**Chapter 44: Disciple (which means a growth-type sex toy) (3)**

"Your greeting was a bit harsh. You're not quite the same person."

Idelbert said, brushing the frost off her cloak.

We were now sitting at a table in the corner of the inn.

Idelbert sipped her ale with a grim expression on her face, and Diana covered her face with her hands as if embarrassed and ashamed.

I just sat there, helpless to do anything.

"Well, that was⋯ because you said it in a nuance that I misunderstood⋯"

"Misunderstood? I gave you the plain, unambiguous facts. Your cursed, perverted brain took it the wrong way. Isn't that right, apprentice?"

“Bah, Balkan. Honestly, don’t you think it was a misleading statement?”

Idelbert stared at me with her characteristic expressionlessness, while Diana glared at me with a face that looked like she was about to hug me at any moment.

Ah. If you ask me.

I frowned, pondering the events of the past hour.

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A battle of monsters that eluded my perception.

I couldn't even chase them with my eyes, so I had to concentrate on my perception to the point of drowning.

-Aaaahhhhhhh!

When Diana drew her ice bow in the sky, dozens of ice arrows materialized from the empty bowstring and rained down on Idelbert.

Even ice picks shot out of the magic circle behind her back.

-Puck! Puck!

With her two fists, Idelbert smashed the flying ice arrows and ice picks one by one.

Ice crystals drifted down like snow in the dark Labyrinth City, and some citizens came out to enjoy the mysterious scene.

Others, on the other hand, rushed out in panic, their eyes lit up.

As Labyrinth City Guard and their captain approached, Diana and Idelbert stopped fighting and stepped back, as if they reached an understanding.

"Ms. Union Leader, and⋯Diana Ordia⋯you two are really putting us in a bind⋯"

"I'm sorry, we've inconvenienced you."

"Here. Take this. I hear the guards are having a hard time with the disturbances in the Outlaw District these days.”

"Oh no! Hahaha! What the hell, all these precious soul stones!"

The captain of the guards, who was salivating after receiving the Beast Soul stones from Idelbert, left with the guards as soon as the situation calmed down.

The lack of damage to the surroundings seemed to be a big factor.

‘Or maybe she just chickened out.’

In addition to the guards, there was another unusual visitor.

A design that struck a chord, two meters of pure white armor, a helm that swelled her chest and a strange sigil embedded in the center of her breastplate.

Her appearance was unforgettable.

‘Armored Knight?!’

The benefactor who saved me from dying in a goblin lair during the Labyrinth Trip, and the one who gave me the artifact map that Grumpy took!

She approached Diana and greeted her.

"Diana Ordia, you've been retired for years, what's all the fuss about?"

I shook my head as soon as I heard the voice.

The voice of the Armored Knight was so sweet that my eyes widened. It wasn't that gravelly.

The armor was also strangely different in design. The one before me had a flat breastplate.

The breastplate of the armored knight I knew was of a magnificent size. It also had a strange, peculiar design.

‘Come to think of it, back then, as a token of gratitude, I should have stripped naked.’

"⋯Huh, there was a minor disturbance, but it's nothing that the head of the royal knights would care about."

"Hmm. I'll keep an eye on you, I hope you won't get into trouble like the old days."

And with that, and the arrival and departure of the head of the royal knights, or something, I revealed to Diana that I had entered into a master-disciple relationship with Idelbert.

"My, my, what a terrible misunderstanding."

A red-faced Diana stalked back into the inn, putting an end to the immediate commotion.

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"Well, I don't think it's anyone's fault but yours, and I'm just glad you're both alive and unharmed."

I chose to slither away from the argument like a loach and leave the situation.

If I agree with Diana, I'll have a very difficult time with the duel tomorrow morning.

If I agree with Idelbert, tomorrow's breakfast wouldn't be Diana’s special course, it would just be a special course.

"Balkan⋯"

"I don't know who you are, but you are very wise."

Diana looked at me, impressed, while Idelbert's black cat tail flicked like a whip.

Somehow, I think I got away with it.

"By the way, I didn't realize you and Balkan were acquainted⋯"

"I ran into him yesterday in front of the inn. He's quite good, I'm sure he'll make it big if I teach him well."

"Hmph⋯ Disciple⋯"

Diana's eyes widened slightly and she glared at Idelbert.

"Really, he’s just a disciple?"

"⋯For now, yes."

"⋯⋯"

"⋯⋯"

"⋯⋯"

"⋯⋯"

Idelbert leisurely sipped her beer, her tail wagging while Diana kept her eyes on her for a while longer.

For some reason, I felt stifled, as if I were suffocating.

"Hah⋯ yes. I'll stop her if she does something stupid."

Diana muttered quietly, then looked at me again, her eyes narrowed.

"Balkan, Idelbert may look a bit rough around the edges, but her skills are proven. Since you've become her disciple, you might as well absorb everything from her. It'll surely be a good foundation for your future growth."

"Yes. I will."

Diana surprisingly didn't say much about my becoming Idelbert's apprentice. She simply respected and supported my choice to become stronger.

"Well, you're a bold pupil, daring to tell your master you're going to stick a straw in her."

"What straw? Think of it like the relationship between fertile land and a new sprout. The disciple needs to be nourished by the master's teachings to grow."

"That's a good mindset. Go ahead and grow while the land is fertile."

-Gulp. Gulp.

Idelbert downed her beer in one gulp and stood up.

"I see you've warmed up after a long time, Diana. I'll come back another time."

"Yeah. Go, go, go."

"Be careful what you wish for. Master."

"Yes. My student is very polite, unlike others."

"You⋯"

Diana's reaction is new. Was this the bromance I've heard about?

Idelbert walked away, her black tail behind her back and her hands waving roughly while her pace quickened.

"By the way, didn't she just leave without paying?"

"⋯She paid with a soul stone, so you can close your eyes to that."

Letting out a rare sigh, Diana looked toward the inn's entrance, which was pierced by an ice pick.

"I'm afraid I won't be able to serve dinner, and I have to fix up the shop, so I think you should just rest for a few days."

"Yeah."

I had unexpectedly gotten three days off which would give me time to adjust to the rigors of training with Idelbert.

"So. How was the training? Was it too much for you yet?"

"She's a real demon, isn't she? Totally one-sided⋯"

Diana and I sat at a table and chatted for a while.

Mostly about Idelbert, but we also talked about trivial topics.

It was quite therapeutic to hear the laughter that crept into our conversations, even when they were unimportant.

After a pleasant conversation with Diana, I left the inn again.

As I walked around the labyrinth city, the night sky sparkling, I soon saw familiar faces.

"Oooh, there you are, Balkan!"

Joy Hog's party greeted me.

The time for settlement had come.

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At a table in a sprawling tavern, in the Explorers' Quarter of the Labyrinth City of Valerus a party of five gazed expectantly at a dwarf.

"Here we go. Does everyone want this?"

The group shook their heads in unison as Joy Hog chuckled and held up a large pouch.

-Bam!

She slams the pouch down on the table, and the sound of coins clinking inside echoes throughout the room.

Joy Hog carefully untied the strap of the pouch, and out poured a handful of silver coins.

"Oh, my God, how much is this!"

"Drink! Here's another drink!"

"The goddess is looking out for us⋯!"

"Crererek!"

The harpy wizard Lammel Royce rubbed her face against a silver coin, while the bovine girl, the swordsman Jubeel, called for another cup of beer.

Hitolis, the cat priest, sought out Mother Earth while Gregor, the lizard girl, let out an unintelligible scream.

"Wow. Shit."

I marveled, too. How much is all this worth?

Suddenly, I remembered my second trip to the Labyrinth, when I'd gotten nothing but dog damage on the first floor.

Excluding the bounty for killing Deluna, the harvest was barely worth a single silver coin.

'Of course, I didn't even get to hunt a proper beast back then...'

On the other hand, the money in my pocket now contained at least 200 silver coins. That's almost two gold coins worth.

As you can see, the labyrinth's rewards increase with each level.

It was easy to see why explorers would plunge into the lower levels for greater rewards, risking the possibility of never returning to the surface.

'I wonder how many months an ordinary citizen of the Labyrinth City would have to work to earn this kind of money.’

If it weren't for the fact that I was an employee of Diana's, I'd still be saving up for an identification badge.

I could have been investing years just to get it right.

"Come on. Everybody calm down, let's get this settled."

Joy Hog pulled the money from the pocket and distributed it with precision.

Stacks of silver coins were placed in front of the party like poker chips.

I've heard of many parties where money causes fights and division, but Joy Hog's party didn't seem to have that problem.

Smiles lingered on the corners of everyone's mouths.

Gregor and I got a little less than the rest of the party.

That was to be expected, since Gregor was a porter and I was a late arrival.

‘Still, twenty silver coins.’

I was quite satisfied. I honestly didn't expect to get this much.

'Idelbert said she'd replace the axe she broke, and Diana said she'd replace the breastplate she accidentally tore, so I'll get a new one⋯'

I summarized the results of this labyrinth.

I lost two party members, Grumpy and Jeremy, but gained a new blessing plus 20 silver coins.

I don't know whether to consider this a gain or a loss.

"Balkan. Why are you so silent after all that?"

"What?"

Lost in thought for a moment, I realized that Joy Hog's party was smirking at me.

"I wonder if he's inexperienced, or if he's just innocent⋯"

"By the sound of your voice, I'm guessing you didn't even think about it, pooh."

"Ew. Maybe I should have just gulped it down first, but I can't bite it now that I've already spit it out⋯"

Jubeel, the bovine girl swordsman, and Lammel, the harpy mage, giggled, while Joy Hog, the dwarf, scratched the back of her head in amusement.

I stared at them, my face full of questions.

Joy Hog shoved her hand into her money pouch. She'd already finished the allotment, so there was no money in there.

"You don't think you'll get paid for the sixty-eight hobgoblins you single-handedly annihilated?"

"Oh."

No way. They kept that while I was at it?

I opened my mouth, dumbfounded by what happened next.

The money bag was filled with silver coins.

Inside the corner of it, a single gold coin was revealed, its golden color shining through.

At the same time, a piece of crystal I recognized from somewhere.

‘Soul stone!’

One day, Grumpy told me about them.

'A treasure that drops in extremely rare cases when you kill a monster, and an essential ingredient for crafting artifacts!’

It was placed in front of me.

"Fifth-level Hobgoblin Soul stone. In simple monetary terms, it's worth at least one and a half gold coins."

"Kiyahow!"

You crazy, sensible, romantic, conscientious explorers, you thought to pick this up from the mess!

After all the trouble I went through, I deserve this much in return!

When I received the one gold coin from Zernier, my heart was pounding in fear of dropping it, and now I have over two and a half gold coins in my hand.

It wasn't a favor or a tip. I earned it with my own blood and sweat.

Tears of joy flowed down my face as I realized all the hardships I had endured.

I rubbed my face against the Hobgoblin Soul stone in excitement, then suddenly remembered Hobgoblins and put the Soul stone down.

Joy Hog watched me with a smirk on her face and made me a suggestion.

"Balkan, would you ever consider working with us, since we've seen with our own eyes that you're a man of great skill and character?"

"Work?"

"Yes. The date is the day the Labyrinth opens in two weeks and our destination is the sixth floor."

She made a very curious proposal.

"The purpose is to escort Academy students on a tour of the Labyrinth."