**Chapter 50: The 6th floor (2)**

We landed on the outskirts of the second floor and moved towards the center of the floor.

"Follow me carefully. Take it slow wherever we step-"

-click.

"Hic!"

"Thud."

The trap's signature mechanical sound rang out as one of the students stepped on it.

Immediately, a rain of arrows rained down from the ceiling.

These erratic, wide-area attacks were the greatest danger of all, as students could be injured or killed.

But the women by my side now were not explorers who would lose their composure over something like this.

"Windcutter!"

"Breeze."

Lammel and Assistant Gelsia chanted the magic they had stored in their staffs, and the change was immediate.

Dozens of blades made of wind slashed at the rapidly descending arrows, the air currents grazing their skin and altering their trajectory.

The falling arrows scattered across the floor or pierced the walls.

No one was injured and it was smooth sailing, despite the arrow trap.

"Wizards are so convenient."

How would I have avoided the arrow trap?

I might have been able to push them out of range, like I did with Grumpy and Jeremy, but it would have been impossible to save this many people at once.

The mission would have failed immediately.

Magic, on the other hand, can be used in a variety of situations with the click of a button.

This was why wizards were treated so well.

"Well, that's about it⋯ I've had to catch up on my studies, but it's the least I can do. I don't know when I'll graduate⋯"

"As an assistant mage, I assume you're thinking of joining an academy or a noble?"

"Yes. As long as I can graduate⋯"

Mages, too, seemed to change their paths a lot depending on whether they went to the academy or not.

Whether to learn more at the academy, become a vassal of a noble, become an explorer, or find something else.

"What does Ellie want to do when she grows up?"

"⋯I don't know. Don't keep talking more casually than that."

I sneak up on Ellie and ask her, but she immediately looks away. It's still too early, I thought, and I sounded like a father who wants his daughter's attention too much.

The students around us gave me and Ellie strange looks, but I shrugged it off.

"Just follow the path we're taking. There are traps ahead, so don't be rash."

"Okay. Sorry⋯"

"You don't have to bow down so low."

The student who stepped on the trap apologized like she was really sorry. We threw up our hands. It wasn't intentional.

It's impossible to avoid a trap completely unless you're a shrewd trap detector in the first place.

After a short rest, we moved on and soon reached the center.

"What the hell?"

"This is bad luck."

The center was in an uproar, and it was clear that something had happened.

Professor Mankostil, who was wiping his forehead in the center of the commotion, spotted us and waved.

"You're the last of the party, just in time. Let me explain at once."

The case was simple.

"A party has fallen into a transition trap, and I've located it on the map, and it looks like it's on the eighth floor."

That was pretty shitty news.

There's no way a seventh-level explorer would ever touch an eighth-level transition trap unless they made a really stupid mistake.

The best that could be said for the situation was that a student, an insufferable asshole with a strong desire to investigate the phenomenon of the Labyrinth, had touched the transition trap.

"Whoa⋯ I've told you so many times, but these students⋯"

Professor Mankostil's face sank even further. His face showed his frustration with the curious and disobedient students.

I guess he shouldn't have given them a speech about how they shouldn't be so curious and disrespectful.

"You're good girls."

"Uh, really? Hmph."

I tapped the shoulders of the students who had stepped into the arrow trap and they scratched their heads in embarrassment. Not a compliment.

"Maybe I should go, the students on the eighth floor are in too much danger at this rate."

The difficulty of the Labyrinth increases exponentially with each multiple of four.

If a party of top explorers on the seventh floor accidentally falls to the eighth floor, they can still make their way back up with a combination of desperation and luck.

The problem is the students below them.

The escorting explorers can't afford to take care of them when they've fallen to a level above their own.

So Professor Mankostil decided to make a quick trip down to the eighth floor and back through the labyrinth on his own.

"Are you sure you're okay? Even an academy professor can't make it to the eighth floor alone."

"You have nothing to worry about. Even if he’s a research professor, he’s much older than us. He’s not a professor for nothing, you know?"

"That's right, he used to be an explorer in the past. We should be worried about ourselves."

As the other escorted explorer party said, the professor was not the one to worry about.

With Professor Mankostil gone, we would be without a reliable backstop in case the unexpected happened.

"Don't worry too much, I'll leave my alter ego, just in case."

Professor Mankostil waved his staff, and an old lady doll appeared.

"This doll is capable of basic mental arithmetic and intermediate magic. If you run into any other problems, please contact me through this doll."

There was only one doll, as if he couldn't make more than one.

The escort explorers' eyes lit up when they saw it, including ours, but after some mediation and discussion by Mankostil, it went into the hands of the most powerful party of sixth floor explorers.

"Well, then, escort explorers. Please take care of the students."

At first glance, it sounded like a favor, but it was also a warning. Don't get carried away and keep the students straight.

As soon as Professor Mankostil finished speaking, he vanished into thin air and began flying toward the edge of the labyrinth.

The remaining escorted explorers watched in disbelief, then exchanged glances.

"⋯All right, let's go again, shall we?"

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A little over two weeks had passed since then, and we had made it through the second and third floors without incident.

It was a bit of a hassle to gather in the center of the floor and wait for other parties to arrive, but it definitely had its advantages in terms of safety.

"I'm tired⋯ I'm tired⋯ I want to wash⋯ I want to wash with warm water⋯"

"How can you eat the same preserved food for days on end? Don't you get tired of it?"

"I'll never enter the labyrinth next time. The monsters are scary, it's dark, and it's cold."

However, something unexpected began to happen. The students started to get tired of the long walk through the labyrinth.

Of course, the grumbling only lasted for a moment. It was inevitable.

"Ke-"

Zzzzzzzz!

They were right next to people who were suffering much worse than them.

They couldn't complain, even if they were grateful for the protection.

Tsk!

Two hobgoblins leapt out from hiding at the fork in the road, spears in hand, and screamed as they were cut down by a fierce battle axe.

The hobgoblins' hides, tough even for the most experienced explorers on the seventh floor, were torn apart by the axes as smooth as butter.

"Heh. Crazy."

Joy Hog, who was leading the party right next to Nam Soo-jin, let out a small exclamation.

The hand that held her shield dropped stiffly. Lammel fumbled with her staff, and Jubeel slid her sword back into its scabbard. It was already over.

Everyone's reactions were ever so slightly slower.

The surprise was unexpected and right under their noses but Nam Soo-jin's response was quick and concise.

He just dodged the spear, and then took a shot with his axe.

Dodge all of your attacks, hit all of mine, and I win.

It's easy to say, but if anyone could do this, the explorers would have had a tenth as many beast attacks, and a tenth as many cracked skulls. This was no easy task.

My base speed hadn't changed much from the last time I've been in the labyrinth, but my situational awareness and reflexes had become deceptively quick.

"Balkan. What is it with you? What the hell happened to you in the last few weeks?"

While you can simply increase your physical abilities by entering the Labyrinth and killing a lot of monsters or equipping artifacts, the part about combat sense like that can only be trained by practice.

It's a skill that can only be cultivated by those who are constantly in the line of fire, fighting monsters instead of running away from them but the man in front of them was only on his fourth trip to the Labyrinth.

‘Such a performance on only his fourth trip to the Labyrinth?’

Joy Hog didn’t know anyone like him.

'Until the last labyrinth, he often showed signs of inexperience ⋯'

While she was excited to have him in the party because of his physical prowess, she wasn't expecting this.

Though she'd been nervous for the past two weeks, the raid on the fourth floor had finally convinced Joy Hog.

For him, there would be no surprises or changes.

"What⋯ I just got my ass kicked."

"Haha. If you can grow that big, I'd like to try my hand at punching!"

Nam Soo-jin shuddered for a moment as he recalled the past.

Training, where he'd been constantly getting punched in the back, dodging flying punches and looking for an angle to strike back.

Training where he'd run away from Idelbert, wearing a gravity-controlling artifact.

The day he was strangled by Idelbert's thigh, unable to breathe, and passed out.

The results of his hard training had begun to show since his return to the Labyrinth, and he felt quite satisfied that his efforts had not been in vain.

"Speaking of which, it's been rumored for a while now that the head of the Explorers' Union has taken on a disciple."

"Uhhh. I've heard that too, but wasn't that a rumor, and where in the world is a fit man who wears a helmet to hide his ugly face, ⋯huh?"

Balkan strode over to the hobgoblin, ignoring Jubeel and Lammel, who were suddenly staring at him wide-eyed.

He didn't want to be bothered with a barrage of questions if they found out he had become Idelbert's apprentice.

"Tsup⋯"

Instead of thinking, I focused on the sole of the hobgoblin's foot in front of me. The hobgoblin's shadow, to be exact.

'I could definitely feel something off about it⋯'

A similar feeling to when I saw Diana's womb symbol.

However, the feeling of reluctance disappeared without a trace as soon as the Hobgoblin died.

"Did you feel something too, Mr. Balkan?"

 I don't feel anything on the Hobgoblin's corpse right now."

"Is that so⋯"

Hitolis, a priest of the Earth Mother Order, also frowned at the hobgoblin corpse.

She'd been doing the same thing when she and Jubeel had gone out to hunt down the goblins, and that black thing seemed to be bothering her quite a bit.

"Can you feel that?"

"I don't know. I don't really feel it either. Maybe it's just my mood?"

"Hmm. Well, there was an omen last week, so maybe something has changed in the Labyrinth. It can't hurt to be cautious."

‘Am I the only one sensing this?’

Apparently, the rest of the party hadn't noticed the uneasy feeling in some of the beasts.

I don't know why Hitolis and I are the only ones feeling this, but we rejoined the party in the center of the 4th floor.

"I've been communicating with the puppet, and it just so happens that Professor Mankostil has just gotten the explorers and students from the eighth floor."

"Phew. That's good."

“But somehow, isn’t it a little tighter than the usual 4th floor?”

 "It's the new traps and monsters, but it's generally more difficult than the floor average."

“What is that unpleasant thing...?”

 The good news and the bad news came together.

The priests of the other parties seemed to feel a little uncomfortable, but once we were all in the center, there was nothing to fear.

We bulldozed through the fourth floor and arrived safely at the portal.

"Ellie. Take care on the fifth floor."

"⋯Haah."

Ellie sighed and held out her hand first.

"This is really the last time."

Aside from sounding like she had no choice, I was glad to see that her resistance had lessened considerably.

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"At least I didn't pass out this time.

The last time I'd fallen through a transference trap to the fifth floor, I'd passed out.

This time, however, I felt the same floaty sensation as I did when I crossed the portal normally, but I didn't feel anything special.

‘Is this the first event to enter a multiplier of 5?’

I don't know exactly, but the fifth floor and its fountains seemed to be shrouded in secrecy.

"It's different here."

"Wow. It's so much bigger than the other floors⋯"

But even students who had clearly never been to the fifth floor before didn't faint or collapse.

‘Am I the only one who fainted?’

With some doubt and frustration, I picked up the fountain move scroll.

"I'm going to tear this up."

"Okay."

A yellow portal immediately appeared as I tore open the Fountain Movement Scroll, and the students' curious gazes were drawn to it.

It is known that it is virtually impossible to create a portal by human hands.

They were surprised to see the special feature of the Fountain Movement Scroll that created the portal.

"Ohhhhh!"

Ellie's eyes sparkled in particular. Her eyes burned with curiosity.

"⋯!"

As soon as our eyes met, the flame faltered slightly.

I wondered if it brought back memories of the library. Ellie chewed on her lower lip as she pushed her hat down tightly and avoided my gaze.

After a long pause, her eyes refocused.

"⋯Whoa."

Then, as if deciding something, she walked over to me and reached for my hand.

"Did you really just say that was the last time?"

"⋯⋯That's it, and I have to keep my promise."

"Promise?"

"The portal. I said I'd research it and let you know what I found."

"Oh."

I'd forgotten for a moment.

"⋯What, you forgot?!"

"Uhhh. No. I remembered it well. I did. Mmm."

"⋯⋯"

Ellie looked at me with a dubious glance, then grabbed my hand.

"Just until we're done with the portal research."

"You. You keep changing your lines?"

"⋯If I keep doing that, will you let go of my hand?"

Actually, we don't have to hold hands to go through the fountain portal. I also have a few extra scrolls but I didn't say anything, just smiled quietly and held onto Ellie's hand.

I swallowed hard before stepping through the portal.

‘⋯Am I going to meet [that being] again?’

The one in the light, with the warm, nostalgic touch.

I had crossed the fountain portal and met them last time, so it wasn't impossible that I would meet them again.

My steps were strangely light. I stepped through the fountain portal, as if I were heading home for a nostalgic visit.