**Chapter 129: The 12th floor (5)**

A chill ran across my cheek.

It felt as if I had been cut by a blade.

Beyond the 11th floor of the fall was the 12th floor where winter reigned and it was a snowfield.

Ellie stared at it, mesmerized by the majestic sight before her.

Indeed. The Labyrinth is mysterious.

Bony undead and bull monsters lurked in the dank marshes.

Small, green demons dwell in cold, dreary caves.

Mysterious portals beyond the current magical understanding of mankind, and a variety of traps that could hardly have been created by humans…all of it felt so foreign to Ellie.

At the same time, it was also incomparably intriguing.

Carefully, Ellie touched the potion vial strapped to her belt.

She gazed at the portal magic that filled it.

‘I wonder if I can solve this mystery.’

As she turned her head absentmindedly, she saw a figure being hit by the sharp wind like a blade.

He had a broad, massive back, supporting a massive axe.

The man with the strong back asked her to do him a favor.

'Can you reveal the secrets of the Labyrinth and study the Portal?’

‘It's not whether I can.’

Ellie shook her head.

‘I must.’

No need for uncertain assumptions.

Even if it takes months or years, the inscrutable phenomenon of the portal would be deciphered for the sake of the man who had smiled and stroked her hair that day.

Ellie's gaze naturally turned to him.

As he passed the 10th floor, his already tall height grew even bigger, so Ellie had to look up at him for a long time.

Every time her eyes traced his body, her heart pounded a little faster.

His already perfect body became more artistic.

What female wouldn't blush at the sight of such a truly masculine body? Ellie wasn't sure.

At least her heart was beating like crazy now.

Just the thought of him made her body heat up and her nipples stand erect, a side effect of the aphrodisiac.

His gaze, however, was blank.

Ever since he crossed the tenth floor, he seemed to be looking somewhere else.

Suh-

Such thoughts were quickly blown away by the bitter cold of the snowy field.

He took a step forward, and the rest of the party naturally followed.

Ellie, fists clenched tightly, quickly followed behind him.

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~The 12th Floor~

They've heard stories from some of the mid-level explorers who come and go from Diana's tavern, but they can't judge the labyrinth based on those stories.

“Is this… the entrance to the middle floors?”

 “It's bigger than I imagined.”

The first thing they noticed was the majestic scenery.

The first through eleventh floors were also spacious, but that's just the total distance.

Even though there were dangers such as mazes and traps, they had a strong feeling of following the 'wide cave' while exploring.

The 12th floor, the middle floor, was a different story.

The surroundings are wide open, with no cave walls to restrict your view and behavior.

Most importantly, there is no 'ceiling'.

“Is that the sky?”

A blue sky filled with clouds came into view and there's even a sun.

It was a view they couldn't see on the previous floors, where the ceiling was blocked.

“What kind of principle makes that possible⋯?”

“If we knew that, we would have been labyrinth scholars. Would we have been rolling around as explorers?”

“That makes fucking sense.”

It was like playing a side-scrolling game and then playing a massive open-world game.

There was so much more to care about.

Joy Hog, our guide, pulled a map out of her backpack.

The map was quite large…something that big would be hard to carry.

An artifact map would have been handy, but the floors were so massive that we'd have to buy our own.

As with anything with the word “exclusive” on it, it was going to cost a lot of money, and our party didn't have the funds for such an expensive item.

“Got it. Tsk. We're a long way from this portal, all the way out in the middle of nowhere.”

It was disappointing news, but not the kind of news that makes us want to hit the ground and mourn.

We'd be entering labyrinths dozens of times, falling through floors hundreds of times.

You can't be an explorer if you sweat the small stuff.

“This is the first time we're exploring the middle floors properly, so we'll be as cautious as possible.”

“Good. It never hurts to be cautious.”

The party nods at the simple suggestion.

The environment has changed, but the task remains the same.

Be wary of the dangers around you, and make your way through the labyrinth without dying.

“Since we're on the outskirts, why don't we harvest some winter saplings and winter flowers?”

Joy Hog chuckles as she pulls out the request form.

It's always a shame to leave out something that pays the bills.

Making money is the primary goal of most explorers.

For me, it's a close second. I've invested a lot in equipment, and I need to make money again.

“Great! We can sell Winter Saplings in the market at the price of 30 silver for five bundles.”

“Winter Saplings are used in black magic and command spells to raise corpses, and winter flowers are also in high demand for their ability to make your dick cold and allow for unusual play.”

“Hmph, that would be a good trade!”

There are many winter trees on the outskirts of Tier 12.

They are native to the area, so we should be able to find quality winter saplings and winter flowers.

We have a rough plan for our exploration.

We'll walk up and around the outskirts, looking for winter saplings and flowers.

With a plan in place, there was no reason to stand still.

The party set off on their way.

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-Swoosh. Swoosh.

Our footprints carved into the fresh snow, and soon we were on the outskirts of a clearing of winter trees.

Winter trees were different from ordinary trees.

They were not green and brown, but clear and blue, like the midwinter sky.

The trees were tall enough to tower over me, but they didn't obstruct my view too much because of their midwinter appearance.

“Even if we cut them down, we can't carry something that big. Smaller ones are more marketable.”

We worked in groups to find the smaller saplings.

We'd be more efficient if we split up, but this is a labyrinth.

If we were to be attacked by a monster while scattered, we'd be torn apart.

Footprints were imprinted in the snow.

There are even footprints on the 12th floor.

Since no one has reached the state of 'stepping on snow without leaving a trace,' it is impossible to erase traces perfectly.

The more we stick together, the better our chances of survival.

“Found it! Winter flower!”

“There's a sapling to the east, too.”

Jubeel and I shouted at the same time.

It wasn't hard to find, as there were plenty of people to check in different places.

“This little tree is worth six silver coins.”

We carefully cleared the snow around the tree and dug with Bernie.

[Ew! How dare you use my body for digging!]

I ignored Bernie's comment and focused on the task at hand.

Those who have dug in the winter know how cold it is. They know how cold the ground is in winter.

-Kaang! Kaang!

“Damn it. It won’t work with a sword.”

Jubeel, who was beside me, helping me dig with her sword, clicked her tongue.

It's almost glacial at this point.

I swung my oversized axe in silence.

-Pow!

Bernie glided smoothly over the frozen ground.

In just four strokes, I was able to pull the sapling completely out of the ground.

“What kind of power is ⋯?”

“Well, the weapon is good.”

"If it were all about the weapon, everyone would have stolen an incredible sword and lived off it. It’s just that you're like a monster. A body that’s not only enticing but also vicious. That’s scary."

Jubeel stuck her tongue out at me as he casually scanned my body.

Certainly, my physical prowess, which was already excellent after my physical realignment on the tenth floor, was even better.

I carried Bernie on my back with one hand. Now I can swing Bernie around easily with one hand.

“I'll put the seedlings in my backpack.”

“Thanks. The subspace backpack is definitely more comfortable!”

Everyone has a lot of stuff in their backpacks, so I put the seedlings in my subspace backpack.

Considering the convenience of storage and the possibility of damaging the goods, it was the right decision.

“Oppa. Here's a winter flower.”

Ellie picked a winter flower that could make the cock cold and brought it to me.

“Yep. Thanks for the trouble. Give it to me.”

I took the flowers from Ellie and took stock of her appearance.

She was in her school uniform, wearing a thick fur coat, thick socks, and long winter boots.

‘You're going to smell like sweat when you take it off.’

No, Ellie's face was not greasy after a week in the Labyrinth. As an elf, she would smell like grass.

But apart from that, her bare elven ears and cheeks were flushed red.

“Are you cold?”

It wasn't just Ellie, the rest of the party was chilled to the bone.

No matter how much winter gear and tools they wore, unless they brought artifact or relic-level equipment, they couldn't fully withstand the cold of the 12th floor.

Of course, that wasn't the case for me.

-Whoosh.

The chilly wind that had been blowing at me was instantly pushed back.

Because the miracle of warmth I received from Serif was working properly, I didn't feel cold right now.

Ellie shook her head, a tongue-in-cheek remark, but she didn't care.

“Oh, no!”

Ellie exclaimed, and produced a small flame in her hand.

“I can melt it with a tiny fireball⋯”

“⋯Crazy, how is that possible⋯”

Looking at Ellie, the harpy mage Lammel was silently amazed.

Apparently it was not a normal skill.

The party spent the next four hours walking the outskirts, harvesting winter seedlings and flowers.

“Seven saplings and three flowers?”

The saplings alone are worth 42 silver coins. The flowers are slightly less expensive than the saplings, costing two silver coins per flower, for a total of 48 silver coins.

We're lucky, we've earned half a gold coin in just four hours.

“Crazy!”

“Is this why everyone is gritting their teeth and trying to become a top explorer?”

“It's different. It's different.”

Everyone's mouths dropped open at the enormous amount of money.

Suddenly, I remembered the time I explored the labyrinth with Grumpy.

In our second trip through the labyrinth, we had risked everything to get five silver coins.

Now we have nearly ten times that amount.

‘I wonder what she's doing now.’

I was just curious because she had a lot of potential but suddenly fell off.

I peeked into her status window for the first time in a while.

[Bonded Slave: Denshi LV.31]

*TLN: Denshi is her real name, while Kachil is the name she used as a slave and the MC calls her Grumpy.*

The slave contract was still in place.

I was about to close the status window when I realized that it was still open.

[Denshi Lv.31]

[Stamina:(7) Strength:(10+2) Dexterity:(21+15) Wisdom:(2+10) Finesse:(7)]

[Blessings and Curses currently possessed by Denshi: 3]

[◆ Curse of the 30th Puppet]

“What?”

I look at the details of the status window.

Even the stat distribution is crazy.

Until now, I was far away so I could only see her name and level.

 “⋯What?”

I looked around quickly.

The status window in front of me meant only one thing.

‘Grumpy is nearby.’

Not too far away!

-Aaaahhhhhhhhhh!

As soon as I realized that, I heard a sound that ripped through the air.

-Kaang!

I quickly drew Bernie and parried the arrow.

A heavy vibration traveled through the axe.

This was no ordinary arrow.

I immediately activated my perception and glared at the direction the arrow came from.

“Cheruk. Cheruk.”

A white-skinned monster with a hobgoblin-like appearance held a pure white bow in its hand.

“Chhhhhh.”

The creature stood atop a winter tree, sneering down at me.

“Who's that?”

“It's a snow kobold!!! All hands, prepare for battle!”

Joy Hog, realizing the situation, shouted urgently to the party.

-Thump!

The party instantly readied their weapons.

I grabbed my axe again.

I've finally located Grumpy and there's no time to be tied down by those guys.

‘Did the party members call Bernie, Bernion?’

The giant woodcutter, there's never been a better time for that nickname.

The snowy kobold has strung up her bow.

-Squeak.

I grabbed Bernie and prepared to pounce.

[Huh...?! Yes, you...! Be a little more gentle!]

I hear Bernie's whining in my head, and I tighten my grip on the oversized axe.

Ziying-!

As I aimed at the target, a crosshair appeared, like the scope of a sniper rifle.

The crosshairs darted in and out of my vision.

-Clang.

It floated in the corner of the ice tree's base.

That was the magical effects of Weakness Detection and that's where the ice tree's weakness is.

As the snowy kobold's arrow left the bowstring, I sprinted and swung my axe.

-Kaaaaaaaa!

The face of the snowy kobold perched on the treetop turned in horror as the giant ice tree began to tilt in an instant.