**Chapter 45: Preparing for the 6th floor (1)**

I accepted the offer of the Joy Hog party and left the inn.

They offered me a drink, but my helmet made it difficult.

I parted ways with a modest wave and walked through the night, thinking.

Sixth floor. This is worth a try. The sixth floor is much easier than the fifth floor, which has a more specialized environment than the other floors, perhaps because of the fountain.

‘I'll be fine, right?’

I stopped thinking about it. It's the labyrinth, after all, and I can't let my guard down on any floor.

I returned to Diana's inn, wondering how to invest my newfound wealth.

"Balkan, are you going into the Labyrinth this week?"

Diana asked, assuming I went to discuss the next trip to the Labyrinth with my party but I had no intention of entering the Labyrinth this week.

I would have my hands full dealing with Idelbert right now and my next trip with the Joy Hog party would be in two weeks.

"Nope. I'm not going this week."

"Oh, that's good."

Diana patted her chest with a rare look of relief.

"What's wrong?"

"Um, nothing special⋯ I'm just reminded of my jinx as an explorer."

Diana's jinx as an explorer? I looked at her questioningly, and then she spoke.

"The day the new year begins and the first labyrinth opens."

She looks like she's remembering something bad.

"I was always unlucky then."

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"Tap, tap⋯"

I slapped my hand across Idelbert's toned thigh, and the grip on my throat loosened slightly.

I breathed heavily for a long, long time. Crazy. I thought I was going to choke to death.

"You're such a drama queen."

"How is this being a drama queen? I almost died for real."

"Training is supposed to be realistic. You never know what you'll encounter in the real world, so you have to be prepared for anything."

And with that, Idelbert choked me with her thigh and handed me her hand. I picked myself up wearily and left the training room.

Three days after our first fight, my muscles no longer ached from simple training. My stamina is just a little bit better.

It was proof that I was gradually adapting to my training with Idelbert.

‘Of course, I still haven't landed a single punch.’

However, I feel like I’m learning something from the physical contact.

'I'm getting better at controlling my body. Besides⋯'

Sixth sense, intuition, or should I say survival instinct.

It's more than just being aware of the situation.

I felt like my sense of how to move in this situation, how to avoid it, and how to act in order to survive was getting sharper and sharper.

"Well done, though. You're getting sharper and sharper. You've already felt and dodged my fist twice."

Idelbert complimented me. The nuance of her words was something else, but it was definitely a compliment.

Anyway, I managed to dodge Idelbert's punch twice in this duel.

Considering the last time I'd come to train, I'd gotten the shit beaten out of me, it was a remarkable improvement.

"Focus more on the sensations you're feeling now. In a crisis, when you can't see a thing coming, the only thing you can trust is your own intuition and instincts."

"Yes. Master."

"I see you have some time to spare, since your answer came so quickly."

Uh-oh.

"I can't let you walk out on two feet. Run."

Idelbert pointed to the running track and the anklets in front of her.

"These anklets are enchanted with gravity control magic. A perfect artifact for developing explosive agility."

Aha. You're using such a precious artifact to train your disciple.

"Is it really necessary to do this⋯?"

"There's no point in futile repetitive exercises. Don't worry too much though, I'll be by your side to make sure you don't get lonely."

Haha. I'm at the mercy of my master's grace.

As soon as I put on the Gravity Adjusting Anklet Artifact, I immediately felt a tremendous pressure on my entire body, including my head.

"Kaaaah!"

As the world began to crush my entire body immediately after putting on the anklet, I immediately fell to the ground and was crushed by gravity.

Fuck. I'm supposed to run like this⋯? I can't even get up.

"Master, this is not training, this is abuse, abuse!"

-Thud. Thud.

Under an immense gravitational pull that I was no match for, Idelbert came at me, cracking the running track with each step.

-Thud.

In her hand was an axe similar in design to my old battle axe but it was something else entirely.

The blade was sharper than anything I'd ever seen before, with a graceful curve.

I don't know, but it seemed like I could take down a goblin on the first floor with it.

-Hmph.

It swung out of Idelbert's hand.

Ah. Now he felt like I could decapitate someone for some reason.

"I don't really care if it's abusive or not. Battle is about survival."

Hmph.

"Try to survive. Hard."

I fucking ran.

It was gravity, it was my feet, it was a monster with an axe on my back, but I ran anyway.

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"⋯, ⋯, ⋯, ⋯."

I don't know how many laps I ran. Thirty laps, forty laps, I don't know. My legs felt like they were going to break.

I was so exhausted that I passed out and when I woke up, I was lying with my head on Idelbert's thigh.

My brain is deprived of oxygen, and I keep having strange thoughts.

"Here. Take it."

I instinctively grasped the handle of the axe. It fit nicely in my hand with just the right amount of friction, and it was quite comfortable to grip.

It was not a cheap item.

From the blade to the handle, it was a far superior product to my battle axe, which I had bought for a mere 17 silver coins.

"Wow, this is what you're giving me?"

"It's the remains of the axe I smashed the other day. It's not good to have too good a weapon at your level, so I picked one that's good enough for the eighth level."

"Thank you, Master!"

So this is the grace of a teacher that I had only heard about in words.

Even though her methods were rough and crude, I could feel her heart for me, and I was a little touched.

No, when I think about it, it was Idelbert who caused the axe to break, so why should I be so grateful?

Still, the axe that cost 17 silver coins has been replaced with a much better one, so it's a win-win for me.

"⋯⋯"

Idelbert said nothing in response to my heartfelt thanks, her tail flicking like a whip, before she suddenly spoke up.

"Disciple, don't go into the labyrinth this week, just keep training."

With a very serious expression.

I had a premonition that something bad was about to happen.

'So is Diana, so is Idelbert...'

The two unusually strong people exuded such a strange aura, which made me, a newbie, extremely nervous.

"⋯Diana told me a similar story. Is something happening this week?"

"Did Diana tell you that story?"

"Yes. She said it's a jinx."

"Hmm. Well, if it's a jinx, it's a jinx, but I wouldn't worry too much about it. It hasn't happened in nine or ten years."

An omen. It was something I had heard before. Was it while waiting to enter the labyrinth?

- It's almost a new year, and the ritual is about to begin?

- It hasn't happened in nine years. Maybe the Labyrinth has calmed down a bit.

I recall what experienced explorers once said.

"Omens bring change and disaster to the Labyrinth. The last one was over a decade ago, but it never hurts to be careful."

Apparently, Idelbert and Diana have bad memories of omens.

Perhaps that's why they're wary of a phenomenon that hasn't happened in ten years.

"I'll take that to heart."

If I had no information, I would have been wary, but the warnings of those who had gone before me should have made me wary.

"I'm not going into the Labyrinth this week anyway.

"That's right. That's it for today's training."

And that was the end of my training.

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Another three more days of faithful training with Idelbert in the mornings and working in the bar at Diana's inn in the evenings passed.

"Ahhhh! Jubeel! That crazy kid again!"

"Everyone run! That kid is spraying milk again!"

I have to clean up all this."

"⋯Woohoo⋯ I like milk⋯ Milk⋯ I want more⋯"

After dealing with the drunken, uncontrollable mess, the crazy cow, spewing milk from her teats, I realized that I was strangely relaxed today.

I glance around and notice that the normally bustling inn has thinned out a bit.

"It's Labyrinth Day, so we're a little more relaxed than usual."

Diana, who was always baking by the fire in the kitchen, came out into the hall from time to time.

It was true. Today is the day the Labyrinth opens for the first week of the new year.

At the same time, it was a day that could bring about the omen that Diana and Idelbert had been warning about.

‘Thank God it wasn't me.’

Their caution was not misplaced.

"Did you hear? There's been a lot of shit going on in the Labyrinth this time."

"An omen? Why the fuck is something that hasn't happened in ten years suddenly happening?"

"Young explorers who didn't know about the omens were pretty dead, eh. Daffy's knees get sore this time of year, and she avoids the Labyrinth on her own."

"Well, we have to go into the Labyrinth to make a living, too. But it's good to hear that the Labyrinth will be stable starting next week."

Over the next two days, the Labyrinth City's fiery liveliness subsided a bit.

The usual sounds of people eating, talking, and milling about in the inns and taverns were missing, along with a few of the usual suspects.

Perhaps it was because I worked at the Diana Inn, where explorers were the majority of the clientele, but the silence seemed all the more poignant to me.

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~Two days later~

"Diana, I'm going to visit that temple!"

After another morning of being physically squeezed by Idelbert, I decided to take advantage of the free time before the evening rush to visit the temple.

I wasn't going for a blessing.

‘The only libraries in Labyrinth City are in the Academy and the Temple.’

Working in the tavern and listening to the rumors of the patrons could fill me with knowledge, but there were many false and misleading rumors.

I had always thought that I needed to build up more accurate common sense and knowledge about the world.

"The Academy's Grand Library is only accessible to students and their companions, but the temple is open to everyone! What do you think? Doesn't the Mother Earth Goddess's Order, which cares for all, feel truly great?"

"Here are ten copper coins."

“Thank you!"

I handed the copper coins to the coachman. The temple area is a bit far away.

It wasn't unreachable, but I didn't want to waste time walking, so I took a cheap carriage.

The ride was horrible and my butt is still tingling.

I got off the carriage and looked around the entrance to the temple.

The last time I'd visited the temple, the explorers who'd been pushed in for the pacification ritual were complaining.

"Off⋯ I can't feel my legs⋯"

Please, please⋯"

"What a blessing, or is it a curse? Fuck. Fuck."

"Just not a curse. Please don't be a curse⋯!"

This time, the room was full of explorers who had been to the Labyrinth.

Some had been severely injured, such as having their limbs cut off, and came to the temple to receive miracles or healing, while others were nervously checking for blessings and curses.

‘What's the ratio, 8:2?’

There were quite a few injuries, perhaps because of the omen. The Labyrinth is supposed to be dangerous, but this time it seems to have been particularly intense.

‘None of my business.’

I was glad I hadn't gone into the Labyrinth this week.

I headed straight for the temple's window.

"What brings you here? Are you here for a miracle? To check for blessings and curses? Or⋯"

"I'm here to use the library, my name is Balkan, a low-level explorer."

After a brief identification process, I was about to head to the temple's library.

"Wait. Who? Balkan?"

A gold-armored, helmeted paladin with a sword stood silently inside the window, calling my name.

"Ah. Yes. I am Balkan."

"Balkan? Are you sure you're Balkan? Mmm⋯ You look just like you sound."

The mysterious Paladin moved her head and looked me over from head to toe, then nodded to herself and quickly ran off somewhere.

"⋯Who is that?"

"She's the Paladin of the temple, and she's always there to protect us if anyone makes trouble at the window."

‘But why would someone like that react like that to my name?’

Is there a rumor going around?

‘Come to think of it, every time I go to the Explorers' Alliance lately, they've been making comments about me⋯’

I doubt such a story would have made it to the Temple. Hmm. No matter how much I thought about it, it didn't stick.

"⋯Do you mind if I go to the library?"

"Ah, yes. Since the Paladin didn't say anything, here's your pass. Just show it to the librarian when you enter."

And just like that, I was granted access to the library.

I walked confidently toward the temple library and realized that my steps were gradually slowing down.

I'm not bragging, but I'm pretty sure I've built up a big wall between me and the monstrous creatures called books in my life.

My head is already aching and my heart is pounding at the thought of having to acquire knowledge when I have zero wisdom, but I can't help it.

I have to know. I don't want to be caught off-guard, unable to react and scramble when something happens that is beyond my knowledge.

As I resume my stately stride, the massive library building comes into view.

I'm about to take a nervous step.

"Hmph."

In the library, a treasure trove of knowledge and a sacred place of learning, a lascivious moan reached my ears.

My head naturally turned toward the source.

The first thing I saw was a head of pure white hair, white cat ears and a gently flicking tail.

Next came the red eyes that had become strangely familiar lately, and then.

-Boo-boo-boo-boo.

A suspiciously suspicious crucifix necklace, vibrating frantically like an electric di\*do on a voluptuous chest.

"We meet again, Balkan⋯ Uh, well. What a coincidence."

A high priest of the Earthmother Order, Serif Adeline was there.

And in the distance, a paladin in golden armor watched us.

I couldn't see her, but I could feel her presence with my recently expanded perception.

‘⋯Did she let Serif know I'm here?’

I don't know, but the circumstances led me to assume so.

"Well, you haven't come by in a while, so I thought you'd forgotten about me."

"How could I forget you, Serif, I've just been busy lately and haven't had a chance to enter the Labyrinth."

"Well, have you?"

Putting aside some of the questions for now, I answer Serif as casually as I can.

"What brings you to the temple's library?"

The expression of Serif, who was looking at me, started to gradually frown.

"⋯⋯?"

"⋯Serif. You don't look well, are you ill?"

"Oh, no. I don't think so⋯wait a minute⋯"

-Sniff.

Serif's big nose twitched slightly.

-Sniff. Ssshhh.

Suddenly, Serif, who had closed her eyes and inhaled, gradually moved closer to me.

Her fluffy ears twitched, and her tail wagged frantically as if she was excited.

-Boo-boo-boo-boo-boo.

The pouch of holy power, or rather, the pair of breasts, vibrated more intensely each time she approached me.

What is it?

Serif moved closer and closer to me, until she was standing right under my nose.

-Sniff. Sniff. Sniff. Hum.

Slowly, Serif craned her back and neck, putting her nose close to the nape of my neck and inhaling the scent.

Serif's finely coiled brow furrowed into a full frown.

It was an expression like that of a cat whose cherished possession had been marked by another.

"Balkan."

Serif asked, looking up at me, tense with the suddenness of the situation.

"Have you, by any chance, met Idelbert Adeline?"