**Chapter 108: Graduation Ceremony (4)**

Gelsia followed Balkan with nervous steps.

Balkan was deliberately heading off the beaten path, which meant he knew he was being followed.

“So, you're the informant.”

“⋯!”

As if on cue, he saw right through her as soon as she appeared.

‘I see.’

Balkan had already realized that the outlaws were going to attack.

Not only that, but that he was communicating with them.

There was no point in hiding it any longer.

Unlike their encounter in the auditorium a few hours earlier, Gelsia had been forthright about the incident.

The situation she was in, what she had done, and the information that outlaws were now inside the Academy.

As she spoke, she often tried to analyze his reactions through his facial expressions, but was unsuccessful as his face was hidden by his helmet.

Eventually, her gaze fell on his eyes.

When she met those cold pupils, she instinctively shrank back.

“Why are you telling me all this?”

“⋯No matter what the situation is, if the outlaws commit a crime, I will also become an accomplice. All the efforts made at the Academy should not go down the drain. Also⋯”

Once she started confessing, she couldn't stop talking.

The anxiety of a ruined life, the guilt of sacrificing her fellow assistant, Reichem, to the outlaws, was overwhelming.

When she finally got it all out, she felt an unexplainable sense of relief.

Balkan, on the other hand, frowned as he looked at TA Gelsia, who continued her confession with a pleased expression.

‘So it was for your own good in the end.’

She did what she did because she was blackmailed, but looking back, she feels scared.

She's worried that being honest with the professor will destroy her career so she asks Balkan to step in and help her.

That was Gelsia's motivation for confessing.

‘It's a shame that her parents are in this mess, but honestly, it's none of my business.’

He put aside the distractions and focused on one truth.

What mattered was what he'd been told.

The appearance, demeanor, and power of the ten members of Clan Blues, including their leader, Vesta.

“In the end, you don't know that much, do you?”

“⋯Yes. They must have used disguise artifacts with illusion magic to change their appearance, since all ten of them are wanted outlaws.”

Gelsia didn't know about the clan members' use of disguise artifacts.

There was no way to catch them by appearance but I had an idea.

“You don't even know the names of the outlaws?”

“I don't know all of them, but I know a few, including Vesta.”

If I knew their names, I could run them against the status window.

This is apparently a perk that only I have in this world.

“Their purpose is most likely to kidnap students. Vesta seems to want human resources more than money, and she told me to have a carriage and a large oak barrel waiting for them to return around midnight⋯so given the timing, they'll do it at the dinner party. They're probably already infiltrating the ballroom by now.”

I got some more information so I synthesized the information from Gelsia's confession.

First. The size and names of the Blues Clan members who infiltrated the Academy.

Second. The purpose of their attack, and the time they had to leave the Academy once they had accomplished their goal.

'Not a bad harvest.’

Up until now, I've only had vague information that the outlaws might be attacking, but now my speculation has turned into fact.

And now I have even more details.

“Are you okay with that?”

“⋯⋯”

I glanced at Gelsia, who had been manipulated by Vesta into doing all this, but she still looked defeated.

“The outlaws haven’t come forward yet. There’s plenty of opportunity to turn back.”

‘But I’ll end up in jail anyway.’

Gelsia cannot escape punishment for helping the outlaws, even if it was not of her own volition. but she can cleanse her tainted conscience.

“A chance to turn back⋯”

Gelsia's eyes light up for a moment as I offer her hope that she can redeem herself.

I watched her for a moment as she muttered quietly, and when her lips closed, I offered a suggestion.

“⋯You mean, you want me to do that?”

“Yes. If you want to prove that you really didn't mean it, you should take that risk.”

“⋯⋯”

Vesta must think she has Gelsia's leash tight, but now she's blurting out information in front of me.

‘I need insurance in case things don't go well.’

This situation can be used to my advantage.

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“So, you said you smuggled the Blues Clan into the oak barrels that held the wine?”

“Ah, yes.”

“A person’s scent can’t be changed with a disguise artifact?”

 “Yes.”

Suddenly, I had an idea.

“Miao!”

As I thought about Shuding, a cat with a proud and elegant face popped out from my shadow.

It was the familiar left by Idelbert, Shuding.

This feline form could enter and exit the shadows at whim.

“What, what⋯ in the shadows⋯”

A dumbfounded Gelsia glared at Shuding, but Shuding paid no attention and rubbed her face against my helmet.

Ever since Idelbert left Shuding in my care and went to the Labyrinth, I took her out often, fed her, trained her, played with her, and she quickly bonded with me.

She even understands me now.

“Shuding, do you know what green apple scent smells like?”

The scent of the wine is like a green apple and after hiding in the oak barrels that held it for days, the scent must have permeated their bodies.

“Meow-”

Smart Shuding nodded quickly.

“If there's anyone around here who has a strong green apple scent, and who has a bit of a rough or cheap vibe, can you come to me and let me know?”

“Miao-”

Shuding immediately nodded, though the order was probably too complicated and difficult for a mere cat.

“Right, right. Good job. Let’s go!”

“Meow?!!”

When she was praised and spanked on the buttocks, Shuding was startled and her tail stood up and her body flinched.

“Myaooooong⋯”

Exhaling a sticky breath, Shuding began to stagger around the academy grounds, climbing the buildings with a shuffling gait.

It was now less than two hours until the dinner party started.

I finished talking to Assistant Gelsia and headed to the ballroom.

The ballroom was a stunning building, even for my not-so-aesthetic eyes.

As I walked through the wide open doors, I was greeted by colorful chandeliers and long tables piled high with food.

“Haha. Mr. Jayden. Long time no see. How's business?”

“Well, my son was recommended as a vassal of the Copson family.”

 “Oh, look who it is, Professor Mankostil!”

It was still before opening time, and there were men in suits and women in dresses, each with a glass of champagne in their hand, chatting away.

There were a few professors among them.

‘They're all old.’

I apologize for being so direct, but there was no hiding the truth.

Most of the people here are mothers or fathers of children.

They're at the age when wrinkles start to appear on their skin but it wasn't just old people.

“Do you feel sorry for me?”

“Aaaargh! Failed! Virgin confirmed!!...But I guess that’s to be expected since they’re my parents?”

“Crazy bitch⋯ how could she do that in a place like this⋯”

“For her graduation project, she developed a virgin identification magic that can even see how many times she's mated. That's going to sell like hotcakes.”

Graduates who had just shed their student t-shirts were milling around in their own attire.

I glanced around.

Diana and Ellie hadn't arrived yet.

“Heh! Look who it is, I haven't seen you in a while.”

I turned at the sound of a voice beside me and saw an elderly woman with wrinkles on her face looking up at me.

“Professor Mankostil? Long time no see.”

Professor Mankostil, the same face from my last escort assignment, smirked at me.

“How long has it been since I've seen you, and you're stronger than ever?”

“Haha. You flatter me.”

“I'm not. You must be quite entertaining to watch, eh, if only you had more magic.”

Professor Mankostil left it at that and laughed hysterically.

I laughed, too, sweating profusely.

If I had a talent for magic, I would have been Gelsia or Reichem No. 2.

I was terrified to think of the possibilities of my future as a graduate student.

“That offer still stands.”

Professor Mankostil brought up the offer she had made the last time they parted ways.

-If you want to learn magic professionally, you can always come to me.

I had reserved that offer at the time.

I'm interested in magic, but it's too inefficient to delve into the subject in earnest now.

I'd rather find a mage I can trust.

“Haha⋯ I appreciate the offer, but I'll have to think about it a bit more.”

“Good. The door to learning is always open, and you're still young enough that you should learn more while you can.”

I chatted with Professor Mankostil for a moment and looked around.

“⋯What’s with that guy? Professor Mankostil with that kind smile⋯”

“If the professor is evaluating him like that, then I guess his skills are pretty good?”

 “That helmet? No way. Is that the carriage I saw at the front gate?”

So many different reactions, so many different eyes.

“Professor. Excuse me.”

“Okay. Okay. Got it.”

 As if reading my mood, Professor Mankostil tapped the floor with her cane.

A shallow wave of magic enveloped me and Professor Mankostil.

“Hut! Where's the Professor?”

“I don't know, did she disappear? Did she disappear with the man?”

The group around the professor scattered in panic.

“Silence and invisibility spells. No one can hear us, no one can see us. Oh, and don't move. It's a simple spell, and if you move, it will break. So, what do you have to say?”

As expected of a professor, she was quick to recognize.

‘It seems like she has a connection with Diana, and she is someone who entered the 8th floor of the labyrinth alone for the students, so she is trustworthy.’

I quickly explained the situation.

The outlaws had infiltrated the academy and were trying to kidnap students.

“Hmmm. We'll have to stop them from leaving, then. We'll have to rally the scattered teaching assistants and guards.”

As soon as Professor Mankostil heard me, she suggested the next move.

“⋯You believe me?”

“What's not to believe? You risked your life protecting my students from a mutated minotaur, and I don't think you'd deliberately lie to me.”

My head snapped up as if I've been hit with a punch to the gut.

“Even if you did lie to me, it wouldn't matter much, because you'd have been incapable of lying for the rest of your life.”

Professor Mankostil smiled, her forehead full of wrinkles, and a chill ran down my spine.

“That's not going to happen.”

“So, what do you want me to do, and from the way you've been talking, I'm guessing you have something in mind?”

“We must stop the banquet immediately and use the disguise artifact to weed out the outlaws who have infiltrated the banquet hall before they kidnap the students and leave.”

 At my words, Professor Mankostil frowned.

“I'm afraid that's not possible. It's beyond my jurisdiction, and even if I could talk to the Dean, she'd refuse, the old woman's so stuck up she can't be guided. She's not about to show the Academy's weaknesses in front of the Second Princess.”

I questioned Professor Mangosteel's words for a moment.

“You mean the 2nd Princess?”

“Yes. The 2nd Princess is attending the dinner party tonight. The Dean is hell-bent on making the party perfect at all costs, so she won't even mention stopping the banquet.”

In short, she wants the event to go off without too much fuss and without offending anyone in high places.

“⋯That won't work, will it?”

“Yes. To prevent kidnapping, there will inevitably be a disturbance. But we can keep the noise down. Do you have any means of filtering out the outlaws?”

“Not all ten, but I can weed out about seven of them.”

“That's good enough for me. Do you think you could help me with that?”

“Sure.”

I didn't want any harm to come to the students or Ellie, and most of all.

‘This is my chance.’

This was my chance to make the professor and the Academy owe me big debt, which would help me immensely in the future.

I had gotten myself into a lot of trouble, but the prospect of a reward was invigorating.

Professor Mankostil’s wand gathered energy.

As the magic from the staff touched my body, a huge and strange flow of magic enveloped my body.

“Hmm. It's been a while since I've used magic, so it's a bit too much⋯”

“What is this?”

“It's the magic I just used. It's a silence and invisibility spell, but I put a little too much energy into it, so it should last for at least two months.”

What, crazy?

“You're telling me I'm going to be invisible for two months?!”

“No, no. You can remove it at any time at your will. Well, consider it a temporary blessing.”

I hope that Professor Mangosteel's words are right.

“Ugh…! What, what’s going on all of a sudden?!”

The graduating student who was walking around the room stumbled back in surprise at my sudden appearance and wine spilled all over her dress.

Upon closer inspection, I saw that it was the punk graduate who had been gossiping about Ellie and my feelings of guilt immediately disappeared.

I stared down at the asshole for a moment before turning away.

“What, what was that? I swear, there was a person just now⋯?”

“Keep your eyes open. You know where you are. Always be on your guard.”

“No, Mom. There really was!”

“Stupid!!!”

Sure enough, there was a person right in front of her, and then he was gone, leaving only the victim dumbfounded.

“⋯That's a lot of magic.”

“With a little more effort, you can now move a few steps in a transparent state. However, be careful, because if you make any sudden movements, the effect will be released immediately. Those with excellent senses may notice.”

For all of its drawbacks, it was a great spell and now I had the blessing of stealth for two months.

‘You really made a mistake when using such sophisticated magic?’

It couldn't be.

My opponent was not a mere academy student, and a professor-level mage would make such a mistake.

This was a reward of sorts, a handout from Professor Mankostil herself.

“Now we can be quiet about this. I will certainly repay you for your help with the Academy. I'll do what I can to make sure the saboteurs don't get away with it.”

“If the outlaws do withdraw, they'll be riding in Assistant Gelsia's carriage.”

“⋯She's a good girl, how could she do this?”

Professor Mankostil seemed to realize that my short comment had revealed that Gelsia had been an informant.

I leaned down, leaving Professor Mankostil smiling bitterly.

“Miao-”

I hadn't even removed my invisibility before Shuding was crying at my feet.

“Did you find the target?”

“Miao!”

“Good.”

As I patted its round black fur-covered buttocks, the black cat's tail wagged uncontrollably.

Obviously, my first impression was of an aggressive, edgy animal, but here she was, a pure pet.

I followed Shuding, who was walking in front of me with excitement, to an eerie balcony on the fourth floor of the ballroom.

“Uu...”

“Ugh. This guy is so drunk, he can't even speak properly. He's a fresh graduate.”

“He's just asking to be fucked. Bitch. Fuck.”

Two women in suits were harassing a drunken, half-masked male graduate who could barely control himself.

Up to this point, the scene was familiar enough to be seen on the street.

It's an aristocratic area, but aristocrats are no different, and what they do when they're drunk and horny is similar.

No, maybe they had harder and more eccentric tastes than everyone else because they were noble but the women before you were not of high standing.

Rather, the very bottom of the Labyrinth City.

“Hah. I want to have my way with him right now, but I have to put up with this.”

“Just a little longer. When this is all over, I'll have enough money to hug these bastards until I'm sick of them. Isn't that what sister said?”

“Yeah. I have to endure it. But Sister is really bold. Even if she needs a slave who can handle magic, how can she raid the academy?”

 “I don't know exactly, but it's not like she's dealing with a slave trade⋯no, I mean, it's not a normal organization. There must be a reason.”

It was a line that made me cringe.

[Kepson Zillier LV.25]

[◆Curse of the 4112th Puppet]

[Valterri LV.27]

[◆Curse of the 3812th Puppet]

Their names matched the ones assistant Gelsia told me, along with the bizarre curse that seems to be a given.

I've cross-checked with the status window, so it's a sure thing that those two are outlaws from Clan Blues.

I cast the invisibility spell and placed my hands on the skulls of two women who hadn't even noticed my presence when I walked right up to them.

I grabbed one by the hair with my left hand and the other with my right.

“⋯whoa?”

“What, like someone's stroking my head-”

-Bam!

There was a crunching sound as the two women's skulls slammed together.

“Grrrr-”

Both of them were foaming at the mouth. They weren't dead, but they would probably retire for the night.

 Covering the man's drunken, passed-out eyes, I pinned the two outlaws down and muttered.

“This is the taste of assassination.”

Eight prey left.