**Chapter 105: Graduation Ceremony (1)**

“Sister. Are you really, really going to do this?”

Vesta, the head of the Blues Clan, glared at the cadre who spoke in an uneasy voice.

There were ten people, including herself, who had infiltrated the noble section through the 'rat hole'.

Three clan officers and six elite fighters stood behind Vesta.

'You bastards, you couldn't even manage a slave correctly and created this whole mess.’

Vesta's mouth twitched as if she was about to spit out an expletive, but she held it together with superhuman patience.

Now was not the time to demoralize them.

Instead, they needed to be set straight with a false sense of purpose and illusion.

“The plan is perfect. One Academy student is worth dozens of common slaves, so if we kidnap ten of them, we'll have a reputation as outlaws who raided the Academy and a ton of gold in no time.”

It was a poor plan. The idea of raiding the Academy in the first place was insane.

But the outlaws, driven by selfishness and greed for money, listened to Vesta's words with mesmerized fascination.

Vesta didn't say anything negative about the risk of the Academy coming after them for kidnapping students, or that they might end up in a battle with the faculty if things didn't go well.

She only told them what they wanted to hear, letting her clan mates dream big.

“Damn it, I was counting on you, Sister, you're really going against the Academy, you're going to be the worst outlaw ever, I'll follow you for life!”

Vesta looked at the one who called her sister.

‘Iron Carlino.’

A former mid-level explorer who was cursed to turn into an orc.

She was once blessed with the [Blessing of Iron Fists] and [Blessing of Hardened Mills].

Her nature was so vicious that she was a natural outlaw, and she was the second strongest person in the clan after Vesta.

'A useful bitch.’

She's easy to control because she follows her so well.

If she used her well, she could kidnap a student and sneak out of the noble district without anyone noticing.

She'll use the same 'rat hole' she used to recruit Reichem, so she'll have no problem getting in and out of the Academy.

“It was fine for getting in, but if the academy is attacked, will the rat hole still be intact?”

"Ugh. As long as we have control over that kid's parents, she’ll have no choice but to follow our lead."

“Kuuuuuu. I can’t believe you threatened an Academy’s assistant like this. You’ll definitely be known as the worst outlaw in the Labyrinth City.”

Having answered her subordinate's question, Vesta chuckled at her insinuation and stalked off into the darkness.

To hunt, you had to strike when your prey was least alert.

“When the party is ripe, we strike.”

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I had ridden in a carriage once before.

It was dirty and grimy inside, with dingy, sunken chairs that showed it had been ridden by many people.

Even at a slow pace, the carriage was uncomfortable, with the worst cushioning I've ever experienced, making my butt sore, but the carriage Diana had waiting for us had none of those flaws.

The cushions were as comfortable as sitting on a plush couch, and the ever-changing scenery outside made the ride almost fun.

-Thump, thump, thump

The carriage shook occasionally as we traveled over the dirt roads, but it wasn't so bad when I could see Diana’s breasts bouncing wildly in her skimpy dress.

I took a moment to admire the magnificent view before I spoke.

“You said Ellie went to the Academy, didn't you?”

“Yep. She just came by to get her dress fitted⋯ I'm guessing she's in the middle of rehearsals for graduation.”

I was told that Ellie, who had gone to the royal court to pursue her career, had only seen Diana for a day or so to get her dress fitted and then left for the academy again on schedule.

So I hadn't seen Ellie's face in over two weeks.

The carriage, which had been traveling for a while, slowed down. We were approaching the walls of the noble district.

-knock.

There was a knock on the door and the coachman's voice came through.

“The guards are demanding to know the purpose of your visit and your identity.”

It was definitely the Noble Quarter, and the guards seemed to be stricter than in the Temple Quarter or the Explorers' Quarter.

“Give them this.”

Diana dug into her bosom and pulled out a blue explorer's badge.

It took her a moment to scratch her head at the unfamiliarity of the plaque, which wasn't just a wooden low-level, silver intermediate, or gold high-level.

“Supreme Explorer⋯?”

“What the hell, it's real!”

“Hmph! I'm sorry, we don't know who you are, what are you doing, open the door!!!”

From outside came a voice, almost a scream, a mixture of panic and alarm.

The door opened again, and a stern-faced guard handed me a piece of paper through the crack.

“Ba, ba, ba, ba, guest book. The, the, the, signature.”

I snatched the guest book out of the guard's hand, too stiff to speak.

The guest book contained entries and remarks.

At the top was a name I hadn't seen in a long time.

[Entry] [Remarks]

[Assistant Gelsia][Bringing in 40 bottles of wine for the dinner party and 15 large oak barrels.]

Professor Mankostil's assistant, Gelsia.

40 bottles of wine and 15 oak barrels. It seemed like they were going to enjoy it to the fullest.

 “Thank you!!”

I scribbled my name and Diana’s in the guest book and handed it over, and the guard disappeared in a flash.

After a brief pause, the carriage resumed its journey toward the Academy.

I glanced out the window and saw a group of guards, including the captain of the Noble Quarter Guard platoon, saluting the carriage.

I don't know Diana's exact backstory, so it's not an accurate analogy, but at first glance, it looked like a new platoon leader greeting a visiting division commander.

'Well, the captain of the guard also bowed low in front of Diana, so that's not too strange.’

After getting her ID card back, Diana smiled warmly as if nothing had happened.

“It's your first time in the noble district, isn't it?”

“Yes.”

“Hoo-hoo. It's not like you can just come here anytime, so take this opportunity to explore as much as you can.”

I turned my attention to the window at Diana’s words.

When I heard the word “noble district,” I expected to see some sort of gorgeous landmark or capital city, but all I could see was dense forests and trees as we drove on.

“The outskirts of the Noble District, where the Academy is located, are surrounded by forests like this.”

The enormity of the Labyrinth City of Valerus was suddenly realized, with such a dense forest in just one section of the city.

“If I came here by myself, I'd probably get lost.”

“Yeah. It's complicated, isn't it? The city walls are supposed to be aesthetically pleasing⋯”

Diana often came up with interesting stories to keep me from getting bored.

“Still, if it's this complicated, don't you think we might miss our opponent if the security is breached?”

“For the nobles, erasing the unpleasant things in front of them is more important than practical gain. There have been a few incidents like this in the past, and they must have suffered damage, but instead, the number of trees has increased⋯”

I remembered the information Reichem had told me the other day.

There was ominous news that today the Academy might be attacked by the Blues Clan.

The nuanced way she mentioned that it had happened a few times before made it all the more troubling.

The Captain of the Explorers' Zone Guard Platoon had said she would communicate with the Academy, but somehow that didn't reassure me.

I mentioned the information to Diana, just in case, and her mood changed slightly.

“Did the Guard really communicate with the Academy about increasing the number of guards?”

“I've heard that they did, but I haven't heard anything definite.”

“I see. I'll have to go check it out, just in case. If they're so sure, they might have an insider.”

It was better to confide in Diana than to be complacent and trust the guards.

She had come purely to celebrate Ellie's graduation, but it couldn't hurt to be prepared, just in case.

With the heavy talk out of the way, we talked about the day's schedule.

The main events of the day were twofold.

“There's the Dean's speech in the Academy's auditorium during the day, and a dinner party in the ballroom at night.”

The speeches are the same old stuff at any graduation ceremony, and the biggest event is the dinner party in the ballroom.

Not only the graduates, but also their parents and relatives gathered. It was a kind of socializing.

And the students of the Academy are usually well-connected.

Children of nobles, relatives of the wealthy, sons and daughters of middle- and upper-class explorers, etc.

 ‘It's a chance to make high-level connections.’

Explorers must keep in line.

Not only do they explore the labyrinth, but they often act as mercenaries, so the quality of the requests they receive depends on their connections and reputation⋯

I've overheard conversations in taverns of mid-level explorers bemoaning the fact that they can't get a job.

In that sense, the dinner party was an opportunity that would never come again.

'Explorers at my level, they don't get to do this.’

Again, Diana and Ellie were gracious, so I can only be grateful.

“We're almost there.”

Diana's words made me glance out the window.

The view was majestic.

‘Wow, it's almost as big as Hogwarts.’

The buildings loomed over the lush trees, awe-inspiring to behold.

Honestly, I don't know much about the aesthetics, but there was a sense of grandeur and overwhelmingness that came from the huge building.

I gazed at the Royal Academy building like a country bumpkin on his first trip to the city.

Then, I looked at the long line of carriages in front of the Academy's main entrance.

“⋯What's all that?”

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In front of the Academy's main entrance was a long line of carriages.

The line was so long that it reminded me of a holiday slowdown, and the tired people in it all complained in unison.

“Damn. How long are we going to have to wait?”

The entrance, too narrow for the sprawling grounds, was a traffic jam at this time of year.

Those who could afford to send their children to the Academy had no reason to travel by foot.

They were killing time in their ornately decorated carriages, but even that could only go so far.

"Do you know who I am to be kept waiting for an hour?! I'm the grandson of the famous Claudia Merchant Guild's leader from the Labyrinth City! The third daughter’s second son, that’s me!"

Impatient with the wait, he strode over and shouted at the Academy guards guarding the main entrance.

“Yes, sir, we are currently processing those who arrived first. Please wait.”

The guards gave him a cold shoulder and muttered formalities.

This was due to the academy's operating policy.

It was more important to invest in cultivating talent than in the miscellaneous complaints that came in once or twice a year, so they didn't invest funds in unnecessary things like expanding the front gate.

“Ugh!”

The people who were arguing had sent their children to the academy because they believed in the academy's education policy, so in the end, they didn't say anything else and crawled back into their carriages.

As they were returning from their pointless expenditure of stamina, an unassuming carriage whizzed by them.

The appearance was not particularly flashy, the wheels were ordinary, and the horses that pulled the carriages were not famous horses, but rather a breed that was close to being the first to fail at crossbreeding.

 “Are they crazy?”

He couldn't help but ask.

The carriages that were far more advanced than his own were lined up in front of him, but how could such an ugly carriage ignore him?

“What family are they from? Has anyone seen them?”

“The carriage doesn't seem to have a family seal on it⋯ it looks like it's just a commoner.”

“From the looks of the carriage.”

The word “commoner” brought laughter from all around.

I had a rough idea of what was to come.

Noble blood, semi-noble blood, and their relatives were all standing in line, but a commoner with nothing was allowed to pass by without lining up?

 “The guards must be really pissed off.”

“Yeah. They'll just let us go, but they'll give the commoners a hard time about how they can't wait.”

“Well, that's good, because waiting is boring, and we need something to keep us entertained.”

“I agree.”

Just as the boredom was reaching its peak, an interesting event happened.

They each stuck their heads out of the carriage windows, imagining what was about to happen.

And what they saw was.

“All hands!!! Salute!!!!!”

The Academy guards saluting at the top of their lungs.

-Thump-thump-thump

A rickety old carriage lumbered through the gates.

Their eyes widened at the sight, finally realizing the situation after a moment of silence.

“⋯What is this, the Academy guards reacting like that?”

“The Second Princess said she'd only show her face for the dinner party, so she shouldn't be here right now⋯”

“Hey, who are they? Who the hell are they? Didn’t anyone even look through the window?!”

 “I thought I saw a man in a helmet, but I didn't get a good look, so I didn't say so before.”

“Why would he wear a helmet to a place like this, isn't he just an escort?”

The boredom and irritation that had been building up in their heads quickly subsided, and the void was filled with questions and even greater interest.

They had come to this graduation for many reasons, but the biggest one was to make connections.

If they wanted to get higher than they were now, they needed to make connections…and in front of them stood a figure that seemed vastly taller than them.

At the commotion behind them, the woman with her eyes closed muttered quietly.

“A man in a helmet.”

The words that came out of her mouth had many meanings.