**Chapter 227: It's Been a While (7)**

Zirnier's gaze followed Balkan's.

Eventually, her eyes turned to the armor being maintained.

"Why? Do you want that?"

"...It belongs to someone else."

"Right. You knew that? I thought you'd covet it for sure."

"Something like that must have an owner."

It was tempting.

Back then I hadn't noticed, but now I could see the blue light emanating from that armor.

It's qualitatively different from the armor worn by the knight order soldiers.

Something between an artifact and a relic, positioned one step closer to being a relic.

It was an artificially created relic artifact and a masterpiece born from Zirnier's hands.

"...Could it be that this was the 2nd Princess's armor you said you were maintaining?"

"That's right. I passed out after finishing it last night."

Balkan's mouth fell open at this casual admission.

"Now I can finally leave this tiresome royal palace tomorrow. I already miss my workshop. By the way, you... hmm..."

-Tap. Tap tap.

Zirnier tapped Balkan's shoulder and arms, then let out an exclamation.

"How many months has it been since I last saw you? Your skeletal structure and muscles have changed for the better!"

"Ah, yes. I've been through quite a lot."

There's also the effect of physical restructuring that occurs at every fifth floor.

And with all the hardships experienced, muscles had built up considerably, so changes were inevitable.

"With this much change, you must have needed your armor refitted?"

"Actually, I don't have proper armor right now."

"You wrecked it again?"

"Rather spectacularly this time."

The leather armor Diana had gifted me was torn apart by the lust-consumed Idelbert.

And after that, trying to get armor in Eden was futile as everything was either too expensive or garbage quality.

When I returned, Idelbert did provide temporary armor, but being temporary, I had to put up with inconveniences like ill-fitting sizes.

Having obtained quite a bit of gold coins this time, it was about time to get equipment befitting the middle floors but putting that aside for now, I focused on the situation at hand.

"You keep looking at that. Do you like that kind of armor? You can take a closer look if you're curious."

"Is that really okay?"

"I made it, so why not? Come in. Ellie too. Want some water?"

"Auntie! I want milk tea!"

"My quarters only have alcohol and water, so just drink water."

Leaving behind Ellie and Zirnier chatting unexpectedly intimately, I stood before the armor.

The armor had a voluptuous protrusion at the chest. From the engraved patterns to its delicate design...

Seeing it up close made that time even more vivid in my memory. It was indeed that armor.

'The 2nd Princess's armor...'

With such definitive evidence before my eyes, there was no mistaking it.

The 2nd Princess, who was suspected to have the blessing of the demon of Sloth, was the armored knight.

"She can't even wear that armor anymore, yet why such obsession."

Just then, Zirnier's mumbling reached my ears and my head turned blankly.

"...What do you mean she can't wear the armor? Why?"

"Because she's changed too much to fit it anymore. Both body and mind. Well...everyone will find out roughly tomorrow anyway, so I suppose I can tell you two first."

Zirnier began the story with a bitter expression.

The story of how a princess became confined to her room.

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The next day the royal palace banquet hall, the venue for the 2nd Princess's birthday party, was filled with festive energy.

With the main event starting in 30 minutes, this was only natural.

"Oppa. Try this. It's champagne! Champagne!"

Ellie, dressed in royal mage robes, handed over champagne while fluttering her elf ears tinged with alcohol.

Balkan accepted the champagne with a bitter smile.

"Don't drink too much, it'll be trouble."

"What's wrong with iiit. Everyone's already had a glass..."

"You're done after one glass. Don't gulp it down, drink slowly."

"Uuu...okay..."

After helping steady the already stumbling Ellie, I looked around.

The music ensemble played sophisticated yet classical music in the distance.

Long tables covered with white tablecloths lined with foods I'd never seen before.

Maids busily moving about and nobles engaged in conversation with champagne in hand.

It was truly a place that felt like an upper-class party.

"A birthday party for the 2nd Princess. How many years has it been?"

"Indeed. Except for that time when Gott invaded on the 2nd Princess's birthday, parties haven't been suspended for this long."

"Whew. That was truly a disaster. If Lady Ordia hadn't been there then, who knows what would have happened..."

"Isn't it fortunate that it's being held again, even like this? I heard rumors that Gott started moving again, but it's even more reassuring since Lady Ordia herself is serving as the princess's guard this time."

It seemed Diana had protected the 2nd Princess at the party in the past.

No wonder she spoke as if reminiscing about the past.

Balkan listened to their conversation while tasting the party food one by one, watching people through his mask.

More specifically, their status windows.

[LV. 58 Eluo Rohart]

[LV. 27 Clitris Claudia]

[LV. 41 Michael Terrace]

'That one was some marquis, the head of the Claudia merchant group, and a high priest of the temple...Their levels aren't as high as I expected? Or were the people I've been seeing just exceptionally strong?'

There were few chances to check the status windows of such big shots.

Though the level difference wasn't enough to see the details of blessings or curses, just remembering this much would be plenty helpful.

"...Balkan? How are you here?"

And I could also see a familiar face after a long time, a girl with a chick on her head.

She was not an ordinary child, but someone with the position of Vice Guild Master of the Explorers Union, Yonel Freya.

She glanced this way and tilted her head.

"It's been a while, Vice Guild Master. How did you recognize me?"

"How could there be two men in the world with a body like that?"

Though my face was hidden behind a mask, most people who knew me like Ellie, Zirnier, or this Vice Guild Master recognized me by my body.

"I got a report from Nuer. You've been through quite a lot?"

"Well, it wasn't exactly a smooth exploration."

"Rescuing the attacked explorer party, taking down the turf clan that was causing trouble in Eden's back alleys, dealing with Bio who was a minion of the Sloth worshipper. These aren't things you'd typically experience in one labyrinth run."

Despite the Vice Guild Master's admiring tone, Balkan's expression slightly hardened.

'Bio, the back alley turf clan leader, was a minion of the Sloth worshipper?'

That was unwelcome news.

I had just heard from the Lust worshipper that the Sloth worshipper was targeting me.

If the Sloth worshipper investigated Bio's death, they would find out who killed their subordinate and the possibility of retaliation wasn't zero.

Come to think of it, I still hadn't found a way to open the safe I got from Bio back then.

'Given how Bio remained silent without saying a word, there must be something related to that worshipper inside.'

While lost in these sudden concerns.

"Is there something you want?"

"Pardon?"

Yonel Freya suddenly asked about my desires.

"You healed Nuer's mind, and accomplished everything I mentioned earlier. Don't you deserve sufficient compensation?"

"But I've already received compensation for that."

"No need to be modest. This is a reasonable investment in an explorer with a guaranteed future."

Yonel Freya truly believed this as she looked at the surprised expression on Balkan's face.

Talented explorers can be seen occasionally but explorers with good character are rare.

'To face off against a clan alone to save another explorer party and his own party, even going into a desert worm's stomach.'

He was practically the only one with the talent, skill, and character to do such things and return alive.

Yonel Freya had the responsibility to support and nurture explorers with both conscience and ability, and the man before her was more than qualified.

While she had briefly doubted the Guild Master's judgment, she had long since changed her mind to believe that Balkan was worth taking on as a disciple.

"...I'll think about the compensation slowly."

"Alright. Come tell me whenever you want something. I'll try to arrange it if possible."

As if that was her purpose in approaching, Yonel Freya soon moved away.

Unlike at Ellie's graduation ceremony, there were no nouveau riche here to cast jealous glances at someone talking with the Vice Guild Master of the Explorers.

"Hmm. Who is that masked gentleman over there?"

"Given how he was talking with Lady Freya, he must be an explorer? And that body...wow...ahem. Quite impressive. Definitely an explorer."

"He seems to be a promising explorer. I've never seen the Vice Guild Master promise that much support to any explorer."

"Though he seems a bit lacking to be here."

"That means he must have proper backing. Makes him even more interesting."

Instead, their eyes held strong interest mixed with curiosity about my background, and lustful gazes that persistently traced my body.

Though they didn't openly discuss lewd matters like explorers would, they had such honest gazes of desire.

"I am Rubel Keltman, a labyrinth relic scholar. Perhaps you'd be interested in the relics I appraise—"

"I am Meia Ophelia. Would you be interested in photo shoot modeling? It's a business that's starting to spread recently—"

Sure enough, there were lower nobles approaching without hiding their desires and quite a few of them.

"Uuu, opppaaa...!"

Ellie was swept away by the wave of people far into the distance.

That was fortunate in a way. It would have been troublesome if their gazes had extended to Ellie.

While appropriately mingling and conversing, I saw a familiar face.

"Keukeuk. I heard a familiar voice and came to look, and your popularity has grown even more since I last saw you."

"Ah. Professor Manko Steel!"

The old academy professor approached, laughing "keukeuk" while patting her hunchback-like curved waist.

As others backed away slightly, recognizing that someone of a different caliber had arrived, another woman appeared behind Professor Manko Steel.

"Ohoho?! Mr. Balkan! I never expected to meet you in a place like this!!"

Rubia Steel, the party's reliable tank and a noble young lady with blonde roll-tied hair.

She raised her voice with an "ohoho" while covering her mouth with one hand, wearing elegant dress armor.

Balkan stared at them blankly before having a sudden realization.

Manko Steel. Rubia Steel.

"Could it be...?"

"Keukeuk. She's my cute granddaughter. Though she's a bit too energetic."

"Ohoho! It's the power of positivity inherited from grandmother in her youth!"

Rubia tapped the iron plates of her more elegant and fluttering dress armor than when she entered the labyrinth, raising her voice.

She was the temporary party member who had filled Joy Hog's vacant position.

Though I had heard she was a noble, I never imagined she'd be Professor Manko Steel's granddaughter.

"By the way, Mr. Balkan. When is the next labyrinth expedition scheduled?"

"Oh, you want to come with us again? We're really grateful but... wasn't it a temporary contract?"

"Wawawa...?"

"Pardon?"

"After showing me such thrilling and heroic adventures, you say temporary?! Of course it should be changed to a formal contract!"

Rubia, who was about to grab Balkan's neck, quickly lowered her hand.

She probably intended to grab his collar and shake him, but seemed to have quickly regained her senses.

Professor Manko Steel laughed "keukeuk" seeing her granddaughter's outburst.

"Keukeuk. Take responsibility for my granddaughter."

"Haha. I'll do my best as the party leader."

"I'm not joking."

"...Haha..."

As I tried to avert my gaze with an awkward laugh at Professor Manko Steel's strangely serious response, music began to echo in my ears.

Everyone's gazes turned to one place as the gentle yet captivating music played.

The song catching everyone's attention meant the princess' entrance.

Upper part of the banquet hall.

Divided by stairs, in that place where everyone had to look up, a doll-like figure began to appear.

"Is that...the 2nd Princess?"

"No, what could have happened..."

Balkan turned away from the stirring surroundings and focused solely on one person.

Neatly arranged golden bob cut and green eyes shining like they contained meadows, there stood a woman with jewel-like crafted beautiful features wearing a purple dress.

[Celsia de Arlonia LV.53]

[◆ Blessing of the Incompetent Magician]

Unlike back then when I was weak, now her name could be seen clearly.

I swallowed hard for no reason and my hands unconsciously became sweaty.

This was my chance to get a private audience with her.

As Celsia looked around the crowd with a strangely anxious and uneasy expression, her gaze turned this way.

While capturing her in my black eyes, I carefully raised my hand above my mask.