**Chapter 168: 13th Floor (4)**

Tap. Tap.

"Ugh, grrk–"

A scream rang out, abruptly cut off, along with the smell of burning flesh.

Two people were shriveled up, scorched by Lammel's fireball.

One other person had been lucky enough to avoid the fireball, but was captured, ensnared by Nuer and Fusilini's binding magic.

It would have been better if they'd all burned to ashes, but the lucky survivor thrashed violently, her body bound in chains, and shouted.

"You crazy bastards! You're doing something you'll regret! Do you understand?!"

Trash always seems to say the same things.

Balkan smirked as he looked at the foul-mouthed woman, her body leaking yellowish fluids from between her legs.

"Why would punishing kidnappers and rapists be something to regret?"

"You son of a bitch! I definitely heard your voice. You think the boss, one of the big shots in the 15th-floor back alley, will let you off?!"

**Slaaap!**

"Argh!"

"Ah, damn. She won't shut up."

Jubeel spat out a curse and kicked the naked woman's chest.

"And she's bragging about sucking blood off people on the 15th floor, too. Stupid bitch."

"Ahh, s-stop! Don't kick me!"

"Oh. Damn. Check out the feel of her chest. Well, if you look like crap, at least your tits better be decent."

"Jubeel."

Jubeel, who was lightly kicking the woman's underbust with her iron greaves, turned to look at Balkan.

"Yeah? You wanna try too?"

"It looks fun, but maybe later. We're about to breach, so get over here."

"Yessir."

The rest of the party had already finished their preparations to breach.

The remaining enemies were a vanguard, a dual-dagger rogue named Perkins, and a mid-rank mage.

They had already cut down four of the vanguard in the earlier commotion, so the enemies were surely aware of the situation.

There was a chance they might sense the disadvantage and try to flee.

‘Judging by how that one just screamed and fought back, though, I doubt it.’

It needed to be finished quickly.

**Shrrip!**

Rubia tore down the tent that covered the entrance with one hand and led the way inside.

Following her were Balkan, the rear-guard members, and Jubeel, who protected them, in that order, as they stepped into the camp.

Under the lantern's glow, which pushed away the desert's darkness and turned the surroundings crimson, a shriveled, unmoving man lay limp.

It was the priest Hope and the leader Gellen from Fusilini's party.

"Ah, ahh…"

Fusilini dragged her trembling legs toward them.

She hugged Hope and Gellen, their bodies marked with clear signs of assault, and sobbed.

Watching her was uncomfortable, but now wasn't the time for awkward grieving.

"To think you dare attack us, your guts are larger than your brains."

A voice—old and female—spoke as an unfamiliar flow of magic filled the air.

Turning his head, Balkan saw an old woman cloaked in robes, aiming her staff at the party.

"Troublemakers who interrupt our rest must be shown a little thrill."

**Crackle!**

The old woman’s staff flashed, sending streaks of yellow lightning surging toward the party.

"Come at the girl!!!"

**Boom! Crackle!**

Rubia slammed her massive shield into the sandy ground, blocking the lightning head-on.

**Sparks!**

The scattered streaks of lightning that sought to hit the rear-guard party changed trajectory at Rubia's shout.

With the smell of burning flesh, Rubia's twin buns of hair started rising stiffly toward the sky.

"Uurrgghh… Th-the girl… she… she can endure it…!!"

**Boom!**

The electric magic scattered as if it had exploded, leaving Rubia trembling all over.

"Huff, huff…! That was thrilling!"

"…To withstand my lightning magic…"

The old woman, who had spoken with impressed disbelief, suddenly widened her eyes.

**Whoosh!**

A strong gust of wind blew as the blade of an axe came hurtling toward her in an instant.

As her eyes followed the thick arm swinging the heavy axe—

**Clang!**

A pair of daggers deflected the axe blade, sending sparks flying.

Balkan's eyes narrowed as he looked at the wielder of the dual daggers.

A rogue with an artifact that masked her presence. The one who had betrayed Fusilini's party.

Perkins.

**Whoosh!**

Balkan spun his body and swung his axe horizontally.

Perkins didn’t deflect this time. Instead, she jumped back while holding the old mage, increasing the distance between them.

At a range of about 10 meters, they stood at a stalemate once again.

Balkan frowned as he watched Perkins.

‘Since when has she been next to that hag?’

He hadn’t noticed.

Unlike the illusion magic used by that lunatic grad student Rahem, Perkins' stealth felt different.

If illusion magic altered what appeared to the eye, Perkins seemed to paint over her very existence, erasing it completely.

It was tricky and unfamiliar.

‘But doable.’

As Balkan adjusted his grip on the axe and looked for an opening to attack, Perkins was whispering to the old mage about what she'd just realized.

"We need to escape, old woman."

"…But we can still handle this, can’t we?"

"No. Look at my hands."

Perkins’ hands, gripping the daggers, were trembling.

"That guy’s pure strength is greater than mine. My blades are already worn just from deflecting that one strike. If I repeat it a few more times, my daggers will break first."

"…For you to say that much?"

The old woman furrowed her brows and looked at Balkan again.

But he was just a man. A male.

One who surely shared the same genes as the seed-spreaders her subordinates had just passed around for fun.

Men who, once pinned under women or monsters, would reveal their pathetic true nature.

But Perkins, after clashing with him only once, had realized he was different.

"Yes. We're outnumbered anyway. Forget the two men and take the slime-being instead. I already ordered the last one, so now’s our chance."

"Understood."

Perkins and the old mage knew each other's skills well, so their judgment was quick.

**Whirr–**

The old woman's staff began glowing again.

"Where do you think you’re going?!"

Furious at the sight of Gellen and Hope, Fusilini fired a binding spell from the tip of her wand.

Perkins, carrying the old mage on her back, dodged the magic with agile footwork.

Taking advantage of that moment, Balkan charged forward, prompting Perkins to throw a knife to stall him.

The knife flew straight toward Balkan.

‘It’s working!’

Perkins celebrated inwardly.

She trusted her skill at throwing and knew the worth of the weapons she carried.

That’s why she could predict Balkan’s fate.

‘He was strong, but he overestimated himself.’

It would have been a different outcome had he dodged it.

But instead, he chose to block the knife with his axe.

The knife Perkins had thrown was an artifact that passed through objects it touched.

Even if it struck the axe blade or even if he wore a helmet.

The knife would pierce through everything and skewer his forehead.

‘What a waste. Just looking at his body, he’s top-tier, but I’m forced to kill him like this.’

It was truly a shame. She’d just missed a chance to earn dozens of gold coins.

While thinking that during the brief moment, Perkins turned her head and witnessed something bizarre.

“Eat.”

As the man said that, the axe blade split open and gaped its mouth wide.

The knife that should have pierced through his forehead, along with the axe blade and helmet, was swallowed up by the axe and vanished.

Under normal circumstances, it was the kind of situation that would make her rub her eyes and question if she were hallucinating.

But what happened next was even more unbelievable.

“Spit it out.”

Whoosh!

At the words uttered by Balkan as he swung his axe, the axe blade once again opened its mouth.

And from that gap, the knife that had surely disappeared re-emerged and flew straight back toward Perkins.

Its speed was faster than when Perkins had thrown it.

It was as if it intended to give it right back to her, aiming for her forehead.

“What the– Ugh!”

Sensing imminent danger to her life, Perkins barely managed to duck her head and evade the knife.

She used every ounce of instinct honed from her time in the labyrinth to dodge it.

But the price was steep.

Thwack!

“Ugh–”

With a sickening sound, the old woman she was carrying on her back stopped breathing.

That was the consequence of ducking to evade the knife.

-Thud!

Perkins made a quick decision and abandoned the old woman in the desert, taking off alone to escape.

The Balkan party stood watching Perkins as she fled into the distance, then turned their attention back.

They felt like they’d left a mess unfinished, but there was no immediate need to chase her.

During the fight with the Perkins-and-old-woman combo, Jubeel had quietly captured another scumbag who was trying to flee.

-Squirm. Squirm.

Inside the woman’s backpack, they discovered four additional slime lumps.

Combining them with the single slime lump they already had, the five slimes began to merge into a single form.

“Turutu bapbabara⋯!”

“Aldente!”

Fusilini burst into tears as she tightly hugged Aldente, the young slime who had just been revived, while Aldente gently patted her back.

“Barabubbu⋯!”

Then, turning to face Balkan and the other party members, Aldente bowed deeply, performing a polite belly-button bow.

She seemed to have pieced together roughly what had happened while she was dead.

Balkan smiled with satisfaction as he tapped the soft, squishy head of the slime.

They hadn’t managed to save the male party member’s dignity, but that was never really possible.

At least they saved everyone before they were all killed or sold off.

The mental satisfaction of rescuing someone and the thought of the rewards they could demand brought a smile to his face.

He was busy patting himself on the back, convinced that this was a perfectly satisfactory outcome, when—

Rumble, rumble, rumble–

The ground beneath them.

More precisely, the sand began to tremble slightly.

“What the. Does the 13th floor have earthquakes too?”

“⋯N-no! This is not an earthquake⋯!”

At the casual question, Rubia, the only one with experience on the 13th floor, hastily started looking around with vigilance.

“When a Sand Worm detects prey nearby or starts chasing it, the surroundings tremble like this! Everyone, check your surroundings–”

“You son of a bitch!!!”

As Rubia was offering her advice, a harsh curse echoed from the distance.

The direction sounded all too familiar.

And sure enough, a silhouette began to appear, kicking up sandstorms as it drew closer.

It was the person who had just fled moments ago—Perkins.

She was now running back toward the party.

-Rumble, rumble, rumble.

With each step she took, she brought with her a massive earthquake.

“⋯N-no way?”

“That crazy bitch! If you’re going to get eaten, get eaten alone!”

Balkan and the party quickly pieced the situation together.

That lunatic was trying to offload the Sand Worm’s aggro onto them.

The Sand Worm was a colossal worm monster, its average length comparable to a 5-story apartment building.

“Everyone, run to the cave!!!”

To avoid getting eaten, they would have to run like hell.