**Chapter 106: Graduation Ceremony (2)**

The carriage entered the Academy grounds and stopped near the main auditorium.

The area around the auditorium was already crowded with numerous carriages and people. Since the students were inside the auditorium, these were mostly parents.

Perhaps because of the dinner party that night, the parents were also dressed quite colorfully.

“I'll be right back, but you should go inside the auditorium first.”

“Okay.”

I stepped out of the carriage alone while Diana had excused herself and headed off somewhere.

Presumably to prepare for the Blues Clan raid I've told her about.

‘I feel a little sorry for her.’

I wondered if I had said the wrong thing to a mother who had come to celebrate her daughter's graduation and caused her to worry.

I shrugged it off and walked into the auditorium.

As soon as I entered the auditorium, I saw a tired-looking assistant guiding parents around the room.

I recognized the face from memory.

“Ms. Gelsia?”

“⋯Ah. Mr. Balkan?”

I recognized her because she was the academy assistant who had accompanied me on the labyrinth the last time I received a request from the academy.

Gelsia remembered my appearance as well.

We weren't friends, but we were acquainted, so we exchanged formal greetings.

“I never thought I’d see you in a place like this. Are you a parent?”

I wasn't technically a parent, but I didn't want to bother explaining, so I nodded.

“Yeah. Something like that, by the way⋯ are you okay?”

Assistant Gelsia's face was not in a good state even to say the least.

The dark circles were deeper than before, and she was on the verge of collapse.

Moreover, her unfocused, wobbly eyes reflected intense anxiety.

“⋯A slave on the verge of emancipation is always in this state⋯”

“Ah, congratulations.”

“Haha⋯”

It seemed that Assistant Gelsia was able to escape from Professor Mankostil’s arms. It was the fulfillment of every graduate student's wish.

However, after nodding, Gelsia's expression did not brighten.

“Is something wrong?”

I felt strangely cheap and unnecessarily intrusive.

“⋯No, nothing, it's just a personal matter.”

I was dismissed as a prying question. There was nothing else to say about family matters.

But why?

The nape of my neck grew cold, and the feeling of cheapness intensified.

“When I came in today, I saw in the guest book that you brought in 15 oak barrels. I assume they're for the dinner party, and I was wondering if you could give me a hint as to what kind of wine they are?”

“⋯⋯Yes?”

“Oh, I used to work in a liquor store, so I'm kind of interested in this stuff.”

I honestly didn't know what the hell wine tasted like but assistant Gelsia stiffened sharply at the keyword “oak barrels,” and then relaxed with relief when I added the word personal interest.

“It's ⋯Andrée Clouet Bleu Reuther Gold. It has a distinctive blue-apple scent.”

“Is it? I'm already looking forward to the dinner party.”

“⋯Haha. Yes⋯ Parents' seats are upstairs on the second floor.”

Ms. Gelsia told me to go to the second floor as if to dismiss me.

When I looked back, there was a line of people waiting to get in.

“If you are suffering from anything, please do not hesitate to tell me. I'm an explorer myself, so I can accept non-lethal requests.”

“⋯I'll be in touch if that happens.”

I received a polite refusal so I had no choice but to go up to the second floor.

Sitting down in a suitable seat, I sat still and thought.

“Something's wrong.”

“What?”

I replied, unfazed by the words coming from right behind me.

“That assistant. She's got a weird vibe about her.”

“⋯⋯”

Ellie fell silent at my words.

“⋯Mister. Why are you not surprised when I suddenly talk to you from behind?”

Puffing out her cheeks, Ellie plopped down on the seat next to me, which was meant for Diana.

“There's been a little commotion around here, so I'm a little wary.”

“Hmm.”

Since it wasn't a place I usually went to, I had to keep my awareness on and be on constant alert, like in the labyrinth.

 As a result, I can quickly detect any unfamiliar or familiar signs in the vicinity.

Ellie had been following me ever so slightly as I climbed the stairs to the second floor.

“Chi. I was trying to surprise you.”

“Next time, try harder to hide your presence.”

“Ugh.”

Sighing, Ellie in her school uniform put her elbows on her knees and picked her chin.

She looked down at the students sitting in the auditorium on the first floor.

“I'm graduating with honors.”

“That's great.”

“Yeah, well, I guess it's kind of amazing, since I've been recommended to be a royal wizard.”

“Speaking of which, how did it go?”

The reason Ellie went to the royal castle for a few days was to decide her next move.

Would she become a royal wizard and have a successful career or would she try something else and expand her horizons?

“⋯I'm still thinking about it. I'm not sure what I want to do.”

Ellie clenched her jaw and sighed heavily.

Your life depends on the path you take so she must have a lot on her mind.

It was time to show her some adult acceptance.

I patted Ellie's back with my thick hand.

“You're smart, Ellie, and you'll do well in whatever path you choose. So my advice is, do what you want to do, and I'll be behind you no matter what you choose.”

The sooner Ellie gains confidence and develops her skills, the sooner she can make progress on her research into the Portal.

Portals, a mysterious phenomenon that only exists in the Labyrinth, may have some connection to the Labyrinth's secrets.

And I believed that Ellie, the self-proclaimed genius mage, would one day uncover the secret.

“⋯⋯”

Ellie's breath caught in his throat at my words, and he blushed, jaw clenched, and glared at me.

"Mister."

 “Yeah.”

Red hair, red eyes, and perky elf ears came into view one after the other, and then red lips parted cautiously.

“⋯You're so sweet to my foster mother, aren't you?”

This was not the reaction I expected.

I was expecting Ellie to go into her usual “Hmph! Of course, I'm a genius!” mode, which is how she usually responds to praise.

“⋯? Of course. Because she’s my benefactor.”

“⋯Benefactor⋯”

 After a moment of mumbling, Ellie stared at me.

“Mister. I have something to say-”

Beep!

A sharp noise rang out, it was the sound of a microphone being set up before a broadcast.

-The Dean's speech is about to begin. Graduates and parents, please take your seats.

The announcement was indeed made. The students and parents who had been moving around in a hurry began to find their seats.

“⋯I have to go!”

Ellie said, jumping to her feet.

“What were you going to say?”

“⋯ Heh heh. I’ll tell you later. I’m graduating at the top of my class today, so I’ll be giving a speech, so please listen carefully.”

Smiling broadly, Ellie waved her hand wildly at me as she said that.

“Your daughter is so lively. I wish my daughter was like that.”

 “⋯Is that your daughter? She has a weird look in her eyes.”

“Making a daughter through incest with a daughter-in-law⋯”

“That's low class! Don't denigrate sacred family love like that. How nice is it to see a father and daughter getting along?”

“No, she called him mister in the first place, is he family?”

The attention of the people around me increased.

The helmet and suit had drawn stares before, but now it was too much.

I smiled bitterly and gestured toward Ellie, then turned my attention back to the first floor.

“Ego… Ahem… Our Royal Academy…”

The Dean of the Royal Academy, a wiry old woman with a cane, was beginning her speech.

It was just as boring as you thought it would be.

Just as the Dean was about to finish, Diana returned.

“Haha. Thank goodness I'm not late!”

“I saved you a seat.”

“Oh, thank you, Balkan.”

Diana sat down somewhat uneasily, her purse on her lap.

“⋯? Ta, it's warm⋯”

“Ellie was in and out. Did you get your work done?”

“Uh, yeah. I told her we needed more guards, just in case, and she said she'd hire more. Professor Mankostil herself has taken matters into her own hands, and I'm a little relieved to hear that she's adding five more wizards at the assistant level.”

Was it Professor Mankostil you met with?

‘Come to think of it, Professor Mankostil was also an explorer.’

I thought maybe that was the connection.

Anyway, thanks to Diana's intervention, security was tightened.

I was relieved, but not completely relaxed.

–Next, we will have a speech from the valedictorian, Ellie Ordia.

 As I turned my attention to the broadcast, Ellie was walking up to the podium.

“Valedictorian⋯or rather, Ordia, where have I heard that before?”

“No way, she⋯?”

“That's right. That's right, Ellie Ordia! Diana Ordia's daughter! My son told me!”

“If she has a daughter, does that mean⋯ she's here, Diana Ordia?”

“But I only know her name, not what she looks like.”

“I saw her at the retirement ceremony, her eyes are as piercing as a problem child, her body as lithe as an elf⋯”

There was a sudden uproar around him.

Their ears brushed the name 'Ellie' aside, remembering only the last name 'Ordia'.

‘This is bad.’

Coincidentally, Ellie was the most uncomfortable.

Her feelings of inferiority and defeat over Diana's exalted name were the biggest source of her problems.

Sure enough, a stiff-faced Ellie stood in front of the podium.

'I thought things were getting better⋯'

I thought I had tried to come between Diana and Ellie and make them a good mother and daughter.

However, even that wasn't enough.

The emotional gap was gradually resolved through mother-daughter conversations.

The root cause of the conflict, Ellie's inferiority complex, needed a little more time to resolve.

In her clenched hands, she unfolded her speech paper.

Ellie stared at the paper for a long moment, her expression stony.

“⋯⋯”

A hush fell over the huge auditorium.

“What the hell. Why is she still?”

“She’s always so high-minded.”

“Ouch. She’s going to embarrass herself.”

“Well, now we have something to talk about at the dinner party.”

As I focused my hearing, a group of mean-looking graduates were gossiping and snickering at Ellie's stiffened form at the podium.

Ellie's elf ears pricked up impatiently and her hand clutching the paper trembled.

Ellie's hearing was very sensitive.

Perhaps all the chatter in this great hall was reaching her ears.

In a place like this, hearing voices of inferiority and jealous mockery directed at her⋯ naturally, she could not help but stiffen.

'⋯Those bitches⋯'

If I'm listening to this from afar, I can't help but wonder how Ellie feels.

I can't let them ruin her graduation like this.

“Cheer up.”

Ellie's ears perked up at the muttered words.

Red eyes that had been darting around came into focus.

Ellie stood on the dais, her expression stoic, then gradually lifted her head and turned her gaze to the second floor.

Ruby-red eyes peeked out from behind the helmet and into my field of vision.

As she stared at me, I shouted in a loud voice.

“Be brave!!! Ellie!!!”

A thick, booming voice echoed through the silent auditorium.

“You can do it!!! Come on!!!”

The thunderous voice, which had been raised from a single battle and was only used to provoke large monsters, rang out, and the attention of the surrounding people poured in.

“Go, Ellie!”

Diana calls out, smiling broadly, and the positive vibe gradually spreads through the auditorium.

“Come on, Ellie!”

“You're going to give a great speech, what an experience!”

“If you were born a girl, you should be able to do things like this! Others can't even if they want to! Ellie! Ellie!”

It's possible that these are simply flattering remarks to Ellie, Ordia's daughter.

Regardless, there was no adult in the room to spew venomous words at the students who were about to finish their studies and face the world.

The atmosphere centered on the second floor eventually spread to the first floor and beyond, reaching Ellie.

“Ugh, ugh!”

Ellie's face flushed red, her ears pricked up, and he finally regained her composure.

Taking a deep breath and stepping away from the microphone for a moment, Ellie looks up at me on the second floor and quietly purses her lips.

- Thank you.

Her lips closed tightly as she tried to say 'me'.

- ⋯⋯⋯⋯Brother.

A new title was formed in her mouth.

Ellie opened her lips, her face full of confidence and the valedictorian speech had been a success.