**Chapter 248: Familiar and different Parties (7)**

"You decided faster than I expected."

"Given the conditions, and since we've decided to do it, it's better to handle it quickly."

Yonel Freya nodded at my words about going to hunt the Elder Lich.

"Good decision. Since the necromancers are tricky, it's better to leave before more enemies appear. When do you depart?"

"Tomorrow morning."

"...Tomorrow? But the labyrinth isn't open tomorrow? Don't tell me Diana has a spatial movement relic?"

"We plan to test Ellie's portal magic experiment. If it fails, we can go when the portal opens in three days."

"Hmm...if it's that royal magician, well. Alright. Since there's a method, I'll have to believe it."

\*Snap!\*

When Yonel Freya snapped her fingers, Nuer came up from downstairs like last time.

"Nuer. Are you ready?"

"Yes, Vice Union Leader. I've already prepared all the equipment."

I blankly stared at Nuer answering Yonel Freya.

I had built up tolerance to the pacifier necklace and yellow chick hat since I'd seen them before but Nuer's current state was even more serious than then.

A childish yellow dress so short that lifting it slightly would reveal her private parts, with a pink backpack that looked like a randoseru (Japanese backpack).

Even a toy magic wand with twinkling starlight.

"...Nuer. Is your head really okay? Your condition seems more serious than last time."

"It can't be helped. Labyrinth exploration is too stressful, so I need to keep my physical condition at its best."

"This is the best condition?"

I couldn't believe that a mature dark elf who was well past her prime age was acting like this.

This wasn't looking like someone going labyrinth exploring, but rather like a kindergartener going on a field trip to the neighborhood hill.

She definitely wasn't like this before - you could tell how deeply these few months of 'cute' lifestyle had settled into Nuer.

"Hmph. Even though it looks like this, it's top-grade Arachne silk. It definitely protects the areas it covers. This bag is also a void space relic, and the wand is an artifact specially made with a unicorn's soul stone. Besides, I'm your senior in labyrinth exploration. Have you been to the lower levels of the labyrinth? I have!"

The fortunate thing was that despite looking completely devoted to cuteness on the outside, there was still a solid elite magician inside.

After all, she was a magician I sought out purely for her skills.

Come to think of it, with Jubeel also in the party, this level of uniqueness was acceptable.

"Here's the advance payment."

I received the money pouch Yonel Freya handed over and placed another object in front of her.

Yonel Freya tilted her head at the safe that fit perfectly in one hand.

"...What's this?"

"Remember the compensation I mentioned before? I'd like you to use it to open this safe."

"I thought you'd ask for rewards like gold coins or artifacts, but this is unexpected. What's in it?"

"It's a safe that belonged to Bio, the head of the back alley clan."

"Hmm. Something that belonged to that sloth worshipper's underling..."

—Give it back! That's a precious item that someone like you shouldn't have...!

Recalling Bio's words when I took this, whatever was in this safe clearly had considerable value.

That's why I tried everything to open this safe.

I tried hitting it with full force, even had it go through Bunny's stomach and come out...but the safe only got slightly scratched and showed no signs of opening.

Bio was someone who wouldn't reveal how to open the safe even under death threats.

Since I couldn't find a way to open the safe on my own, I planned to entrust it to the Vice Union Leader, who knows many things and is quite favorable to me.

"Bio was the one who supplied all sorts of poisons and seed-spreading men for the sloth worshipper's beast experiments. If it's something that person valued, there must be something to it. Alright. I'll look for a way to open this, so look forward to good news."

"I'll be counting on you."

After finishing such simple business, I left the Vice Union Leader's office with Nuer.

Checking the money pouch received as advance payment showed 30 gold coins.

Since I'd be sharing the risks of this request with party members, I needed to distribute it fairly.

"I'll give you the money later combined with the completion reward."

"You're confident. I guess you're certain you'll return alive from the labyrinth?"

"If I want to receive solid cash instead of afterlife travel money, I have to survive no matter what."

Nuer smirked at my response.

"It's not bad for a party leader to have moderate confidence. The schedule is tomorrow morning, right?"

"Yes. Please don't be late."

"I'm good at keeping appointments! Anyway, I got it."

Leaving behind Nuer who was walking away bouncing while waving her magic wand, I headed to Zirnier's weapon shop workshop.

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"Ah, Intermediate Explorer Balkan? Master Zirnier has been waiting for you."

Now even the weapon shop employee recognized me.

Without me even mentioning it, rumors had spread about Jubeel, Lammel who left the party, I had risen to intermediate explorers, and I also visited the workshop quite often.

Following the guidance of Zirnier's mechanical arm trio to the underground workshop, I saw Zirnier with her arms crossed amid the hot air flowing from the furnace.

Having found a replacement mask, Zirnier, who had her mask hanging diagonally on her forehead, waved at me.

"Ah, you came? ...What's this? Why aren't you wearing the mask I gave you last time?"

As Zirnier said, I was currently wearing a helmet instead of the mask she gave me.

"Well, it felt somewhat strange."

While the mask's performance was certainly excellent, it had been an item Zirnier always wore.

When breathing, when eating, when drinking beer and other alcohol...

Maybe because we were born from the same egg, thinking about wearing a mask that had been 24-hour close contact marinating with Zirnier's face that resembled Celsia's...my erection wouldn't stop.

"I gave it to you so wear it. If you're not going to wear it, give it back. These are uncomfortable. That mask was definitely more comfortable."

"I'll wear it. By the way, is that possibly...?"

Turning my eyes away from Zirnier who was fiddling with her replacement mask while complaining, I looked at the armor in front of her.

Full body armor and helmet with an appropriate harmony of grey and black, not just smooth but somewhat rough...

Like dragon scales with splits.

"Is that, that thing?"

"Yes. That's right. Your new armor. I promised to make it for you last time."

Although I had the magic armor I learned from Idelbert, using it for long periods in the labyrinth carried too many risks including mana consumption.

The existence of armor was still essential, and Zirnier had promised to craft armor for me when we met at the royal palace last time.

Looking at the armor that exuded a fierce and wild aura rather than the restrained energy of royal knights or temple paladins, admiration naturally burst forth.

It was a perfect appearance that could make a non-existent womb throb with excitement.

"Tsk."

Nevertheless, Zirnier was glaring at the dark armor with an expression of dissatisfaction somewhere.

"But it's still incomplete. I've been making it bit by bit for a while, but time was short and...above all, mixing relic alloy with dragon soul stone fragments turned out to be trickier than expected."

"Dragon soul stone fragments?"

"Yes. I mixed in a little like when I made your axe Bunny. I can't give you ordinary items after all...ahem, hem. Anyway. Maybe I was too greedy. I think I'll need to work on it more later."

I could roughly understand what appeared lacking in Zirnier's eyes.

A dim light was emanating from the armor.

It was evidence that the armor stood between a relic and an artifact.

As an artifact, it had incomparably superior value to ordinary armor, but not as good as relics, which are byproducts of the labyrinth.

Nevertheless, it was equipment that would make even intermediate, no, advanced explorers drool with desire, but Zirnier with her excellent craftsmanship seemed unsatisfied even with that level.

"Is even this level not enough?"

"Of course. At this level, it would break even in the lower levels, let alone the deep levels. It needs a lot more reinforcement."

"It seems sufficient for my immediate use though."

"Still, I can't be satisfied with this level. I want the equipment I make to reach the end of the labyrinth."

"......"

I swallowed at Zirnier's words because I knew how difficult, no, nearly impossible that task was.

It's too difficult to reach the magnificent end of the labyrinth with mere artifacts made by human hands.

That's also why advanced explorers have higher demand for relic equipment compared to intermediate or lower ranks.

Of course, equipment made by artifact craftsmen who can be counted on one hand in the labyrinth city are exceptions.

"Every blacksmith in the labyrinth city lives with one wish. To make weapons that work even at the end of the labyrinth. I'm no different."

That seemed to be why Zirnier was so happy after making Bunny into a relic axe.

After all, ordinary artifact equipment that isn't relic-grade will inevitably face its limits someday.

"...That's a difficult dream. There are hardly any people who've reached the end of the labyrinth in the first place."

"Hmm. Well. How many floors of the labyrinth have you gone to, Balkan?"

"I'm going to the 19th floor this time."

At that answer, the corners of Zirnier's mouth lifted slightly.

"You've come almost halfway. They say the beginning is half the battle, but you've come more than halfway, so you must be almost at the end."

"You want me to fulfill that dream?"

"Of course. I'm invested in you. I've already made one of my life's masterpieces for you."

-Buwoong.

For some reason, Bunny on my back shuddered as if screaming not to talk nonsense.

Even putting aside Bunny's fierce opinion, this is good for me.

What could be bad about maintaining connections with such a skilled blacksmith as Zirnier, and moreover with the kingdom's First Princess, though her identity is hidden?

"...But this armor, the purchase budget seems like it might go over more than expected."

"Hey, what money? I'm a blacksmith so I make equipment for you, and you're a warrior so you wear my equipment and reach the end of the labyrinth. ...Ah. But you still have to pay repair costs."

I looked at Zirnier who was holding out her fist while speaking as if joking.

Zirnier, who became able to make relics with human hands, broke through her limits and now it's my turn to fulfill her dream.

Zirnier seemed certain that I could reach the end of the labyrinth.

"Hurry. My arm's getting tired."

She shook her fist as if telling me to bump it quickly.

I also smiled and bumped my fist against hers.

It wasn't just for Zirnier's dream.

I had to head toward the end of the labyrinth for my own purpose of finding my younger sister as well.

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I returned to the inn room wearing the incomplete armor.

Though called incomplete, it's an artifact armor, just short of becoming a relic.

Durability that would only get slightly dented even when struck by Bunny.

Already a passing grade in that it weighs less than half of ordinary full plate armor.

Movement was also comfortable as it was custom-made to fit my body shape, with Zirnier having measured even my thigh and penis length.

Moreover, it even secured convenience through self-repair unless severely damaged thanks to having maintenance magic applied.

Though I got slightly scolded for testing the newly made equipment too roughly, it's the most satisfying armor I've acquired so far.

If it's this satisfying now, what kind of item will it become when completed as a relic later?

After suppressing my trembling lips that couldn't contain the excitement, I took off the armor and started organizing the room.

Diana will also join this labyrinth trip to open Cozy Winter Night Inn Branch 2 in Eden on the 15th floor.

Since she said she would prepare a separate room for me there as well, I was thinking of bringing some clothes to keep there.

I definitely opened the closet with such thoughts but.

-Clatter!

A rattling sound came from deep inside the closet.

Two items were sleeping under that closet.

One was the small doll received from the puppeteer.

And the other was...the cloth wrapping the head of Anya, the girlfriend of Jeremy who left to find the rumored resurrection miracle on the 19th floor.

-Clatter! Clatter!

That cloth suddenly started shaking violently, shaking the entire closet.

I quickly took out the cloth and checked what was inside then blankly opened my mouth.

"......Crazy."

On the eyelids of that half-rotting head, blue ghost flowers had bloomed.