**Chapter 232: Secret Meeting (3)**

I gazed at the woman sitting next to the bed.

Golden hair with green eyes, an appearance more fitting to be called a girl rather than a beauty.

Lowering my gaze slightly, I could see the girl's delicate body.

While her figure didn't exude the rich, mature feminine scent typical of a well-ripened female, it was a cute and dainty body type that would likely be in high demand among certain adults with specific preferences.

Though modest, her breasts made their own statement, and her hips clearly showed she was a female of breeding age.

As I absentmindedly stared at her body, which was light enough to be picked up with one hand and made one want to play mischievous pranks...

"Hic."

Her body shook with the hiccup.

Celsia immediately moved her arms to cover her mouth but the hiccups wouldn't easily stop. The stimulus had been too strong.

'He's...looking at me so intensely...'

He was staring at her body, which had become small, with no trace remaining of her formerly superior physique.

Though he kept trying to look elsewhere as if avoiding her gaze, those black eyes would occasionally scan Celsia's body greedily as if about to swallow her whole.

Celsia's heart raced madly at his gaze, which was different from when she saw him in the banquet hall.

"Hic...Wh-why...hic...suddenly...hic..."

"Are you alright?"

"Ah, uh, hic, hic..."

When Balkan came closer across the bed and patted her back, the hiccups got even worse.

Celsia felt the firm, long palm patting her back.

'His hand is...so big...'

It was much bigger even compared to her own hands from the past.

Now that she had transformed into a girl's body with no proper physical abilities, there was no comparison.

With arms much thicker and stronger than her former self, he could easily restrain and bind the current Celsia with just one hand.

Celsia swallowed hard and mumbled with a trembling voice.

"You're...too...close..."

"Ah."

Balkan belatedly remembered her timid nature.

No, it might be a bit wrong to call it her nature.

As could be guessed from what he heard from Zirnier and from others' reactions, Celsia's original personality and physique weren't like this.

[◆ Blessing of the Incompetent Magician]

The Blessing of Sloth proudly displayed in Celsia's status window was the cause of all the changes.

Having become an incompetent child, even her mind had become utterly incompetent.

When Balkan moved to the edge of the bed, Celsia's hiccups subsided a little.

After glancing at Balkan nervously while moving her lips for a moment, Celsia looked around.

This room was the problem.

Though it was just one of many lodgings, just being in the space where he had spent a night and breathed brought an overwhelming tension.

"Could we...talk outside...?"

"Of course. Knight...um, Princess."

"...You can call me whatever you want. Whatever you prefer."

"Then. Yes. Lady Knight."

Celsia felt a bashful emotion rising at the title he used.

It was as if he was telling her he wouldn't forget who she was back then.

"But where are we going?"

"There's a place I always go when I want to think alone...would that be okay?"

"You probably know the palace better than I do, Lady Knight, so I'll trust you and follow."

"Uh, okay..."

Celsia left the room with Balkan, who wore a mask, trying hard to hide her growing embarrassment.

"Oh, we behold the Light of the Kingdom!!! And...black-haired muscular man...? Gasp...! G-greetings to the Knight of Light as well!"

We encountered some knights doing night patrol, and every one of them saluted while using peculiar titles.

It wasn't just them either.

The hairdresser who fixed my hair and the tailor who made my clothes before meeting the queen had used such titles too.

Surely those who had witnessed me saving Celsia from Gott had given me grand nicknames, and those had spread as rumors.

Since I had used the Blessing of Radiance and worn armor made of magical power, calling me the Knight of Light wasn't exactly wrong.

"That title sounds really embarrassing."

"Re-really...? I, I think it's nice... Knight of Light... heehee... Ah. I-it's not like I like it because it matches my title perfectly..."

Celsia chuckled at seeing me scratching my cheek with an awkward expression.

During her time confined to her room, Celsia hadn't just stayed idle.

Since she couldn't move her body as she wished, she read books to accumulate knowledge, and occasionally read erotic novels for relaxation.

'The Light of the Kingdom and the Knight of Light...'

It was almost as if he had become her retainer, standing by her side.

And in such books, scenes often occurred where a knight, unable to resist their lord's temptation, would eventually pounce on them...ugh.

Celsia hurried her steps while shaking her head vigorously as if to deny her rising fantasies.

Eventually, they arrived at a forest bathed in moonlight.

"Wow..."

Balkan gaped blankly at the scene before him.

While trees surrounded the area, not a single tree blocked the sky in this spot.

The moonlight floating proudly in the blackened sky beautifully illuminated the surroundings as if looking down only upon this place.

It was a sense of liberation incomparable to viewing the moon through an open window at night.

Though I had often gasped in wonder while looking up at the starry skies of the Labyrinth City, this scenery was on a different level entirely.

"H-how is it? My secret place..."

"...It's beautiful... truly..."

"R-really...? Heehee. Th-that's good..."

As if her words about coming here often weren't a lie, Celsia sat down on the well-maintained weeds and patted the spot beside her with her palm.

Balkan was about to sit down a bit far away, remembering what happened in the room, but.

"Y-you can. Come a little closer."

At Celsia's words, mustered with courage, I sat right next to her.

"Eep..."

Celsia trembled as she felt his firm, muscle-packed thigh pressing against her soft one.

"To-too, too close..."

"Ah, then is this distance okay?"

"Y-yes...this much is okay..."

Balkan and Celsia, now separated by just enough space for a fist to fit between them, looked up at the sky again.

As a peculiar silence settled...

"...How did you figure it out?"

Celsia carefully brought up the main topic.

"Back then, when we first met...there should have been no way to deduce that the armor I was controlling... was me..."

She was right.

If it weren't for the status window, or if I hadn't seen the Second Princess' armor with my own eyes in Zirnier's garden annex, until meeting Celsia directly, I wouldn't have noticed at all that she was the armor knight.

Instead of answering, Balkan raised one hand and opened his mouth in an exaggerated manner, as if singing:

"I deeply thank all of you who have gathered here today to celebrate my birth."

"......!"

"It wouldn't be proper to keep you just holding your glasses. To the Kingdom of Arlonia!"

Celsia's ears turned red at his behavior, as if imitating someone's voice.

He was repeating the words she had spoken.

Hearing her own speech from someone else's mouth was more embarrassing than she'd expected, and having him of all people repeat it was even more embarrassing.

Seeing Celsia's reaction, Balkan smiled slightly and spoke while tapping his throat.

"How could I forget the voice I heard when I thought I was about to die?"

"...Ugh..."

"Even at the academy graduation ceremony, I was sure from your voice, but with your height being different and you constantly pretending not to know me, how could I have known?"

Celsia felt a strange joy at his words but lowered her head as if ashamed.

"Ho-honestly. I didn't expect to meet again... I was surprised to suddenly meet you... and, and also..."

"And?"

"...I thought... you would be disappointed..."

"...Disappointed?"

At Balkan's question, Celsia looked down at her hands.

"If you found out that the person who helped you wearing that huge armor...was actually just a gloomy person who controlled the armor like playing with dolls from their room...surely, you would hate me..."

"......"

Balkan stared blankly at Celsia, at a loss for words.

"What the hell...ahem."

The thought escaped his mouth before he could stop it, having been too surprised.

"Uh, uhm...?"

A confused-looking Celsia looked up blankly at Balkan but it was too late to take back the words that had already been spoken.

In the end, he decided to spill rather than contain them.

"...Hah. Lady Knight. Are you in your right mind?"

"Uh, uh...?"

"I was wondering why you were avoiding me. Do you know what I thought first when I found out the princess was actually the knight? Why did she pretend not to know me at that graduation ceremony? She said she didn't want anything in return, but could it be that she really didn't intend to receive any gratitude after helping so one-sidedly? This is really amazing. Incredible. I want to become like that someday too. But no matter how I think about it, I need to repay the life debt. That's what I was thinking, you know?"

"Uh, um, uhm..."

"But what? Disappointment? Playing with dolls in a room? Hatred? Come on. Lady Knight. May I ask just one thing?"

"Uh, uhh...yes..."

"When you saved me, did you save me with such a light heart, as if playing with dolls in a room?"

Celsia's expression hardened at the words that settled heavily in her heart.

That day, did she really save him with such a light heart?

Even before getting this curse-like blessing, Celsia had entered the labyrinth countless times on her own feet to experience numerous explorations.

In that labyrinth reeking of blood, she had slept, fought monsters, accepted companions, and bid them farewell countless times.

Even if she continued exploring by controlling armor, her mindset towards labyrinth exploration hadn't changed from then until now.

Saving him then was an act done entirely by Celsia's will, and she had taken steps directly to help him.

Celsia shook her head at Balkan's question and answered in an unwavering voice.

"That's absolutely not true."

Balkan smiled with satisfaction at that answer.

"Then I also couldn't possibly be disappointed in the knight who saved me with such sincerity."

And he carefully continued.

"So, Lady Knight, please stop hating yourself like this."

"......"

Celsia couldn't easily respond to those words because her current appearance and personality stemmed from the blessing.

Balkan, having roughly guessed this, instead of speaking further, took something from his chest and handed it to her.

"...What's this?"

"It's an orb. Perhaps, an orb that could remove that blessing of yours."

"......!"

Instead of asking how he knew about her blessing, Celsia listened to his story.

Balkan briefly explained how he obtained the orb.

The Demon of Sloth he met at the grand fountain and the fact that sloth's power was imbued in Celsia's blessing.

Celsia had vaguely known this as well.

However, even in the Labyrinth City full of all sorts of mysteries, she hadn't found a way to completely remove a blessing imbued with demonic power.

But the orb before her eyes was the only object that had the possibility of solving this.

"...Should someone like me use something like this...?"

"You're the only one who can use it."

Celsia smiled softly while looking at him grinning.

"...This is too much... as repayment for saving a life..."

"Then let's settle our relationship now."

"...Se-settle? You mean... settling our relationship...?"

As her head felt dizzy as if struck by a hammer at the sudden farewell words, Balkan extended his other hand.

"Now there's no debt between us. We're equals. No, since there's a difference in status... hmm... companions?"

"...Heehee."

Celsia felt a laugh escape without her realizing.

She couldn't help but laugh seeing him seriously considering the status difference, and she unconsciously let out a sigh of relief at the fact that their relationship wouldn't end but continue.

"...If we're forming a new relationship, we should know each other's names."

Celsia said this while firmly grasping his extended hand.

"Second Princess of the Kingdom of Arlonia. Celsia de Arlonia."

Balkan also grinned while feeling the warmth of her hand grasping his.

"Balkan. I'm an explorer."

"...Balkan...Balkan..."

Celsia rolled his name around in her mouth several times with a trembling voice, engraving it in her mind.

Though unfamiliar...it was a good name.

"...Looking forward to our future together. Balkan."

"Yes. Lady Celsia."

"You don't need to add 'Lady'."

"Then. I look forward to it too. Celsia."

Celsia smiled brightly and grasped the orb Balkan held out.

"Thank you too."

-Flash.

The orb that touched Celsia's hand began to emit a dazzling light.

At the same time, changes began to occur in her body.

When the intense light that had covered the forest finally disappeared.

"...Huh...?"

"...Hueh...?"

Before Balkan's eyes stood a naked woman....With a body that had changed quite a bit.