**Chapter 36: I want to go to the second floor (8)**

Gregor the Lizardgirl shuddered at the sight before her.

A man in a helmet, the inn's part-timer, and the male who had caused her so much heartache.

Ever since her defeat in the arm wrestling match, Gregor had been working to sharpen her scales.

Turning down offers to join smaller clans, she traveled to the lower levels of the Labyrinth to become stronger.

A chance encounter gave her the opportunity to join a party on the seventh floor as a porter, giving her a taste of higher-level combat.

However, the man had reached the fifth floor, a place that had been ghastly and frightening to begin with.

"No, why is he here, and all alone?"

Jubeel, the bovinegirl, sounded puzzled. She was always drunkenly slurping milk at Diana's inn.

"It doesn't matter, he's too badly hurt."

Hitolis, the catgirl, examined Balkan's thighs and his entire body.

"It's not a wound that can be healed with a lowly potion. I've used up the water I brought from the fountain, and I'll have to wait a while before I can use my healing miracles."

"⋯I don't think he'll be able to hold out until then."

Dwarf Joy Hog muttered with a serious face.

He was still breathing, but he didn't know when his heart would stop beating, and his consciousness was fuzzy.

"I'll use the ⋯fountain travel scroll."

Gregor, the porter, said through gritted teeth. Everyone in the Joy Hog party glanced over.

"No. What do you mean, Gregor?"

The Fountain. Even in a labyrinth of mysteries, its presence was unique.

The fountains, which exist only at the edges of floors that are multiples of 5, gushed forth the same kind of mystical healing water that potions are based on.

Like the safe zone on level 15, this gimmick is uniquely beneficial to explorers in the Labyrinth.

Some explorers have gone so far as to call the Fountain the conscience of the Labyrinth.

It's as if the fountain is the conscience of the Labyrinth, placed with the explorer in mind as the difficulty of the Labyrinth increases exponentially every 4 levels.

It's not unreasonable for some explorers to think so.

"Do you even know how much a Fountain Travel Scroll costs? A mystical scroll that can only be used on multiples-of-5 floors! A precious relic that opens a portal beyond human understanding! Do you even know how valuable that is?"

That was because of the existence of the Fountain Travel Scroll.

The Fountain Travel Scroll is exactly what it sounds like: a scroll that opens a portal to the Fountain.

And the Fountain is at the end of the floor. At the end of a floor, there is an ascending portal and a descending portal.

This means that you can skip a floor that is a multiple of 5, which has a different environment and difficulty than the other floors.

As an added bonus, the lukewarm fountains provide healing.

The Fountain Travel Scroll was the one and only miraculous relief for a weary explorer in a labyrinth of blood and terror.

"But that's only worth one silver coin⋯!"

"Yes, one silver coin. It's a penny to us. Nice idea, Gregor."

And the price of such a miracle scroll was only one silver coin, because there were too many of them.

Fountain Travel Scrolls are scattered throughout the multiples of five floors and strangely enough there were a lot of them.

As a result, few explorers, like Joy Hog's party, bother to properly explore the fifth floor unless they have a specific goal in mind, such as obtaining Shaman Hobgoblin's staff.

Not to mention that the fifth floor is more difficult than the 6th and 7th floors.

The 5th floor it's a zone that the vast majority of explorers pass through, it's too expensive for top explorers, too dangerous for beginner explorers, and there's no reason to go.

Even a party without enough money can find the Fountain Travel Scroll if they search the passageway at the entrance to the monster village.

Tear the scroll, go to the fountain, and leave the fifth floor.

Often, however, explorers are captured by the beasts.

"Either they were too inexperienced and got caught while searching the entrance, or they fell into a transition trap."

"⋯I'm guessing it's the latter."

The Joy Hog Party speculated that Balkan had fallen through a transition trap and landed on the fifth floor.

"He's pretty unlucky, I've been an explorer for three years and I've never fallen into a transition trap."

"You're the lucky one. You cow-bitch."

"Both of you. Enough small talk, let's go."

-Boom!

Priest Hitolis tore open the Fountain Travel Scroll, and a portal that glowed yellow appeared.

Fountain Travel Scrolls were a necessity for explorers aiming for the fifth floor or higher, so naturally, Joy Hogg's party had a spare.

"If we can get the inn's mascot for a single silver coin, we'll have a surplus."

"I'll have to ask the innkeeper for a cold ale later."

Bovinegirl Jubeel said, and lifted Balkan to his feet.

The Joy Hog Party all joined hands and crossed the portal to the fountain.

As soon as they crossed the fountain portal, they noticed three changes: First, the landscape.

They were suddenly standing inside a giant circular fountain.

The healing water spewing from the fountain instantly restored their exhausted bodies.

"Chit. No."

"Well, they said they were just up on the second floor, so there's no way they had the scroll for the fountain. He must have searched on the fifth floor. Mmm. Good."

Second, the seven reformed explorers they saw last time, standing guard in front of the fountain.

They didn't think much of it because it was a common occurrence up until this point, but the third change was a bit disconcerting.

"⋯No. Where's the kid?"

Jubeel muttered in a panicked voice.

He should have been recognized as part of the party and crossed the portal with them, but he was nowhere to be seen in the fountain.

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The world was dazzling. I was standing in the light now.

'No, am I lying down?’

I don't really know. My senses are not intact. But

'⋯It's warm.'

It didn't really matter whether I was standing or lying down; right now, I just wanted to feel this warmth a little longer.

As my vision gradually blurred, a nostalgic memory came back to me.

- Hey, brother. Put your head here. Here.

- Why do you want me to put my head on your thigh when there's a perfectly good pillow?

- Oh, just hurry up. It's because I'm grateful to you. It's the only thing I can do for you.

It was the day I went to visit my sister So-eun after work as usual.

She kept patting her thighs, and I buried my head in her soft, smooth thighs.

Then I felt a hand stroking my hair, warm, slender, fine fingers gently running through my hair.

- Thank you, always. Big brother.

My heart swelled with the words. At least I'm not doing something stupid right now.

I never dreamed of anything big in life, just a simple happy life.

At the very least, I was happy enough to have a warm house, a healthy sister, and no hunger pangs.

That was a day before the trip to the Labyrinth.

‘Ah.’

I woke up a bit. Yes. I'm in the Labyrinth now.

I blinked back tears, and a pure white light pierced through my slightly blurred vision.

"⋯?”

I tried to look around, but my head wouldn't move, so I just stared straight ahead.

I was lying in the white, dazzling, beautiful, warm light but the area of light was too small.

The area outside the light was filled with darkness.

It was as if the light had been forced into the darkness and I was in the light.

I don't know how this happened but somehow, I remembered a nightmare I had once.

A world of darkness, with the tiniest bit of light in it.

And it smiled at me.

"So-eun.

- Sigh.

Something warm stroked my lying head.

A very familiar touch that contained longing and affection.

Slowly, I turned my head and saw a [being] bathed in light.

It was offering me a lap pillow and stroking my hair.

I don't know if it was because the light was so dazzling or because I felt it instinctively.

I intuitively knew that the being in front of me was something transcendent, far beyond my perception and understanding.

But I wasn't afraid or terrified of it.

There was not even a hint of malice in the hand that swept through my hair.

"-"

Who are you?

I wanted to say, but my mouth moved, but no voice came out.

The being wrapped in light responded slightly.

It seemed to smile slightly, but the light was too intense to make it out clearly.

Then its mouth opened slightly. Again, this was only speculation.

[■■■■■■■■■■■■■■■■]

I could tell that it was trying to communicate something to me but I couldn't make it out clearly, partly because the voice sounded complex, as if it were an amalgamation of the sounds and languages of many creatures, and partly because it was full of noise.

[5 of ■■ ■■■ Dangerous for ■■. Special for ■■.]

But I strained my ears to make out even a fraction of the voice.

And then, just a little, just a little, as if my ears had been opened, I could make out the being's words.

But,

Immediately, the light-filled realm began to shake uneasily.

The darkness seemed ready to tear the realm of light apart at a moment's notice.

The being enveloped in light grew impatient.

The being began to do something I couldn't recognize, and in an instant I was plunged into darkness and began to move away from the area of light.

My body didn't move an inch but as hard as I could, I forced myself to move and reach for the light.

It was instinctive. I wanted to feel a little more of that nostalgic warmth.

The darkness grew closer and the light receded.

I struggled in the darkness again, trying to move toward the light but it was a pointless struggle. I didn't have the strength to push through the darkness yet.

In the distant light, the being spoke.

[I am sorry. ■■]

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"Tsk. Well. I didn't think you'd make it this far."

Derucio clicked her tongue in relief.

What had she been so afraid of?

"Oh, yeah. He was nothing more than a weakling to begin with, a weak guy who used his body to ambush me.

Although she was caught off guard and wounded, if she had been alert, she would have been able to handle him.

Is that all? She would have overpowered him, kidnapped him, and fucked him all the way around the labyrinth.

She was confident that she could traumatize him and even just catching a whiff of a woman's scent could trigger his trauma

"⋯⋯”

But Derucio was thinking to herself.

'⋯Then, how do I explain how that bastard easily subdued two of my men?’

Even if they were weaker than her, they were still capable on their own. Yet, they almost got their heads chopped off before they could even react.

An unexplainable feeling of anxiety rose up inside her.

If she really thought the man was weak, there was no reason for her to be so wary now.

The game was over by the time she hit the fifth floor transition trap and he fell to the fifth floor alone.

It would have been over if she'd just ripped up the Fountain Travel Scroll, healed her wounds, and gone about her business as usual.

But Derucio didn't.

No, she couldn't.

She sat at the fountain, anxiety bubbling inside her, waiting for 'the one' to get here.

Waiting for him to break through the fifth floor, to reach the end of the tier, and then kill him.

But now the wait is over.

‘It's impossible.’

Derucio had concluded after two days of deliberation.

No matter how she thought about it, the odds of a beginner explorer falling to the fifth floor alone and coming back alive were zero.

"Let's go! What are you doing?"

It was eerily quiet around her.

No subordinates who would have followed at the sound of her voice, no party that had just come to the fountain.

They were staring blankly in the middle of nowhere.

‘⋯What?’

Derucio's gaze naturally shifted upward as well.

She opened her mouth in confusion.

"What⋯?"

At the top of the fountain, the highest point of the fifth floor of the Labyrinth, a man wrapped in a blinding light was falling like a meteor.