**Chapter 242: Familiar and different Parties (1)**

The blood scent was spread shallow and wide, as if those soaked in blood had frequently passed through.

Among the explorers in the Explorers' Union, it was easy to see those covered in blood or those with bloodstains stuck to their clothes.

Although explorers dying and getting injured wasn't exactly a rare occurrence, this time it was more severe than usual.

If there were five people, three of them had bloodstains on their clothes, so it seemed like something had happened again.

"Balkan! You're here!"

In the distance, I spotted Lammel, the harpy mage, waving her hand.

As I headed straight to the table where she was sitting, I saw her face was flushed red.

Getting closer, the strong smell of alcohol suggested she'd had a drink before coming.

"It's lunchtime, and you've already had a drink?"

"Does an explorer choose when to drink, whether it's morning or evening?"

"Lammel usually doesn't drink much. I thought you might have had something troubling you."

At those words, Lammel briefly touched the back of her head and explained as if making an excuse.

"...Well. Not much, just had a little."

I felt something strange about those words but continued the conversation without dwelling on it.

"That just now. It sounded like Joy Hog."

"...Did I sound that much like a dwarf? Oh, Denshi's here too?"

Lammel's eyes caught sight of Denshi who was sticking close to my side.

"I'm a slave who guards my master's side. It's been a while."

"Yeah, yeah. Ah. Don't just stand there, sit down."

Denshi had become acquainted with my party members during our stay at Idelbert's mansion.

We had met at the 12th floor too, but she became a bit closer with us at the 15th floor, Eden.

Lammel, who had confirmed Denshi's abilities while ascending to the surface together from Eden, welcomed her warmly.

Denshi, who was quite prickly with others, showed proper manners knowing Lammel was my party member.

"But what happened here?"

As I carefully asked while sitting at the table, Lammel answered casually.

"Smells like blood, right? There are a lot of explorers who crawled out of the labyrinth injured this time."

"Injuries? Getting cut and torn up is everyday stuff, isn't it? The smell seems a bit strong for that though."

"This time that everyday occurrence turned into something like a battlefield. You know those monsters we saw before. The ones whose shadows rippled like pools, stronger than other monsters. The ones with magi, weren't they called?"

"I remember. They’re really tricky bastards."

Depending on the situation, it can be harder to kill one monster that handles magi than dealing with four or five normal monsters.

"They say those monsters possessed by magi have been popping up a lot since last week."

Last week was when the demon worshippers attacked the royal palace.

Of all times, such changes in the labyrinth occurred from then?

"Lower-rank explorers are taking heavy damage, and quite a few from the middle ranks have crossed the Jordan River too, apparently."

Whether it's monsters or people, beings that handle magi are much trickier to deal with than ordinary ones.

Just look at Gott, the Wrath demon worshipper who left a clear impression in my mind.

The magi leather that Minotaur wore dispersed even Professor Manko Steel's lightning magic and blocked all the sword strikes of Marquis Rohart, known as the Sword Saint.

"Here it's just the smell of blood, but I heard the temple is extremely busy, healing injured explorers, sending out temple knights and paladins to the labyrinth..."

However, even such tricky magi hesitate before the light of holy power.

It has a relationship of opposing forces with my Radiance Blessing too.

While it wasn't good news that many magi-possessed monsters had appeared in the labyrinth, it wouldn't greatly change our upcoming schedule even so.

"What about the other party members? I met Rubia recently and she said she'd officially join."

"That's good news. Jubeel is still locked in solitary, and Hitolis isn't responding so she seems really busy."

Well. If explorers flood into the temple injured, the ones who suffer most are the lower-ranking priests.

I figured our party's priest was probably running around healing explorers while sweating profusely right now.

Thinking I should give Hitolis her share of the compensation when I go to take the promised lessons with Serif, I handed Lammel a coin pouch.

"This is the compensation settled this time."

"Ha! Finally giving this now! I really thought you ran off with it since you didn't give it for so long. Oh! It's quite heavy!"

She immediately checked the pouch and exclaimed in admiration while grinning as she confirmed the amount inside.

Ever since becoming party leader, I feel a strange sense of fulfillment whenever I see such expressions from party members.

"How could I do such a thing? I've been too busy lately to find time to meet. I added more since it's late."

"Heh. Getting this much makes the wait worth it."

Looking around at her smiling, I asked:

"Are there any worthwhile requests? Since there are lots of magi-handling monsters appearing, I thought there might be related extermination requests."

"The one with the highest reward right now is the Elder Lich on the 19th floor, and as you said, most are extermination requests...Don't tell me you're planning to enter the labyrinth in this situation?"

I tilted my head at her tone that seemed to ask why I would enter the labyrinth.

"...Of course."

"Oh. Balkan."

Why was it?

The moment Lammel called my name while grabbing her head, I felt a strange foreboding.

"I was thinking I should tell you soon anyway but I ended up saying it earlier than expected."

"Why, what's the matter?"

"Balkan, you. You know your growth rate is incredibly fast, right?"

"Well. I've heard it occasionally."

It's already been almost a year since I fell into this world.

When I first fell here, I fought dozens of goblins until I was beaten to a pulp, but now I can easily take a goblin's head with just a gesture.

My master Idelbert and others filled with jealousy had said my growth rate was fast too.

"Occasionally? No. Your growth rate is really fucking fast. Remember when we first met on the 5th floor?"

"You saved me when I was about to die fighting a hobgoblin."

"Right. Honestly, even then I couldn't believe you were only a few months into the labyrinth city, but looking at you now, you're at least twice as strong as then, so honestly it seems like that's real talent."

From her slightly intimidated voice, I could vaguely guess what Lammel was going to say.

"Can I be honest? These days, I'm a bit scared to enter the labyrinth."

Lammel's eyes trembled with fear.

"Back then when some crazy monster came out at the fountain on the 5th floor and took both my legs. Sometimes I still wake up thinking about it like a nightmare."

I remember how Jubeel had taken care of Lammel and Hitolis who were hesitating to enter the labyrinth right after that incident.

-Shudder.

[......]

Bunny strapped to my back trembled slightly.

It seemed to at least remember the things it had done but right now I focused more on Lammel in front of me than on Bunny.

"Balkan, you're...really brave. That bitch Jubeel is just crazy with no backup plan but you're not like that. The times you've nearly died would already fill both hands. It's honestly amazing that you continue such a journey."

"......"

It's hard to smile comfortably even hearing pure admiration and praise.

Surely because I anticipated what she would say next.

"But I'm...honestly a bit scared. Not just that I might die, but what scares me most is..."

-Sigh.

She carefully said after exhaling.

"That I might soon become a burden to you all."

Harpy mage Lammel is an ordinary labyrinth mage.

Just a few months ago, the 8th floor was her highest reached floor.

She has both the ambition and skill to want to advance to middle rank... but at the same time, she's an explorer who feels hesitation.

"My talent can't catch up to you all. I'm envious and jealous of that. You'll continue heading towards the end of the labyrinth, but with talent like mine, I can't join that ranks."

-Fwip.

She raised magical power at her fingertip as if trying to imitate the flame that Ellie had raised at her fingertip before, but compared to that, it was too small and shabby a flame.

After briefly looking at her own hand with a bitter expression, she lowered her head.

"I'm sorry. Now, going to the labyrinth with you all..."

She pressed her lips shut, unable to finish her words.

What words were originally going to come out of those lips?

That she's scared? Or that she's sorry she can't continue together?

Looking at Lammel's expression, I could tell it was a mix of both.

What answer should I give her?

Should we wait to get good blessings while continuing to explore the labyrinth?

While continuing labyrinth trips where we could die at any time?

Even if she falls behind a bit, should we say let's grow together while riding our bus?

'Is that really, what's best for Lammel?'

After briefly collecting my breath inside, I opened my reluctant lips.

"Thank you for telling me first. It must have been a difficult decision. ...I'm sorry."

"What's difficult about it? And what do you have to be sorry for? I should be sorry for not being able to keep up with you all."

"If it were me, I couldn't have said such words first. It's something only Lammel could say. We won't find another mage like Lammel."

This was sincere.

How many mages with proper common sense like her are there in this crazy city?

"When you say it like that, I feel grateful again."

Lammel smiled bitterly with a wry smile.

Just the fact that she didn't immediately pounce on a man already put her in the top 1% of explorers in the labyrinth city.

Regret naturally welled up.

It won't be easy to find a sensible mage like her.

"Then. When are you thinking of leaving the party?"

"Since I've already said it, I think it's right to just leave now. Sorry for suddenly creating a vacancy in the party. Should I introduce you to some mages I know?"

"It's okay. How many mages are there like Lammel? I'm wondering if I should bring in upper rank personnel like Rubia...thinking about the long term."

A mage is one of the important personnel who becomes the core of the party along with priests.

It won't be as easy to find one as it was with Rubia.

"What are your plans going forward? Do you have any plans?"

"Well. Since I have some money saved up. I'm thinking of opening a magic herb shop over in the commercial line. It's the typical explorer retirement course, right? If Joy Hog returns later, maybe I'll just earn some pocket money in the upper floors."

She seemed to have prepared how to make a living even after leaving the party.

I smiled bitterly, took out a coin pouch I had kept ready and placed it on Lammel's hand.

"...What's this?"

"When a party member leaves, as party leader I should at least give severance pay, right?"

"No, which explorer party in the world gives severance pay when a party member leaves? If you die you just become strangers."

"Are we strangers? We're comrades who faced death together."

At my words, Lammel's expression suddenly became choked up.

Lammel, who wiped her eyes with her harpy wing hands, laughed with a sobbing voice.

"You don't look it but you're quite sentimental. That's why women try to pounce on you when you wag your tail around everywhere."

"Heh. Don't joke. Don't cut ties just because you left the party, let's meet occasionally. When you open the herb shop, contact me too. If you give me herb gathering requests, I'll do them cheaply."

"Thank you. Really."

I patted the back of Lammel, who was now too overcome with emotion to hold back tears.

Today, the party's mage left.

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Yonel Freya, vice president of the Explorers Union, thought as she watched Balkan coming up to her office.

"Waah, ttutta, puhuhu..."

This was an opportunity to pass on the ill-fated dark elf mage who had fallen into corruption beyond even her own control.