**Chapter 52: The 6th floor (4)**

"Purrrrrr!"

An aggressive falling attack from the bull's head.

I chose to fight rather than dodge. I swung my axe with the intention of cutting off its horns.

-Kagagagagak!

Sparks flew and the minotaur's horns split.

It's quite hard. I locked eyes with the minotaur, who looked slightly impressed.

"Purrrr!"

“You damn bitch!"

-Kagagagagak!

Like a sword deflecting an opponent's attack, my axe sliced through its horns.

I glanced down to gauge its reaction.

‘What the hell.’

For a moment, I thought I was looking at the wrong thing. The shadow of the minotaur came into view. There was [Darkness] there, a very pale darkness.

That's what I'd been sensing from the hobgoblins and other monsters!

Although it was a pale shadow of Diana's womb sigil, its cheap presence was not easily erased.

-Thud!

The lead minotaur fell from its lofty perch, headfirst, but remained perfectly centered as it attacked.

-Boom!

I duck my head to avoid the fist and gifted an axe to her neck.

-Kaaaaang!

She quickly rejected the gift and blocked it with her arm. It was an iron-walled woman, no, an iron-walled minotaur.

‘What kind of monster wears this?’

The quality of the minotaur's breastplate armor, including the bracers, was considerable.

Idelbert had said the axe could cut through the eighth floor monsters, but this breastplate seemed to go beyond that.

The minotaur's fist dug deep, and after a moment's thought, it drove straight through.

It lowered its upper body to add momentum and it took me a moment to decide. Should I just dodge, or should I go for flesh and bone?

The fist was aimed at my abdomen.

It was the hardest part of the leather armor Diana had given me, so I trusted this armor to perform.

The fist that was thrown out while flexing her monstrous muscles was instantly embedded in my abdomen.

"Purrrr."

The leader minotaur chuckled in triumph.

It hurt. It felt like a knife in the gut. Blood gushed from my mouth as my guts churned.

No amount of leather armor could fully offset the minotaur's fist.

No, it's the other way around. I'm only alive because I'm wearing this. Actually, it doesn't really matter.

The only thing that matters right now is that I survived that punch.

"Don't laugh already, asshole."

The minotaur's expression hardened at my casual remark. Even if it didn't understand the words, it must have sensed the cheapness in them.

"Purrrrrr!"

The Boss Minotaur shouted urgently but the axe had already been swung.

-Zzzzzzzzzz!

The minotaur screamed but it wasn't the scream of the Boss Minotaur.

A minotaur had heard the boss’ cries and rushed forward, knocking the boss out of the way and slamming her head in my axe.

At least I managed to slaughter one.

"Purrrrrrr!"

The Boss Minotaur shouted again as she closed the distance between us, and the Minion Minotaur's attention turned from the party to me.

They, too, had made a choice and focused.

It brought me in immediate danger, but in the grand scheme of things, it was to our advantage.

"Ms. Gelsia, take care of the students first!"

I bought Gelsia time to convince the students, who were cowering under the Minotaur's assault in the Intermediate Barrier.

Explorers are used to dying and killing, but not students.

Besides, if any of them died, the mission would be a failure, so I couldn't let them die.

"Kids, calm down and listen to me! That minotaur can't break intermediate barrier magic. If we can hold out inside the barrier until Professor Mankostil arrives, we have a chance!"

"Is that really so⋯?"

Soon, a human-sized hole appeared in the barrier.

One by one, the students in our party began to slip through.

It was a good sign. Part of me wants to run through that hole right now.

"Purrrrr!"

"Purr! Purr!"

The minotaurs attack is getting serious as four minotaurs surround me from all sides.

There is no escape but paths are meant to be forged. If there's no way out, you make a way in. Simple logic.

"Jubeel! Joy Hog!"

I quickly turned my head and shouted loudly, and one of the creatures on the left got lured. This is the drawback of higher intelligence. A goblin wouldn't have fallen for it.

For being distracted in the midst of a battle, an axe has been impaled on its head.

-Tsk tsk!

The skeletal armor shattered, decapitating the creature.

Pushing past the helpless creature, I ran to rejoin the party.

"Kaha, you're crazy, coming through that, and killing two of them single-handedly!"

"If you knew it was crazy, why didn't you help me?"

"Haha, you have to understand. We were busy defending them."

Joy Hog and Jubeel were protecting Lammel, who was chanting magic, and Hitolis, who was praying with eyes closed.

"I tried to put them in the barrier spell, but it didn't work. I guess there is a limit to how many it can hold."

Jubeel said grimly. She turned her head toward the barrier and locked eyes with Ellie, who was pounding her fist against it.

-Mister! Mister!

I couldn't hear her voice from the distance, but the shape of her mouth seemed to say so.

I nodded to tell her not to worry, then turned my attention back to the battle.

"The Earth Mother will embrace you, O body of the dead."

As I received a miracle from Hitolis, the internal injuries inflicted by the Minotaur began to heal. At the same time, I felt a slight boost in vitality.

Lammel broke out in a cold sweat and continued to chant, her mouth moving constantly.

She must have run out of magic.

As the chant continued, some kind of power began to gather in Lammel's staff. I naturally realized it was magic.

"Five more minutes," she said.

"Fuck. Five minutes? Five minutes? Are you kidding me?!"

"I need some time to perform my special move. But if I finish the chant, it's a sure kill."

Five minutes it’s ridiculously long time considering it's been just over a minute since the minotaurs appeared.

"Huh. Let's see what I can do."

But now was not the time to complain; we had to keep going.

"Purrrr!"

Eight minotaurs, led by the boss minotaur, charged at a furious pace.

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Assistant Gelsia muttered softly as she watched the battle begin to unfold.

"I'm sorry, but they're going to have to be sacrificed."

Ellie's eyes widened at that, and she turned her head.

Now, what the hell was that crazy TA talking about?

"Ms. TA, what the hell are you talking about?!"

Hearing Ellie's rant, the TA sighed heavily.

"Ellie, look at the flow of that battle. You don't have to be an explorer to see which side is at a greater disadvantage."

"⋯⋯"

Ellie stared at the battlefield wordlessly.

Clearly, the odds were stacked against Balkan's party.

Until Balkan killed the first two minotaurs, it looked like they might be able to turn the tide, but then the tide turned against them.

"Purrrrrr!"

Having had a near-death experience, the eyes of the monsters, including the Boss Minotaur, were half-crazed.

They ripped the horns off the two dead minotaurs and wielded them like blunt weapons.

The Joy Hog Party was among the most skilled explorers on the seventh floor, but the minotaurs in front of them were alien beings, beyond the limits of the seventh floor.

There was no way to hold out while protecting the mages against such monsters, who swung their horns and body-slammed as if they would tear them apart at any moment.

The cow girl swordsman has a broken left arm and is clutching her sword with one hand, while the Dwarf holds her shield steadfastly, but is wounded over her left eye.

The cat priest grimly sprinkles miracles and pours potions on the harpy mage, who continues to chant even as a shard of minotaur horn lodges in her stomach and she spits up blood.

The rest of the party, pushed to their limits, are still alive.

Because in front of them, a battered Balkan was still holding his axe and swinging it at the beast.

With a potion vial in his mouth, he squinted, and fought five of them at once, including the boss minotaur.

He dodged and countered the rapid-fire barrage with near-magical dexterity.

The pace, however, was slowing.

"They can only do this for so long. It's coming to an end."

"That's why we should do something to help them before it’s too late!"

"Absolutely not! Working with other magic inside the barrier will drain it, making the barrier last even less. At this rate, it'll last a week, and that's not what they've prepared for in the first place. Escorts are supposed to protect their employers in times of crisis, even if it means giving their lives."

"Well, still, if I can cast my magic from this safe place, something will help⋯!"

"Get a grip, Ellie Ordia, you're a senior, you should know better! It's better to barricade yourself inside the barrier and wait for the professor! Knowing that, why on earth would you risk it!"

Ellie Ordia was silenced by Assistant Gelsia's spittle-spattered retort.

‘Why?’

Why in the world would I give up the safety of this place for the danger of that place?

Gelsia was right.

The escort will die doing their duty as an escort, but we can sit here and wait for the professor, who should arrive in a week at most.

It's the easiest way. It's also the safest. If we just stay still, if we stay quiet, we'll make it out of the Labyrinth alive and well.

Besides, Ellie was scared of the Labyrinth.

It wasn't just because she was a coward. For the vast majority of normal citizens, the Labyrinth was a danger zone.

Green monsters lunged at them, their ugly faces contorted.

Malevolent traps that rained arrows from the sky, spewed pillars of fire, and caused space itself to burst into flames, all of which could kill you if you so much as flinched.

An uncomfortable, vigilant night's sleep, the occasional scream of someone, the howl of a beast and the corpses.

When Ellie saw the mangled corpses, covered in red paint, she felt a horror rise from the depths of her heart.

She choked back tears and vomited.

After all she'd been through, why couldn't she wipe her eyes from that scene?

Why!

Right now, she’s about to work her magic.

"Ellie Ordia!!! What the hell do you think you're doing?"

"I'm leaving."

"If you do this, we all- What?!"

"I'm getting out. From here. From this barrier!"

"No! Wait! Stop-"

Whoosh-

Ellie stepped outside the barrier, and it spat her right back out.

You have to ask permission to enter, but you're free to leave.

"Ellie Ordia! Are you crazy?! Get back here!"

Ellie was one of the students who shouldn't have died in this labyrinth, given her potential and background.

She had to stop her now, but Ms. Gelsia couldn't take her foot off the barrier easily.

If Ellie died, she'd be a social pariah, but if she left the barrier now, she'd just be a pariah.

"Coward."

Ellie tore her gaze away from Assistant Gelsia's distant scowl and focused on the magic gathering at her fingertips.

She was still scared as hell. Her limbs were trembling slightly.

Ellie was suddenly fully aware.

Why in the world had she stepped outside the safe barrier?

A brief but happy memory from the library came back to her.

The gaze she'd seen over the helmet, the eyes that had looked not at her parents behind her, but only at her.

The praise and approval she'd gotten through.

The warmth of a hand holding her trembling one in the labyrinth.

All the emotions Balkan conveyed to her, including his concern as he patted her back.

"Because you stayed in my heart."

She couldn't just stand by and watch him in danger.

A giant fireball appeared from Ellie's fingertips.

Top of her third year at the Academy. Everything that was Ellie Ordia, the unprecedented genius mage who had been recommended to become a royal wizard before graduation, was contained within it.

"Flare."

It was a short word, but its effects were far different from those of ordinary mages.

A ball of flame, packed with immense magical power, flew at breakneck speed and slammed directly into the left half of the boss minotaur body.

"Purrrrrrr!!!!!"

A tremendous blast of heat and a cloud of dust rose up, covering the sixth floor in an instant but the minotaur survived, even as its left hindquarters and armor burned and melted.

It had instinctively awakened to the [Darkness] that resided in the shadows.

As the minotaur's body was steeped in [Darkness], the magic flames that burned it began to fade.

"When you get back to the surface, I'll give you a stamp of honor. Ellie."

Balkan, who had deftly dodged the flare even before Ellie fired it, was already on the Minotaur's heels.

Shaaaaaah-!

The axe was blessed with a brilliance that had an absolute effect on [Darkness].

Balkan chuckled and tightened his grip on the axe.

"Before you go, let me tell you something. This leather armor, it's made from your family."

-Tsk, tsk, tsk!!!

The axe of light sliced through the dust, decapitating the minotaur surrounded by [Darkness].