**Chapter 128: The 12th floor (4)**

I stared blankly at the words in front of me.

Reorganizing my body to be more efficient?

The meaning of the sentence was immediately obvious.

Ding. Tut-tut-tut!

“Crunch!”

It feels like my body is being torn apart alive.

Muscle fibers, cartilage, bones, blood vessels, and even nerves.

It feels like everything that was slightly twisted and distorted is being put back into place one by one.

Over the course of our lives, we accumulate incorrect postures, behaviors, and habits that slowly break down our bodies.

However, no one is able to observe them completely and obsessively.

The pain that comes from the accumulation of these little things doesn't show up right away.

They accumulate and accumulate over a long period of time, interfering at the most crucial moments.

Tsk. Tsk, tsk, tsk!

And the “body reorganization” that is happening to me now, it feels like my body that was about to collapse is being forcibly torn apart prematurely.

Literally, my body is being reorganized to be more efficient…but the touch was not gentle at all.

It was like, 'Fuck. I should just pass out!'

This is what it feels like when your body is on fire from the inside.

Every time my muscle fibers regenerated correctly, every time my bones and nerves aligned, my body burned from the inside.

“Jubeel! Move the fountain, scroll-”

“It's already torn! Come on-”

I heard the urgent voices of my party members.

Soon, I felt like I was drowning.

I had fallen into the healing waters of the 10th Floor Fountain.

As I quickly gulped down the water, the burning pain gradually diminished.

I was out of pain for now.

As I bathed in the healing water, relieved, my earlier speculation came back to me.

Upon entering the multiplier of 5 floors and touching the fountain for the first time I might be able to meet [the Light-Bathed One]

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Thrrrr-

Someone stroked my head gently.

[You’ve worked hard.]

A tickling, wistful touch.

A warm, nostalgic touch.

My heart melts at the words, “You’ve worked hard.”

At the same time, my mind became clearer and clearer.

As soon as I opened my eyes, I saw a woman bathed in a dazzling light.

[You're already on the tenth floor.]

I could hear the woman's voice clearly, whereas before it had been muffled by noise.

The more I enter this mysterious space, the more the censorship is lifted.

I asked in a slightly subdued voice.

“Who the hell are you?”

-Hush.

The woman brought her index finger, wrapped in light, to my lips.

With her other hand, she pointed to the sky.

At that touch, I spontaneously lifted my head and looked up.

Outside the cage of light in which the woman and I were seated, there were all sorts of unwelcoming energies.

They were very similar to Magi, and they were radiating a sinister energy toward this cage.

[There is much more I wish to tell you, but there is much more I cannot tell you at this time, I'm sorry.]

I nodded slowly at the woman's words.

The warning the woman gave me last time was that the 5th floor is dangerous.

With those words, this cage nearly collapsed in on itself.

Who are you, why did you contact me, why are you helping me, and so on…

There were so many questions I wanted to ask, but I held my tongue.

I knew enough from her behavior to realize that she was trying to help me in some way.

[Time. Write. Twice. Chance. Ask.]

Is there a limit to the number of sentences she can say?

The woman's words were extremely short, but I interpreted them appropriately.

'Does it mean I have two chances to ask something?'

Perhaps, the things I was just thinking about wouldn't be answered if I asked.

If so, I needed an answer that would turn my immediate speculation into certainty.

After some thought, I decided on a question to ask the woman.

“Is the condition for meeting you, to enter the multiplier of 5 floors for the first time and touch the fountain?”

“For now. That's all.”

The woman nodded.

The reason she'd added the word 'now' was obvious.

Just before being eaten by Gluttony, the woman told me there were no more miracles left.

There were other ways to make contact besides reaching the fountain, but I guess that means I've exhausted all of those opportunities now.

On the 5th and 10th floors, I had already come into contact with the fountain and met the woman.

15th floor, 20th floor, 25th floor, 30th floor.

 If I continue exploring the Labyrinth, I have four more chances to meet the woman.

And for me, I needed motivation to continue meeting her.

Should I say it or not?

It's a question I shouldn't have to ask now, but I felt like it would be a relief.

After a long hesitation, I opened my mouth.

“Are you, are you related to my sister?”

The woman's body shuddered at my words.

The light that enveloped her wavered slightly.

In that split second, the corners of the woman's mouth, which had been shrouded by the light, turned up ever so slightly.

A smile.

She was smiling, very faintly.

[Curious?]

I was half-assured by the woman's question.

This mysterious woman was somehow related to my sister.

“Yes. I'm curious.”

My sister's whereabouts was the most important thing I wanted to know right now, and the biggest reason for entering this dangerous labyrinth.

“It's the most important thing to me.”

The woman's smile deepened a little more at my answer.

Sigh.

She moved closer to me, inch by inch.

Kaang! Kaang!

A violent force from outside struck the cage of light.

But the woman didn't even pay attention to it, her eyes only on me.

Thrust.

The woman's arms, enveloped in light, wrapped around my neck.

I didn't resist.

-Kwuuk.

A light embrace.

My tense mind relaxed, and a warmth akin to holy power seeped into my body.

After holding me tightly for a moment, the woman whispered softly in my ear.

“Come to the depths of the Labyrinth.”

Her hot breath mingled with my desperate pleas.

“Then, you will have what you desire most.”

Immediately after she said that, she hugged me as if to crush my body.

“Ugh?!”

The woman, suddenly stronger, muttered in a frosty voice.

“And, woman. Don’t have too many—”

The woman tried to say something, but her voice was no longer audible.

Sighing heavily, she wordlessly hugged me tightly once more, then gently pulled away as if to say goodbye.

Or, as if she hoped I'd come back for more.

The woman waved at me.

With that, my consciousness returned to the fountain.

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“Balkan, wake up!”

I opened my eyes once more, and Joy Hog was in my face.

“Shit. Hmmm. Sorry.”

I don't know about Zirnier, the half-dwarf, but I can't stand the sight of Joy Hog's face up close.

When I regained my senses, I took stock of my surroundings.

Ellie was lying next to me.

No longer masturbating her nipples, she was relaxed and soaking in the healing waters of the fountain.

Hitolis gave me a brief update on Ellie's condition.

“She's doing much better, and the healing water has washed away most of the aphrodisiac.”

“So she's fine now?”

“Mm⋯ but she's been infected by the aphrodisiac for two days, so there might be some lingering side effects if she's unlucky⋯ but she should be fine for now.”

It wasn't long after Hitolis' explanation that Ellie opened her eyes.

“Ah⋯ here⋯?”

Apparently, her memory of the time she was infected by the aphrodisiac was fuzzy.

We explained to her what was going on.

Of course, we didn't mention the frantic nipple-slapping and sneaky masturbation in the middle of the night.

It was too gruesome a story for a young Ellie to handle.

“I'm sorry! I'm so sorry! I'm so sorry!”

“It's okay. It's okay.”

“It’s admirable that you didn’t rape a passing man.”

 The party accepted Ellie's apology.

Being the closest to a woman's primal instincts, they were more forgiving of her mistake.

Now that Ellie had recovered and was rested, there was no reason to linger at the fountain.

The party packed up again and prepared to head to the eleventh floor.

From the 11th floor onward, the floors are seasonal.

The 11th floor is fall and the 12th floor is winter.

It made more sense to bundle up and cross the descent portal ahead of time.

Ta-da!

I hopped from the fountain to dry off my leather armor and put on my winter gear.

The water-soaked leather armor was quite heavy.

I'm going to have a hard time managing this.

As I casually rummaged through my subspace backpack for a change of clothes, I felt a strange gaze upon me.

“⋯⋯”

“⋯⋯”

Ellie and the rest of the party stared at me blankly.

“Why? What's wrong?”

“⋯Uhhhh.”

Ellie looked up at me, confused.

“Oppa. You look like you're ⋯ taller?”

“⋯I'm taller?”

I shook my head at Ellie's words, and then felt a twinge of discomfort as my body shifted.

Sure enough, my vision was a little higher.

Maybe three centimeters?

My height wasn't the only thing that had changed.

My movements are much lighter.

My limbs are more elastic, and my movements are strangely more natural.

Boom!

I swung the artifact axe in the air to test it out, and the motion was cleaner than before.

Looking at my forearms, the muscles seem to have changed shape slightly but not in a bad way.

It feels more aesthetically pleasing and more functional at the same time.

There's no change in the status window, but overall the body's functionality has increased.

I sneakily turn around and look at my lower half.

‘⋯Thicker.’

Even without an erection, it had gained a bit more length and girth.

‘Is this the effect of the body realignment?’

Something similar happened on the fifth floor, but maybe I didn't notice because my growth was small.

'This is⋯ good.'

Isn't this practically free body realignment?

I still don't know exactly what to make of the question mark blessing, but I have to take what I can get.

'Serif said she'd tell me about the blessing someday.’

As I felt today, it was definitely a blessing that helped me.

"Somehow, it feels like your body has become more arousing."

“As if your body was made by God ⋯”

“That's blasphemy, that God made such an erotic body. If God's taste is that kind of body, isn't he just a rug wannabe female?”

“That, don't say that, Jubeel. It's really blasphemy⋯”

“I, please don't say such bad things to my oppa.”

“Honestly, it's factual⋯”

As I listened to the party members stare at my body and chatter, I donned a cold-weather suit made from the skin and fur of a winter bear.

‘Winters in the Labyrinth are cold.’

If I was going to survive, I had to be prepared.

I stared alone at the descent portal to the eleventh floor.

-Come to the depths of the Labyrinth.

I could still hear the woman's voice in my ears, her breath hot and sharp.

-Yes, you'll get what you want most.

The Abyss of the Labyrinth…deep, deep underground, filled with evil and darkness.

I have a clue to find my sister.

-Kaaaah!

My clenched hands shook uncontrollably.

The joy of finally finding a clue to my sister soon became the fuel that set my body on fire.

“Just a little longer.”

I'll find her, I promise.