**Chapter 228: It's Been a While (8)**

"Your Highness. It's time."

Celsia let out a silent sigh at the servant's voice.

Finally, this day had come.

After her body had changed, she hadn't held birthday parties, but there was a limit to how long she could postpone them.

As a princess of the nation, she had to make an appearance and show that she was well.

'Me, being well?'

Her hands trembled as she looked down at them.

Her once large and broad palms had transformed into a child's hands without any calluses.

Her view, which used to be like looking down from the sky, had changed to that of a small child's, requiring her to look up at everyone she saw.

On that day when her body of twenty-some years suddenly changed, how desperate she had felt when everything she had achieved seemed to disappear like bubbles.

"Princess."

A different voice from the servant's made Celsia turn around.

There stood a woman in armor with closed eyes.

Diana Ordia, the explorer who had saved Celsia from the sudden attack of the Ain Gott.

Celsia had grown her dreams watching her and gained the courage to enter the labyrinth.

"...Do you think I can do well?"

So she sought advice from her.

"Since receiving this blessing, I've become broken. Whenever I stand before people, my whole body trembles in fear, and without armor as a medium, I can't even speak properly."

Bitterness tinged her small voice.

With each word she uttered, the frightened girl's body trembled.

"Can I...really do this when I've changed like this?"

Even to this desperate question, there wasn't much Diana could do.

She could only gently pat Celsia's back.

Celsia used that as momentum to stand up.

As she walked through the curtains that the servants opened with graceful movements, she saw the people filling the banquet hall, accompanied by gentle yet enveloping music.

-Thud.

Celsia's steps halted.

Some people would sometimes stop walking or have their breathing disturbed just by encountering others but in Celsia's case, this was maximized.

When such a person suddenly has to face many people, their steps freeze like ice.

Amid the stabilizing songs, disturbing murmurs began to be heard.

"Is that really the Second Princess? She looks so different from my memory?"

"Yes. Just a few years ago, the Second Princess I saw had an almighty physical appearance..."

"Now it feels like seeing the Second Princess from when she was young."

"Did she receive some blessing from the labyrinth? No, is that really a blessing...?"

"Could this be why she hasn't held birthday parties for years...?"

Small murmurs began flowing from everywhere.

Confusion and doubt bloomed in the eyes of those looking at Celsia.

Only a select few knew that the princess had transformed into a child's body.

Almost none knew that her personality had become extremely timid as well but now was the time to acknowledge and accept it.

Since even the temple priests couldn't remove this blessing, it had become a heavy shackle she must bear for life.

As a member of the royal family ruling the labyrinth city, she had to show that she could shoulder such shackles lightly.

"Uh, ah..."

She had to.

She had to, but.

Words simply wouldn't come out.

The questioning gazes looking at her, the numerous mouths talking about her.

Piiiiing—

The more she heard those gazes and small voices, a ringing grew in her ears and her vision began to shake.

As her focus wavered like the debris of a shipwreck hit by fierce waves, blurring like watercolors, Celsia unconsciously stepped backward.

She wanted to run away to a place where no one would talk about her, into that comfortable bed in her bedroom.

That place where no one could enter was always a paradise that allowed her to escape from cruel reality but just as there is no paradise in places you run to, even the seemingly comfortable bed was ultimately just a place that would eat away at her future.

Celsia knew that if she didn't take steps forward with courage now, she would never be able to rise again for the rest of her life.

Though she knew this in her head, her body wouldn't cooperate.

"I, I..."

A small voice flowed from her tightly bitten lips, but it was already after the surrounding commotion had grown too loud.

The small courage that had risen amid fierce waves faded away without any meaning.

"..."

Celsia looked around with confused eyes.

The countless gazes looking at her seemed to hold only questions but there was a place that didn't cast such questioning gazes.

Or more precisely...they weren't looking at Celsia.

The princess's birthday party was held after several years.

In a situation where the princess who had changed so much appeared, it was difficult not to look at Celsia.

Yet they couldn't give their attention to Celsia.

"Ah..."

Diana's small sigh was heard from behind, but it was already inaudible.

Celsia's gaze turned to the center of that strange flow.

There stood a man where those who weren't looking at her had fixed their gazes.

"Ah..."

Celsia recognized him immediately as the man she had saved in the past.

The man who had been coughing blood and dying from a goblin horde attack.

—I'm truly grateful to you for saving my life.

When they had met by chance at the Academy graduation ceremony, he had said he hadn't forgotten that grace, and in his hand...was a half-mask.

There was no one around him looking at Celsia.

Everyone was busy staring blankly at his face, as if hypnotized, as if enchanted by something.

Among such people, only Balkan held her in his gaze.

Those eyes shining with blackness held an upright mindset.

Why?

"Today."

The moment she met his eyes, unwavering words sprang from Celsia's lips.

"I express my deep gr-gratitude to all of you who have gathered to celebrate my birth."

Though it stuttered slightly due to extreme tension, those who heard that voice had light shine in their eyes.

Although her appearance was that of a young girl different from their memories, that voice belonged to the Second Princess they had believed in and followed in the past.

Those looking at Celsia looked up at the girl who wouldn't even reach their chest as if she were a giant.

Such a gap dwelled in that voice.

A voice befitting a leader of a kingdom that ruled over the labyrinth where all manner of dangers, malice, and despair lay dormant, filled with courage and dignity.

It was clear that the girl before them was someone they should follow.

"It wouldn't be proper to keep having you just hold your glasses."

Celsia received a glass from a servant and raised it to the air.

"To the Kingdom of Arlonia."

What followed was the enthusiastic cheering of those drenched in hot fervor.

"To the Kingdom of Arlonia! To the guardian kingdom that imprisons vile demons!"

"Long live Second Princess! Long live Princess Celsia!"

With resounding cheers, glasses were raised for toasts as a song that began to grandly fill the banquet hall to match the occasion.

The princess's birthday party that suddenly became lively began to emit heat worthy of a festival.

Amidst such festivities, Celsia endured the rushing shyness and embarrassment while trying to look at the one who had encouraged her.

More precisely, she tried to look.

"What bullshit."

-Crack. Crackle.

"Throwing those who should be revered as high as the heavens into deep underground prisons, and what the fuck, a festival? A birthday?"

Until a dimensional distortion was detected along with a vulgar curse.

"You, you royals have no right to exist. Descendants of filthy blood who brought in the disgusting hero."

Everyone looked up at the air at that strange phenomenon and voice full of malice.

The air that began to crack like breaking glass, as it began to ripple unstably with distortion, a black oval began to be drawn in the air.

Those who had encountered the labyrinth muttered blankly as they recognized the identity of that oval.

"...Portal...?"

-Shwaaaaaaak!

Following that, an ice arrow shot fiercely toward the inside of the portal.

Though it was at a speed most people couldn't even perceive, the arrow left a trajectory.

People's gazes turned to the direction the arrow was shot from.

Diana, with a hardened expression, spoke in a cold voice while aiming her bow.

"Get everyone to evacuate to the prepared 'guest rooms'. Quickly!"

"Yes!"

Diana, who had been given the request in anticipation of any situation, gave orders to the knights behind her before glaring at the portal.

'Opening a portal is the power of Pride's worshipper. Then their companion is...'

"Such hospitality from the start. Thank you, Diana Ordia!"

-Crack. Crackcrack!

A reddish-brown forearm shot out from the unstably shaking black portal.

It was far too large to be a human forearm, with an ice arrow stuck in it.

As the monster's arm full of ferocious muscles tore apart the portal, its massive body began to appear.

-Crackcrackcrack!

Simultaneously, several attacks struck.

From the Academy professor's lightning magic to the sword strike of one called the Sword Saint.

"Ungh..."

"Tch. What kind of skin...!"

But what was heard were voices of frustration and surprise.

That monster's flesh absorbed all attacks directed at it, and finally emerged completely from the portal.

Even in a situation where a monster appeared from a portal that formed in the air, no one screamed.

The weak-hearted fainted upon facing the thick malice and demonic energy that was being emitted and were carried to safe places by the knights while those still standing until now were frozen and couldn't move even slightly.

Celsia glared with eyes full of anger at the two who had invaded the banquet hall.

A peacock beastkin who spread their wings proudly and the red-haired minotaur Ain Gott who nonchalantly shattered the ice arrow stuck in her forearm.

"Ignorion, Gott...!"

No matter how much time passed, there was no way she could forget those faces.

After all, she was the one who had ruined Celsia's most precious memory.

"Well isn't it just fucking honorable that the princess remembers me."

Gott smiled sickeningly with her face full of scars as she drew the axe from her back.

"Of course you should remember the person who's going to kill you."

-Kuuuung!

The special large axe that even the minotaur over 2m tall had to hold with both hands struck the marble floor, causing cracks and dust to rise.

"No time for chat. Can't maintain the portal for long. End it in 3 minutes."

"Tch. Got it."

Though Gott clicked her tongue at Ignorion's words, she nodded.

Though it was a short time, it was more than enough to dirty someone's precious memory into the worst experience.

Besides, the time she could maintain full power wasn't even 3 minutes.

'Moreover, there's no saint or anyone with comparable holy power.'

This place was now her stage.

-Shwaaaaaaak!

Gott opened her mouth toward the ice arrow flying at her brow and

"Uwoooooooooo!!!!"

She roared with fierce rage.

The blessing of beast roar caught and crushed dozens of ice arrows flying faster than sound.

The roar didn't stop there but shattered the ice arrows and caused fierce winds.

The band's instruments fell and flew away, and the luxurious feast items were blown by the wind as dishes shattered.

The scenery of the splendid banquet hall instantly blurred with broken glass shards and spreading dust as if it had been bombed.

-Puwuk!

Lightning bolts and sword energy flew through the dust.

Gott, who simultaneously took the counterattacks of Professor Manko Steel and Duke Rohart, swung her massive forearm to knock away the two.

Right after, another ice spear flew.

As the thick dust cleared, Gott's eyes caught sight of the woman who flew holding the ice spear.

-Puwuuk!

A strike imbued with powerful magic pierced through Gott's neck skin.

Even with her neck pierced by the spear, a smile spread across Gott's face.

Though it had been a fatal strike that would have severed her just by touching the spear in her prime, now it merely pierced the skin.

"You've gotten weaker!!! Diana Ordia!!!!!"

Though the retired Diana had grown slightly weaker, Gott's skin had grown tougher as she had sharpened her blade for revenge.

-Kudududuk.

Diana, who hardened her expression at the spear stuck in her muscles and not coming out, hurriedly raised her arms to guard.

Through the gaps in her guard, she saw a fist wrapped in wrathful demonic energy flying.

-Jeoooooork!

The fist that struck above her guard lifted Diana's body into the air.

Diana, blown away by that recoil, crashed into the wall raising thick dust.

"...Ah..."

Celsia, who had been gathering magic power to prepare great magic while others bought time, blankly stared at Diana who had flown next to her and crashed into the wall.

She couldn't believe seeing the one who had saved her from the same opponent in the past being defeated like this but there was no time to deny reality.

The opponent was still charging toward them.

-Kung, kuung!!

The ground shook like an earthquake every time the red-haired minotaur holding the axe took a step.

Finally, she took to the air.

The leap that started from the ground reached the banquet hall ceiling and accelerated further, falling at a fierce speed.

The axe held in those massive arms fell targeting Celsia.

Celsia, who instinctively spread a barrier, sensed it.

'Ah, this will be pierced...'

-Kaaaaaaaang!!!!

When she instinctively squeezed her eyes shut, a different sound than expected rang out.

Celsia's eyes that looked up blankly squinted slightly at the tremendous amount of light.

It felt as if there was a huge mass of light before her eyes but soon she could notice that it wasn't a mass of light but a human figure.

"This holy power, could it be..."

Gott's voice muttering something about the one who had blocked her attack was not clearly audible.

Celsia just blankly stared at the one who had protected her with all his might.

That man wearing ice armor made of magic.

The armor he had created looked exactly like the armor she had worn when she saved him in the past.

Balkan, who glanced at Celsia, smiled with a gentle face.

"It's been a while, Knight."