spell, so the amount of arrows coming at them is less than the amount hitting the ground around them.

I steady myself with my lower body, hold my core, and rotate my waist and arms like a batter swinging a bat.

I engage every muscle in my body, all at once and explosively.

My body, which has just begun to step into the realm of superhumans, generates a gust of wind with the swing of an oversized axe.

-Whooooooo!

The fierce wind from the axe deflected the arrow's trajectory.

-Pabababab!

The rain of arrows aimed at the two of them fell to the ground without piercing their bodies.

Once I was sure they were safe, I put the artifact axe I'd unsheathed above my head.

“Enlarge.”

I muttered a small incantation, and the magic drained from me, the axe blade growing to cover my body.

-Thud! Thud!

I braced myself for the weight of the blade and for the heavy vibrations.

The rain of arrows scraped against the blade and fell to the ground.

My patience was short-lived.

Thrrrr-

The axe, now back to its original size, was strapped back to my belt and I looked around.

There were arrow marks everywhere, like the floor after a rain shower.

“Is everyone okay?!”

I shouted for confirmation, and Joy Hog, Lammel, and Jubeel crawled out from under the shield that rose like a turtle's shell.

“Damn. That was dangerous. The further we go, the harder it is to detect traps.”

“So, no injuries, thank goodness.”

“I saw it. Balkan just swung his axe, and the wind blew it right into the-”

She seemed unharmed considering the way she rambles.

I quickly checked on Ellie and Hitolis.

“Phew, phew.”

“Thank God, we made it. We were almost late for the barrier.”

Hitolis and Ellie breathed a sigh of relief inside the hastily constructed barrier.

I exhaled as well.

This labyrinth never lets me relax.

“Poisoned arrow... sniff sniff. Oh. This is a stimulant.”

Joy Hog pulled an arrow from the ground and sniffed it.

She pulled out a small vial and wiped the arrowhead clean of the stimulant.

As I watched the pink liquid drip into the vial, I asked.

“⋯Why are you taking that?”

“Because the stuff in the Labyrinth is far more effective than the stuff you can buy on the market, whether it's poison or aphrodisiac.”

Joy Hog grinned sinisterly.

“It's also used to mate livestock, and to make a night of it even more intense. It's very effective.”

“Oh.”

“It's quite salty when gathered and sold, so be quick. The poison can also be used to coat weapons for combat.”

The reason for entering the Labyrinth was to obtain blessings or artifacts, but primarily to earn a living.

Money is the reason for fulfilling various requests and taking various risks.

Having solved the immediate danger, the party, in true explorer fashion, plucked the arrows from the ground like women gathering the harvest.

“Ahem!”

A startled voice came from behind them.

All eyes in the party turned toward the arrow.

Ellie, who had been the first to help, hastily hid her hands behind her back under their gazes.

Such awkward behavior.

⋯What?

I quickly walked over to her.

“Ellie. Let me see your hand.”

“Mmm. It’s no big deal⋯”

“Come on!”

I shouted, and Ellie held out her hand, which she had carefully hidden behind her back.

There was a tiny scar on her fingertip.

On top of the scar, where an arrowhead had grazed it, was a thin layer of pink liquid, also known as Labyrinth aphrodisiac.

I quickly checked Ellie's face.

“Why, why do you look like that?”

Her breathing quickened a little.