**Chapter 107: Graduation Ceremony (3)**

Teaching assistant Gelsia listened to Ellie's speech from the corner of the auditorium.

Ellie Ordia, the daughter of Diana Ordia, the leader of the party that once came closest to reaching the very heart of the Labyrinth, a party that is almost a legend among explorers.

Though the details of this story are not known to the outside world, Gelsia, who often hears about it among the professors, was even more interested in Ellie.

So when she entered the Labyrinth, she volunteered to be an assistant to Ellie's group.

'Yeah. Come to think of it, it was from then.'

She and Ellie had been escorted by the man's party.

She turned her head to the second floor and saw a man looking down at Ellie with a smirk on his face.

Balkan, a man who had just killed a mutated minotaur with a skill beyond that of a novice explorer.

At the same time, he was strangely wary of her.

‘I've been spotted⋯?’

Gelsia thought for a moment and shook her head. There was no way he would have noticed.

Right now, she was being blackmailed.

Or, more accurately, her mother was being threatened, not Gelsia.

Like many Academy graduates, Gelsia's family was well-off.

Her mother was a typical merchant but a few years ago, her mother's business began to go downhill.

The business went from bad to worse, and Gelsia's mother borrowed money here and there to make ends meet but it didn't make up for the losses.

Her mother eventually reached out for help where she shouldn't have and accepted black money from outlaws.

Still, the business spiraled out of control, and the helpers who didn't get their money back turned around and started showing malice.

-Hey. Your daughter is an academy assistant. You raised your children well. You may not know business, but you are good at raising children.

Gelsia still remembers clearly the moment when the outlaw named Vesta slapped her mother across the cheek and looked down at her.

-I'll pay you back, I'll pay you back slowly, I'll graduate in just a few years⋯

-Ha. Fuck. When are you going to pay back all that money, asshole.

Pfft!!!

With a single fist deeply embedded in her temple, Gelsia gave up all resistance.

-You know what's more valuable than money? People and information. Speaking of which, do you have any disgruntled teaching assistants or students? Introduce me to them. Preferably ones with a knack for manipulating magic.

Vesta was more interested in other things than money.

She seemed to have a strong preference for those who worked with magic.

Teaching assistants who were skeptical of the academy and life, tempted to pay off their debts by divulging information about their students.

TA Gelsia shook her head, understandably.

As a TA, she loved the Academy but her mother grabbed her leg.

-Daughter, it's not too much to ask, is it? Just once, just once, with your eyes closed. Do you think your mother will come to her senses if she becomes a slave to these outlaws, eh?!!!

-Ha, but⋯

-Daughter. My proud daughter. Please, just once, for mommy's sake, please⋯⋯

- ⋯⋯

For the first time in her life, Gelsia closed her eyes in silence as she watched her mother kneel before her and beg.

The first person she passed information about was a special slave named Reichem, who was widely known even within the academy.

A month after she gave Vesta the information, she was passing by Professor Arpo's lab and overheard that Reichem had disappeared.

-I heard that Reichem disappeared, where is she?

-Ah, her? She's doing fine, don't worry too much.

- ⋯⋯

After several weeks of not being able to sleep due to the increasing anxiety and guilt, Vesta came back with a grim face.

-I want to get into the academy.

-Ha, but on this day⋯

It was the long-awaited graduation day.

-You don't like it? Your mother has been getting thinner and thinner lately. Do you miss seeing her for the rest of your life? Oh, if your mother dies, it's your father next. If you're unlucky, you might see your father in a brothel.

Gelsia couldn't refuse Vesta.

She ended up sneaking them into the academy in a large oak barrel under the guise of purchasing alcohol for a dinner party.

She hoped they'd be caught, but the guards didn't seem to suspect anything, since they saw teaching assistants doing odd jobs for years.

-Uh-oh.

Gelsia nervously picked at her thumb nails.

“Nothing's going to happen, nothing's going to happen⋯”

Repeating herself wouldn't change anything. She'd already let the outlaws in. She'd already made herself an accomplice to them.

She didn't know what they were up to at the academy, but she hoped it would end with nothing more than theft of documents and no casualties.

However in the back of her mind, though, Gelsia knew that was not it.

If they were going to do something like that, they could have just made her do it.

The outlaws had obviously come to the Academy for human business and it was, most likely, a kidnapping, because that's how Reichem disappeared.

Feeling as though she was suffocating from the guilt that was weighing down her lungs, Assistant Gelsia lifted her head to let out a sigh.

“Hmph!”

And then she swallowed hard.

Balkan had been looking at Ellie, and now he was glaring at her over his helmet.

No, that wasn't it; she had been looking at him first, unconsciously.

Gelsia looked away from him, and for a moment, she felt a speculation flicker through her mind.

Ellie had dared to leave the safety of Barrier to help Balkan during the attack by the mutated minotaur.

Ellie and Balkan, who had seemed friendly since they left the labyrinth.

Balkan shouting at Ellie to be brave before her speech, and Ellie responding in kind.

And, crucially, Balkan nodded his head when asked if he was a parent.

“⋯What?”

It was a small suspicion, but when you put it in context, everything that had happened between them fits together neatly.

“Father and daughter?”

If they are, it means they have Diana Ordia by their side.

Assistant Gelsia began to formulate a hypothesis in her head.

‘What if we could catch those outlaws… even now?’

If they were imprisoned by the Guards, the debt owed to them would naturally be lessened, and this terrible guilt would be relieved.

Any harm that might have been done would be eliminated.

-If you're suffering from anything, feel free to let me know. I'm an explorer myself, so I'm open to non-lethal requests.

Balkan's words echoed in her head as she ascended to the second floor.

After a moment's hesitation, Gelsia made her decision.

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After Ellie's speech, Diana and I hurried down from the second floor.

“Is Ellie Ordia his daughter, by any chance?”

“No way. Then is the person next to him⋯?”

“No, but that's not quite right, how could that sleazy, lascivious, fleshy body be Diana Ordia, she looks like a total dud?”

“Hmm, is that so? No, she's retired, so maybe her body shape has changed over the years⋯”

“In the first place, Ellie called that guy mister. Isn't he just an acquaintance?”

“Even if it's just an acquaintance, it's worth it because they seem so intimate.”

“Hmph, I'm the guy over there in the Explorers' District who owns a small crafting business-”

The parents who had seen Ellie and me chatting on the second floor rolled their eyes and tried to make conversation.

I was here to make connections, but I didn't need connections that were trying to poke straws into Diana’s and my relationship.

In this respect, I vaguely understood Ellie's feelings.

I needed someone who would see Balkan as an explorer and invest in me.

That being said, I'm going to have to make the best of this situation until I've established some kind of a foothold.

I quickly left the great hall and entered the carriage, and only then did the surroundings fall silent.

“Fleshy body⋯”

A frowning Diana muttered to herself as she looked down at her body.

Apparently, what she had heard earlier had bothered her quite a bit.

“Balkan. Am I really fat?”

“No, you're not. Don't you remember the bodies of the people who said that earlier? They were just jealous, and you're looking your best right now.”

There was not a hint of insincerity in my voice.

I honestly couldn't imagine Diana without her MILF body.

“⋯Hoo-hoo. So⋯?”

She suppressed the corners of her mouth that were about to curl up, but I could tell she was amused by my words.

After a while, Ellie, her face covered by a large wizard's hat, entered the carriage.

I had motioned for her to follow me to the carriage after her speech.

Ellie took off her hat and casually plopped down next to me.

“Fuuuu⋯ They were more talkative than usual, so it was hard to get rid of them⋯”

“Hoo hoo. Good job. Ellie.”

Diana, sitting across from Ellie, grinned and hugged her tightly as soon as she saw her.

“That was a great speech, you've been working so hard.”

“Uhhhh.”

Ellie squirmed in Diana’s arms for a moment, then bowed her head, holding her breath at the word “hard”.

Perhaps overwhelmed with emotion, Ellie quietly lifted her hand and wrapped it around Diana's back.

For a few seconds, I watched as the mother-daughter bond grew stronger.

Embarrassed, Ellie pulled away from Diana’s embrace and glared at me.

“But mister, what the hell was that?! I was so embarrassed!”

Was it because she was feeling shy that she called me oppa?

However now the title reverted back to mister.

“Why? It was nice, wasn't it? People just yelling your name. It's so encouraging. I don't get many opportunities like this.”

“But, yeah, it was embarrassing.”

Ellie's voice got smaller and smaller.

It seemed that she was used to other people's comparisons and devaluation, but not to genuine support.

“⋯Well, it was still nice of you, though, hahaha-”

I put my hand on the redhead's head and stroked it, and Ellie let out an odd groan and laughed.

“Your bangs are all messed up. There’s a dinner party coming up soon. Shouldn’t you wear a dress?”

“Oh. I left my clothes at my old dorm in a hurry⋯I don't think I can put them on by myself.”

“Hee hee, I'll help you. I'll get you a new haircut.”

Diana and Ellie's conversation flowed well together.

‘Ellie was a bit of a wreck before she went to the royal palace.’

They met up a few days ago to go dress shopping and talk, and it seemed to work.

“I think we have some free time, so why don’t we go to the dormitory together, Balkan?”

I paused to consider Diana’s suggestion, but then Ellie jumped in with a wave of her hand.

“Hey, an old man coming into my room?! T, that’s a bit⋯!”

“What's wrong with that? I'm here, so it's not a problem.”

“Well, it's just that. I've been at the academy for a few days⋯it's not a total mess⋯just a little unorganized⋯”

“Oh⋯”

Deanna heard Ellie's whisper and let out a short gasp.

Ellie's dorm room was a mess.

The thought of a room where she'd obviously thrown away her bra and other clothes, but had at least had the decency to keep her panties in order piqued my interest but for now, I was more concerned with the familiar figures milling around the carriage.

“I don't mind, there's a lot of interesting stuff in the Academy, I'll just look around a bit and then we'll make it to the ballroom in time.”

“Sure, sure.”

The ballroom was close to the Auditorium, but the dormitories were a bit farther away.

Diana and Ellie took the carriage and headed for the dormitories, and I got out of the carriage and started walking aimlessly through the Academy grounds.

I could feel a human figure following me.

I took a leisurely pace and headed for the least populated area I could find.

“⋯You noticed.”

As soon as I was out of sight, the figure behind me spoke up.

I didn't bother to answer, turned around and saw Professor Mankostil assistant, Gelsia.

I had sensed something was amiss with her behavior, but it was a hunch, a gut feeling without any evidence.

It was only when I felt Gelsia's gaze on me, even during Ellie's speech, that my suspicions turned into doubts and now, here, the suspicion had turned to certainty.

-If you are so sure that there will be an attack by outlaws, there may be an informant ⋯

I remembered the conversation I had with Diana in the carriage, sharing information.

An informant…someone who would have let the outlaws into the Academy and given them the opportunity to attack.

Why would such a person seek me out?

The reason was clear from the look on Gelsia's face.

'I see. All of you assistants think alike.’

That's the same face I saw when Reichem betrayed the Blues Clan and leaked the information.