**Chapter 53: The 6th floor (5)**

"Whooosh..."

From the fallen Boss Minotaur's severed head lying on the ground, a final scream echoed.

The [Darkness] that had consumed her flesh vanished without a trace due to the Blessing of Radiance, and soon began to dissolve into particles of light into the void.

-Tsk!

Something landed at my feet.

It was a shard of crystal, smooth and shiny, a minotaur soul stone.

Normally, monsters leave behind a corpse when they die, but when they drop a soul stone, their bodies disappear without a trace.

"Purrrrr!"

The minotaurs were enraged as their leader's head was blown off before their eyes.

"Fireball!!!"

Kaaaaaah!

Just in time, Lammel finished her chant and a giant fireball swept through the minotaur horde.

It was less powerful than Ellie's flare, but it was enough to send them rolling on the ground in agony as their flesh cooked.

The savory smell of cooking meat wafted up.

I opened another potion vial and popped it in my mouth. The fatigue that had overtaken me after using the Blessing of Radiance was forcibly restored.

"Let's taste the Labyrinth Mountain beef."

The slaughter was not yet finished.

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Professor Mankostil succeeded in rescuing the students and escorted explorers who had fallen to the eighth level.

They were lucky: the area they fell into was relatively uninhabited by monsters.

The escort explorers and teaching assistants decided to hold out for as long as they could, waiting for the professor to rescue them, rather than attempting to climb the floor on their own.

Thankfully, Professor Mankostil was able to rescue them with minimal damage but the damage was done.

"Please bear with it a little longer. If there's just a missing part, I can reattach it."

A student lost an arm, a student broke a leg, etc. It meant that there were already injured students.

It was fortunate that none of the injured students were children of nobles or powerful families, but it wasn't the politics of the situation that touched Professor Mankostil’s nerves.

He could see the students' faces contorted in pain, but he could also see the explorers, who looked relatively unharmed.

Professor Mankostil noticed that the explorers had generously applied potions to their wounds.

"⋯Didn't you have any potions for the students? I thought we provided you with enough supplies."

"We had no choice. It was the eighth floor, not the other way around. It was two levels below our destination, and the students unwittingly triggered a transference trap. We ran out of supplies much faster than we expected."

It all made sense.

If they wanted to last as long as possible in an emergency, it made sense for the more experienced explorers to take more supplies.

And the student who set the trap and the teaching assistant who failed to supervise him were to blame for the deaths in the first place.

'⋯I understand that the escort explorers were trying to do the best they could in a crisis situation⋯'

Professor Mankostil had been an explorer in the past and knew how common sense and moral the escorted explorers in front of him were.

There were plenty of rotten explorers who would prioritize their own survival to the extreme, even if it meant sacrificing a commission.

These explorers were saints compared to those who were bad.

But still.

'It is also true, I regret to say, that...'

Professor Mankostil swallowed hard.

'Yes. Few explorers are willing to protect others to their own detriment.’

To ask more of a junior explorer would be tantamount to bullying.

If they wanted something more, they should have invited a mid- or high-level explorer.

"We'll judge the success of the request later. Let's go up to the sixth floor."

"Yes."

After saving the party and ascending to the seventh floor, Professor Mankostil's head pounded.

The puppet's communication function had been activated.

He opened it, thinking it might have something to say.

- Professor, help me, help me, help me!

-Boom.

The communication was abruptly cut off.

Professor Mankostil's head went cold.

Something untoward had happened.

"Pick up the pace! Quickly!"

In an instant, they were over the seventh floor and down to the sixth, where Professor Mankostil landed near the center of the sixth floor, protecting the injured students.

 ‘Blood?’

He frowned at the strong smell of blood that immediately wafted in.

"What, are we on the sixth floor? This smells like a minotaur?"

"Minotaur? That's a 7th floor monster! How can a 7th floor monster be on the 6th floor?!"

"I don't know, but the smell is pretty strong. Is it an unusual creature?"

The words of the escorting explorer with the Scent Discrimination Blessing caused everyone to adjust their guard.

Sure enough, something had happened on the sixth floor.

"I smell a scent coming from the center."

Up until this point, the party had stuck to the method of gathering in the center and then moving forward again.

"⋯No way."

The smell of thick blood and gore mixed with the smell of a monster that shouldn't be on the sixth floor. Even the direction the smell was coming from.

It was all too easy to predict what had happened.

‘No! No way!’

In an instant, Professor Mankostil's mind flashed through the worst-case scenarios: the wiping out of the escort party, the annihilation of the students.

The voice of the student who had lost contact with him, begging desperately for help, echoed in his head.

‘Please don't. Please let my assumptions be wrong!’

Flying at full speed, Prof. Mankostil entered the center of the floor, ready to strike.

Along with the thick smell of blood, the Professor's eyes caught sight of something.

‘Bodies?’

A pile of bodies.

They were not human but minotaur bodies.

"Kyo, Professor, Professor is here!"

Students and teaching assistants looked at him with relief.

Contrary to their horrifying expectations, they were unharmed.

‘With so many minotaurs, how can they be unscathed?’

The question was quickly answered. A loud voice echoed through the center.

"There are two Soul Stones!"

"You're crazy, Balkan! You're the best!"

A dwarf with an eye patch and a cow girl with an arm patch.

"Kiyakho! We're rich now!"

"The goddess was watching over us!!!"

"Grrrr!"

A harpy vomiting blood, and the escorting explorers, including cat girl and lizard girl.

"Ah, ouch. Ouch. It hurts, now put me down!"

They were tending to a man in a blood-soaked helmet, covered in wounds.

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"You've been through a lot, Mr. Balkan."

The excited party members finish rinsing, rubbing their throbbing limbs and drinking potions.

After being briefed by his assistants and Academy students, a smiling Professor Mankostil approached me.

"From the sounds of it, something untoward happened, but thanks to the sacrifice of Mr. Balkan's party, it seems to have worked out well. And thanks to you, all the students are safe."

Yeah. They should be. Everyone was in the barrier except us.

I nodded, feeling like I was technically a temporary member of the party, but I wasn't in the mood for a correction.

"You don't have to bend over like that, I'm an escort."

It was a bit overwhelming to have an elderly man bend down to thank me, and I tried to brush it off with a blank stare.

Instead, Prof. Mankostil just smiled even wider in admiration.

"Haha. It's great that you not only have the skills, but also the responsibility and humility to do your job. When I was your age…"

And then he began to rattle off his life story.

It was dressed up with all sorts of colorful words and metaphors, but it went something like this.

"When I was younger, there were so many fucking explorers, huh? So I studied to be a professor instead of a fucking explorer, huh? Even now, there's a lot of shit without romance, but you guys are kind of cool. You're talented. Keep it up. And thanks for saving the students. I know it was hard because they're a bunch of wusses”.

The unfamiliar academy professor exuded the familiar aura of an old-fashioned laborer.

At first, he was a little mean, but when he saw that I was doing a good job, he suddenly treated me well, as if he was worried that I might escape.

"Haha⋯ yes⋯"

I felt like I was going to lose my mind listening to them even though my body was hurting like hell here and there.

But he wasn't just any ordinary person, this was a chance to make a connection with an academy professor.

I tried to stay awake and focus on the professor's words.

"Who the hell is this guy? What's taking so long to talk to the professor one-on-one?"

"Apparently, a freaky minotaur came down from the seventh floor to the sixth floor, and that guy took it all out, and none of the students got hurt."

"What kind of crazy shit is that? Floor shifts? Minotaurs? You expect me to believe that?"

"Believe it or not, there's a Minotaur corpse over there. See, there are axe marks on the neck. He had an axe at his waist. How common is it to find an explorer wielding an axe?"

"Hmm. If that's real, I'm kind of curious."

The escort explorers and students who started to gather one by one were still chattering away as they watched me and the professor.

The gazes of the explorers, who were usually busy drooling and checking out my body, gradually changed.

They looked at me like a skilled rookie, or someone equivalent to that.

"I... my uterus is fluttering⋯ I think I'm about to ovulate⋯"

"I've never been protected by a man before. I can't believe there's a male like that. I want to fuck him, no, I want to be fucked."

"I don't know his face, but a man who protects me like that might not be bad⋯"

When I first came to the central area, the students who were afraid were also muttering strange things.

"Hey, you guys, follow me for a second."

Ellie disappeared into the distance, dragging the girls, who were rubbing their thighs together in annoyance.

Magic was imbued in Ellie's hands as she reappeared. What could possibly have happened in the brief moment she was gone?

"⋯⋯"

Ellie made eye contact with me and turned away, pressing her hat back on her head in frustration.

Her floppy elf ears flicked.

"Anyway, what I wanted to say to you, Mr. Balkan, is this."

The professor's words, as boring as the headmaster's pep talk, seemed to be coming to an end. I turned my attention back to Professor Mankostil.

The professor offered me a rather strange proposition.

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Joy Hog's party and the students who had fallen from the eighth floor and sustained near-disabling injuries would be allowed to recover in the healing waters of the fountain on the fifth floor and then return to the sixth floor.

For the next week, we stayed on the sixth floor, waiting for the students to finish investigating the situation.

"Ellie, what the hell is this thing doing?"

"⋯Are you confident you'll understand if I explain?"

"No."

"Well, people usually don't. I'll summarize it for you later when I write the report."

"Can you summarize it in three lines?"

"How can I summarize this in three lines⋯⋯⋯But I'll try."

I had no idea what I was doing, so I just did what Eli told me to do.

I stared at Ellie as she stood there, holding a monster corpse or waving her hands in the air, trying to manipulate magic.

As we stayed together and talked a little, I felt my relationship with Ellie gradually returning to normal.

But the fundamental misunderstanding remained. I held my breath, waiting for my chance.

And today, it came.

One student and one escort explorer out of the group will stand guard, totaling two sentries.

And today, it's Ellie and mine's turn.

We've had this opportunity once before, but Ellie didn't even bother to look at me, and I ended the day awkwardly chatting away.

Ta-da-da-da-da

I turned to face Ellie across the campfire we'd built to keep warm.

She was a beautiful elf girl with red hair and red eyes.

At the same time, Diana Ordia's foster daughter.

"⋯Mister. I, uh, have a question."

She spoke first. This was a first for me on this trip to the Labyrinth, as I had always spoken first.

I nodded, pleased to see her.

"Sure. Go ahead. You can ask me anything."

"⋯Anything?"

"Uhhhhhhhh."

What the heck is she going to ask me?

I swallowed hard and waited for Ellie's red lips to open.

"⋯You're⋯"

Ellie fiddled with her fingers nervously for a long moment, then glanced over at me and asked cautiously.

"You’re...my stepfather, I mean... my dad...right...?"

"⋯What?"

What the hell do you mean, Ellie?