**Chapter 99: The Day Before the Storm (1)**

A low shout drew the attention of the marauding mob at the inn door in my direction.

In my head, I labeled them as enemies, not guests.

There were three of them, a drunken female dwarf, a human and a dark elf sobering them up.

They wore no armor, but each had his own personal weapon.

The dwarf wears gauntlets on her fists, and the human has a dagger strapped to each thigh while the dark elf carries a wooden staff.

'Elven mage.’

This was the one to watch out for.

I remembered Ellie's spell against the boss minotaur earlier, a spell of immense power.

Not all elves would be as good as she was, but it never hurt to be careful.

[Nuer Erencia LV45]

[◆ 298th Puppet's Curse]

‘She's got more potential than Grumpy.’

I instinctively opened the status window and saw a curse I hadn't seen in a long time.

The dwarf and human also have puppet curses, but at the beginning of level 30, and their curse was in the thousands.

The dark elf named Nuer, on the other hand, was nr. 298, the highest number I've ever seen.

And according to my big data, nine times out of ten people with that curse are either outlaws or reformed explorers.

It meant that there were a lot of guys with such bad personalities that they would cause trouble in front of a bar that hadn't even opened yet.

“What the fuck, bitch? You fucking whore, you fucking whore.”

“Hey, stop.”

The human woman halted the dwarf, who was about to take a step forward with a heavy hand.

Her eyes, glistening with lust, were locked on me in my suit.

“Don't you think it’s too much of a waste to just beat the crap out of him? Couldn't we have some fun?”

“Fuck fun. It's more fun to laugh at your lives than it is to watch you stinking drunken bitches in front of someone else's store, so get the fuck out of my way when I'm trying to be polite. Fucking assholes.”

“⋯What?”

The human woman's face changed at my fact-filled words.

A 6:4 mix of lust and anger.

“If you were sober, you'd go home and get some sleep, but why are you hanging out in front of someone else's store? Don't you have a home to go back to?”

“That's a bit of a mouthful. What do you care if we're here or not?”

“Because I work here.”

The dwarf shouted at me.

“How dare you, an employee, talk shit in front of guests!”

“Why are you even a customer? We accept breastfeeding bitches and drunk bitches who want to f\*\*k on the table, but we don't accept assholes like you who talk shit in public. Get the fuck out of here.”

Diana agreed. Even without those assholes, she still had plenty of customers.

“What the hell, what's going on?”

“There were some bitches making a fuss outside the cozy winter night inn earlier, and Mr. Staff found them.”

“Who's Mr. Staff?”

“The guy in the helmet over there. Oh, shit. His suit looks so ugly…This is it for today.”

The harsh words were enough to attract the attention of pedestrians and bystanders on the street.

The combination of three armed women and an unarmed man in a suit drew even more attention.

“Mr. Staff, he's a man, isn't he in danger?”

“I don't know. Someone said he's an explorer. He must be a low-level explorer.”

“It's a bit ominous to see drunk bitches armed⋯Shouldn't we call the guards?”

“Someone already went. But it's a long way to the guards, so I don't know if they'll be here soon.”

Someone had already noticed the commotion and went to call the guards.

It was a good situation. Working at Diana's tavern had been rewarding, as the people who came and went were familiar.

“A low-level explorer? What does he think he's doing? If he gets bitten by a monster, he won’t be able to move and will just fall asleep. How dare he be so presumptuous⋯!”

A drunken dwarf stomped away, sneering at the idea of a low-level explorer.

“Enough.”

The dark elf Nuer blocked the dwarf's path with her staff.

“Moderation, you've attracted too much attention. Let's turn back.”

The dwarf glared at Nuer.

“Eared. You're quite snobby for a wizard.”

“Just because the boss treats you well doesn't mean we have to treat you like a prize, so behave yourself.”

The dwarf and human snarled at Nuer.

‘What, weren't they on the same side?’

I stared at them, dumbfounded by the sudden infighting.

From their conversation, it seemed that the dwarves and humans had a boss they served, and that Nuer was someone the boss gave special treatment to.

“Do as you please, but there's nothing good about your rowdy behavior in front of this inn, and we wouldn't be in this mess if you hadn't said you were going to drink more.”

“⋯Tsk.”

“⋯Huh. I see.”

The dwarf and human woman clicked their tongues at Nuer's words.

“What luck. Kak-tap!”

The dwarf spat a thick phlegm on the inn door.

“Consider yourself lucky, male. You almost became a pussy rug slave and barely survived.”

“Let's do this some other time, I'll be nice to you. Phew.”

They giggled and walked past me.

I laughed out loud at their brazenness.

“What do you guys think you're doing, just walking by with a straight face?”

“What?”

The words echoed through the eerily quiet streets, causing the dwarf and human to look back at me with blank expressions.

Nuer, the dark elf, sighed and scratched her forehead.

I ignored her and continued.

“I didn't expect reparations. But isn't it human decency to at least apologize?”

At my words, the dwarf and human looked at each other.

“⋯Reparations? Apology? Kahahahahak!”

At my obvious comment, the dwarf and human laughed out loud for a long time, as if a seizure button had been pushed.

I laughed, too, because it was so familiar.

“It's kind of ridiculous, isn't it, that you guys think it's okay to do this and not apologize. Hahahahahahahahaha!!!”

Hahahahahahaha!!!

The three’s laughter echoed through the quiet street.

Hahahahahahahahaha!!!

Hahahahahahahahahahaha!!!

“You bastard-”

[Blessing of the Time of Judgment]

After a short silence, time passed slowly.

In the near-stasis of time, I stared at the dwarf's outstretched fist.

The gauntlet wrapped around her fist was transforming, radiating magic. It was an artifact.

But it was meaningless information. Attacks are only meaningful if they land.

My reach was much longer than the short dwarf's.

[Invest three free points in Strength?]

[Invest three free points in Agility?]

Enraged, I meant it.

The world went back to normal.

“Pinched, eh?”

The dwarf's face was in my grasp.

I could see the dwarf's face in slow motion as it realized the situation and turned into a look of horror.

It immediately grabbed the dwarf's face and slammed it to the ground.

“Koooooow!

“Kahaaaak!”

The dwarf screamed and coughed up a mouthful of blood.

“Ugh! What the hell!”

“Kehek!”

The people around fled, confused by the sudden battle.

The thick sandy dust rose even higher with their movements, obstructing their vision.

I immediately activated my perception.

My vision was blocked by my helmet, but I could see the world around me as if it were in the palm of my hand.

A blast from behind.

The one with the dagger leapt into the air and tried to bring it down with her weight.

I reached my arm behind my back and grabbed the hand that held the dagger.

“Uh, how did you know-”

“Aaaaahhhhhhhh!”

I spun around, snapped her arm, and grabbed the defenseless creature by the throat.

“Get off me, get off me, get off me!”

She pounded on my arm with her fists and legs, but I continued to hold her in midair.

“⋯gulp, gulp⋯”

Eventually, the frothing at the mouth sagged.

I threw her onto the dwarf's stomach, which was stuck in the dirt and looked at the dark elf, who hadn't done anything until now.

“Kghhhh!”

Her supposed allies were down, and the dark elf, Nuer, was clapping me on the back in admiration.

“Awww, that's refreshing. I never thought it would be so hard to be in the company of such inferior people. They're outlaws, anyway, and they're stupid. I've told them a couple times not to do it, but they won't listen.”

“⋯?”

The sudden change in tone confused me for a moment.

Level 45. My body, which had been prepared for a battle with an opponent who was almost as strong as Nate Elin, went limp for a moment.

“What the hell, I thought you were going to fight too?”

“No? What mage would get into melee with a warrior your size without preparation, and why should I fight? I was trying to stop them.”

That's true. But⋯ hmm.

Nuer, the dark elf, looked at the two of them on the ground, cleared her throat, and spoke to me.

“Sigh. It's a shame to let the contribution go to waste, but⋯ what the hell. They’re on the Explorers Alliance wanted list, so I'm sure you'll get credit if you let the guards take care of them.”

“⋯Wait a minute. What are you doing, a bitch, aren't you an outlaw?”

Outlaws don't abandon their side so easily.

Paradoxically, a captured ally might give away all of their information.

But Noir's tone was one of contempt for the outlaw.

“Me? Hmph.”

She hesitated for a moment, then swayed her hips.

She gestured to the explorer's badge tucked into her pants.

Not a low-level explorer's badge, made of wood, but a mid-level explorer's badge, made of silver.

It was stamped with the seal of a reformed explorer.

\*\*\*

“Oh, and drink this. It's a healing potion. It's a small price to pay for the repairs.”

The self-proclaimed reformed explorer tossed me a water bottle and a coin pouch, then blended into the crowd and disappeared.

I didn't drink the potion, as my injuries were minimal and I felt strangely reluctant to use it.

The pouch contained eight silver coins, enough to pay for a door and some food.

As I dusted off my clothes, I thought about Nuer the Dark Elf.

The words of the stunned dwarf and human were troubling, and there was too much behavior that didn't add up to a simple reformed explorer.

‘Could she be a spy or something?’

Like a dark hero infiltrating a villainous organization and taking it down from within?

“Eh. It's a fucking bumper crop.”

Suddenly, my mind was racing.

I shook my head and focused on the situation in front of me.

Only when the guards arrived did things calm down a bit.

“Sorry for the trouble. This is what we should have done, but we didn't.”

The platoon leader of the security platoon apologized in a sincere tone, her face pale.

Maybe it's because I’m wearing a suit, but somehow I feel like I'm being treated better than usual.

“It's okay, I heard you give credit for catching the idiots.”

“Ah, yes, we're offering two points of credit for every wanted outlaw you capture. Here are two-point contribution documents. You can take it to the Explorers' Alliance.”

The platoon leader handed me the contribution papers. They didn't look like Gurmimi and Reichem-class outlaws.

Two plus two equals four.

With the 10 points from the last trip to the Labyrinth, I'm 16 points away from being promoted to Intermediate Explorer.

“And that helmet⋯ are you, by any chance, Mr. Balkan?”

I was slightly surprised to see the guard platoon leader call my name out of the blue.

“How do you know my name?”

“Most people who drink around here know it, and your name has been mentioned as an explorer of note lately. More than that, I have a question for you.”

The guard platoon leader eyed me warily.

From what I'd picked up in the tavern, a guard platoon leader was a pretty elite position.

There was no reason for her to be so low-key unless she was asking for a favor, but she opened her mouth cautiously.

“Do you by any chance remember a woman named Talian who was the target of your last outlaw capture request?”

I can't remember her.

Her real name is Reichem, illusionist and outlaw of Clan Blues.

Professor Arpo's ten-year teaching assistant, a crazed graduate student who was eventually corrupted.

I caught her in the Labyrinth after she went on a rampage with Gurmimi, an official of the Blues Clan.

“Yes. Is there something wrong?”

“I'm interrogating her for information, and she won't open her mouth to tell me anything but repeatedly asks me to bring her 'a tall, muscular male explorer wearing a helmet' ⋯ and you're the only one who matches her description, so I asked.”

“Are you saying she’s looking for me?”

I scratched my head.

‘There's no reason for that crazy grad student to be looking for me?’

“Yes. That's why I need you to come to the guard post as soon as possible. I'll give you a reward-”

-pop.

The sound seemed strangely loud in the distance.

Naturally, my head snapped in the direction of the sound.

Diana dropped her shopping bag and stared blankly in my direction.

“⋯Balkan?”

Diana's gaze flicked to the mess around the inn, to the trampled food, to the captured outlaws, to me, sitting on the dirt floor, talking to the guard platoon leader.

Through her bleary eyes, her amber pupils trembled with anxiety.