**Chapter 225: It's Been a While (5)**

"I'll leave the inn to you while I'm gone, Tans."

"Yes, Lady Diana."

Tans, an elderly woman with scattered gray hair, bowed to Diana.

She was the coachwoman who occasionally delivered ingredients Diana purchased and drove the carriage for Ellie's graduation ceremony.

Though I hadn't paid much attention then, now I noticed that her level was quite high.

Level 44, no less. She was a powerhouse on par with Nate Elin, the paladin guard protecting Serif.

Rescued by Diana during her explorer days, she had pledged to dedicate her remaining life to following her, and now she was the one who would guard the inn while Diana was away.

"Have a good time, Master!"

Not to be outdone, Denshi, standing next to Tans, bowed deeply in greeting.

She had decided not to accompany us to the royal palace, saying such a luxurious setting would be too awkward.

Having spent most of her life as a slave in the lawless zone, she added that being at an upper-class party would give her goosebumps.

"As a slave, I should be your footmat wherever you go, but I'm sorry..."

"What's there to be sorry about? I'll be back in three days, so take it easy and look around the area."

"Hehe. Yes!"

Denshi smiled and naturally extended her collar.

Perhaps inspired by the sight of me sharing a warm "welcome back" hug with Diana, she was now asking for a "see you later" choking.

-Paak!

Balkan pulled the collar without hesitation.

"Kuhp... Kehek, huk...!"

"Harder?"

Denshi nodded with an expression somewhere between pain and pleasure.

Perhaps due to our height difference, by this point her feet were already off the ground.

"...Hu, huuk..."

When Denshi’s face had gone beyond red to pale, I finally released the collar.

"Puhuu...Huu, hu..."

Collapsed on the floor, she finally showed a satisfied expression as she rubbed her face against my suit pants.

"As expected of Master. The best..."

"Come here, senior. The lord is uncomfortable."

"Uuh, ah, nooo..."

Denshi was dragged away by Belle.

Though she was bigger than Belle in build, height, chest, and hips, Belle had slightly higher physical stats.

With Tans and Belle the Gluttony worshipper, plus the intruder detection relics and mansion defense artifacts Diana had brought to the inn last night, this level of security would be enough to handle even a Lust worshipper's servant or mid-high level succubus prowling around the inn.

Satisfied with the thorough security, I patted Denshi’s head as she was being dragged away with a loose smile.

"I'll be back soon."

"Hehe...have a safe trip."

Leaving the loosely smiling woman behind, I boarded the carriage with Diana.

Slightly upgraded from before, the carriage with its luxurious wheels from the start was driven by a middle-aged woman who was said to be Tans' daughter.

-Clunk. Clunk.

With some vibration, the carriage started moving smoothly northward, toward the noble district where the Arlonia Royal Palace was located.

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Past the noble district's guards who saluted Diana after seeing her explorer ID, beyond the Academy on the same route, and out of the forest area characteristic of the noble district.

Looking out the window, I saw the scenery of a city lined with buildings both splendid and classical.

It was unlike the explorer district's scenery, giving a different feeling from that place where commoners, explorers, nobles, and priests all mixed together.

Being a place exclusively permitted to nobles or those of equivalent status, it felt cleaner and more refined, but quietly refined without heat.

"This is my first time here."

"Take a good look around. You might come here again later."

While there was nothing wrong with memorizing new places, there had to be a limit.

This vast city of nobles was overwhelming to take in at a single glance.

After briefly looking around the unfamiliar scenery with perception range maximized, I turned my gaze back to Diana before me.

Diana was wearing light armor instead of her usual midi dress.

No, it might be inappropriate to call it light.

'How much does all this cost?'

Everything worn on her body, from clothes to accessories, emitted a dazzling blue light, clearly indicating these were relic equipment from Diana's active days.

At Ellie's graduation ceremony, she had worn flashy and bold attire that was hard to look at anywhere, but now Diana wasn't just here for fun.

A white blouse and shawl draped over her shoulders covered her curved upper body, and with short pants and knee-high boots, the typical archer outfit on Diana stirred unfamiliar emotions.

"This is my first time seeing Diana dressed like this."

"...Is it strange?"

"You're just beautiful."

"...Huut..."

I didn't mention how the massive breasts' lines showed through clearly despite the blouse and torso-covering shawl, or how the shorts wrapping her plump thighs and buttocks looked ready to burst at any moment.

They said Diana's body during her explorer days was much sharper than now when it exuded female pheromones in streams.

The equipment was the same as before, but seeing her body transformed into the most feminine of females was quite stimulating.

"If anything, I wonder if it's okay for me to be like this while you work."

"Hmm? Why?"

"It feels like I'm just playing while you work hard."

Diana looked at the worried Balkan with a bitter smile.

A clean suit, tie, shoes and even the wristwatch she had personally gifted him in the past.

Except for the oversized axe he brought saying he'd be anxious without it, his attire showed no intention of engaging in combat.

It was natural, if anything.

"That's because you're not here on guard duty like me. It's natural."

To begin with, Balkan wasn't formally invited to the party, but was brought along through connections, purely to give him the rare experience and memories of a royal birthday party.

It wasn't like she brought him to look at the moon or eat together after the guard duty was over...well, actually that was true but......

"So enjoy the party to your heart's content."

-Gulp.

Balkan swallowed hard and nodded, feeling Diana's gaze occasionally glancing over his body.

After all, he had come thinking of looking around the event, eating some food, and having a small date with Diana after her duty was over.

If lucky, he might even be able to form connections again with some nobles, those he had made an impression on at the Academy graduation party last time.

"Don't feel too pressured since we came to enjoy. Explorers who enter the labyrinth need regular mood refreshment. A positive explorer has more flexible thinking. Huhut. That's my tip."

"Yes. I'll take it to heart."

Though she tried to hide her true feelings by bringing up other topics, everything showed on her face as they chatted and laughed for hours while moving forward.

Having departed at dawn, by the time sunset began to fall, the carriage stopped again in front of massive castle walls.

They had arrived at the royal palace and Balkan blankly expressed amazement while looking at the scenery through the window.

The castle walls were as massive as those dividing the four districts of the Labyrinth City.

Is this what makes the royal family different?

It seemed like no one could easily intrude into the royal domain with such massive walls blocking the way.

"It's amazing. Looks incredibly solid at a glance."

"It means nothing. It's just walls after all."

But Diana looked at the walls with disinterest, like looking at a straw house that could blow away in the wind.

"...Don't tell me, you could break through that?"

"Anyone who wants to break in can break through it. What happens after breaking through is the issue."

Perhaps because she had entered mission mode as we approached the royal palace Diana's atmosphere, which had been warmly smiling, dropped slightly and sharpened.

Like the noble district's guards, there were people guarding the castle gate in front of the walls.

Their levels were in the mid-30s with at least 2 blessings each.

People at the level of decent intermediate explorers were mere grunts guarding the castle gate.

"We welcome Lady Diana Ordia and her companion."

"Open the gate quickly!"

Those wearing pure white armor similar to the Royal Knights Commander and Armored Knight I saw before bowed to Diana in the carriage showing respect.

Feeling their gazes turn to him and widen, Balkan awkwardly scratched the back of his head.

He wasn't wearing a helmet now.

While that might have been possible at the Academy graduation ceremony, it certainly wasn't possible at the royal palace but he hadn't completely revealed his face either.

His philtrum to forehead was covered by the classical half-mask Diana had prepared.

As he stroked his lower face that felt empty without anything covering it, Diana spoke in a serious voice.

"If anyone tries to remove even that, shout loudly 'No, I don't like it, please don't.' I'll come running right away."

"Hu. Understood."

Since he knew the action came from concern, he didn't strongly refuse.

The carriage moved again, rolling for a long time along the garden road that was jaw-droppingly wide and elegantly maintained, before finally stopping.

"It's been a while, Diana. And...that husband. Balkan, wasn't it?"

Before he could even take in the majestic royal palace that could only be endlessly looked up at, an old woman in armor's hoarse voice was heard.

Royal Knights Commander Seyton.

Since Diana had said it was the Knights Commander who permitted Balkan's entry, it wasn't surprising that she recognized him even with the half-mask.

"Yes. It's been a while, Commander."

"Keukkeuk. Indeed it has. But...you're not particularly rejecting it?"

She glanced between Balkan and Diana with a playful smile.

"D-don't say such...huut..."

Diana, who was about to snap back embarrassedly, swallowed hard as she felt Balkan's warmth firmly gripping her hand.

"Hooh..."

The Knights Commander looked at their clasped hands with a genuinely impressed expression before breaking into laughter.

"So this is the man who bewitched Diana! His strength has grown much stronger since our first meeting, truly a fine specimen!"

"...uut, let's stop... this conversation."

"Keukkeuk. To think that Diana would be caught by a man, what a laughing matter! Anyway, I understand. The princess is waiting too."

Balkan had to stop while following the two heading into the inner palace.

Only the Knights Commander and Diana, who was assigned guard duty, could have an audience with the Second Princess.

It wasn't an area permitted to mere outside guests.

"Wait just a bit. The servants will guide you to today's room."

"Yes. Have a safe trip."

Right after Diana and the Knights Commander departed for their audience with the Second Princess, a maid in neat attire guided him to his lodgings.

It was a room as spacious and luxurious as Idelbert's room.

I immediately jumped onto that white bed and planned to spend my time leisurely here until the Second Princess's birthday party in two days.

-Buuuung.

Until the small bead carefully tucked inside his suit started vibrating.

I took out the bead that suddenly showed changes.

The bead received from the Demon of Sloth, that item said to be able to recover power from those with sloth's energy suddenly started showing changes.

This meant only one thing.

[Sniff sniff. I smell it. Energy that makes even breathing feel bothersome...]

And Bunny's words on his back confirmed such thoughts.

[Someone with sloth's energy is inside this castle.]