**Chapter 81: Drunken Jokes (3)**

Inside a quiet inn with no one around except a mother and daughter and me.

-POP!

A cheerful sound rang out as I popped the cork.

Dwarven liquor is one of the more expensive alcoholic beverages, so I hadn't opened it much, except for when I was at Zirnier's.

“Yuck.”

Eli frowned and covered her nose as she caught the scent of alcohol wafting through the air.

“It smells weird in here.”

“Smells weird?”

I ask, smirking at the cute reaction, and Eli bobs her head up and down.

It certainly does smell strong.

Dwarven brews are strong enough to get you drunk, and they don't have a pleasant aroma.

However, its hot, cool throat feel and addictive flavor make it a surprisingly popular drink.

‘It's also a favorite of the Zirnier.’

In short, it's a drink for sophisticates.

“It's a little hard for a kid to drink, isn't it?”

“Well, I'm an 'adult' now, so it's totally easy for me to drink! I'm a grown-up!”

Eli said with a lot of emphasis on the words 'adult' and 'grown-up'.

Even without emphasizing it, I can tell by looking at her body.

Her breasts are in the top 1 percent.

The fact that Ellie had an exceptionally nice body even among adult women capable of ovulating was painfully felt as I stamped compliments on her butt.

'Even against Diana, a walking sex machine, I'd say she'd win 3 out of 10 matches.'

I handed Diana the bottle.

“Mr. Diana, please pour Eli first. You know how they say you learn to lead from your parents?”

Diana looked a little surprised at that.

“Parents⋯”

After a moment's reflection on her mother's mission, Diana took the bottle.

“Eli.”

“⋯Yes!”

Eli raised the glass with a slightly nervous expression.

It was slightly larger than a soju glass, about the size of a straight shot glass.

A clear, watery liquid poured from the bottle, filling the glass about halfway.

As the glass filled, Eli's face became strangely tense.

Next, Eli, who received the bottle of wine from Diana, filled Diana's glass with wine as well, to the brim.

 “It's good to give a lot, right?”

“⋯”

I don't know much about liquor in this world.

Even when I worked in a bar, I was used to drinking beer on the rocks, but I've never seen anyone drink from a glass like this.

Zirnier always came in full glasses or bottles.

“⋯I'm fine.”

Diana didn't say anything, so it didn't seem to matter.

Now that their glasses were filled, it was my turn.

Without thinking, I raised my glass to Eli, who held the bottle.

“Sir, did you want me to pour you a drink?”

Eli asked, looking somewhat amused.

The grin made me feel weird. I quickly shifted my drink.

“Uh, Diana. I think your glass is a little too full, but let me ease it-”

And with that, Eli filled my glass.

For some reason, she looked even tenser and focused than when she took the drink from Diana.

I smiled bitterly as I watched the glass fill to the limit of surface tension.

All three glasses under one table were full.

The lineup of appetizers that Diana had prepared was also colorful.

“Congratulations on your return from the Labyrinth, Balkan and congratulations in advance on Eli’s graduation from the Academy.”

 “Cheers!”

With Diana's brief toast, a salty sound rang out.

It was the beginning of a full-blown drinking party.

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There's nothing quite like alcohol to bridge the distance between people.

The conversation between the mother and daughter started off a little awkward, as any drinking session would, but as the bottles were emptied, the conversation deepened.

With each clink of glasses and slurp of liquor down their throats, they unravel a little more of their complicated stories and feelings.

After all, three years of no communication was too long.

There were many complicated stories they couldn't tell each other, and deep unresolved feelings.

But little by little, the mother and daughter told each other their stories, and together they untangled the threads.

It would not be possible to resolve all of these feelings in one day, but if they had a meeting like this often in the future, they might be able to resolve them sooner than they thought.

‘This is family.’

I listened to them talk in the background and felt myself drift away.

Having grown up without parents, this was always new to me⋯and enviable.

I thought of my only family.

Nam So-eun, my one and only sister.

'Where are you, where have you gone⋯'

My heart was empty.

A terrible bitterness and loneliness ate away at my emotions and heart.

-Tsk-tsk.

I heard the sound of the glass in front of me being filled.

 “What's wrong, you don't look happy⋯”

I looked up and saw Diana, her cheeks slightly flushed, looking at me with a worried expression.

“⋯No. It's nothing, I just got dizzy for a second, and Eli's ⋯ ah.”

I didn't even bother to ask Diana.

I looked over to see Eli, who had retired with her forehead on the table.

‘What the hell is she dreaming about?’

“She was so excited that she drank too much and now he's gone.”

“Whoo-hoo. You learn by drinking, don't you?”

Diana laughed softly, a little drunkenly.

Her flushed cheeks were a little redder, her smile a little wider.

She's pretty.

I'd always thought that, but today she was strangely prettier. Maybe I'm getting drunk, too.

“Should we finish our drinks?”

Diana asks, glancing at Eli for a moment, then clinking her glass.

I couldn't resist the temptation.

“I'd be honored to drink with you, Diana.”

The corners of her mouth turned up at the words.

This time, I filled her glass halfway.

-Snap.

A crisp, clear toast rings out, and she empties her glass again.

We often shared some of Diana's appetizers as well, and we had many conversations.

Mostly about the Labyrinth or the inn.

“⋯You did it again⋯”

Diana's expression darkened slightly when I mentioned the monstrosity I had encountered on the fifth floor, but it was quickly erased.

“By the way, how are your relationships with the others these days, and are you settling in well in Labyrinth City?”

Diana changed the subject.

It had been nearly five months since I had traveled to this world.

In that time, I've done a lot of work to adapt to the Labyrinth City, and to descend the Labyrinth, where modern common sense and experience doesn't apply.

What has helped me the most along the way is, of course, people.

I thought of the people around me.

Diana, Eli, Idelbert, Serif, Zirnier, Jubeel, Joy Hog, Lammel, Hitolis⋯

Benefactors, benefactors' daughters, teachers, saints, business partners, and colleagues.

I also thought of those who were gone for a while and the unknown.

My pet masochistic slave, Grumpy, Jeremy, my armored knight, etc.

I met and lost so many people in that short time and without them, I wouldn't be who I am today.

“Yes. I had a lot of people who helped me, so I think I'm settling in well.”

“That's good to hear. Who were the people who helped you?”

Diana asked, and without thinking much about it, I named the people who had helped me.

“Without Ms. Idelbert, I would have lacked combat experience, and without Ms. Zernier, I wouldn't have been able to get good weapons.”

Eli also does an important job of analyzing portals.

Serif's miracle has also been a great help.

Trusting them or not, it's clear they've been a great help.

“⋯I.”

I heard a muttering, almost inaudible, sound.

I looked straight ahead, and saw Diana with a bitter expression on her face.

“⋯I was of no use to Balkan, I see.”

She had a slight flush from drunkenness and her lips pursed in defeat.

The reddened corners of her eyes were wetter than before and my heart sank instantly.

“I was just... just... just... someone who fed you and housed you.”

“No, no, no, no!”

I shouted urgently. It was a ridiculous misunderstanding.

She was only speaking for herself.

She might have thought she was being unhelpful, that she was just giving me food and a place to stay but that wasn't the truth.

I took Diana's trembling right hand in both of mine and held it tightly.

“The reason I didn't bring you in with the others is because you're helping us so much more than the others.”

Who was it that handed me a bowl of warm soup when I was nearly raped by beggars in a back alley?

Who wholeheartedly helped me find my place in this world?

Who has warmly embraced me and taken care of my mental health whenever I've been in the Labyrinth and gone through rough times.

It's all Diana.

In fact, she's the only person I can completely trust in this harsh Labyrinth City.

I say all of this with as much care as I can muster.

I want the favor and affection I have for her to reach her, unfiltered.

“You are the only person in this world I trust completely.”

At those words, Diana's eyes, which had been closed the entire time, snapped open.

Her beautiful amber eyes shone even more brilliantly, moistened slightly with emotion.

Diana's eyes caught the image of a man in a broken helmet.

Yes. A helmet.

In order to break down the psychological barriers between people, the first thing you have to do is talk to them face to face.

For me, it was the last thing on my list of things to do, but it had its benefits.

Because once the psychological barrier is broken down and you're on the same page, it's proof that the person sees you on the inside, regardless of how you look on the outside.

‘Now, I won't need this mask in front of Diana.’

“I want this⋯ to be proof that I trust you completely.”

“Balkan. What's that⋯”

I looked at Diana, who looked slightly confused, and smiled.

Then, I reached for my helmet.

Diana's pupils gradually widened.

She seemed to have realized what I was about to do.

-click.

The sound of the strap coming undone echoed through the silence of the inn.

Carefully, I removed my helmet and on Diana's lower abdomen, a pink womb tattoo emerged.