**Chapter 47: Preparing for the 6th floor (3)**

‘Ellie Ordia⋯?’

Ordia. Diana’s last name. At the same time, I remembered the foster daughter of Diana who had gone to the Academy that Idelbert had mentioned.

'I heard the other day that the students of the academy have gone outside.’

-Boom!

As if sensing my gaze, the girl hastily closed the cover of the book.

Under the full name, Ellie Ordia, I could see the name Ellie as she covered Ordia with her hand.

"Ah! If you think it's me, I'm Ellie, third year senior at the Royal Academy, genius mage!"

Ellie introduced herself, but didn't give her last name.

By the way, isn't this a bit like introducing yourself to someone you don't know as a genius scientist from Seoul National University?

‘I'm the head of Seoul National University.’

That's the greatest achievement of your life. You'd be proud enough to say it before your own name.

If I was the chief scientist at Seoul National University, I would have been so proud that I would have written it in the corner of my business card.

"Yeah. You're amazing."

"You know, I always think I'm amazing, too. Keep an eye out for the name Ellie, who will one day write the history of the Labyrinth City!"

"I am Balkan."

"Yes, Mr. Balkan. You're an explorer, right?"

"Yes, I'm an explorer, but aren't you an elf? How old are you and you're calling me Uncle?"

Elves are the symbol of the long-lived species.

She looks more like a teenage girl, but I can't guess her age just by looking at her.

Do you know what it's like for a man to be called uncle by an elf like that?

‘No matter how much I wore a helmet and she couldn't see my face...’

Does my body look that bad? I don't think so. I feel a profound sense of regret. Maybe I should walk around without a helmet to see things differently.

Of course, I was just thinking.

"I'm nineteen! I'm a half-elf, so I'm not a long-lived species like normal elves, but I can live with this appearance until I die and not age a bit."

"That's pretty bullshit. But there's only a three year age difference, so don't call me mister."

"Oh? Three years older? Huh. The atmosphere feels totally different there... Mister, you don't need to feel so young. Inner qualities matter more than outward appearance!"

Sigh. It's quite embarrassing when such a good-looking elf says something like that.

"I called you because I wanted to hear firsthand accounts of explorers who have crossed the Labyrinth Portal."

"Experiences?"

"Yes. I'm researching the phenomenon of the Labyrinth for an assignment, and I chose the portal as my topic!"

Ellie was talking to me because she wanted to hear first-hand accounts of explorers who had crossed the portal in order to complete her assignment.

Sure enough, the book she's carrying says it's a journal of research on portals and dimensional magic.

My curiosity is piqued. On what basis did the Academy's genius mage study the connection between portals and dimensional magic?

'If I delve deeper into this, I might be able to uncover the secrets of [that being] or the portal?’

It was an intriguing hypothesis.

"I'm sorry, but I don't have time right now."

"That's okay, I'll be here for the next three days or so anyway, so just drop by whenever you feel like it. I'll even pay you depending on the quality of the story, though it's not much."

"Okay, then I'll come by tomorrow around this time."

"Okay!"

Nodding vigorously, Ellie returned to her seat with the book of mysterious and amazing labyrinth tales.

I decided to head back to the inn as well. Time is running out.

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The next morning, after finishing my usual work at the inn, I finished my fighting and running training, followed by subjugation training.

"Kehek, Kehek⋯"

Ssup. Ssshhh.

Idelbert, who had been demonstrating by choking me with her thigh, leaned down to sniff my body and asked.

"Have you met Serif Adeline?"

What the hell, sister. How do they recognize each other by smell alone?

"Uh, yes. We met on the way to the temple library."

"Hmph."

Idelbert stared at me without saying a word.

The black cat's tail swished like a whip, making a popping sound in the air.

Somehow, my training has gotten ridiculously intense since then.

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"Balkan, are you dead?"

"Uh, ah, no. I’m alive."

I swallowed hard and came to my senses. I opened my eyes to see the priest and Ellie standing in front of me.

"I'm glad I called the priest auntie first, since you collapsed while talking."

I gestured that I was okay, and the priest nodded and walked away.

The priest's expression was quite grim, and it was easy to see why.

Even in this world, the word "auntie" can be quite destructive.

Despite lacking in sensitivity towards appearance and age, Ellie, the genius wizard, has enough humanity to call for a priestess when someone collapses.

"So. What happened to you since you fell into the transition trap?!"

"Ah. Did I mention that?"

"Yes. A trap in the form of a portal⋯ interesting!"

She seemed more curious about the story of the labyrinth she heard from me than reflecting on her own actions.

"The Fountain Transition Scroll⋯5 can only be used on the drainage floor, and the fact that humans can open the portals is certainly curious."

"The Fountain Transfer Scroll... It's fascinating that it can only be used on floors divisible by 5, and humans being able to open portals is also intriguing."

Ellie listened with sparkling eyes as I told her a story, nodding her head, then muttered to herself and began scribbling something in her journal.

‘What are you talking about⋯’

Somewhere between the magic and the formula, I felt like my brain refused to understand.

"I've never heard of a transition trap or a fountain before, even from other explorer aunts, but this is definitely new! A good story deserves a good price⋯ Ugh."

Ellie's face turned to stone as she opened the coin purse in her arms.

It looked like someone who had picked out a bunch of things to buy at a convenience store but forgot to pay for them.

"Why do you suddenly look like a good story is about to turn into a cheap one?"

"⋯Ehehehe."

Ellie pushed her wizard hat down tightly, as if to cover up the situation but I couldn't let this opportunity pass her by.

‘A chance.’

A chance to step up from being a mere storyteller.

"Surely, you don't have any money to pay me?"

"Oh, I'm still a student!"

"Enough excuses. Just answer yes or no."

For explorers, getting paid has a special meaning. It's about getting paid for the work they do.

But to say you're going to pay them and then not pay them? That's riotous, no matter how small the payoff.

I put my hands on my waist. Ellie's eyes, which had begun to flutter uneasily, traveled to the battle axe at my waist.

Gulp.

Swallowing hard, Ellie stammered, avoiding my gaze.

"Uh, nothing⋯"

"Well, that's good, then."

"Huh?"

Ellie looked at me again, blankly.

After being so intimidating just a moment ago, she looked very uncomfortable.

"Why do you look at me like that? Students might not have money. Do you think I would forcibly take money from you?"

But I wasn't looking for a penny for a few copper coins in the first place.

"I'll come back to tell you stories of the labyrinth and portals from time to time, so do your research. And when you're done, I want you to organize them in a way that makes sense and tell them to me once. That'll be my payment.”

I know my limits.

Even with a string of lucky breaks or a miracle, I'm not going to be able to unlock the secrets of the portal with my own mind.

‘But what about Ellie, the Academy's third-year senior genius mage?’

I don't know, but it would be a lot easier than trying to figure it out on my own.

"You’re a young genius of the academy, can you do that much?"

"⋯Genius⋯"

Ellie muttered softly as she looked at me, and then smiled sheepishly.

"Of course, I'm a genius, even the Labyrinth Portal is no big deal if I can dig my way through it!"

Ellie laughed, crossing her arms with a confident look on her face.

The tips of her ears twitched red, as if she was embarrassed to be praised so openly.

"I see. Please do well."

In any case, I had succeeded in getting her to behave.

But even if Ellie was a genius, the research wouldn't be done in a day or two.

The labyrinth is a constant challenge.

‘But somehow, I feel better about it.’

Maybe it's because I invested in Grumpy and Jeremy and got burned.

After all, a stable and reliable savings account is the answer rather than a stock that aims for the big time.

As long as the country doesn't collapse, your savings won't go bust.

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Over the past three days, Ellie Ordia had been discussing labyrinths and portals with someone who visited at the same time every day.

"Have a good day, Mister, and thanks for another great talk!"

"Uh-huh. Ellie. Keep up your research, too."

"Yes!"

Ellie Ordia casually ruffled her hair and watched him leave, analyzing the emotions swirling in her chest.

Joy. Exultation. Delight.

Whenever someone praised and stroked her shining talent, Ellie Ordia felt a strange sense of pleasure.

But the pleasure she felt now was far more exhilarating than the praise she'd heard from her professors at the Academy.

- It's Miss Ordia. She's talented.

- I want to know who that dazzling talent was nurtured by, no, I want it even more.

"If Ellie Ordia were to be employed as an assistant, would Diana also...?"

- Haha. No matter how long she's been retired, people our age don't forget her.

It's Ordia. She's Diana’s daughter. She's different.

No one looks at Ellie. All anyone cares about is the last name Ordia.

It wasn't just the professors but also the people who came up to her claiming to be her friends.

They were all the same, however the man she met in the library was different.

‘His compliments were directed at me.’

He didn't care about her last name, Ordia, he saw her for who she was, and he encouraged her to pursue her talent.

For some reason, thinking of him brings to mind the faces of her real parents, whose memories are now a blur.

‘If my dad were alive, I wonder if this is how he would have felt.’

"⋯⋯"

It was pointless to think about it. Ellie snapped back to reality as if from a brief dream.

No money.

Deanna Ordia had sent her a generous allowance, but she hadn't spent it since she'd arrived at the Academy. Ellie's pride wouldn't allow her to spend it.

The Temple's library was open twenty-four hours a day, and she'd spent the last few days there almost like an overnight stay, but even that had its limits. The librarian's glare was stinging.

‘I don't smell anything.’

Ellie sniffed her ragged robes unnecessarily.

The half-elf's clean, fragrant body, kept clean around the clock by clean magic, didn't allow for the slightest trace of dirt or odor.

The nights in the Labyrinth City were dangerous, and with nowhere else to go, Ellie had only one place to turn.

[Cozy Winter Inn]

"I can't believe I came back here again."

Late at night, Ellie stared at the unlit inn.

Memories of growing up here came flooding back.

- Wow. So Ellie has a talent for magic?

She recognized the face of the woman who had raised her, her foster mother, Diana Ordia.

Come to think of it, they had a better relationship when she was a child than they do now.

"⋯It's unconscionable, but just for one night⋯"

Tomorrow, she'll be joining the rest of the Academy and entering the Labyrinth.

What Ellie needed now was a place to rest her weary head.

‘Looks like they're closed for the day.’

She opened the door and was immediately greeted by a familiar sight. Not much had changed from her childhood memories.

Ellie headed straight for Diana’s room.

As much as she hated it, she had to see her since she was staying the night.

It had been a long time since she visited, but every time she walked into the inn, memories came flooding back.

"Hmph, hmph, hmph."

With her elven lightness of step, Ellie reached Diana’s doorstep and caught a lustful moan coming from somewhere.

It was coming from inside Diana's room.

‘⋯I shouldn't have come now.’

Ellie blushed and regretted it for a moment. She should have waited a little longer. It was quite embarrassing to hear her stepmother moan in embarrassment.

She quickly turned to leave.

“Balkan?”

The name sounded familiar to the sensitive elf's ears.

The man who had been with her for the past three days was also named Balkan.

"Please be quiet, Diana. The other guests might hear you."

"⋯Hang in there a little longer. I'll calm down in a minute."

As if to drive a wedge into that, Balkan's voice came from inside Diana's room.

"⋯⋯?”

‘What? Did I hear wrong? No, elf ears don't lie. I heard right.’

Tapping. Pounding.

For some reason, her heart fluttered uneasily.

Ellie's footsteps led her toward Diana’s room.

She cracked open the door and from there, a dazzlingly beautiful light streamed in.

Ellie held her breath and peered through the crack in the door.

When the light finally cleared, a sweaty Diana appeared⋯

"How's it going, Diana? Has the curse calmed down a bit?"

"Haa⋯ haa⋯ yes⋯ thank you. Balkan⋯ it was so good⋯ ah, no⋯ more, thanks⋯ I've calmed down⋯"

"I'm going into the Labyrinth tomorrow, too, so just be patient while I'm gone. Okay?"

"Mmm⋯"

Balkan lay on the ground beneath her, stroking Diana’s bare belly with his bare hands.

"⋯?"

Ellie's arms went limp as she realized what was happening. Her heart was beating too fast and her head suddenly felt dizzy.

-thud.

She dropped the thick research journal she always carried in her arms.

"⋯!"

"Who is it?"

Balkan reacted to the sound faster than Diana, who was exhausted from the rush of pleasure.

Ellie ran out of the inn.

She ran through the dark labyrinthine city with her heart beating too fast.

She slumped against a wall in an obscure alleyway and leaned back.

She covered herself with her robe and pulled her hat down tight.

Ellie felt like she was going to cry.

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"We'll be escorting academy students on this labyrinth expedition. Let's pass the time by chatting until the rest of the party arrives."

I stared at the five Academy students I'd be escorting on this trip to the Labyrinth as I listened to Joy Hog's words.

No, actually, I only recognized one of them.

"⋯Heng."

That one person, however, quickly averted her gaze as soon as he saw me.

"Haha."

I scratched my forehead as I looked at the red-faced elf girl, Ellie Ordia.

How the hell did this happen?