**Chapter 112: Graduation Ceremony (8)**

“⋯Oppa.”

“Uh.”

“Hmph. Mister.”

“Yeah.”

“Oppa.”

“⋯That's enough.”

“Heehee.”

The elf's reddened ears twitched.

Had she recovered?

Ellie had brightened noticeably since I gave her permission. A level of euphoria I've never seen before.

'We still don't see each other much, though⋯'

Anyway, Now I'm exhausted.

It wasn't even barley barley rice, but the oppa oppa mister combo that lasted over twenty minutes made me dizzy.

Luckily, it wasn't long before Professor Mankostil approached from the front door.

She grabbed assistant Gelsia's by the scruff of the head and strode toward us.

“Off, off! I'm sorry, Professor-!”

“Don't apologize. If you're sorry, you'll be a research slave in the Academy's underground labs for twenty years or so. You'll serve your time, be reformed, and go on to be a good person.”

Gelsia's attention was taken away by Professor Mankostil's words. Her shrunken form looked like she had fainted.

From the looks of it, the case was over for them as well.

“Good work, Professor. Have you captured Vesta? The outlaws in the ballroom have been rounded up and held in two locations.”

“⋯Who are you?”

I wondered if the old woman had presbyopia.

Professor Mankostil frowned at me for speaking.

‘Ah. Mask.’

Professor Mankostil only knows me in my helmet but now I was helmetless and barefaced, my half-mask broken.

The same bare face I'd only shown to the armored knight, Diana, and now Ellie since my trip to this world.

“Professor. It's me. Balkan.”

“⋯⋯⋯Ah. You are? Heh heh heh!”

Professor Mankostil scrutinized my face for a long moment, and then smirked.

“Oh my, I didn’t recognize you! Balkan, thank you for your hard work and for doing this old woman a favor.”

Professor Mankostil, who recognized me, smiled and thanked me.

Apparently, the dean's preoccupation with welcoming the second princess had prevented her from publicizing the outlaw raid, and she felt guilty for asking me for help.

It was a good thing I did. For Professor Mankostil now owes me a debt of gratitude.

I don't know about the other professors, but from what I've seen of her, Professor Mankostil is a decent woman. She really cares about her students.

She was an explorer herself, so she might know something about portals and labyrinths, and if I asked her nicely, she might be able to help Ellie with her portal research.

'The results are too good for the effort.’

Just knowing that I might be able to get help from a professor someday is a huge benefit.

Still, I shouldn't make too much of this.

“No. Why wouldn't I want to help catch criminals who prey on students?”

“You speak beautifully, and I'll send you a reward as soon as we're done. You're an explorer, so you'll want something to help you explore the Labyrinth, right?”

Professor Mankostil smirked and offered an additional reward. A large barrel, indeed. It was worth the trouble.

‘Anything you can give me will be gratefully accepted.’

“But more than that, my granddaughter is very nice, would you like to meet her?”

“⋯Yes?”

I stared at Professor Mankostil, dumbfounded by the suddenness of the arrangement.

Professor Mankostil looked rather excited.

“She’s a bit of a slacker, you know. She needs a man who can hold her tight and keep her in check. Besides, I heard she’s been running around the labyrinth with the maid these days. I’m sure it’ll be a good meeting–”

“Oh, that, that⋯!”

Ellie, who had been quietly listening to my conversation with Professor Mankostil, rushed in.

“Gyo, professor, that's a ⋯!”

“⋯Aigo. Didn't you already have someone?”

“Oh, no⋯not exactly⋯not yet, not yet⋯!”

Ellie stomped her feet, not knowing what to do.

Professor Mankostil smiled and took a step back.

“Well. I see. Now, to get back to the point, I did catch the outlaw leader. But she's got some troublesome people involved.”

“You got her⋯?”

Something didn't sound right. Shouldn't you just say you caught her?

And troublesome people? Who are you talking about?

“⋯This is not the time to talk about it, so let's talk about it after the party.”

Professor Mankostil trailed off, hinting at a later date and I nodded.

“Ah, the party!”

Ellie's eyes snapped back to her body.

Her hair was a mess. Her dress soiled. Her makeup smeared with tears. And the dark marks of her nosebleed.

She was in no shape to be attending a party.

Ellie's eyes were filled with sadness. The elf's ears drooped.

“Don't worry too much.”

-Thump.

Professor Mankostil struck the floor with her staff, and a strange bolt of magic shot through Ellie and me.

Our wild hair was tidied up, the dust from our dresses and suits brushed off.

Smudged makeup and nosebleeds were removed and replaced with fresh makeup.

“Wow!”

“It’s beauty magic. It’s pretty useful. ⋯There’s a minor problem with the ‘beautification’ effect all the way down, though.”

“Eh⋯?”

Ellie, who had been idly admiring the professor's magic, blushed and rushed over to him, whispering in her ear.

“Oh, the bottom ‘beauty’. Professor⋯?!!”

“Uh-huh.”

Professor Mankostil avoided Ellie's gaze.

I sneaked back, unbuckled my belt, and looked down.

Sure enough, it had been 'beautified'.

“Balkan, you can wear this. It's a little dangerous with your light makeup. I can't have you leading innocent graduates into false hopes.”

“Thank you.”

I took the white half-mask the professor handed me and put it on. The material was quite good.

“⋯Phew.”

Ellie, who had been squinting at me, looked straight at me.

“What's with the sigh?”

“It's just that I don't have enough tolerance yet, so ⋯ oh, it's nothing!”

Ellie said and stared at my half-masked face.

“Heehee⋯”

Then I giggle to myself.

Yuck.

“⋯!”

I take off the half-mask, and she stares again, averting her gaze. Her hesitation was a bonus.

I smiled bitterly and put the half-mask back on.

Diana too, this mother and daughter. Every time they see my bare face, their reactions are strange.

“Kekekeke… It’s like seeing my youth. Well then. Enjoy the party. Young people…”

Professor Mankostil touches Ellie with her wand, and her body tingles.

The magic of flight, as they say. We flew toward the banquet hall at high speed.

“Uhhhhhhhhh!”

An embarrassed Ellie pressed down firmly on the high collar of her floating dress to hold it down.

She seemed to care about the lower part that had been 'beautified'.

I turned to Professor Mankostil to express my gratitude.

“Professor-”

“If she grows up well, my granddaughter would make a fine concubine… Heh heh. She’s becoming quite a tempting talent.”

“⋯?”

Swallowing hard, Professor Mankostil waved us off.

I nodded my thanks, then turned away again as a chill ran down my spine.

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“It's magic to detect virginity. We developed it. Of course, you can see the number of times they’ve copulated, right? Of course, you can also see if they’re virgins! We still need to improve it, but the number of times they ejaculated and the amount of ejaculation will come out as statistics⋯”

“Bitch!!! Who are you trying to use such crude magic in front of!!!”

“Tsk, academy graduates these days don't even have the basics!”

“That's right! ⋯Student, buy that magic later⋯”

“Hmph. Me too⋯ actually, I've been wondering about the circumstances of my husband's affair lately⋯”

Diana was unable to escape the baptism of questions.

Nobles trying to get their faces on somehow, professors wanting her to take an interest in their research, and teaching assistants and graduates demonstrating magic that was a bit dizzying.

At first, they were reasonable, but after almost an hour of this, her head started to spin.

Diana, who had somehow created an excuse to get out, smiled bitterly and left.

“Woohoo.”

The wine washed down her throat and she felt calmer.

‘Is Balkan having a good time? And Ellie?’

Diana’s mind filled with the two people she'd been thinking about the most lately.

It was the first time they'd both been to a social party like this, and she wanted them to come away with something, whether it was information or connections.

Of course, having fun and making memories had to be the top priority.

Diana scanned her surroundings, trying to locate them.

She looked around the ballroom, but there was no sign of them.

‘⋯Why can't I see them⋯?’

Just as Diana was asking herself this little question, she spotted Ellie and Balkan coming in from outside the ballroom, arm in arm.

“⋯Eh?”

For a moment, her voice was filled with panic, but she quickly calmed down.

An escort like that was natural for an intimate relationship, and maybe Ellie had asked for it.

But there was something else that stood out.

‘⋯Half-masked?’

Balkan was wearing a half-mask, unlike when he came to the graduation ceremony.

“⋯with⋯no, that's⋯heh⋯”

“Wait, I suddenly feel weird in my lower stomach⋯ it keeps thumping⋯”

“This is not supposed to happen⋯ I have a husband who promised to be with me for the rest of my life⋯”

“Who is that person? Isn’t that girl next to him Ellie?”

“⋯Kidnapping. No, no⋯ Endure⋯ No rape⋯ Endure rape⋯”

From a corner of the tumultuous ballroom, Balkan made his way to the balcony, ravaging the innocent wombs of the graduates and noblewomen whose gazes he met.

In an instant, the freed females tried to reach him, but Ellie, her arms crossed beside him, held them back with a wide-eyed growl.

‘There you go! Ellie, stay on top of Balkan!’

For a moment, she clapped her hands at Ellie's dazzling performance.

Diana realized that Ellie's hair had been styled much differently than she had done for her.

Her dress, which had been neatly arranged, was also floating slightly, as if it had been caught in something rough.

The same was true of Balkan. His blazer was untucked, and his tie was slightly loose as if he had changed his clothes in a hurry.

‘⋯What the hell?’

For some reason, I remembered my daughter looking at Balkan with a strange look in her eyes.

“Student.”

“Whoa, whoa, whoa! Dee, dia-dia-ooo!”

“Don't make a fuss⋯!”

Diana immediately walked over to the student, who was shoved into the corner of the ballroom, and covered her mouth.

It was a female student who had developed a bizarre magic called the virgin virginity discrimination magic.

“Student magic, I'll take it.”

Diana opened her purse, mesmerized.

Her pride as the first woman of Balkan, and her responsibility as the parent of a child, set off alarm bells.

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Fourth floor of the ballroom. The balcony where I hid my helmet.

It had been quiet before the banquet began, but now there was quite a bit of foot traffic.

“Oppa. Here's some wine.”

“Uh-oh. Thank you.”

“Hee-hee.”

Ellie accepted the wine in a champagne flute from the server and handed me a glass.

I'm still not used to being called oppa, but I don't feel bad about it.

Honestly, I've always resented being called Mister, even though we're a few years apart in age.

As I reached for my helmet, Ellie tugged gently at the cuff of my suit sleeve.

“Uh, oppa. ⋯I need to talk to you.”

I'd had a lot of conversations with Ellie on the way here. But she'd never been so cautious.

“Well, I don't want to say it in front of everyone.”

“Well, why don't we go to the terrace?”

“Sure.”

We headed to the terrace, away from the prying eyes.

‘Is that what she was going to say in the auditorium?’

Now that I think about it, even then she was very cautious, unlike Ellie.

I looked over at Ellie, who was looking at me hesitantly, guessing it was advice on career, family, or my relationship with Diana.

“⋯⋯”

“What do you want to talk about?”

“⋯⋯⋯”

To tell or not to tell.

After a long moment of hesitation, Ellie downed the wine in his champagne flute in one gulp.

-Gulp. Gulp.

The white throat moved, and Ellie's alcohol-addled face flushed.

Her hand trembled as she gripped the glass tightly.

“Hey.”

“Yeah.”

“So, be honest. I really need you to be honest with me, for the sake of our future, because it's really important.”

“⋯Uh, okay.”

Her eyes were more serious than I expected, and a possibility suddenly dawned on me.

Ellie's gaze had always been strangely following me.

The way she'd always been suspiciously close to me.

Crucially, this time I was with Ellie and saw what she had seen.

'No way. Ellie⋯me?'

Seeing her as a human female and a member of the opposite sex, rather than a benefactor's cute daughter, it was a very real possibility.

Suddenly, sweat dripped from my hands like rain. I swallowed hard.

“Oppa.”

I don't know if it's the moonlight or the beauty magic makeup.

As a half-elf, she was always beautiful, but tonight, Ellie looked even more so.

Her lips, red as a red peach, parted cautiously.

“⋯You had sex with my adoptive mother⋯ right?”

⋯Huh?