**Chapter 54: The 6th floor (6)**

Dad.

In other words, her father.

It was an unfamiliar word. From the moment it entered my ears to the moment it rolled off my tongue, words related to parents were so foreign to me.

It felt even stranger to hear it from a benefactor's daughter, much less someone else.

I was both stunned and embarrassed, so I naturally asked.

"Why did you think that?"

"⋯Well, it's⋯"

After a moment of silence, Ellie's face immediately turned bright red. A few more moments and it would be the same color as her hair.

Her eyes scanned every inch of my body as if she didn't know where to look. Then.

"⋯⋯!!!"

Ellie's long elf ears flared to a smoldering red.

She pressed her wide-brimmed wizard's hat down tightly to hide it, but there was no chin to cover it.

"There, there. I think I know what you're thinking."

"⋯⋯"

Ellie hangs her head, embarrassed and ashamed at her own thoughts.

Let's rewind to the beginning of the misunderstanding.

That day, I went to Diana's bedroom to calm her curse.

I was followed by Ellie, who came to visit her.

Ellie came out of the doorway and accused Diana of baby production. She fled from the inn, mistakenly believing that Diana was engaged in the act of producing a baby.

When we were reunited, Ellie had gone from the shy and energetic Positive Ellie from the library to the depressed and pessimistic Nerd Ellie.

"You're still young, it's understandable that you'd be shocked to be reunited like that with your adoptive mother, who you don't even get along with.

I and Ms. Diana aren't like that. I was just helping my benefactor break her curse.”

⋯It wasn't that kind of relationship, at least not yet. It might be something else later, but it wasn't now.

For a moment, I wondered if I should tell her about Diana's curse, but then I realized that everyone around me was asleep, and Ellie was Diana's daughter, so it wouldn't matter.

"It's that kind of curse, so I don't think Diana had any choice."

Honestly, curses like the curse of inept intrusion or the curse of lecherous weakness with a corruption motif are both beyond conventional curses, especially in the sense that getting caught with either would be social suicide.

"⋯Is this real? So, you're not my dad?"

"Seriously, I'm neither an uncle nor a dad."

I've never had sex or kissed a woman, let alone married one. Poor Ellie had such a misunderstanding.

"Actually, I didn't even know you were Diana's daughter until we met at the library. I first heard about you on the day you ran away."

"Oh."

Ellie's mouth fell open in a daze. Her eyes shook like an earthquake, and her ears flapped uncontrollably.

Tugging hard at the brim of her hat, Ellie buried her face in her lap.

"My, my, what a misunderstanding!"

Her reaction was similar to Diana's, as if they were mother and daughter even though they didn't share blood.

"Stupid, stupid bitch! Ugh! Just die!"

No, maybe it's a little different.

Ellie was very embarrassed by her misunderstandings and delusions about me, and she rolled around on the floor in agony, unable to overcome her shame.

It was a fresh reaction, like a college student remembering the black history of his middle school days.

After rolling on the floor, Ellie covered her face with her hat and lay down, staring into space. Her long ears drooped as if reflecting her feelings.

"⋯I'm pathetic, right?"

The way she said it, even with a hint of self-help, made me think she was in the throes of a severe breakdown.

"I run away stupidly, I'm delusional, and I don't have the confidence to ask people honestly even if I want to."

"⋯⋯"

"It's not just this time, it happened at the academy too, I can't take compliments as compliments, I take them with a twist in my stomach, and when people give me compliments, they have ulterior motives."

"⋯What do you mean?"

"Everyone's looking at the last name Ordia, not the girl named Ellie, and it doesn't matter if I'm being sneaky and throwing in more accomplishments, it doesn't change anything."

I remembered Ellie's wide smile at my compliment in the library and I could vaguely realize what she was lacking.

‘Inferiority, affection, or interest.’

An inferiority complex about Diana, a craving for praise and a need for others to see her.

They were normal feelings that any kid Ellie's age would have.

"I don't understand."

"You don't?"

I turned toward Ellie. Her face peeked out from under her hat.

I plopped down on Ellie's side and put my hand on top of her head. The texture of her red hair felt good against my fingertips.

"What the hell!"

Panicked, Ellie tried to dodge my hand, but there was no way a half-assed mage could escape a warrior's grasp.

She stopped moving and meekly accepted my touch.

Her hair, which was obviously unwashed, was soft and shiny as if it had been well cared for by her elven blood.

I stroked her hair gently.

"Ellie, I don't know much about magic or the history of the Labyrinth City, so I don't know how amazing Ms. Diana is. She must be amazing, but does it really matter?"

Ellie gave me a dumbfounded look, the kind of look that says, of course it matters.

I didn't understand it.

Why do you keep comparing yourself to others and putting yourself down?

"From what I've seen of you, Ellie, you're one fine mage in your own right."

"⋯⋯!"

Ellie's eyes widened and I continued to speak.

"I am alive because of your magic. Do you think I would have dealt with the minotaur so easily if it weren't for your magic? I don't think so, so I'll say it now. I'm alive because of you. Thank you, Ellie."

"That's not true! ⋯anyone would have acted like me in that situation."

"But you saw it, you were the only one who had the courage to step out of the barrier, and that's a choice not many people can make."

"⋯⋯"

"Ellie, you don't have to compare yourself to others. You are already special enough as you are."

No matter how much you compare yourself to others, at the end of the day, the most important thing in your life is yourself.

What I did for Ellie wasn't much.

"I am my own person."

Ellie mumbled, her eyes calm as she took in my words.

"⋯Really, do you think so?"

"Of course I do. You're the best wizard I've ever seen."

"I have professors and teaching assistants⋯"

"Who can't even help when I need them."

Ellie smirked at my comment. I felt quite embarrassed after I said everything, so I just laughed.

After a round of laughter, there was a moment of silence.

Bang-bang-bang

The only sound was the crackling of the campfire, and then Ellie cautiously spoke up.

"Thank you, Mister."

"You don't have to thank me, I was just telling you the truth."

I don't know if she’s embarrassed or ashamed but Ellie flicked her reddened ears and looked away, her gaze fixed on the bonfire.

Maybe it was the scarlet flames, but I could see the determination burning in her eyes.

With a little self-esteem, Ellie would either be consumed by her inferiority complex or use it as a springboard to new heights.

"I'll do better from now on."

It's up to Ellie.

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The next day the students' labyrinth phenomenon investigation was finished.

"This is your last phenomenon investigation, so I want you to make sure you have no regrets before you graduate."

The contrast between Professor Mankostil’s smiling face and the students' stifled laughter was stark.

"The Academy requires you to write a paper analyzing the Labyrinth or develop a unique magic before you graduate, so it's kind of a capstone project."

Ellie's explanation made sense. So that's why they’ve been going through all this trouble.

"Ellie, what are you going to do after you graduate?"

"⋯I'm thinking about it. I have a recommendation for a royal mage, and I can choose a noble vassal."

Ellie pondered her options with a serious face. With her future at stake, it was only right to choose carefully.

"If you have nowhere else to go, come to our party, we'll take you in anytime!"

"⋯?"

"What nonsense, Jubeel. Are you crazy? Ellie, don't listen."

I quickly plugged Ellie's eager ears and stepped away from the crazy cow girl.

What a crazy bitch, trying to throw a beautiful girl across the street into a dumpster in the middle of nowhere.

Ellie, being dragged by the hair by me, slowly raised her head.

"⋯Mister. Are you still going to be an explorer at that party?"

"Uh. For now."

Unless something big happens to them, or the party suddenly breaks up, I think I'll be going with them at least until the eighth floor.

Ellie looked at me with a strangely lascivious expression. I felt a slight tug on the back of my neck at the sight of that face.

Ellie is an excellent mage but the Labyrinth is too dangerous. Being the daughter of a benefactor makes me even more concerned about her safety.

"Ellie, you're a genius, a mage with a bright future ahead of you, recommended by the royal family."

"I know that, I'm a genius, no doubt about it, you reminded me of that last night."

"⋯Since you know, make the right choice. Okay?"

"⋯I'll think about it!"

Ellie laughed wryly and let the situation pass.

For some reason, I think she lost her smile from last night.

No, did she go from being a dorky Ellie to a positive Ellie again?

"Tsk!"

That's a good thing. She's a smart kid, even if she looks like that. I'm sure she'll make good decisions.

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We exited the labyrinth after two weeks and three days. None of the students were injured or involved in any incidents because we were extra cautious about safety.

The mission was a success, and our party parted ways with a promise to meet again to settle the bill.

"I'm going to Diana's inn, are you coming?"

"I just got a little break, so I'm planning to go back to the academy after seeing her face."

The destination was the same. Diana's inn.

Hopefully, the mother and daughter would mend their relationship, even if it took a while.

After a few moments of silence, Ellie's head snapped up as if she'd remembered something.

"That reminds me, Mister. I need you to keep your promise."

"Huh? A promise? What promise?"

I wondered what I promised, but Ellie's cheeks were flushed, and she was inching closer to my side. And then.

-Bam.

She wrapped her arms around my left arm and hugged me tightly. A little smaller than Diana’s, but no smaller by any means, she swallowed my arm. I focused all my attention on that touching sensation.

"⋯You said you'd give me a stamp."

⋯Uh, now that I think about it, I did say that, but⋯Why is he making such a face?

"I'm too embarrassed to do it outside, so let's go to the inn. At my stepmother's inn!"