**Chapter 266: Who are you? (6)**

Even after a brief greeting, the meeting with Jellicy continued.

And quite vigorously at that.

-Bang! Thwack! Slash!

Sounds of swords striking shields and flesh, and trained fists and legs bursting something filled the air.

Next came the musty body odor.

The breath and sweat of women wielding swords and sparring filled the surroundings.

"Grrrr! How is it? This is the training hall where paladins hone themselves as swords and shields protecting the order!"

Louis Jellicy had brought me to the training hall where the pure virgin females of the Earth Mother Goddess Order, who stayed away from sexual matters, were emitting plenty of biological pheromones.

The reason was that just having a sophisticated conversation in the reception room would be boring.

'I've felt it since our first impression, but she's quite a tough priestess.'

Balkan thought so, but Jellicy’s mind was elsewhere.

'...Hmm.'

The lion beastkin Jellicy’s sharp senses were drawn to the guard walking behind her and the male exuding an enormous presence from his entire musculature.

-Thump thump.

The lion beastkin's heart pounded.

'These two...there's something between them! Grrr!'

Just earlier, she had seen guard Giltear and Balkan firmly grasping each other's hands while gazing intently at each other.

She couldn't see Balkan's face clearly because of his helmet.

It was truly surprising that Giltear, who usually avoided meeting others, including other members of the temple, showed interest in Balkan and even offered a handshake first.

And that sudden change was enough to make Jellicy fantasize about something else.

'Does she like him? Balkan?'

—I would like to have a sincere conversation with Lord Balkan.

Giltear had even specifically asked to have a separate conversation with Balkan.

There's only one reason a woman suddenly changes.

'Only when she falls in love!!! Grrrr!'

As someone who once experienced passionate love between a handsome man and a beast but ultimately failed to realize it, Jellicy couldn't help but be interested in her guard's love life.

'Giltear is not yet a full temple member, so it doesn't matter much if she gets involved with a man.'

Giltear's position as a paladin guard was temporarily arranged by Jellicy using her power.

Giltear, who hadn't yet fully committed to the temple, was in a position where she could have a passionate romance.

'This is my chance to repay my debt to Giltear.'

Jellicy’s lover and paladin, who had cultivated a passionate love together despite violating the order's rules, ultimately died in the labyrinth.

It was Giltear who stopped Jellicy from trying to die meaninglessly in the labyrinth following her dead lover and saved her.

'Today. I'll bring Balkan and Giltear together. No matter what!'

Lion beastkin priestess Jellicy burned with enthusiasm as she thought this to herself.

"So the Eden Temple has places like this too."

"Since combat experience gained in the labyrinth may return as blessings when you go back, it's slightly more efficient to build combat facilities in the labyrinth than on the surface. Well, that's not the only reason."

"Are you trying to show off the temple's military power?"

"Grrrr! That's right! There are many outlaws in Eden, and we can't handle them all, but we're trying our best to maintain order in the central part of Eden! Especially in turbulent times like these!"

The royal court has been attacked, and worshippers of Sloth are openly spreading their experimental monsters throughout the labyrinth.

Moreover, a new year will arrive in just two months.

It's possible that signs of the labyrinth's transformation and various changes might appear.

The situation was quite tumultuous both inside and outside the labyrinth, but Jellicy proclaimed that at such times, the order should display its dignity and control disruptive elements.

"Everyone here wields swords and raises shields high for a better tomorrow. What do you think? Does it seem quite useful even to the eyes of a warrior who has caught an Elder Lich?"

I observed the paladins sparring around in response to that question.

The average level is around the early to mid-30s.

None have extraordinary blessing abilities, but all perform above average.

Considering that most of the temple's capable personnel have been deployed to deal with the recent surge of magic-wielding monsters in the labyrinth, this is quite an impressive force.

"Well...it's decent."

"Grrrr? Just decent?"

"Yes. They're all quite capable."

Something about that answer seemed unsatisfactory, as Jellicy crossed her arms and began to nod, then abruptly stopped.

"...Hmm, no. To the eyes of a warrior who has caught an Elder Lich, I suppose it's just an adequate level of skill. Grrrr! If we had other forces, I could have shown you something more impressive!"

It seemed she had intended to show off the temple's power and impress me.

As Jellicy’s face filled with regret, Hope, who was walking behind, said to her:

"The other force is right beside you, isn't it?"

"Grr? Priestess Hope. What do you...Huh?!"

Jellicy suddenly widened her eyes after hearing Hope's words.

"Grrrrrr! That's exactly it!!!"

And she cast her gaze toward Cleassia, who was following behind her like a shadow.

"Giltear!!!"

"...I refuse."

Cleassia, who had already foreseen what was about to happen, slightly furrowed her brow.

But regardless of her guard's reaction, Jellicy clung to her.

"Don't be like that! This is a really good opportunity! Show him the temple's dignity!"

"What dignity? Aren't you just a battle maniac who wants to see me fight?"

"No! Augh!! Grrrrrr! You stupid, frustrating girl! Do I have to spoon-feed you like a baby caretaker?!!!!!"

"...Pardon?"

Cleassia looked at Jellicy with astonished eyes as the lion beat her own chest with her paws in frustration.

She seemed genuinely confused.

"Chance encounter! Adversity! Combat! Friendship blossoming amid it all! And evolving into love! Don't you get it?!"

"...I can see that you're not in your right mind, Lady Jellicy."

"Aaagh!!!"

Jellicy grabbed the back of her neck with a face that suggested she was about to go mad from frustration, then turned her gaze to me.

"Balkan! Don't you want to spar with Giltear?!!"

"Hmm..."

At that sudden proposal, I crossed my arms and pondered a bit, then made eye contact with Cleassia, who was an underling of the Jealousy worshipper.

'She's already noticed me.'

I knew that even before she hinted at meeting separately later.

What's important is how she thinks of me.

'Will she think of me as Idelbert's disciple and a shadow hunting demon worshiper, or as an apostate carrying a weapon imbued with magi and disguise magic?'

Is she an enemy, or someone who can be considered an ally despite different ideologies?

My response will vary depending on how she thinks of me.

If time passes smoothly, Serif, who has been contacted, will come to capture Cleassia within a few weeks.

But the problem is during those few weeks.

'Will the Jealousy worshipper forces, now aware of my existence, allow time to pass smoothly?'

Judging from the demon worshippers I've encountered so far, I can't help but shake my head.

These are people who attacked the royal court with just two persons, built laboratories in the labyrinth to spread monsters and cause trouble, and employ succubi who devour humans on the surface.

I couldn't even begin to guess what pretexts they might use to attack.

'Maybe. This opportunity is the chance to capture her for certain...'

Perhaps now, with Cleassia in the temple, is the opportunity.

Moreover, she is the person that Serif, who has helped me numerous times, has been searching for.

[Capture: 60 gold coins. Miracle of a high priestess of the Earth Mother Goddess Order]

[Description: Green hair, green eyes. Obese. Wing-shaped brand on the back]

[\*The brand is certain, but other features and name are likely to have changed]

Recalling the rewards on the wanted notice I saw at the Adventurer's Union, my contemplation deepened, and finally, I reached a conclusion.

'...Indeed, it's better to bury her now.'

Whether physically or socially.

"Sounds interesting. A sparring match."

"Ohhh!! I knew it! As I expected! What warrior with a body like yours would avoid a match!"

"...Tsk."

My answer brought joy to Jellicy and dismay to Giltear.

Giltear clicked her tongue with a voice so small it was barely noticeable and quickly masked her expression.

When Jellicy swiftly borrowed a section of the training hall, the gazes of the paladins who had been sparring around immediately converged.

Actually, there had been many glancing looks before, but now that there was a proper reason, they seemed to be watching openly.

"Hey, what's going on?"

"A sparring match. It's between Lady Jellicy’s guard Giltear and a mid-level adventurer. His name is Balkan, right?"

"Wait. Balkan as in... the one who jumped into the grand fountain with d-dildos and anal plugs?!"

"Well, yes, that too, but didn't you hear yesterday's news? Their party slew an Elder Lich that had established itself on the 19th floor and rescued all the necromancy faction people."

"That's right. And I heard that he also nearly annihilated the Back Alley Clan almost single-handedly..."

"Insane. What kind of stunts does he pull every time he comes to Eden?"

It seemed that yesterday's events had already spread as rumors, as most of the thirty or so paladins surrounding the area appeared to know me.

Considering that just a few months ago I only received looks that said "Who's this guy? I feel like raping him," it was quite pleasing that rumors of my prowess were spreading.

While thinking about how to deal with Cleassia with one part of my mind, I continued to observe my surroundings.

"He caught an Elder Lich yesterday and today he's sparring with Giltear? What insane stamina. I wondered how he became that Adventurer's Union leader's disciple—"

"What a male body... Gulp. Ugh... E-Earth Mother, please grant me a peaceful night tonight as well...!"

"Away, lustful thoughts! No male can challenge my pure faith in the Earth Mother Goddess...!"

That's not to say that suggestive gazes had disappeared.

In Eden, where men were already scarce, some virgin female paladins of the Earth Mother Goddess Order, who were even controlled against masturbation for mental training, encountered a sudden male presence and cautiously rubbed their trained thighs while looking at each other.

"Too bad. If the opponent were Giltear, it would end in an instant..."

"Come on. It can't be that bad."

"No, haven't you seen Giltear killing monsters while protecting Lady Jellicy? With that thin rapier, she punches holes in monster bodies like they've been shot with a ballista."

"Hmm... Honestly, I find Giltear a bit off. I guess it's because Lady Jellicy pushes her so much... I've never seen her handle holy power."

"Since she didn't become a paladin through the orthodox way of handling holy power, it can't be helped that she can't use it. Still, at least she's not an apostate dealing with magi."

"I guess..."

I could also overhear conversations about Cleassia.

Contrary to how Jellicy had been pushing her, public opinion didn't seem entirely favorable, and the reason for that also appeared to be because of Jellicy.

Well, jagged stones inevitably attract negative attention.

'Though in this case, it's closer to a radioactive nuclear waste stone.'

Thinking about what was about to unfold, there would soon be no need to cast jealous glances at that stone.

"Bunny."

[What.]

"Let's show off our newly acquired power."

"The rules of the sparring match are simple. Subdue your opponent! With me here, don't worry about minor injuries!"

Cleassia sighed at Jellicy, who had appointed herself as referee and was winking at her.

'What a pointless thing to do.'

Even inducing emotions through blessings didn't always work as intended.

Jellicy’s immense friendship and trust in Cleassia occasionally manifested in such impulsive actions.

Of course, from Cleassia’s perspective, this was a positive phenomenon.

It was evidence that her emotion manipulation, which was close to brainwashing, was working.

'Just two more months to go. I've already passed more than half.'

Cleassia’s master, the Jealousy worshipper Karelos, had not given up his ambitions for the temple, and Cleassia, following his orders, was about to fasten the first button of that grand plan.

Starting with the complete brainwashing of Jellicy, the forces of Jealousy would once again take root in the Earth Mother Goddess Order.

'And at the end, the brainwashing of the saint, which failed previously...'

"Ahem! Hmm!"

Cleassia’s thoughts were cut off there. Jellicy was signaling her to prepare for the sparring match.

"Go easy. Be generous. Show the inclusiveness and sweetness of a woman. Got it? Grrrr."

"...Understood."

Turning away from Jellicy, who was whispering as if giving tips, Cleassia looked at the man standing in the distance.

"One bout. I look forward to it."

After briefly showing respect, he assumed a stance, aiming his massive axe that was over 2 meters long, wearing a dark gray helmet modeled after dragon scales.

Facing the muscles that seemed ready to pounce at any moment and the presence that dominated the surroundings, she felt as if her breath would stop.

Who would consider that a weak man?

He was a massive beast with strength that would rank in the top three even in this place.

'An axe imbued with magi...'

Moreover, his axe contained an indescribable, suffocating magi firmly embedded within.

It was so skillfully concealed that even Cleassia, who was adept at concealing and detecting magi, might not have detected it.

Someone wielding a weapon with such magi wouldn't have agreed to a sparring match without any thought.

'Whatever his intention is, I'll have to find out step by step in this sparring match.'

Cleassia, with her lips stiffened by tension, drew the rapier from her waist.

"Likewise, I look forward to it."

After those words, silence fell, and Jellicy lowered her hand to signal the start of the match.

Simultaneously, Cleassia rushed toward Balkan and launched the first attack.

It was an attack delivered at high speed, but the force behind it was pitiful.

It was merely a feint for probing, without any special meaning.

Just a first move thrown to gauge each other's intentions.

But

Swish—

Balkan's body moved in response to the simple thrust that could have been deflected even while standing still.

As if he wanted to be hit by that attack.

"...!!"

That was a sense of incongruity that only Cleassia, who was facing him, could feel.

Before Cleassia could withdraw her rapier, feeling intense doubt and anxiety at that strange movement.

Clang!

The tip of the rapier and his axe blade collided very slightly.

However, the aftermath was not at all small.

Kwaaaaang!!!

Along with a massive vibration, a violent explosion of magi swept through the training hall, and Balkan, caught in the explosion, rolled across the ground and crashed into the wall of the training hall.

"Kuh, urgh...!"

Balkan, who had fallen from the embedded wall, spat out a mouthful of blood through the mouth hole of his helmet and then used pure holy power to heal himself.

Cleassia stared blankly at Balkan.

"...W-what...?"

Pretending to be injured by his own explosion?

'And he's even healing it with holy power? How? What was that magi he just used? Could he possibly be wielding magi while also using holy power? That can't be possible—'

"Just now, that... I didn't feel that wrong, did I?"

"Magi...! There's no way we could have misperceived such intense magi!"

"A-ambush? Is it an ambush?! Is the temple under attack?!"

"...No. No, this isn't an ambush...!"

Cleassia, who couldn't find words in that bewildering situation, looked at the paladins who were drawing their swords amid the commotion.

The gazes of those who had drawn their swords were all directed toward Cleassia.

As she faced the paladins' gazes gradually pouring toward her, Cleassia realized.

'Oh, fuck...'

She had been tricked.