**Chapter 249: Familiar and different Parties (8)**

There was a girl named Anya.

She was my first official party member in my first labyrinth exploration, and an ill-fated girl who died to goblins immediately after entering the labyrinth.

Jeremy, who went mad at the death of Anya, his childhood friend and girlfriend, entrusted her head to me and left to search for a miracle of resurrection.

-Tick. Tick. Tick.

However, Anya's head, which should have been dead, was clicking its jaw while emitting blue spirit flames.

"What is this?"

A stupid-sounding voice came out at the utterly baffling situation.

Did the resurrection miracle really exist? I thought it was just a mere rumor...

But I soon shook my head. No matter how I looked at it, this wasn't a normal resurrection.

I found myself staring at Anya's head, now covered in blue spirit flames.

'The status window won't appear.'

The status window applies even to corpses. Whether alive or dead, Anya's status window should have appeared.

But Anya's status window didn't appear before my eyes.

It was evidence that she had become something other than human... like a monster.

"My goodness. It's a Dullahan, isn't it?"

When I took the head to Diana for answers, the answer came immediately.

Despite me bringing a half-rotting human head, Diana, a former explorer, just calmly observed it.

-Tickticktickticktickticktick.

Anya's head clicked its jaw whenever it made eye contact with Diana, who showed signs of interest.

Seeing the blue spirit flames fluctuating unstably, it seemed to be instinctively frightened after sensing Diana's power.

"A Dullahan?"

"It's one of the undead monsters that black mages control. It's a monster that must either be raised through necromancy from a person whose neck was torn off, or captured and tamed in the labyrinth... But why is this here? Surely not like last time, did someone send a familiar—"

"That's not it. It's a bit complicated to explain..."

I briefly explained about Anya and Jeremy to Diana, who was examining the Dullahan-turned Anya with a questioning gaze.

"Even for a black mage, I've never heard of raising a corpse from far away...It seems this Jeremy child must have had a truly deep bond with this Anya child. It would be impossible otherwise."

I recalled what Amel Drexia, the black mage I met in Eden, had said.

'A talented junior who was desperately trying to revive his dead girlfriend had joined, and went on an expedition to the 19th floor with another party.'

Though there was no physical evidence, I was certain that the junior was Jeremy.

Did he perhaps obtain some opportunity in the 19th floor where the Elder Lich who wields necromancy exists?

That's something I can't know without knowing the situation over there.

The problem now is...

'What should I do with Anya?'

Jeremy had asked me to safely keep Anya's head.

It was an easy task when she was just a corpse. I could just stash it away in a corner of the wardrobe.

But now that she's become a Dullahan monster, it's difficult.

I have no means to control a monster since I'm not a black mage.

It might be better to split that head in half now while the Dullahan appears powerless.

-Tick. Tick.

Moreover, Anya kept trying to go somewhere while clicking her jaw.

Looking at the direction she was trying to go, it was the labyrinth entrance where the labyrinth entry portal opens.

"The undead are highly sensitive to their master's will. Doesn't this mean the black mage who raised this child is calling for her from within the labyrinth?"

"Does that mean Jeremy is in danger?"

"Hmm. I can't be certain about that. They might just want to see this child."

Diana said this with a gentle smile, her eyes warmly crinkled.

"Even now I feel loneliness just from someone being far away. I can understand that feeling. Besides, since she's not showing any particularly threatening behavior, wouldn't it be fine to just watch over her?"

When Diana carefully stroked the Dullahan Anya's head, its jaw began clicking faster and the blue spirit flames gradually began to fade.

Eventually, Anya's drooping head slipped back into the wrapping cloth.

"Oh my. Did she faint?"

"...It seems so."

Seeing Diana who could make an undead faint just by stroking it, it seemed there was no possibility of Dullahan Anya causing any trouble as long as she was around.

Moreover, if Jeremy really did revive Anya as an undead...keeping her safe would be the right thing to do according to the promise.

There was no point in thinking about it further, so I thought about other matters.

There were four main things to do in the labyrinth this time.

First and most importantly, hunting the Elder Lich.

Second, delivering the orb containing Celsia's blessing to the Demon of Sloth.

Third, helping with the opening of Diana's second inn, and fourth, delivering Serif's letter to Idelbert.

Hunt monsters, Ellieminate crises, lay foundations in new territory and prepare for what's next.

And while we're at it, searching for past connections would be fine to add.

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The next morning, I headed to the temple and received a letter from Serif.

-Sniff sniff.

"...? The letter has a strangely odd smell."

"Hya! Is, is that so...?"

"Well, it must be my imagination. I'll make sure to deliver the letter to Master."

"Yes. Please be careful too, Lord Balkan. Don't get hurt. Please."

Receiving such a heartwarming farewell, I smiled and waved my hand, and Serif carefully waved back while tapping the ground with her pure white cat tail.

"...La-Lady Serif...?"

Nate Ellien, who was watching Serif's shy face from the side, raised a question mark above her head with a surprised expression, but her voice quickly disappeared behind the carriage.

At the small open space behind the inn where laundry was usually hung stood party members with unfamiliar yet familiar faces, equipped with the gear and supplies needed for labyrinth exploration.

The cow beastkin swordsman Jubeel.

The blonde twin-drill noble lady tank Rubia.

The mentally regressed dark elf mage Nuer.

My personal slave and guide cum close/long-range supporter Denshi.

And me, the axe warrior.

The party balance isn't too bad, though it feels slightly combat-heavy without a priest.

It gave me a strange feeling seeing how little remained of the Joy Hog party days except for Jubeel.

This is 'my party,' my party that is familiar yet different.

From now on, I must explore the labyrinth with them.

And this time, there are two more joining us besides them, the mother-daughter pair Ellie and Diana.

Diana to prepare a second inn location cum new residence in Eden on the 15th floor, and Ellie...

"Ellie. The portal?"

To experiment with new portal magic.

"Just need to flow mana! Should I open it now?"

When I nodded, Ellie, who was standing in front of a magic circle with strange patterns, began emanating mana.

The concentrated mana that burst from her body flowed along the strange patterns of the magic circle, creating a crack in its center.

Along with an illusion as if space itself was collapsing, an oval black portal eventually appeared in the center of the magic circle.

"Wow shit. Why does that actually open? If I wasn't being careful, the meridians and milk ducts might have opened too."

"It's really similar to the portal that the Dimensional Duke opened during the palace raid. If we could just freely open portals like this, just think what we could do... Girl! I'm so surprised right now!"

"What's that? Waah... I don't know about such things, scary......"

"......She can use such magic?"

Though I had mentioned it beforehand, the party members and Denshi expressed amazed reactions with their mouths wide open at the sight of Ellie opening the portal.

Seeing their surprised expressions, especially Denshi's, Ellie wiped away the sweat she shed from using so much mana and made a proud expression.

Then she immediately came up to me, thrust out her perky chest, and grinned.

Seeing her appearance as if asking to be praised, I firmly grasped her long elf ears along with her breasts.

"Hyak! Hng, uh... no-not there. Here. Hehe..."

Startled by my touch, Ellie grabbed my hands with embarrassment and moved them to her red hair while showing a satisfied smile.

Meanwhile, she left the hand holding her left breast alone, as if having her breasts fondled by me in front of others wasn't entirely unpleasant.

Although Ellie pretends otherwise, she cares quite a bit about others' opinions, so perhaps she feels a strange sense of superiority showing off like this.

Seeing her appearance that couldn't go without praise, I vigorously stroked her head while saying:

"It seems more stable than when you opened it last time?"

"Hehe. Because I did lots of preparation and reinforcement. I still don't fully understand portal magic, but I found some gaps. Do you remember when we collected mana samples while going around the labyrinth portals?"

"Of course. It was your second labyrinth exploration. We collected mana samples up to the 12th floor."

It was also when Ellie and Denshi first met.

"Yes. After experimenting several times, I found I could somehow move to the floors where we collected mana samples."

In other words, the portal Ellie opens now can serve as a passage that can reach up to the 12th floor.

"It's different from the labyrinth entry portal that opens at the labyrinth entrance. That portal is more stable than the one I opened, and drops from the 1st floor. But what I opened will drop randomly among floors 1 through 12, so you need to prepare more thoroughly."

"Right...But, are you really sure it's okay to come along?"

Ellie said she would join this labyrinth trip to experiment with portal magic and collect mana samples from other floors.

If she collects mana samples from other floors, she can improve the portal to eventually transfer to deeper floors.

"Royal mages can substitute work with labyrinth exploration if we just notify in advance. Moreover, when it comes to portal magic research, it has even more value."

"That's not what I'm asking about."

"Brother."

When I spoke with concern, Ellie looked at me and grinned.

"I'm not just a pubescent kid anymore, you know? Now I'm a proper mage who can help brother like this."

"...You brat."

"Ububub...hehit."

At that endearing yet worrying appearance, I messed up her red hair vigorously, and Ellie grinned while putting on her wide-brimmed mage hat.

Leaving Ellie for a moment, I greeted someone who was watching us from a few steps away.

"Belle. You have to guard the inn well while we're gone, okay?"

"Yes, my lord. My lord's command. Belle will definitely protect it!"

Belle, who was sitting on the ice box artifact containing 100 sandwiches made by Diana, nodded her head vigorously.

She decided to stay at the inn instead of participating in this labyrinth trip.

Although Diana placed her connections and artifacts to protect the inn, I felt somehow uneasy since the worshipper of lust knows this location.

But I'm somewhat relieved if Belle is guarding it.

-Clank. Clank.

After finishing greetings with Belle, I did a final equipment check.

I had preserved food and map artifacts up to the 20th floor.

Since we don't have a priest, I wanted to stock up on more potions than usual, but perhaps other parties were in similar situations—I could only obtain four high-grade healing potions and a few antidotes.

Even these quantities were barely obtained for five gold coins, making me sigh inside, but I was somewhat relieved since the new full body armor made by Zirnier would serve as a new lifeline instead.

-Shing.

"Is everyone ready?"

I asked the party members while adjusting Bunny on my back and the artifact axe at my waist.

"Of course, master!"

"Kiyahoo!!"

"Waah. I suddenly want to go home..."

"Hawawa...! May this time also be full of new adventures!"

"Mmm. Balkan's party is lively..."

Making physical contact with the party members who each muttered something, we crossed through the portal Ellie opened.

The fresh air of the surface instantly fades away, replaced by sticky blood smell and suffocating silence.

Along with a cold that cuts into flesh we dropped once again into that place of bitter cold.

However, our party's current strength was enough to call the mere 12th floor nothing.

Just four days later we reached Eden on the 15th floor.