**Chapter 57: Taking a short break (2)**

Let's summarize our gains this time.

First, we have a blessing. Unfortunately, it wasn't mine.

"Alas~ I didn't want to use it in a place like this!"

Cow girl Swordsman Jubeel drew her sword with one arm and struck a bizarre pose.

"Sword kii-ii-ii-ii-ii-i!"

The sword was gently drawn from its scabbard, and a mysterious aura began to emanate from it.

"Ooh, that’s the Aura!"

"Ah. I got it from the brink of death. Damn. Getting one blessing is insanely tough."

"Kuhahaha! You look terribly shabby! Your heart is rotten!"

"Why does such a precious blessing go to a young cow that only squirts milk every single day...?"

"Ahhh. If I get something like this, they're going to ask me to become a mid-level explorer - what am I supposed to do with it, hahahaha!"

The explorers around us either admired or laughed at this sudden turn of events in the center of the inn.

"Jubeel obtained a blessing called Aura Blade, during this labyrinth expedition."

[Jubeel LV.24]

[Blessings and curses currently held by Jubeel: 1]

[◆ Blessing of the Enlightened Sword]

- You gain insight into the nature of the sword.

- You gain the ability to use basic sword techniques.

- Wisdom +1 Finesse +5

The full name in the status bar is Blessing of the Enlightened Sword, but who cares.

-Tsk, tsk.

I applauded.

It was a shitty move, but a cause for celebration. They say there is no blessing more precious to a warrior or swordsman than that.

‘You must be extremely gifted to realize it on your own.’

It's a very rare thing, and it's usually earned by luck.

It's like buying a lottery ticket out of habit every day and hoping to win, and then praying to be blessed.

Jubeel miraculously won the lottery.

"Balkan, you're the only one. Sweaty women are jealous and sneer at me! In return, I'll give you my breast milk. Drink it sparingly."

"I really, truly don't need it."

"Do you⋯?"

Jubeel slumped her shoulders and turned to leave.

Explorers' blessings can vary in performance, even those with the same name, and Jubeel’s sword energy was quite dull, so it didn't look like it was going to perform well.

"Ouch! No, my scabbard!!!!"

Nevertheless, Sword Aura was a Tier 1 Blessing.

Jubeel lost control of her blessing and cut her scabbard while trying to lead her sword.

That kind of sharpness, even with just a touch, is a crazy performance.

I shook off my envy by looking away.

I shouldn't be interested in what others have already eaten. Now I need to focus on what I'm going to get.

"First, let's settle the silver from the monster hunt."

The price for each monster I killed while escorting the students was 25 silver coins per person.

This time, the amount was similar to the last time, even though I went as the main combatant. We hadn't gone to the Labyrinth to hunt in the first place.

Besides, the main event here wasn't worth this kind of money.

"Two gold coins, paid by the academy as a reward for the successful request!"

"Yippee! Yippee!"

"Aaahhhh!!!"

Jubeel and Lammel whistled, Hitolis prayed to Earth Mother again, and Gregor just grunted.

Two gold coins. The nearly four weeks of hard travel had been well worth it.

During the first month in this world, I've saved about twenty silver pieces from my part-time job at Diana's tavern, and now in a month I've made nearly ten times that amount.

Sure, it was ten times harder than the inn job, but it was a breath of fresh air.

With this kind of money, I can afford to live comfortably, even if I'm only a beginner explorer and have a decent weapon.

"And now, here's the problem⋯"

But that wasn't even the main part of the settlement.

The party members, who had been whistling and boisterous just moments before, swallowed nervously, because of a rarely dropped treasure and an essential ingredient for crafting artifacts.

Its value was no secret.

The soul stone of a 7th floor minotaur and not just any minotaur, but the soul stone of a special entity.

"I've been an explorer for three years, but I've never gotten a minotaur soul stone before."

"This is even an unusual one⋯"

There you go.

Pfft.

So, don't give me that look.

"⋯Balkan. You decide what to do with this."

Joy Hog and the rest of the party drooled and asked.

"Even the party members who had readily declared 'It's yours' for the Hobgoblin soul stone, perhaps to gain favor, seemed to covet this.

Normally, the reward for slaying a monster is paid at a rate determined by the party, and when an artifact or soul stone is acquired, the person who contributed the most to the acquisition is the one who gets it.

If the contributions are uneven, there's usually a big fight, but in this case, it's clear who contributed the most.

Who scooped up the minotaur, who won the battle, who stomped the most minotaurs, and whose slain monster spat out the soul stone.

"Hmmm. Let's start settling up, shall we?"

Without hesitation, I reached out and grabbed the soul stone of the boss minotaur.

This one is mine for now.

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"Woooo⋯ Milk tureen⋯"

"Gathering the sources of wind and fire into one place⋯"

"Alcohol! Bring me more alcohol!"

"Mother Earth Goddess⋯ there⋯ there⋯ ouch!"

"Grrrr!"

I organized the five unruly drunks.

I put the milking cow in a corner, gagged the harpy who started chanting at the top of her lungs, knocked out the drunken dwarf, and put the cat priest with the wild look on her face next to Lizardgirl.

All of them looked amused and satisfied.

'As it should be, after all the sacrifices I've made.’

I remembered their faces when they'd been told to divide the other one among themselves, unable to hide the smiles on their faces as if they'd reaped an unexpected harvest.

There are few things that can cause more headaches and frustration than a relationship gone awry over money.

It was a small price to pay to buy the trust of the higher powers among the lower explorers and prevent future problems.

"Are those the new party members?"

Diana smiled as she came out of the kitchen and watched me move the party members.

She hadn't even made eye contact with me yesterday when she came down from the second floor with a mop drenched in sticky liquid, but she seemed to have recovered somewhat over the past day or so.

"Yeah. They're pretty nice people."

"Hoo-hoo. That's good. It's always good to have good people around you, it'll help you in the future."

Diana then asked coyly.

"So, did that spoiled⋯ no, I mean, bratty⋯ kid from the other day get away?"

A spoiled, unruly child. A child who ran away. I can guess who it is even if I hear it roughly.

But the words were a little rough for Diana.

'Maybe it's because she's been hitting on her since the first meeting.’

Diana, whose age is unknown, pretended not to be, but she was bothered by her.

"Somehow, it just happened."

Where is she now?

[Currently owned slave: Denshi (LV.20)]

I don't know, but she leveled up a lot since the last time I checked.

It was a phenomenal growth rate and she'd have to be at least on the 8th floor to get this kind of growth.

To gain a lot of experience points, one needs to go that much deeper into the labyrinth, but Grumpy couldn't possibly have strong backup to cover for her.

‘She's enemies with the outlaw Bloods Clan she used to belong to, and even if she finds a party, this kind of speed is...’

Suddenly, I remembered Grumpy’s curse.

[◆ The Curse of the 1389th Puppet]

- Denshi became the 1389th puppet.

While blessings and curses are beyond human understanding, this curse is even more mysterious.

Every outlaw or reformed explorer I've ever met has a very high probability of having this curse even if they weren't even aware of it.

But according to the letter Jeremy had handed me, Grumpy had gone off somewhere, saying she needed strength to protect me.

'She moved with a clear intention.'

At that point, I realized that she was aware of the puppet's curse so she most likely went to the Outlaw Zone.

There, her rapid growth would make sense if she was being helped by puppets of the same level or even higher up the chain.

‘What's the curse?’

At first, I had a feeling of disgust at the curse, like something outlaws would have, but now I was just genuinely curious.

‘But at this point, poking around might just backfire.’

There's something I've been feeling desperately lately.

I am weak.

[Nam Soo-jin LV.16]

[Stamina:(8+10) Strength:(8+10) Agility:(7+10) Wisdom:(0) Finesse:(0)]

[Free Points: 3]

I've gained four levels on this trip through the Labyrinth.

I haven't used any of my free points yet, as I gained three levels of experience in one fell swoop by killing a group of minotaurs.

I think I've done more than enough for one of the lower level explorers.

'Still, I'm weak.’

Diana, Idelbert, Zernier, Serif, the Royal Knight, and others.

Perhaps it's because I've met too many powerful people lately, but my confidence is a bit low.

The lower explorer ranks aren't the only ones.

There are intermediate, advanced, and even the highest, of which there are only three in the Labyrinth City.

'If you count the renegade outlaws and the branded, there will be many more.’

There is power above and my hunch is that those associated with the Puppet's Curse will be quite strong.

Not just those like Deluna and Derucio who don't even recognize the curse, but the more informed ones.

In the end, it all boils down to one thing.

Whether it's exploring the labyrinth or answering questions.

‘First, I have to be strong, then I can do anything.’

And I've always been on a quest to get stronger.

In the end, it's just a combination of training and exploring the labyrinth as usual.

After finishing my work at the inn, I lay down on my fluffy bed, thinking about what I had to do tomorrow.

Perhaps my mind was overworked, but sleep came quickly.

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Craftsmen don't blame their equipment but that's because her equipment is the best of the best.

If a beginner gets their hands on a master's equipment, they may not be able to make rapid progress, but at least they won't blame the equipment.

If you get the right equipment right first, you'll be able to improve purely on your skills so I went to get some gear.

In front of me is an awe-inspiring luxury weapon shop.

The best weapons shop in the Labyrinth City, where Zirnier’s weapons are displayed in all their glory.

A place I wouldn't have set foot in if Zernier hadn't offered to make me a weapon.

From what I've heard, Zirnier’s workshop is in the back.

My helmet is a bit tattered from recent battles and I wonder if she could repair it.