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"He fell asleep. Now, young ladies, you too..."

"Arnest-san!"

I reflexively shout my protest out at Arnest-san.

"Keep it down, Agnes-chan."

"Sensei is sleeping. He's in the body of a child, so the burden is high on him."

As Betty and Cindy caution me about my loud voice, I cover my mouth in a hurry. Sensei has finally fallen asleep, so I mustn't do something as silly as waking him up in the middle of it.

"But, I can understand Agnes-chan's anger."

"Me too."

Us three begin to press on Arnest-san. Certainly, there's some truth to what he's saying, but he doesn't understand one very important fact, namely, our feelings as girls.

"How mean of you, Arnest-san! And here I had thought that I could give sensei a lap pillow at long last!"

I start the attacks against Arnest-san at a volume low enough that sensei won't wake up from it.

I wanted sensei to think 『Agnes' lap is really soft』 while getting him to rest on it with a peace of mind. All for the sake of having him become aware of me as a woman after we escape this place. That was the major point.

"Indeed! You went too far!"

"No matter how much of an old man you might be, your lacking understanding of a maiden's heart is way too extreme!"

Even Betty and Cindy, who follow up next, should have felt the same. Both of them are my rivals so far as it goes, but rather than that, they feel like they need to whip Arnest-san who busted the contest between us.

"That is not the point here. To begin with, it is imperative to make sure that Earl Baumeister does not collapse from overwork."

Uugh! Arnest-san's argument is too sound! He's definitely right here, but us offering sensei a lap pillow at this point shouldn't have posed much of a problem.

"Even though I had planned to gently wake up sensei once it was time..."

For Betty to have come up with something so enviable... I should have realized this as well, and yet I allowed for such a terrible blind spot to exist. After all, his wives and the people in his mansion totally monopolize the enviable option of waking up the sleeping sensei.

What a blunder for me of all people.

Just when I considered Arnest-san to be unforgivable all the more because of this, Betty and Cindy had moved to sensei's side without me noticing. Don't tell me! They plan to appeal to sensei as future wife candidates by instilling in him the image of capable women who'd gently and timely wake him up...

Damn! I was totally beaten to the punch by these two!

"Uuhhh...."

This is also Arnest-san's fault for having destroyed the foundation of my initial plan.

I end up staring at him with reproachful eyes.

"Hmm, little ladies, you need to quickly take a rest as well. I am still not all that exhausted, so it will not be a problem for me. Do not worry and take a nap, I will keep watch."

That's not the issue here, but...still, what Arnest-san is saying isn't wrong.

I decide to take a nap as well, falling prostrate on the small desk. Somehow it's like nodding off during class.

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"It is time, Earl Baumeister."

"U——ungh. I wonder, did my stamina recover a bit?"

"It is just a light reprieve, but it is better than nothing. Around thirty minutes have passed since you fell asleep."

"I see..."

When I open my eyes, the room's walls have approached quite closely. It looks like the walls had no nasty contrivance of teasing us by suddenly increasing their speed. Since we've had a little rest, all that's left is to destroy the exit with magic and head to the upper floor.

"Agnes, Betty, Cindy, it's time."

I wake up the three girls who've been diligent about recovering their stamina and mana by taking a nap.

"Fuueh...huh? Sensei, you're up already?"

"Arnest woke me up."

"Is that so...?"

""...""

Are they people with a foul mood after waking up? The three narrow their eyes as they stare at Arnest with expressions that are hard to read.

"Now then, I wonder whether this break will prove to have been good or bad luck."

"We will find out after proceeding. You three, we're off."

""""Yes!""""

It'll be easily possible to blow open the exit door when using a certain level of offensive magic. Receiving my order, Cindy faultlessly smashes down the thick door with her magic, allowing us to successfully escape this floor.



"The next area is...water?"

"A pond, swamp."

"A big puddle of water?"

The next floor is mostly filled with water. It's a huge, man-made lake, but as some kind of magic has been cast across almost all of this floor, 『Detect』 doesn't work.

"Hmmm." Arnest seems to have noticed the oddity of this place.

"Is there some kind of trick set up in the water? ...Agnes."

"Okay."

Agnes also tries to probe the water with the 『Detect』 I taught her, but there's absolutely no contrivance in the water itself. It's really nothing but simple water, so our bodies won't start melting or anything if we go in.

"Earl Baumeister, it is very cold water. In other words, it is the ancient strategy of 『Defeat half a force by having them cross a river』."

"I see."

I touch the water as well, but it's numbingly cold. This underground ruin has stuck to military methods to destroy its invaders so far. The water level reaches up to Agnes' waist, whereas I sink in up to my chest.

That means, it's a trap to unnecessarily make us accumulate fatigue by crossing through cold water.

"Magic is being used to maintain the water's low temperature."

"There's another spell, right?"

The strategy of exhausting the invaders by forcing them to proceed through cold water won't work on magicians. I mean, magicians can cross the water without getting wet by using 『Flight』.

Because the other side likely knows about that as well, another spell should be active on this lake floor.

"Cindy, try floating up with 『Flight』."

"Okay...huh?"

Cindy tries to invoke 『Flight』 at the water's edge several times, but she can't float as the spell is being canceled out. It looks like my prediction has been right.

"In other words, we have to head to the exit while passing through this cold water."

"It can't be helped. It's freezing, though."

"It's kinda like swimming, isn't it?"

"Well, you got to cross rivers during hunts as well."

As expected, that's their level of perception, huh...? Still, the designer of this ruin has been quite evil, and his thought process is clearly that of a soldier. After all he has adopted the steady method of gradually weakening the invaders to kill them in the upper floors instead of the often used method of defeating invaders with powerful golems on each floor.

"It is definitely a nuisance, but it is inevitable."

"Sorry."

"If you were to die, Earl Baumeister, I would not be able to investigate the ruin here. And even before that, we would die together anyway." With those words, Arnest bends down to carry me on his back.

If I entered this water with my current body, I'd become unable to move by the time we reached the exit.

"How about warming up the water with magic just around ourselves?"

"You'd use up quite a lot of mana until we reach the exit. It's truly a nuisance."

You could probably call it a fortune that no golems have been deployed on this floor. It'll be fine as long we just get through the cold water.

It'll cost quite a bit of stamina, but we've got no choice but to let it recover by warming ourselves up at the exit.

"Hyaaa! It is cold!"

"It's not cold...it's freezing."

"Cold."

"This coldness all the way to the exit..."

Arnest, who carries me, and Agnes' team who are submerged into the water up to their waists, trudge towards the exit with their expressions twisted due to the water's coldness.

And then the demerit of having chosen to take a break on the previous floor catches up with us. The trap on the previous floor has probably been reset. Accordingly, the great number of small dragon golems from the second floor have followed us up to this floor.

"We shouldn't have taken a break..." Agnes has apparently started to regret her previous choice.

"No, if we had continued without resting, we might have used up all our strength on the way through this water. Agnes, your choice hasn't been wrong."

"You're exaggerating. No matter how cold it might be, it's just water."

"It's just cold water, but since it reaches up to your waist, you expend stamina by just walking through it. Moreover, since the water is freezing cold, it robs you of even more stamina."

"This means, either choice would lead to hell."

The creator of this ruin was fully aware just how much stamina would be lost if you walk several hundred meters through numbingly cold water.

"Sensei! Behind us!"

"So they're here."

The dragons have become able to freely move around after the trap on the previous floor was released. Now they have gathered up into a huge swarm. One after the other starts to shoot their breath at us from the opposite shore.

"Arnest."

"I am on it."

A single breath doesn't have much firepower. But, that doesn't mean that you come out unscathed when hit. We have to block them with 『Magic Barrier』 at any cost.

Not getting as exhausted in comparison to Agnes' team since the water is only reaching half way up his thighs, Arnest begins to quickly block the attacks by deploying his 『Magic Barrier』.

"It is an ill-minded trap."

We can only proceed slowly thanks to the water's resistance. Given that we must keep up the 『Magic Barrier』 for an extended period of time, it'll also exhaust our mana in the end.

"Agnes, Betty, Cindy! Leave the 『Magic Barrier』 to Arnest!"

"But..."

"Don't worry! It's a division of roles!"

We cannot afford to have Agnes' team, who can use offensive magic, to waste their mana in this place. I'll have Arnest actively devote himself to defense, seeing how he can't attack golems despite having lots of mana.

"They don't advance above the water, huh?"

"Just like 『Flight』 has become unavailable for us, those dragons can not maintain their floating power above the lake."

Having said that, the water resistance is stronger than expected. We haven't distanced ourselves more than 50 meters from the shore. I didn't notice it since the labyrinth-like structure of the lower floor had many walls, but if the small dragons concentrate on just the distance of their breaths, they seem to achieve quite the range.

They have assembled at the shore, and keep releasing their breaths at us. Arnest has been blocking those, but since the breaths exploded very close to me, who's riding on his back - albeit with the 『Magic Barrier』 in-between - you can't really describe it as a situation that's overly desirable for my mental sanity.

On the other hand, if I were to try walking through the water, my exhaustion would be extreme because of this child body, and I'd immediately become a burden after becoming immobile. It's a setup that drains the invaders to a truly detestable extent.

"Earl Baumeister, it looks like we also have to deploy a 『Magic Barrier』 to the front."

"Yeah..."

I guess there's no way for the creator of this ruin to be so half-hearted. At the shore near the exit, which gradually came into sight, a great number of small dragon golems is awaiting us. Once they caught sight of us, they began hurling breath attacks at us.

"That is what I had thought would happen."

"Betty, please handle that side."

"Okay."

In the end, it's resulted in us continuing to advance with Arnest deploying his 『Magic Barrier』 to the back, and Betty hers to the front.

"It kinda feels like disembarking amongst enemy fire. Just like a military history story I've read in the past."

I think the big difference with the story mentioned by Agnes is us also being attacked from behind. Moreover, embarking amongst enemy fire is something you'd usually do when the landing side has the bigger military forces. You wouldn't start any landing operations with a small party like ours against an enemy with overwhelming numbers. After all, it's ill-advised and very likely that you'd fail. We simply don't have any other choice as we'll die if we don't continue onwards.

"Sensei, aren't we going to raise the walking speed?"

"Cindy, that's unreasonable. You're spending more stamina than expected despite having thought that it's just normal water, right? If we make the mistake of hurrying, we'll be worn out before reaching the shore at the exit. The guy, who came up with this trap, was quite cunning."

If the invaders grow impatient after receiving attacks from the back and front, and try to hurry up, they'll lose too much stamina, and use up all their strength then and there in the worst case.

"I think the next floor will be the most dangerous one so far, if the ruin does not manage to bring down the invaders on this floor."

"Most likely."

It's because the invaders would have used up lots of mana and stamina on this floor.

"The ruin just has to kill us, the invaders, in the end. That's the kind of design it is."

If it was a normal underground ruin with traps and challenges, they'd have placed trump cards on every floor, but this place has many traps with the sole objective to tire us out mentally, and steal our mana and stamina. The traps have been set up with the idea that we simply need to croak in the end.

"That's why it's the design of a soldier."

"Did someone like a strategist, appearing in military history documents, come up with this?"

"Considering the scale of this place, it might be a military installation of the Ancient Magic Civilization's era, so it might have been created by someone well-acquainted with military affairs. Or maybe a genius who had such knowledge." I replied to Agnes.

"With that said, don't mess up your pace. Panicking will just play into the cards of our opponent."

We keep proceeding forward while being showered by breath attacks from the front and back. The breaths can be blocked with 『Magic Barriers』, but accordingly, Arnest and Betty keep using up their mana.

"No matter what you choose here, it's full of demerits! The person, who thought up this ruin, was truly malicious!"

"I'm pretty sure he was someone with a very sinister look!"

"His personality was the worst!"

It's just as the girls say. If it comes to such an ill-spirited ruin of the Ancient Magic Civilization's era...Count Ishrubak again? It's very likely, I think.

As we advanced while enduring, we could confirm that several dozens of small dragons were regularly firing breath attacks at us from the shore near the exit. They're acting just like an artillery battery.

"Sensei, the attacks from the rear have stopped."

Did we leave their range? No, the small dragons of this ruin move just like military forces. They're probably making sure that the shots missing us don't hit their allies in front by mistake.

"Arnest, the 『Magic Barrier』 in the back is no longer needed."

"Yes. The yellow girly is going to have it tough from now on."

Arnest, at least remember Betty's name after you've gone through all this together with her! Calling her yellow girly because of her hair color...this is why scholars are such a pain.

It's great that the breath attacks only come from the front now, but the dragons have accordingly raised the attack speed.

"Jeez, they're so weirdly smart!"

I guess that's the final, fierce attack against us who intend to land on-shore.

"Sensei, should I attack them?"

"Betty...you can't pull that off right now, can you?"

The feat of opening a hole in a part of a 『Magic Barrier』 and attacking through that opening can only be done by veterans at Burkhart-san's level.

"Now that you mention it, you're right."

"Hence, push your way through all the way to the exit just like that, Betty."

As long as she keeps up a 『Magic Barrier』 of a certain thickness, we'll be able to reach the exit even without attacking the dragons.

"It's better to not waste mana than imprudently attacking."

I guess you could call it lucky, but as we get closer, we can identify the details of this floor's exit. It seems to be a huge iron door with a height of around five meters. If we succeed in reaching the other side of that door, we should be able to cut off the dragons' attacks.

"Push!"

Having safely reached land at the exit, we continue walking towards the exit straight away.

"Huh? I can't run."

"My legs..."

"I can't move..."

Figures. They've been soaked in water that has been cooled down to almost freezing point.

I can understand the theory behind it, but actually experiencing it myself is really harsh." Even Arnest, who has offered less surface area for the cold water in proportion to his tall height, has apparently suffered quite a bit from this cold water hell.

His walking pace is slow as well.

I think it'll be quite bad if we don't take a break after passing through the exit...

"We're going to rest once we pass through that door!"

""""Okay!""""

"I really want to take a break. Also, is that door one you open by pushing or pulling?"

The chance is 50-50.