**Chapter 51: The 6th floor (3)**

I swallowed hard and looked forward.

I still remember the gentle touch and warmth.

When I was mentally exhausted from one ridiculous setback after another, [that being] touch revived my spirits.

Even though I was an orphan, I was happy to be with my sister, and I remembered my childhood and how I used to earn a day's wages, and I felt so relaxed.

It was something to look forward to.

The touch was deeply addictive. I couldn't get out of it.

So I squeezed my eyes shut, swallowed hard, and waited, like Pavlov's dog, for the gentle hand to rest on my head.

"Mister. Wake up, why are you so dazed?"

"Leave him alone. Maybe he's having a pleasant dream."

My eyes snapped open at the sound of Ellie and Jubeel's voices.

"⋯Why didn't it work?"

I mumbled in a daze, feeling so lost.

I don't know if it's a good analogy because I hadn't interacted with the opposite sex, but I felt like my partner had run away from me after I'd gotten a motel room and cleaned myself up.

The anticipation that had filled my mind and the stiffness of my body deflated like a punctured balloon.

"What do you mean? The portal can only go to one place."

Ellie said, as if to wake me up.

But I had it last time.

‘Is there some kind of special condition, like a hidden piece?’

My rapidly working brain, quicker than ever before, presented two hypotheses.

‘One. I can meet her when I'm unconscious, or something like that?’

I met her first when I passed out in Diana's inn after the trip, and again when I was still breathing after the hobgoblin fight, when I crossed the Fountain of Life portal.

So, if I were to punch myself in the head so fucking hard that I became a mangled mess wouldn't I see her again?

I'm having so much fun just thinking about it.

⋯No. Calm down. Let's not rush to judgment. I lowered my raised fist to my side.

'Second hypothesis. I can only encounter her in multiples of 5 floors when I go to the fountain for the first time.’

In truth, it was more of a gut feeling than a well-founded hypothesis.

[5's ■■ ■■■ risk ■■. Special for ■■]

I remembered what she had said. I didn't hear the whole thing, but I've been thinking about it ever since.

I was still nervous about the latter part, but the former part was more or less certain.

‘Multiples of 5 are dangerous.’

Why are there fountains that spew healing water in the multiples of 5 floors?

Why are there fountain travel scrolls that can only be used on that floor, and why are there so many of them?

‘What if all of this was orchestrated by someone to keep explorers away from the multiple of 5 floors?’

I shook my head as my feet were damp.

The healing water from the fountain had soaked through my gaiters and soaked my feet.

"You can't take the healing water from the fountain to the other levels?"

"You can't. The healing water evaporates the moment you leave the fifth floor."

"Besides, it's not like we can gulp down the water of other explorers. Ouch."

Joy Hog and Jubeel replied to the curious student.

I wondered the same thing myself, and then realized, "Okay.”

I pulled my foot out of the fountain.

For some reason, I didn't want to stay on the fifth floor any longer. A strange tingling sensation followed. I wanted to get out of here as soon as possible.

Fortunately, there was no reason to stay on the fifth floor. Our party quickly crossed the portal to the sixth floor.

A light breeze blew in.

Mmm~ the disgusting smell of blood.

"Fuck."

The curse word immediately came out of my mouth. Activating my perception, I took in my surroundings without having to turn my head.

No enemies or monsters nearby.

There was, however, the mangled corpse of an explorer.

It was not uncommon to find corpses while exploring the Labyrinth. But,

"Shh, corpse, corpse, corpse!"

"Gahhhhh!"

It was too much for the students.

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"Ooooohhhhhhhh!"

"Ellie. Throw up slowly."

"De, don't pat me on the back⋯ I'm fine⋯ You're just hurting me more⋯ Owww."

I and Hitolis tended to the shocked students.

"May the Earth Mother look upon you."

Chaaaahhh.

A faint dusting of light fell on the students' heads. The chaos had only stopped after the miracle of the mental barrier.

It was inferior to the miracle Serif had bestowed upon me, but it was enough for a simple mental hold.

I finished patting Ellie on the back and joined Joy Hog, who was standing guard at the perimeter.

"It's eerily quiet."

"⋯For all that screaming, not a single monster has been spooked. And there's a dead one right over there."

"Tsk."

Jubeel, who had been searching the explorers' corpses, clicked her tongue.

"They're still warm, not much decomposition, and they've been dead for less than half a day."

That meant there was a monster nearby. But the beast still hadn't shown itself.

"Is there any chance of an ambush or is it watching from afar?"

"No. The skeletons that inhabit the sixth floor aren't that flexible, and when they spot undead prey, they'll lunge at it with death-defying ferocity."

"But that one, it doesn't look like it was killed by a skeleton."

I looked at the corpses of the explorers.

They were torn apart, upper and lower bodies separated, as if by an overwhelming force.

"There are even signs of gutting. Skeletons don't even have a digestive system, so why would they do this?"

The explorer hadn't been killed by skeletons, so that left only one possibility.

"A new monster on the ⋯6th floor?"

"That's likely, but it could also be an outlaw. Maybe one of the branded ones."

I'd rather it be the former. If it was an outlaw, there was no telling what they would do when they saw the Academy students.

Besides, even if it was an unfamiliar beast, we would be able to handle a sixth floor beast.

"The other escort parties seem to have arrived safely at the sixth floor, so let's gather in the center and wait for Professor Mankostil to come up to the sixth floor, and once the students finish investigating the phenomenon, this request will be completed. Just a little more work, please."

TA Gelsia unfolded the map, studying the geography and nodding her thanks. We'd gotten lucky.

We're dropped near the center of the sixth floor, so we can reach the center in a day at most.

"We'll have to be on high alert."

"We're almost there, so we can't mess it up at the last minute. Stay tense and let's go."

Everyone drew their weapons and formed up. The students' spirits are lifted and they're ready to go.

I walked with Joy Hog at the head of the party.

It was my first time on the sixth floor, so I took a few moments to familiarize myself with my surroundings.

Overall, the scene is similar to the first floor.

Dark and dank, with a spooky cave feel that makes you feel uncomfortable just standing still.

The blue luminescent stones embedded in the walls, except for the ceiling and floor, made it easy to see, but the blue color of the stones gave off a strange chill that blended in with the dark cave landscape.

"How many hours have we been walking?"

"About five hours."

Skeletons are at a similar power level to goblins and will fall instantly to a single blast of a priest's holy power, but there are a lot of them.

And we walked for five hours without encountering a single one of these common skeletons.

Joy Hog's party, no stranger to exploring the seventh floor, is beginning to take this situation in stride.

"This feels really creepy."

"⋯I know. Still, we have to get to the center first. If we band together with the other escort explorers, we'll have a better chance against any monsters."

"Ah. One of the escort parties has just arrived at the center, and the students' vital signs are fine."

That was good news.

The only time more power is bad is when your companions are outlaws.

The explorers on this journey had the skills and character to be of great help.

We walked another hour after that, arriving safely in the center of the floor, and.

"⋯⋯?"

"⋯What is it? Why are there only kids?"

We found five students huddled together, clinging to each other, looking at the ground and shivering.

‘Something's wrong.’

A sudden chill ran down my spine since reaching the center.

There was no sign of the escorting explorers who were supposed to be protecting them. The way the students were huddled together, heads and bodies bowed, was also strange.

"Hmph, hmph, hmph, hmph."

"Eaten, eaten, eaten, eaten, eaten."

One of the students, muttering unintelligible sounds, was clutching something tightly in his arms.

It was a familiar object, the old woman's doll that Professor Mankostil had left behind, said to be capable of intermediate magic.

She clutched it tightly as if it were her lifeblood.

"Students, why are you all so-"

I cautiously walked towards them and reached out to touch them.

-Thud.

My hand bounced away without reaching them. It felt like I was blocked by a solid wall.

"Looks like the professor cast a barrier spell with his puppet. Kids, why are you the only ones here, where are the escort explorers?!"

"⋯Assistant Professor⋯?"

At the sound of Assistant Gelsia's voice, the students who had been looking at the floor and trembling slightly turned their heads.

When their panicked eyes recognized us, she spoke in a voice as quiet as a mouse.

"Do, run⋯ run⋯ run⋯"

"What? What do you mean, run away? I don't understand."

"Woo⋯ woo⋯ woo⋯ woo⋯ woo⋯"

A student makes a babbling sound under Ms. Gelsia's brush.

Wooe? Wee?

-Tsk.

We stared blankly at the ceiling of the Labyrinth.

-Tuduk⋯

And then, we opened our mouths.

-Tuduk, tuduk, tuduk⋯

Something fell from the ceiling of the Labyrinth.

Stone dust, blood drops and then.

-Pow!

The corpse of an escort explorer.

Red rain poured down from the labyrinth as the creature bit into the neck of its half-killed prey.

"Ha ha. What the fuck."

I looked up to the ceiling, where the bull-headed beast was dangling like Spider-Man with her arms stuck in the ceiling of the labyrinth. The corners of its mouth were smeared with unidentifiable flesh and blood.

Despite their bursting muscles, they were very clever.

There was no reason for them to be out there. They were destroying evidence, trying to get out of their opponent's sight and take them by surprise.

"Uh, how can a minotaur be on the sixth floor?"

"No, it's not like a regular minotaur. This one, it's something more."

A large, armored minotaur and nine minotaurs that crushed skeletons and wore them as armor.

The panicked voices of Joy Hog's party convinced me.

This is not an ordinary situation. This is an unusual situation and an unusual entity.

They were among the top explorers of the lower ranks, but the moment they saw those minotaurs they took a step backward.

They realized it with their human instincts before they were explorers. That's the most dangerous of all minotaurs.

What was needed now, however, was not panic and confusion, but decisive action.

As I thought, I summoned all the energy I could muster and shouted.

"All hands!!! Prepare for battle!!!"

"Purrrrrrrr!!!!"

Boss Minotaur and I shouted at the same time, and the troops on both sides quickly raised their weapons.

Immediately, the minotaur began to fall from the ceiling so I swung my axe in response.

-Kagagagagak!!!

Sparks flew as my axe clashed with the horns of the boss minotaur.

This signaled the beginning of the battle.