**Chapter 226: It's Been a While (6)**

The next day Diana did not return to the lodging.

Perhaps she's accompanying the Second Princess as an escort.

'Then, I only have one thing to do.'

Balkan stepped out the door, properly dressed.

"N-no personal activities allowed...!"

With flushed cheeks and a flustered face, the royal maid crossed her arms to make an X.

I asked her again.

"Really not possible? Please?"

"Not allowed! Walking around the palace with weapons...absolutely... not...allowed..."

-Glance. Glance.

The maid's eyes wandered to my chest visible through the loosened tie and shirt.

After being unable to take her eyes off my well-defined pectorals, she finally changed her words at my earnest request.

"...Would it be acceptable if I accompany you?"

"Yes. That's fine."

The maid before me was slightly weaker than a knight guarding the palace walls.

She probably calculated that even with an axe, she could at least stop a man from going wild.

Balkan gladly accepted her accompaniment.

After all, he had no intention of breaking anything in the first place.

[Sniff sniff. Left...go straight down this corridor. Now right!]

He was simply following Bunny, who was sniffing like a tracking dog, to trace where the magi of the Demon of Sloth was.

The Demon of Sloth had made two requests: the annihilation of its followers who worship it and retrieving its energy and body from those who possess it in the form of a blessing.

'Surely, it was something about the blessing of that incompetent magician?'

The jewel tucked in my suit pocket was prepared for this purpose.

Since the Demon of Sloth had put its power up as a reward, I couldn't easily let go of the clue to find it now that I had one.

After wandering around for about 40 minutes, the maid made an X sign with her hands again.

"This area is off-limits."

Somehow, I had expected that.

The third floor of the inner palace gave off a more splendid and mystical feeling than the first or second floors where various guests came and went.

Moreover, even when I closed my eyes and expanded my perception range, I couldn't sense anything from the third to sixth floors.

They probably had placed some kind of presence-concealing artifact.

'If I still had Professor Manko Steel’s invisibility magic, I could have broken through.'

Just as I was about to go back down the stairs with regret.

-Bang!

A small explosion sound came from the third floor corridor.

"Eek!"

Along with a familiar voice.

"...Ellie?"

The half-elf girl Ellie, Diana's adopted daughter and the one I spent my first night with.

Her voice was heard along with the explosion sound.

"Do you know Royal Magician Ellie Ordia?"

"Oppa?!"

Following the maid's surprised voice, Ellie's voice came from far away.

The elf's exceptionally good hearing had caught even that small murmur.

Ellie peeked out from the third floor corridor.

Her usually glossy red hair was slightly singed at the ends, probably from the explosion, and her magician's robe with elaborate embroidery was somewhat torn.

Ellie stared blankly at Balkan.

Her eyes grew large as her red pupils contained only the welcome sight of a man in a suit.

Could there be two men in the world with such a body?

That voice, the way he breathed, his appearance. He was definitely the person she had been waiting for.

Ellie jumped down from the third floor corridor and hugged him as he stood on the stairs.

-Poof.

Balkan caught her with his trained body and patted her head as she expressed her intense joy with her whole body.

"When did you get out?! No, rather, how did you come to the palace?!"

"I came with Diana. More importantly, what was that explosion sound just now? Your clothes are torn too."

"Oh, this? Let's say it's a trace of a failed portal magic experiment... hehe."

Ellie scratched the back of her head sheepishly, but Balkan's eyes widened at her words.

"Portal magic?"

"Yes. You know what you asked me about? The portal investigation. I thought I was getting somewhere during research, so I tried it but...it didn't work well and exploded. Though I expected it, it's still difficult."

Apparently, the explosion sound just now was a side effect of the failed magic experiment.

Ellie used clean magic to remove traces of the explosion from her body and asked the maid beside her to clean up the room.

"Understood! But..."

As the maid glanced at Balkan nervously, Ellie waved her hand.

"I'll go with oppa. There's no problem with that, right?"

"If Ordia-nim says so...understood."

"Ah. Don't clean up the experiment data unnecessarily. Just replace the scorched curtains."

"Yes!"

Indeed, there seemed to be a stark difference between a maid and a royal magician.

The maid bowed respectfully to Ellie and went to clean up Ellie's room that had been turned upside down by the magical explosion.

Balkan felt a strange impression watching Ellie.

"You've become skilled at handling people."

"Hmph. It's been several months already, so I've gotten used to this position. I think it was a better choice than becoming an assistant to the professors."

"I think anything would have been better than that."

While saying so, Balkan internally breathed a sigh of relief.

Since Ellie had a strangely sister-like quality that made him want to worry about and take care of her, he had been concerned about how she would handle her first experience in society.

Fortunately, looking at her like this, she seemed to be managing well on her own.

"Hehe. More importantly, tell me some stories. Like what happened in the labyrinth!"

Balkan chose what to say to her who was speaking with a bright smile.

Since telling the mating story that even shocked Diana would probably break Ellie, he put those aside for later and focused purely on the adventure story.

They walked in the palace garden outside for a while, sharing recent news with each other.

Ellie talked about her daily life as a royal magician, the progress of recent research, and how the Second Princess showed interest in the portal magic she had just used.

And even about how she received subtle jealousy from other royal magicians who were much older than her...

"They're not doing anything bad to you, right?"

"Well, they're old enough to know better, so they don't do anything too obvious. I do get scolded whenever I blow up my room from failed experiments, but that's my fault anyway..."

During this, she also talked about the structure of the royal inner palace.

The third floor is where royal magicians like Ellie, who have sworn loyalty to the royal family, stay.

From the fourth to sixth floors are where the owners of this place stay, in other words, where the real royalty stays.

[It's up there. The smell is coming from there.]

And according to Bunny, the smell of the one who might have the Blessing of Sloth is coming from up there.

"These days it's mostly just the Second Princess who stays there."

"Even now?"

"Yes. Probably? I'm not sure about the details, but I had several conversations with the Second Princess just the other day."

Balkan stroked his chin at Ellie's words.

...Could it be?

'Is the one with the Blessing of Sloth the Second Princess?'

For some reason, he remembered the blonde girl he met on the day of Ellie's graduation.

[Celsia de ■■■■■ LV.5■]

A girl with the same name as the Second Princess, Celsia.

[Current blessings and curses possessed by Celsia: 3]

[◆ ■■ ■■ In■ Magic■■ Blessing]

If his current memory is correct, that blessing was definitely...

Though he wanted to head to the fourth floor right away to confirm, unfortunately, even Ellie couldn't freely go above the fourth floor.

In the current situation, all he could do was wait for tomorrow when he could see the Second Princess.

'No, I can't just wait.'

He needs to get a chance to meet with her privately.

To retrieve the power, he would need to have her touch the jewel directly, which meant he would need to face a member of the royal family.

But how could he obtain such an opportunity?

"Oppa. Do you have something worrying you? Your expression is a bit dark."

Just then, Ellie looked up at him with worried eyes.

The thought of Ellie having several conversations with the Second Princess crossed his mind, but he immediately shook his head.

No matter if Ellie was a royal magician, such a request would be too much of a burden.

"It's nothing to worry about."

"That's not nothing. It's about you, oppa. If something's wrong, tell me! I'm not just a little kid who only receives protection from unc...ahem, no, oppa anymore! I've become a proper adult in both body and mind. Let me help you!"

"You brat."

It seems like just yesterday she was getting annoyed calling him uncle, but now she's developed such a kind heart.

As he was squishing her cheeks that were like rice cakes, having absorbed the waters of society and grown significantly, the smell of alcohol wafted to his nose from somewhere.

It was quite a terrible smell of alcohol that made his nose wrinkle automatically, yet somehow familiar from somewhere.

Ellie must have smelled something similar too, as she held her nose with her hand.

"Ugh. Alcohol smell...Aunt Zirnier must have drunk a lot again..."

A familiar name popped out of Ellie's mouth.

"Zirnier? Zirnier Besil? The one I know?"

"Yes. You know her too, right? Aunt Zirnier. She lives alone in that annex next to the garden now, and often comes by completely drunk."

"Well, she's a dwarf even if she's a half..."

Come to think of it, Zirnier had gone to the palace to repair the Second Princess's armor.

'To think she lived alone in a royal annex.'

Having spent nights in one of what must have been dozens of lodgings on the first floor, Balkan knew well how special it was to be given an entire annex.

When Zirnier had spoken freely about the Second Princess being a loser and even that the Knight Commander had addressed her respectfully, I had thought she must be quite important, but to this extent.

"Want to go together, oppa?"

"Is that okay?"

"I visit often though? Besides, oppa, you're close with Aunt Zirnier too, right? You even drank together....I wanted to drink with oppa too."

"You pass out after three drinks."

"Th-that...! It-it was because it was my first time drinking...!"

Ellie flapped her red elf ears as they flushed and kicked at the garden bushes with her feet.

Separate from the fact that Ellie was terrible with alcohol, her words had a point.

Although it was mostly one-sided care, I had shared drinks with Zirnier occasionally.

[Tch. That detestable woman!]

And above all, she was the one who had made me the excellent weapon that was Bunny.

Regardless of her status, since I had heard news of her after so long, it seemed fine to at least go pay my respects.

Fortunately, the distance wasn't far.

After just a few steps, the annex beyond the garden came into view.

Though called an annex, it was larger than most single-family homes.

The building, which looked even sturdier than the palace walls, appeared like a rough brick mass as if directly transplanting Zirnier's taste.

Ellie knocked on the annex door with a familiar gesture.

"Aunt! I'm here!"

"Uuugh..."

Then from upstairs came the groan of someone seemingly at death's door.

Soon, along with trudging footsteps coming down, the door opened without making a hinge sound.

"Ellie. Why so early in the morning...oh."

A half-dwarf woman with blonde hair and tanned-looking skin, holding a dwarven liquor bottle in one hand opened the door.

Surprise rose in Zirnier's voice as she wore a mask covering her face.

"Balkan? How are you here..."

Just as his eyes were drawn to her superior figure that couldn't possibly be thought of as a short dwarf no matter how many times he saw it, Balkan froze blankly at the sight of an object inside that annex.

Armor preserved like a mannequin and repair tools scattered around it.

There was no way he could forget that armor, which was worn by the person who had extended a helping hand to save him.

It wasn't just similar-looking armor like he had seen before.

It was exactly the same as the armor that person in his memory had worn.

The white armor that the Armor Knight had worn was in Zirnier's annex.