**Chapter 244: Familiar and different Parties (3)**

"You damn guards! From now on, I won't squirt a single drop of breast milk in their direction!"

Jubeel clicked her tongue and spat through the bars above the door of the adjacent cell.

"Arghhhh! What is this!"

A prisoner's scream came from inside the cell, but Jubeel ignored it and followed me.

"Balkan, you wouldn't know. What I went through with these guards."

"I'd rather not know."

"Listen. Here they only give you rock-hard bread for breakfast, lunch, and dinner, you know? Do you know how many tears I shed while soaking it with breast milk to eat it? I was already pissed about being locked up right after getting out of the labyrinth. Well, at least my body got some rest."

While Jubeel was clicking her tongue and going "tsk tsk," I told her what happened at the Union.

"Lammel left the party."

"...As expected? I knew it would happen someday, but that's a bit quick."

Jubeel, who had spent more time with Lammel than I had, showed a slightly bitter expression as if deep in thought.

Still, she didn't seem too disappointed, as if she had somewhat anticipated Lammel's departure from the party.

Despite Jubeel's strange behaviors, she was surprisingly observant of party members.

"Then we need to find a new mage now. Have you looked into it?"

Even though someone left, we had to keep preparing for what's next. Jubeel seemed to think the same.

"We received an offer from Nuer, a mid-rank explorer and mage, to make a long-term contract with our party on the condition of hunting the Elder Lich that appeared on the 19th floor."

"19th floor? Oh shit. We'll need to upgrade our equipment to go there, huh? That's gonna cost some money."

Even though we hadn't accepted yet, Jubeel was already thinking about changing equipment and planning ahead.

"We haven't accepted yet though?"

"Huh? What's there to think about? By Nuer, you mean that dark elf mage Nuer from before? Even though we're doing pretty well these days, we can't find a better mage than them in our current situation. Whatever it is, be it an Elder Lich or whatever, we just need to kill it. It's more profitable if you think long-term."

"Well. That's true but... Aren't you scared? It's the 19th floor."

Lammel feared the labyrinth.

Not just Lammel, but other explorers too.

19th floor. It's going deeper than half of the labyrinth that has 34 floors.

Naturally, the level of traps, environment, and monsters gets higher.

According to Nuer, unlike the upper floors where monsters handling magi only appeared recently, this was the real middle layer where monsters wielding magi had existed from before.

"Of course it's scary. But I've already rolled around too much in the labyrinth to feel afraid of such things. How many times have I nearly died since meeting you?"

Jubeel, who was looking somewhere with a somewhat nostalgic expression, glanced at me.

"What's this? Don't tell me you're scared?"

"What kind of bull—"

"Pffft! How adorable, you little male baby. Where's that ferocious muscle and axe-wielding monster hunter now, getting all timid about going deep into the spooky labyrinth with females? Your fragile male instincts must be showing. Grrrr. I can't stand it. Come here!!!"

Suddenly excited, Jubeel hugged me from behind and bumped her pussy mound against my buttocks.

-Thwack!

When I quickly swung my arm backward, my elbow struck Jubeel's temple directly.

"Urk—"

Jubeel's legs instantly gave out and she collapsed unconscious onto the guard station floor.

"...Sigh."

I rubbed my face while sighing.

I didn't want to take such violent action, but that was too humiliating.

'If she had done it to my crotch instead of my butt, at least my male pride would have survived.'

Clicking my tongue, I grabbed her cow horns protruding from her head like handles and lifted her up.

Knocked out cold, she was completely limp and couldn't move a finger as she was lifted by my hands.

With the unconscious Jubeel tucked under my arm, I bowed slightly to the guard who had witnessed this whole scene.

"Thanks for keeping this one locked up."

"Ah, uh, yes, yes... Take care..."

After receiving the guard's farewell, who seemed to think they had it easier than I would, I left the guard station.

"Should I dump her in the back alley?"

"Forget it. Let's just go."

Though I wanted to just throw her on the street as Denshi suggested, it was obvious that outlaws or beggars would strip and take advantage of Jubeel if I did that.

But I didn't know where her lodgings were either.

In the end, we headed to the temple together, to meet our last party member, the junior priest Hitolis.

\*\*\*

There were many injured people in the temple's infirmary.

Roughly counting, there seemed to be over a hundred.

"Aaagh! Heal! Hurry with the heal...!"

"Priest. I'll get better, right? Right...? Please tell me that's true..."

"I, I got cut by a black goblin. I, I can't feel my arm..."

The effects were clearly felt from what they said about monsters becoming more violent in the labyrinth.

Cut by something, pierced through, bite marks deep enough to leave scars...

Explorers bearing all sorts of wounds were barely managing to stop their bleeding, drinking antidotes and potions while receiving healing from priests to sustain their lives.

The sticky smell of blood permeating everywhere was incomparable to the blood scent I dealt with at the Union.

In the center of this battlefield-like infirmary, the cat-person priest Hitolis, whose fluffy fur was soaked with the injured people's blood, bowed her head.

"I'm sorry. I don't think I can go to the labyrinth for a while."

Along with this shocking news that she wouldn't be able to join the labyrinth exploration for a while.

"As you can see, too many injured explorers have been coming in these past few days and we haven't had a moment to breathe. Not just this infirmary, but other infirmaries are also full of people...I think I'll have to stay put for at least a month. From what I hear, priests from other explorer parties have also been mobilized to treat the injured before going into the labyrinth."

Deep fatigue was visible in Hitolis' eyes as she said this.

Keeping dying people alive through healing requires tremendous holy power.

And with the number of injured being so high, there was no need to elaborate on that fatigue.

Moreover, since the temple had even mobilized contracted priests prioritizing treatment of the injured over labyrinth exploration, it seemed unlikely we could take her on this labyrinth expedition.

Not just Hitolis, but other priests were in the same situation.

'We're screwed.'

A priest is the number one personnel you should secure first if you dream of a safe labyrinth expedition.

No matter how good healing potions are, quality potions are not only expensive but also limited in quantity due to high demand.

On the other hand, priests have at least mid-grade potion level healing ability, and on top of that, can provide beneficial buffs for fighting monsters through various miracles.

Given that holy power has good compatibility against magi, the buffs they provide would be quite effective in this labyrinth expedition...

"I'm sorry..."

Perhaps my expression looked bad, as Hitolis hung her head low.

Though tension naturally built up at the thought of going into the labyrinth without a priest for the first time in a while, I swallowed my disappointment and answered.

"No need to be sorry. Saving people obviously comes first."

"I'm really sorry...But why is Jubeel like that? Is Jubeel injured too?"

"No. She's just unconscious. It's Jubeel after all."

"Ah..."

Hitolis nodded with an understanding expression and that sight made me smile a little.

Right. Even if it's disappointing, we just need to pack more potions than usual.

Later, while giving compensation for the previous labyrinth expedition and discussing Lammel's party withdrawal and matters related to Nuer.

"Aaagh!"

A sharp scream cut through our conversation.

Hitolis immediately ran to the injured person.

The injured person started rolling their eyes while foaming purple at the mouth.

Though Hitolis urgently squeezed out holy power and poured out healing light, even that didn't have a meaningful effect.

The injured person was shaking all over but still held on while clenching their fists.

Humans are creatures with an intense attachment to life.

Even when horrible pain torments them, their attachment to life doesn't easily subside.

That's why screams filled with desperation and groans enduring pain and suffering covered the surroundings.

Just as the lives of those desperately holding onto their lifelines were gradually being cut off.

"It's okay."

Along with a calm voice, a new rope was lowered to those who were holding onto a line about to break.

-Shhhhh.

A warm sensation drove away the smell of blood as dazzling white light spread far away.

Like white snow falling, particles of light fell from the air and touched those crying out in pain.

"Ugh, my arm, my arm... Huh? ...It's healed?"

"The blood. The bleeding stopped. My fingers... are moving too...!"

"It's a miracle. A miracle from the Earth Mother Goddess!"

The holy power containing warm light eliminated pain and brought only comfort as soon as it touched them.

The face of the explorer who was foaming at the mouth and nearly dead just moments ago regained peaceful relief.

The gazes of those who were writhing in pain turned toward the one approaching while emitting dazzling holy power.

"Ah, Holy Maiden..."

"The Holy Maiden saved us...!"

They bowed or lowered their heads to the being who bestowed life-saving grace upon them.

Among those bowing their heads, I watched the particles of light that touched my palm before fading away.

'Strangely familiar.'

Unlike other priests' holy power, it felt somehow attractive...A very nostalgic feeling.

'Where have I felt this sensation before?'

Separate from such questions, it felt like thunder struck in my mind.

Why haven't I thought of this until now?

-Kiiing.

When I slightly activated the Blessing of Radiance in my hand, holy power similar to the light I just saw flowed out.

The holy power emitted by the Blessing of Radiance was qualitatively superior to that of ordinary priests.

Then...

'Can't I do something similar to what priests do?'

Right after reaching that thought, someone's toes entered my helmet-covered field of vision, along with a white, plump, soft cat tail.

At that familiarity, I raised my head to see Serif smiling with her characteristic smile while twitching her white fluffy cat ears.

"Welcome. Balkan-nim. Did you come to study with me again like last time?"

Serif's eyes looked ten times more tired than Hitolis' as she said that.

The healing miracle just witnessed was worth feeling such fatigue. Her voice was even trembling slightly, which said it all.

Even amid all that, she still brought up studying as if thinking of her promise with me, but this was an opportunity too good to miss.

"Yes."

An opportunity to learn healing ability using holy power.

"I want to receive lots of education from Serif-nim."

-Flinch.

At those words, Serif's eyes, which had been drowsy with fatigue, went wide and their white cheeks turned red.

"...What?!"

Along with a squeaking moan, her snow-white cat tail started thumping against the floor.