**Chapter 110: Graduation Ceremony (6)**

After Balkan's conversation with Professor Mankostil.

With Diana's help, Ellie changed her dress and set her hair, then rode in the carriage to the ballroom.

“Hoo-hoo.”

“⋯? What's wrong?”

Ellie shook her head as she saw Diana smiling faintly at her from inside the carriage.

“No. It's just that⋯ not too long ago, I never imagined us together like this- I wanted to.”

“⋯Ah⋯”

A few months ago, before their meeting with Balkan and their conversation, there was an invisible wall between Ellie and Diana.

Not being together, the physical distance, the lack of communication.

No, this was just an excuse.

Even if they had been together, they wouldn't have been able to communicate properly.

The conflict between them was a combination of Diana's inexperience as a parent and Ellie's lack of understanding of adolescence.

However, there was one person who stood between the two and filled in the gaps.

He provided an opportunity for mother and daughter to talk, and gave them the courage to try to talk by pushing them on their backs.

If it weren't for him, there would be no awkward laughter in the carriage at this moment.

“Let's keep it pure today.”

“⋯Yes.”

Ellie smiled and nodded, though she doubted she could enjoy a social party like this innocently.

“Oh my! Miss Ellie?! You look so beautiful today! When your elven blood is like this-”

“They say clothes are like wings, and they’re made of Arachne silk? Oh my, even I have a hard time finding this. Such a luxurious item—”

As soon as she entered the ballroom, people recognized her. Most of them were teaching assistants or professors.

Their gazes went straight to her side.

The teaching assistants gave her a curious glance, but the professors noticed her presence.

She looked and felt different, but the professors could instinctively sense the aura underneath.

“Are you Diana Ordia?”

“Fu, you've changed a lot, haha.”

“Oh my, I'm Arpo, the Labyrinth Ecologist! Miss Ellie's academic talent is nothing short of genius-”

“Well, more than that. We've been conducting research on the strange phenomena that have been occurring in the Labyrinth lately, and I was wondering if you, Ordia, might be able to help us find some prey-”

They surrounded Diana like a school of ravenous piranhas upon discovering their prey.

Ellie was quickly pushed aside.

They didn't even pay attention to Ellie beside her, their eyes fixed on Diana.

“Ellie. Why don't you go enjoy yourself first?”

Diana beckoned as she was swept away by a wave of questions, so Ellie smiled bitterly and nodded.

Despite her smile, something bad was brewing inside her.

It was a feeling called jealousy and inferiority.

These vile feelings had been eating away at Ellie's heart for the entirety of her time at the Academy.

“⋯But, ⋯now, ⋯it's okay.”

And yet, it was okay.

-Come on, Ellie!!! You can do it!!!

I still couldn't get over that loud voice in the auditorium.

Soon after I heard it⋯and honestly, I still feel insanely embarrassed when I think about it.

His cry, which went beyond reaching her ears and penetrated deep into her heart, definitely changed Ellie.

In retrospect, it always had.

He recognized her as a wizard in her own right, and gave her the human encouragement that she could do it this time.

Maybe it was because of him.

“Wooo.”

In one breath, Ellie emptied the bad feelings that had been simmering inside her.

Her eyes widened.

Taking a glass of wine from a busy server, she moistened her red lips and looked around the ballroom.

The only way to resolve these feelings is to meet the man who had already taken a firm hold on her heart.

“Speaking of which, Ellie, you're a half-elf. Is there a male elf inside that helm?”

“Well, I don't know about that⋯”

“But those muscles⋯ don't you think that's impossible with an elf's body?”

“Yeah⋯ I honestly felt my uterus flutter just looking at them⋯”

Very few people knew that Ellie was an adopted child.

Ellie pushed her way through the crowd of speculation to find Balkan.

“⋯Mister. I don't see you.’

Ellie's elven ears perked up and she scanned the ballroom, but Balkan was nowhere to be seen.

Sullenly, Ellie headed for the balcony to calm her nerves.

“Huh.”

The wine washed down her throat, giving her a fuzzy feeling.

As much as she hated to admit it, Ellie was too weak to alcohol.

As she sipped her wine and watched the night sky turn black, she felt relaxed.

Then.

“Sis. Something's wrong. I haven't seen any of the clan members in the banquet hall before.”

Along with the sound of unfamiliar footsteps, a sullen voice that sounded like it shouldn't be there came from the balcony next door.

“What was that?”

“I'm telling you. We were supposed to have at least one person on each floor of the ballroom⋯now, there's no one in sight except us.”

“You mean the plan was discovered?”

“I think the information must have leaked out somewhere. We got Assistant Gelsia's parents, so that's unlikely, but maybe the combatants were distracted and someone overheard them and reported it⋯ at this rate, we're going to be caught⋯”

“Holy shit!”

Thump!

“Hmph!”

The sound of a violent slamming against the wall startled Ellie, and he quickly crouched down, holding her breath.

The drunkenness flew away in an instant.

“⋯⋯”

“⋯⋯”

The shouting from the neighboring balcony diminished rapidly.

There was nothing but silence but Ellie soon heard the sound of footsteps.

Ellie's sensitive elven ears recognized the sound of the steps pounding with malice clearly.

She ducked her head in an unknown anxiety, and instinctively began to gather magic in her hands but the time was too short and a black shoe came into view as she stared at the floor.

“There's a rat hiding.”

She tried to unleash her unfinished magic.

-Woof!

The magic scattered as it touched the pitch-black orb the woman in the suit had taken out.

Ellie doubted her eyes. What the hell was that?

A strange resistance to magic, like she'd felt when she'd faced the dark, mutated minotaur in the Labyrinth.

It was impenetrable unless she really concentrated.

“What the⋯⋯!”

Ellie was immediately grabbed by the throat and lifted up.

“Kolok, Keuhuk⋯”

It was a force that Ellie, who was far from strong due to her studies, couldn't even resist.

As she was grabbed by the neck with such force, her consciousness gradually faded.

“Red hair⋯ Red eyes⋯ Elven ears⋯ Could it be Ellie Ordia, the valedictorian?”

Beside Vesta, who was dressed in a suit, were two more women.

Dray, an officer of Clan Blues, and Kalino, an orc who also went by the name of Iron Ingot.

“Sister. Are you sure? It's Ordia. If you do anything wrong, they'll kill you.”

Vesta pondered as she listened to Dray and Kalino's conflicting voices.

Over the years I have been dealing with [them]⋯ [the devil worshippers] and have offered up over a hundred slaves so far.

 If we fail to meet the deadline for slave delivery, we will be judged to have broken our contract and exterminated.

'If we can make this payment, our dealings with the devil worshippers will be over. Then, this [orb] will be all mine.’

This [orb] was obtained after a long and arduous struggle with such great risk allows me to control trace amounts of Magi.

Now that the Academy knows about them, everything she'd built up would be for naught, but she didn't care.

'If I can get my hands on this orb in its entirety, I can soar higher and more spectacularly than ever before.’

It might not be a bad choice to abandon life in the labyrinth city and head to Eden on the 15th floor, a land of new beginnings and a place where all kinds of people gather, with a few executives.

Vesta's gaze shifted to Ellie.

‘Offering her will not only pay off the debt, but I'll also get an additional orb. A much more valuable orb than the one I’m borrowing!’

A common slave, or even hundreds of Academy students combined, would be worth less than Ellie herself.

The risks were frightening, but the rewards were even greater.

One must have the temperament of a gambler to rise to great heights.

 “Don't resist if you don't want to get hurt.”

-Squeak!

Vesta grinned wryly and tightened her grip.

“Kwak, kolok!”

Tears welled in Ellie's eyes and streaked down her beautiful face.

She had never been choked so hard in her life. It was so painful, and her consciousness faded into a blur.

Every time she woke up after that, her vision changed.

One moment she was in the sky, the next she was on the street, and now she was in a carriage.

“Ooooo-”

The words didn't come out right and before she knew it, she was tied up in some sort of rope.

Ellie kept her mind and body calm, though she was terrified at the danger she had never experienced before.

She tried to gather enough energy to remain undetected, but Dray, who had been clinging to her side and watching her closely, repeatedly stopped her.

“Stay down, bitch!”

Bam!

Ellie's head snapped back with a dull pain as her last ditch effort had failed.

Ellie stared blankly into the dark sky from the covered wagon's luggage compartment.

‘Was I dreaming?

She'd been so happy just a moment ago, and now she'd been plunged into a downward spiral.

The dress her adoptive mother had bought her for this day was stained with dust and dirt, and her makeup and hair were already a mess.

But this wasn't the end, this was just the beginning.

‘⋯This is the worst.’

If only it were a dream, a terrible nightmare.

She had already fallen asleep drunk on wine, and was lying in her soft bed, having a bad dream.

 “Gelsia, what's wrong, let's get going!”

“Oh, we can't leave yet, there's something seriously wrong with the carriage!”

“You fucking bitch! What the hell are you talking about when the carriage it’s perfectly fine?”

 “Give me a little more time⋯”

“We don't have time to hang around, they'll notice and catch up to us if we're any slower! We've got to get out of here as soon as we can. Don't you ever want to see your father?"

“⋯This shit! There's a limit to how far you can go with my parents! Firebo-crack!”

-Pfft! Pfft!

The sound of harsh words and punching from the curtained-off coachman's seat beyond the carriage reminded me that this was real.

-Thud.

After a few moments of commotion, the carriage began to roll slowly.

“Don't be so pathetic. I've seen a lot of slaves in my time, and even if they're a bitch at first, they get used to it after a few years.”

Dray, who was trampling Ellie's stomach with her heel, laughed croakily, like a teacher giving a poor lesson.

Ellie cringed at the words.

A future of slavery?

She could never live like that. She had to resist.

She had to resist with all the magic she could muster.

Somehow, the tears wouldn't stop.

The faces of the people I wanted to see flashed in my mind.

My real parents, who died while exploring the Labyrinth, my adoptive mother, who took care of me like a real parent, even though we had arguments during my adolescence and him, who recognized me as a wizard in my own right.

Who told me I was needed, who told me to be brave⋯

“Mr. Balkan⋯”

“Dray-!”

A desperate voice came from the back of the wagon.

The wagon had started to roll, and someone was running after it.

“Is that your voice, Valterri?! You've been discovered, haven't you?”

“No, I just happened to see you kidnapping Ellie Ordia, so I ran full speed to catch up with you.”

“Ha. Fuck. Well, that's a good thing, I could use another combatant just in case, but what the hell?”

Dray greeted the woman, Valterri, with a familiar face.

It was as if they had always known each other.

Ellie's eyes flickered as she watched Valterri climb into the wagon, taking Dray's outstretched hand.

There were more people, which meant even less chance of escape.

Ellie stared at Valterri in disbelief.

“But when I lifted you earlier, I saw that your hands were… Were they always this muscular? Is it because you’re tall? And they’re also incredibly heavy? Tsk. I can’t tell because of the disguise artifact.”

 “Haha. Is that so?”

“Uhh. Well, since you're here, I'll have to check with sister first⋯ Wait.”

Pausing for a moment, Dray looked at the axe strapped to Valterri's waist and asked.

“Where did you get that axe?”

“Oh. You mean this?”

At that, Valterri casually grasped the handle of the axe and slowly drew it out.

She gently stepped her right foot out in time with the carriage's vibrations.

The axe swung sharply, as if she were demonstrating footwork but behind the all-too-natural motion Dray's throat dropped.

“I brought an axe from the garden, just in case. Don't you think it's a good one for dealing with scum?”

“Ehhh?”

Ellie let out a stupid groan and stared at the unreal thing that had happened in front of her.

A woman's head had fallen off.

In the midst of the unreality of the kidnapping, her thoughts naturally shut down as she faced something even more unreal.

Ellie's eyes naturally turned to the one who had done this.

She naturally walked over to her and broke her bindings with the blade of the axe.

“⋯⋯”

Ellie was too panicked to speak.

When I saw her face, a mixture of tear-stained makeup and embarrassment, I smiled bitterly and removed the brooch from my chest.

Then the female form vanished in a flurry of color, revealing the big, muscular body Ellie had imagined every night.

Beneath the half-mask was the unfamiliar face.

She'd called him “mister” every day, so she'd expected a face full of scars and beard; however he was cleaner and stranger than she expected, but she had no trouble recognizing him.

“I've come to save you. Ellie.”

The familiar voice penetrated Ellie's mind.