**Chapter 66: Catch Them (4)**

I woke up at dawn, before the early bird and began preparing for the day.

I carefully stretched the joints and muscles that would suffer for the next few weeks, scrubbed myself down with lukewarm water, and washed my face.

It was a luxury I wouldn't have for a while.

After a quick routine, I checked my equipment one last time. It's an important task that never gets old.

The opening of the helmet that Zirnier had fixed opened and closed smoothly without creaking.

I could now eat while wearing the helmet. This was very positive news.

The eye sockets were slightly wider, which made it much easier to see.

Other than that, it's been touched up with dings, scratches, rust, and grime from its long, rough ride.

It was Zernier, the best craftsman in the Labyrinth City, and she didn't miss a single detail.

‘And most of all⋯ this axe.’

It's different from the way it feels in my hand. The leather wrapped around the handle is well-made and the finish could not be better.

The blade, forged from a relic alloy, glowed a brilliant blue. It could easily cut through the tough hide of a minotaur.

'Furthermore, the artifact is enchanted with the soul stone of the Boss Minotaur⋯'

I don't need to say much more about its performance. I’ve gotten myself a tremendous weapon that can be used in the mid-tier.

However, the design is not as refined as the axe that Idelbert gave me.

It's crude to say the least, a raw axe that reeked of iron.

‘You have good taste.’

-It's a masterpiece. I haven't had so much fun making weapons in a long time.

I remembered Zirnier leaving with a smirk on her face, clutching the flask of dwarven brew she'd bought from Diana.

"I'll put it to good use."

I strap the twin axes to my waist, checking them in the mirror, and they tickle me a bit.

Next, I took the leather armor Diana had given me and added gaiters and limb guards.

All of my decent gear from the last battle with the minotaurs was ruined, so I replaced it with some crappy stuff.

It was about 80 silver coins but I got the most advanced gear I could afford for a beginner explorer. Armor can mean the difference between life and death.

‘When I didn't have the money for better gear, I could get by with the helmet, but not anymore.’

Every time I looked at my money pouch, I felt calmer.

I stashed the rest of the money under my bed and left the room with a backpack full of food and other supplies.

I came downstairs to the savory aroma wafting from the kitchen, and Diana poked her head out of the kitchen as soon as she heard my footsteps.

"Morning. Balkan."

"Good morning, Diana."

I thought I was up pretty early, but Diana was awake much earlier than I was today.

We had our usual morning chats and prepared an early breakfast.

Since I’m going to the labyrinth so early, I wanted to make sure I had a full stomach.

"It's carrot stew for some reason."

"Yeah. I just thought I'd try it out for something new⋯ don't you like carrots?"

"I eat them."

Carrot soup or potato soup, it doesn't matter.

The important thing is that Diana made it early in the morning.

She ladles the soup into bowls and gathers the utensils.

"Go upstairs and eat first."

She probably said this because I always went up to my room to eat.

I chuckled and opened and closed the opening in my helmet.

"Now I don't have to go upstairs, we can eat at the table."

Diana's eyes narrowed at my words, then she smiled broadly.

"Well, are you sure that's okay⋯?"

"Sure. I wanted to share my first meal with you."

I remembered eating alone and lonely like a dog.

Farewell, old me. No more solo meals for me now that I've donned my new and improved helmet.

Diana stared at me blankly, then swallowed hard.

She quickly put another bowl of soup in front of her, looking quite impatient in case I changed my mind.

"Thank you," I said.

"Enjoy."

In the darkness of dawn, Diana and I sat across from each other at the table and ate an early breakfast, warm, creamy carrot-based soup and moist, soft bread.

The soup was nutritious and warm, and the bread was buttered and dipped into the soup.

Paaaaaaan-.

As Diana ate, she kept looking at me, munching away.

Her eyes are obviously closed, but it feels like she's staring right into my mouth.

The opening is not too big and not too small, as it's meant to hold food.

I thought to myself, "Maybe it's just my dirty lips.”

By the way, the reason she keep looking at it like that is because⋯

"Did I get soup on my helmet?"

"Huh? No⋯ ah⋯ yes. You did. Hold on, I'll wipe it off."

After saying no and then saying yes, Diana pulled out some tissues, stood up from the table, and leaned in close to me, bending her upper body slightly.

‘Wow.’

The baby mama dispenser, precariously wrapped in a gray dress, filled my vision.

I'm glad I'd widened my helmet field of vision. It was one of the best things I'd done in recent months.

The stimulating sight that greeted my eyes early in the morning was energizing in more ways than one.

"Mmm, It's all cleaned up now."

Then my heart sank.

Diana carefully gathered up the tissue she had used to wipe my helmet. Was she going to throw it in the kitchen trash later?

With that thought in mind, I finished the soup. It was so delicious that I wiped the bowl clean with my tongue.

It was a very satisfying meal, both gastronomically and visually.

I felt energized for the rest of the day.

"I'll help you with the dishes."

"No. You have to go early. Go ahead but remember to be careful and alert in the Labyrinth."

I offered to help her with the dishes, but she refused with both arms.

Instead, she told me she was worried about me.

My heart was instantly touched.

Every time I see Diana like this, I feel countless emotions.

As an orphan, I have never felt this way, but I wonder if this is how a son feels when he is worried by a loving mother.

At the same time as my heart soothed, an unknown impulse surged through me.

I reflexively open my arms wide and look at Diana.

Diana. Give me a hug.

She didn't speak, just stared, but as if reading my mind, the corners of her eyes fluttered open.

In the dark dawn, the air was still and cold.

Diana hesitated for a moment, looking around as if she were embarrassed, then swallowed hard and wrapped her arms around me.

"Huh."

I could feel Diana's breasts gently crushing against my thin, light leather armor. It's incredibly stimulating.

Slightly embarrassing, but more than that, it was incredibly motivating.

After feeling the hug without saying a word for a long time, I finally regained my senses and carefully pulled away from Diana.

"Huh."

She exhaled softly and gradually pulled away.

Her ears and cheeks were flushed red, which I thought was cute, given her normally relaxed expression.

"Bye, Diana."

"⋯Yes. Take care⋯Balkan."

I didn't want to leave, but I had a job to do.

Feeling the leather armor warmed by Diana's body heat, I headed for the labyrinth entrance.

\*\*\*

Diana watched Balkan recede into the distance, her heart sinking.

She still hadn't asked him today about his relationship with Zirnier, about his relationship with Idelbert and about his relationship with Ellie.

Zernier had explained that it was merely that of blacksmith and client.

Idelbert dismissed it as that of master and pupil.

His intentions, however, were less than flattering to Diana, who knew Idelbert curse.

More recently, Balkan had returned from training with handprints all over his body.

They were faint, but not so faint that Diana didn't notice.

'Those were definitely not handprints from dueling.’

It was a lustful handprint, the kind that only comes from sticky contact and most of all, his relationship with her daughter, Ellie.

'I'm the kind of person who slaps you until your ass hurts⋯'

It was an impure relationship that Diana's common sense wouldn't allow her to accept.

The knight's words about Balkan being Ellie's boyfriend kept replaying in her head.

At the same time, she remembered Ellie looking at Balkan with happy eyes.

A sigh escaped her lips as she felt a strange sensation.

Diana swallowed hard, feeling a stifling, mushy emotion she'd never felt before in her life.

She wanted to ask him about his relationship with them.

She wanted to ask him about them, about herself.

But inside, she felt a growing fear.

‘What if I'm just someone who feeds Balkan all the time?’

As she thought about it, a part of her ached like it was going to crumble.

Reflexively, she pressed her hand to her chest and felt something warm.

It was Balkan's body heat, the one she had just hugged so tightly.

At the realization, the tightness in her stomach eased slightly, and she smiled.

When she realized that it had been him, after all, she felt foolishly relieved, but only for a moment.

-Thud.

Just as Diana was about to rise from the table, a wad of tissues landed on the floor.

A tissue that, along with Balkan's helm⋯she had wiped the corner of his mouth so quickly that she hadn't even noticed.

-Thud.

Diana's body stiffened in shock.

-Pounding, pounding.

At the same time, her lower stomach clenched and quivered, and her body temperature began to rise slightly.

She hadn't been able to resolve the Curse of Decadence recently, and she was stressed out.

This meant that her libido had built up like crazy.

And now, just in time, Balkan had given her a heartfelt hug and left her with this.

Diana picked up the tissue, mesmerized, and looked up to the second floor.

‘⋯Balkan's room.’

Swallowing hard, Diana immediately shook her head.

She shouldn't have done it, and if she did it again, she would never be forgiven.

If she did, she'd regret it later. Right now, she’s in her right mind so she should hold back.

⋯she should hold back, but.

⋯⋯She needs to make sure Balkan has a clean, fluffy bed to sleep in when he comes back from the labyrinth.

She needs to clean it up.

With that thought, Diana opened the door.

It would be a long time before Balkan returned.