**Chapter 17: The story of how the party fell apart (2)**

The party is ruined, and the goblins are gone. I guess I'll have to wait for another opportunity to make money in the Labyrinth.

‘Though I didn't come here for money in the first place.’

I came to the Labyrinth to explore and investigate, not to make money.

The priest and Anya are dead. All that remains is a crazed spearman and a good, kind-hearted warrior.

We can no longer continue exploring the Labyrinth.

I unfold the map of the first floor that the armored knight had graciously handed over.

The map automatically displayed my current location.

'It's a long way to the escape portal...'

I wasn't in the deepest part of the first floor, but I was in the middle of it, an area where small to medium-sized goblin dens occasionally lie in ambush.

For some reason, I remembered the first time I was trapped in the Labyrinth.

I'd wandered for days before reaching the portal. At least four days, I think.

'But things are different compared to then.’

The biggest difference is food.

I had plenty of drinking water and preserved food, and I was well equipped.

‘There's one risk, though⋯’

I glanced over at Jeremy, who’s been driven mad by grief over the loss of his lover and has made irreversible choices.

[Jeremy LV.1]

[Stamina:(2) Strength:(3) Agility:(3) Wisdom:(0) Finesse:(3)]

[Blessings and Curses currently held by Jeremy: 0]

Based on the stats, he'll never beat me.

‘But you never know.’

The status window doesn't take into account variables like fatigue, health, and alertness.

I wonder if it's worth the risk to stick with him.

‘If I abandon him, he'll die nine times out of ten.’

Either he gets raped by a goblin and dies of pleasure, or he can't handle the grief of losing his girlfriend and kills himself.

I thought about it for about ten seconds. It was long enough for the urgency of the situation.

Uncomfortable cohabitation with a male companion vs. an arduous march alone + the risk of being raped defenselessly by goblins while exhausted + the possibility of being attacked by females who want to rape me and being sold into slavery.

Unfortunately, living in Valerus for the past month has shown me just how ridiculously slaves are treated.

A life of little more than livestock or tools, with no respect for even minimal human rights.

Dramatically, the weight tilted slightly.

"Damn. In a way, I saved you, so if you have any conscience, you won't stab me in the back."

I sighed unnecessarily.

I was never going to trust people easily.

I owe it all to Diana, who restored my waning warmth.

"Keruk, keruk, keruk!"

I could hear the goblins' cries in the distance.

Well, it's more curious that they weren't attracted after all that noise.

"Yeah. Come on."

Now it's his turn.

\*\*\*

Tadak. Tadak.

Jeremy opened his eyes slowly at the sound of the bonfire.

He was immediately confronted by a wall of bleary-eyed, desperate goblins.

"Hiiiit!"

"You're awake now."

A low voice echoed through the cavern as he backed away in surprise.

"⋯Mr. Balkan⋯?"

"Yes. It's me. But first, let me ask you a question."

Hmph.

Balkan drew his axe as effortlessly as water flows and pointed it at Jeremy.

"You. Do you remember everything? Think straight and tell me, or I'll dump you if you have another seizure and delirium."

"What? I remember? I remember?"

Jeremy knew immediately what he meant.

No. My love. My light. The light that has been with me since we were very young has been eclipsed by darkness, and my sun will never rise again.

Nam Soo-Jin lowered his head and looked at Jeremy, who was choking on a breath and didn't know whether to laugh or cry.

‘Is he crazy? Should I kill him after all?’

I could end up like Adolf, with a hole in the neck, if I make a mistake.

I confiscated the spear, but who knows, he might lunge at me with his bare hands.

I gripped my axe and cautiously approached him.

"Anya's⋯ dead, isn't she?"

Jeremy said, his head still bowed.

"Yes, she is. Dead. And Adolf is dead, too. You killed her."

"⋯⋯"

Nam Soo-jin simply stated the facts but Jeremy’s strange silence lasted for a long time.

He was thinking about the disaster he had caused. Driven mad by the death of a loved one, he had made an irreparable mistake.

After a long moment of silence, Jeremy spoke, his voice shaking.

"Knife, can you give me one?"

"A knife? Why would I give you a knife?"

I flicked the knife over in case he suddenly turned and tried to stab me.

I look at Jeremy, frowning.

His eyes are cold. The dead eyes, as they're called.

"You're going to kill yourself?"

"Yes."

The answer was unhesitating, a voice without the slightest regret for the life ahead.

"I, I⋯ am⋯ no longer worth living⋯"

‘⋯That's a bit of a loss.’

I defended him against a dozen goblins alone so I can use him in battle.

I wasn't expecting it, but he was so determined that I was momentarily at a loss for words.

I thought. “How could I get him to stop thinking about suicide and fight a monster?”

"You're not even a man. Just die."

"⋯Yes?"

-Boom!

I tossed a dagger in front of Jeremy. He stared at the dagger and me in confusion.

"What are you doing? I gave you the dagger, now use it. Your loved one is dead, and now you're talking about killing yourself instead of avenging her death, and I'm running out of steam."

Flash!

Jermi felt a shock as if a bolt of lightning had passed through his body at those words.

‘Revenge!’

Why hadn't he thought of that, and why hadn't he lunged for Anya when she died?

What had he done in the immediate aftermath of the battle? He was too shocked and frightened to move.

It was the man in front of him who saved him from freezing to death.

If he hadn't helped him, he would have watched Anya's death for nothing and died himself.

I think of Anya with her head impaled by a goblin.

At the same time, I remembered the goblin smirking as it pierced her head.

-Ugh!

My teeth gnashed in unbridled rage.

‘I have to kill all the goblins.’

Nam Soo-Jin shuddered and gripped his sword, and he felt Jeremy’s mood change in an instant.

His empty eyes, which held nothing, began to burn hot with a dark rage and purpose.

Even without opening his mouth, I could tell he had made up his mind about something.

I can only hope it's on the right path.

"Are you awake now?"

"Yes. Thanks to you. Thank you, brother."

‘For giving me something to live for.’

Jeremy bowed his head in gratitude to Balkan.

What else could I call the person who not only saved my life but also made me realize the purpose of my existence, other than 'Brother'?

‘Surely, my harsh words were because I was feeling pathetic and frustrated.’

How could I not be grateful?

"What do you mean by 'Brother'? Don't kill the mood. It sounds gay."

Nam Soo-jin said that and handed over the spear and watch.

"This, this⋯?"

Jeremy took the spear and looked at the watch with a puzzled face.

"From now on, you're in charge. Wake me in three hours."

It was already 23:00 and fatigue was creeping in.

I remembered Diana's advice to take care of myself.

'I won't be able to eat Diana's hot rice tomorrow morning⋯'

Nam Soo-jin thought to himself and went straight to sleep.

\*\*\*

"⋯So. No, wait. Say that again. What?"

"We're going to revive her."

I looked at Jeremy, who was shouting something insane.

He was holding Anya's head in his hands, a head that had been neatly severed near the neck.

It was a compromise, since it would be a long way to carry the whole body.

"We'll go up to the surface, get the incorruptibility enchantment on Anya's head, explore the labyrinth, and get the miracle of raising the dead."

"⋯⋯"

The Labyrinth is full of mysteries and secrets. There are blessings and curses beyond human understanding.

No one could say for sure that somewhere in this wide and deep labyrinth, the miracle of raising the dead did not exist.

It didn't matter if there really was a way to bring people back.

What mattered was the hope that there was.

"Okay. Do whatever you want. You take care of the head."

"Yes, brother. Let's go. Do you need help with the backpack?"

"⋯⋯"

I feel like I'm losing my mind. But let's stay positive. Didn't I say that I couldn't leave Anya behind?

I quietly searched Adolf's body.

I didn't plan on looting the body, I just needed something to prove she was dead.

I couldn't just cut off her ears like a goblin, so I grabbed her staff and the cross necklace she wore around her neck.

"I'll take your food, just in case. I'll eat well."

After a moment of silence for the dead Adolf, I plucked the goblin's ear, stuffed it into my pack, and resumed my walk.

\*\*\*

After a full night of hunting goblins through the labyrinth, I realized something.

‘This is better than I thought.’

I carefully distributed my stamina. There was no need to rush, and thanks to Adolf and Anya's sacrifices, we had plenty of food.

I glanced at Diana's watch, rested appropriately, and headed for the escape portal.

-Tsk!

A few goblins were no longer my greatest foe.

'Come to think of it, I had more of a problem with food and exhaustion than goblins to begin with.’

Unless dozens of them attacked at the same time, like when I entered the lair, fatigue was mostly to blame for losing a one-on-one fight.

"There, gotcha, you bastards!"

Jeremy stabbed a goblin with his sharp spear and killed it.

-Pow! Pow! Pow!

One stab wasn't enough, so he stabbed the dead goblin dozens of times.

It was a one-on-one fight, but he barely got it.

As expected, even at level 1 without any additional stats, goblins are not to be underestimated.

'⋯Then I⋯'

A question flashed through my mind, and I tucked it away.

Don't inflate your delusions for nothing, focus on the reality in front of you.

Jeremy's combat prowess, while paltry, was still useful.

I've noticed this before, but it's definitely easier with a party.

It takes some of the pressure off, but most importantly, it gives me a chance to rest.

"Let's call it a day and take a break. Help me build the goblin wall."

"Yes, brother!"

Jeremy had been calling me "Brother" ever since the suicide ruckus. I'd told him not to, but he kept doing it, so I just let him be.

"Ugh, I'm so fucking tired."

I was just saying that it was more manageable than I thought it would be with a party, but that didn't mean it wasn't hard.

My body stiffened as I walked, wary of anything that might happen at any moment.

The fatigue accumulated quickly as I kept walking.

‘Come to think of it, Grumpy was quite good at scouting.’

Perhaps it's because she's both an archer and a ranger, but she had an astonishing ability to find monsters.

I couldn't see a trace of where she might have fled to now, but sometimes, mixed in with memories of attempted rape and my first party experience, I did think about her.

“Brother, go to bed first. I will stand guard.”

I didn't say no. It was true that I was a little tired because I killed nearly 30 goblins today.

[Nam Soo-jin LV.4]

 [Free Points: 4 points]

I leveled up. For some reason, the experience points needed to level up seemed to be getting bigger.

'Is this the limit of the first floor?’

It seemed like there was a limit to how strong I could get with just goblins.

I leaned my head against the ground, thinking that next time I entered the Labyrinth, I'd get a more normal party and aim for the second floor or higher.

I heard footsteps and not just one or two, at least four.

‘Thirty meters away, seven to be exact.’

My senses, enhanced by the Great Helm, told me exactly where they were and how many.

I reflexively rose to my feet and drew my axe from my waistband.

"Jeremy. Grab your spear."

"What?"

"Grab the spear!"

My yell startled Jeremy, but he grabbed the spear anyway.

I poked my helmeted head over the goblin wall.

"Holy shit⋯"

I'd found one fatal flaw in the goblin wall.

If you don't have damn good ears, your vision is blocked and you might not be able to spot your opponent.

"⋯Wow. What's going on, we see each other again?"

I recognize the smiling woman from the Explorers' Alliance.

She was the one who invited me to join her party, promising to be nice but I turned her down because her intentions were too obvious.

"Sister. Do you know him?"

"Yeah. I saw him briefly. Very briefly."

A figure stepped out from behind the woman and asked her.

Behind her stood five women armed with swords dripping with blood.

Their armor was spattered with red blood. The atmosphere was eerie.

"⋯Hmph. My eyes were not wrong after all."

The woman's eyes scanned me from the tip of my helmet to my feet, as if appraising me but I couldn't focus on her gaze because the vision was nailed to the woman's lower body.

She looked at me with a shocked face, her head pressed down as if it were a woman's elbow rest.

"Ah, ah."

There she was, the shrew.

"Run away!"

After Grumpy shouted.

-Aaaaah!

With the sound of tearing wind, the woman immediately moved, while I quietly wondered.

[Deluna LV.10]

[Stamina:(2) Strength:(4) Agility:(3) Wisdom:(6+4) Finesse:(5)]

I don't think I'm the one who should be running.