**Chapter 49: The 6th floor (1)**

Conversation is the most basic way humans communicate with each other.

It's how we clear up misunderstandings, mend fences, and organize our relationships.

"Ellie."

"⋯⋯"

That's when you're willing to talk to each other.

If you're not willing to talk, you can't even begin to communicate.

Ellie bit her lower lip and avoided my gaze.

I had a pretty good idea what she was thinking.

‘A stepmother she doesn't get along with, and a guy she's been sleeping with in her room.’

It's not an easy misconception. It was also a misunderstanding that needed to be corrected.

"I think you're making a really big mistake, Ellie, because yesterday-"

But I didn't finish my sentence.

"Attention, students. Please assemble for a moment."

A voice called out from the distance. It was the academy professor in charge of this sixth floor. Damn, why now.

Ellie jumped to her feet as soon as she heard the voice.

"Ellie. Wait."

I grabbed her wrist and tried to talk to her.

Ellie immediately shook my hand away. Her bloodshot red eyes looked up at me with a sleepless look.

"⋯Mister. You don't have to make excuses."

"No, not an excuse."

"My stepmother, she's a good person objectively speaking. It's just that I'm a bit of a foolish idiot, so she treats only me this way. I didn't know you had that kind of relationship with my stepmother. I hope you both have a wonderful love together."

Ellie blurted out the words and ran off to the professor.

Left alone, I sighed in disbelief.

The reaction was more negative than I expected. I didn't know where to begin.

"Balkan. Check this out. It's yours."

Just then, Joy Hog walked up to me and handed me a backpack.

Okay. Time to get back to work. I'll save the conversation with Ellie for another time.

I rummage through the backpack and find most everything I need. Intermediate potions and preserved food.

"Good quality, huh? Intermediate potions and tons of food."

"For an academy like this, they don't skimp. That's good."

I also brought some of Diana's jerky, just in case, but it turned out to be a waste.

"So, who's next to you?"

Beside Joy Hog stood a woman in a robe.

"This is Ms. Gelsia, an assistant mage who will be supervising the students we are escorting this time."

"Thank you for the escort. My name is Gelsia, and I specialize in intermediate wind elemental magic."

Assistant Mage Gelsia scanned my body with a gaze as quick as the wind, and the corners of her mouth twitched up as she spoke.

We gave a moderate chuckle and rejoined the rest of the party.

One dwarven tank, one axe warrior, one swordsman, two wizards, one cleric, and one porter.

It was the closest thing to a perfect party I'd ever seen.

'Plus five apprentice mages, though they're treated as extras.’

"Don't be arrogant at all. Investigating the phenomenon and scoring high is important, but your safety is more important than that. Listen to your escorting explorers, you never know what dangers lie ahead in the Labyrinth, you all know that, right?"

The professor's voice sounded in the distance.

For some reason, it sounded like an elementary school teacher instructing a group of children on a field trip.

The students, who were listening to the professor with blank faces, dispersed and headed to their assigned parties.

Five students approached our party.

"Good luck. Explorers!"

"Oh, please keep us safe⋯"

"Wow. Male explorers⋯"

Thankfully, there were no students who looked like they were going to make trouble.

"Okay. We'll take good care of you. We'll take you safely to the sixth layer."

"Don't get into any trouble, okay?"

"Yes!"

The last thing I expected to be bothered by on this trip was a fight with a student or assistant mage, but there was no sign of that happening, at least not yet.

"⋯Hmph."

Ellie still avoided my gaze.

But that was just as well. It meant she was the only thing I had to worry about, aside from the dangers of the labyrinth itself.

"Come on. Hand in hand. Let's go in."

The maximum number of people the portal can recognize as a party is fifteen.

Any more than that, and you're all scattered and dropped into the Labyrinth, even if you're still in physical contact.

For this reason, not everyone can cross the portal at once.

As the number of people in the group grows, power distribution is essential.

‘That's why the Academy has five escort explorer parties.’

Another party of escort explorers was already dragging students across the portal and into the labyrinth.

The Academy students and the party members stood in a single file formation, each holding hands.

I moved to the far right end of the formation and offered my hand to the girl standing to my left.

"⋯⋯"

"Come on, Ellie. If we don't hold hands, we'll split up. Are you going to leave me behind?"

The girl was, of course, Ellie. Ellie stared at my hand and helmet with narrowed eyes.

"⋯It's not like that⋯"

"Ellie. If you don't want to, can you switch seats with me? I'm so nice. Hehe."

The dog beastman student standing next to Ellie looked at me and smiled sheepishly.

Ellie's face frowned and acted quickly.

"No. I don't like that."

Squeak!

Her grip on my hand tightened, and she looked up at me.

"⋯This is the first time, mister."

"Okay. Take care when you go up to the second floor."

"⋯⋯"

Ellie didn't answer but she was still holding my hand tightly.

Our party crossed the portal just like that.

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"Luckily we landed in the center of the floor. There's no need to move."

Gelsia, an assistant mage, unfolded the map.

It wasn't just any map. It was a map specially created by the Academy.

It was an artifact map that showed the structure of the Labyrinth up to the eighth floor and was even enchanted to track the location of the Academy students.

"The students in the other parties have fallen not far from the center, so it looks like they'll be in the center in a day or so."

"Well, there's nothing to do in the meantime, so let's go around the neighborhood and clean up the goblins."

"Sure. I'd better tell the students to take a break."

The cow beastman swordsman, Jubeel, who was gazing at Gelsia's map with covetous eyes, and the cat beastman, Hitolis, who was watching the students as they absentmindedly looked around the labyrinth, took the lizard girl porter, Gregor, and went to patrol the surroundings.

"This is the first time I've ever been so still upon entering the labyrinth."

"Indeed."

Joy Hog, I, and the harpy mage Lammel stayed behind to escort the Academy students.

Normally, upon entering the Labyrinth, explorers would run straight to the next level, but we did not.

We did so at the behest of the Academy's Professor Mankostil, a man with a strange name.

- No matter what, please prioritize the safety of the students.

The professor put their safety first.

He demanded the safest way to explore, even if it meant a terrible drain on time and supplies.

"If you fall through the portal and land somewhere in the floor, the entire party will immediately join you in the center of the floor⋯

Except for those who fall near the edge of the floor, everyone will converge on the center of the floor without exception.

Then, if everyone on that floor is confirmed to be alive, head to the next floor.

"I guess there's a reason they were so generous with the supplies. If this was just a party of explorers trying to hunt down beasts instead of an escort, who else would waste so much time?"

"Still, it's not without its drawbacks, I suppose... if we have a lot of them, no matter what shit happens, we'll have a way to break it down by sheer numbers, which is the safest way to look at it."

"That's true⋯"

We killed time, moderately wary of our surroundings.

Soon the group of Jubeel, out on patrol and goblin hunting, returned to report.

"They said an omen occurred last week, and I saw a monster I'd never seen before. For a first-floor monster, its patterns were quite varied. But still, it's just the first-floor level."

Jubeel sounded unconcerned, but Priest Hitolis looked very worried.

"There's something else weird... Beneath the newly appeared monsters, there was this creepy and horrifying black something writhing."

We listened to them and nodded.

"Hmmm. The omen must have brought a new monster."

"Maybe there's a new trap pattern on the second floor, we'll have to be careful."

It was to be expected. Omens were said to bring disaster and change to the Labyrinth.

The explorers who entered the Labyrinth last week would have felt the tsunami of change firsthand.

We enter this week, when the Labyrinth has stabilized somewhat, so we won't be drowning in the tsunami.

"Ah. Here they come."

Over the next three hours or so, the other escorted explorers began to gather in the center.

"Twenty-three, four, five⋯ students are here, so let's head up to the second floor."

The Explorers nodded as Professor Mankostil counted the students.

A group of thirty or so explorers who passed at least the sixth level passed by so the new beast was no match for them.

The group reached the end of the first floor in one night and began to cross the descent portal.

"⋯⋯"

Paaaaaaan-!

The back of my head stung strangely, and Ellie turned sharply, startled.

"Uh, Gregor. Do you mind if I stand on your right?"

"Eh? Sure, whatever. Whatever."

I switched places with Gregor and stood next to Ellie.

Then I held out my hand toward Ellie.

"⋯I thought I told you that was the only time, mister."

"Take care on the third floor. Ellie."

"⋯⋯"

No need to rush.

Rushing to heal the wounded will only cause more pain for those who pry open the wound.

I just have to take it one step at a time, lowering her guard a little bit.

"⋯This time, for real, for real, this time⋯!"

That will be the first step to reconciliation between this wounded mother and daughter.

"⋯Crazy male. It's not enough that he has master, but also a mother and daughter⋯"

I ignored Gregor's alarmed voice.

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In the sticky darkness, the two dolls tangled up and engaged in a vicious copulation.

Pow! Pow!

"Heo, heo, heo, heo."

The figure was human-like, but the being was not human.

The minotaur, a humanoid beast with a bull's head and muscular brown skin, lifted its back in response to the man's pleading voice.

Sticky fluid dripped from the minotaur's lower half.

The man's eyes were already half-closed from the pheromones the creature emitted. His brain was already failing him, ruined by the pleasure beyond its limits.

There was a reason why he, a mid-level explorer on the 13th floor, was only on the 7th floor.

He was on his way back to the surface after a long journey through the Labyrinth.

The party was exhausted from the grueling trek, supplies and food were running low, and the party was stretched to the limit.

Of course, the most fundamental cause of this was the unexpectedly disastrous omen.

Struggling with new and unfamiliar traps and beasts, the party eventually dispersed, and alone, he met the fate so many male explorers often experience.

He had become the seedling of a monster.

The Minotaur smiled twistedly as it received the superior sperm of a man who had worked hard and reached the rank of Intermediate Explorer.

The seed of the beast would grow to exceed the limits of its birth, depending on the quality of the man who transgressed.

"Purr. Purr."

The Minotaur gazed at her seeds, now adults. The sperm was superior, and their growth was extraordinary.

Pfft!

The Minotaur's thoughts were interrupted on the seventh floor. The last thing she saw was her own seeds wriggling in front of her.

The minotaur, born of a 13th-level explorer, the seed of a monster that had casually killed its own mother and filled its belly with its own tears, approached the fallen man.

The armor of the thirteenth-level explorer was draped over the body of the minotaur that had surpassed the seventh-level monster's birth.

"Purrrrr."

The minotaur cried low, and the rest of the seeds shook their heads.

The minotaur watched in satisfaction, then turned to the light in the distance.

A large, circular light that pulsed and glowed with red and blue colors.

It was what explorers often called the Ascension Portal and the Descent Portal.

Upon seeing it, a very hazy [darkness] shrouded the feet of an extraordinary minotaur from birth.

If it were a normal monster, it would feel instinctive caution and wouldn't even touch it but the minotaur put his hand in.