**Chapter 18: The story of how the party fell apart (3)**

"⋯⋯?"

I was about to draw my axe and lunge at the woman, Deluna, when my mouth dropped open, dumbfounded by the sudden turn of events.

"⋯h, eh?"

Grumpy, who had been slapped, looked puzzled as well.

"Fufu⋯Denshi, what do you mean, run away? You make us sound like the bad guys when you say that, don't you?"

Deluna looked down at the shrew with a refreshing smile.

Then she grabbed her by the scruff of the neck, lifted her head, and slapped her hard across the cheek.

"What, if, you, say, that, to, my, dignity, huh?!"

-Puck, puck, puck, puck! Puck!

The sound of a palm slapping her cheek had suddenly turned into a beating with accompanying fists.

A groan of yelps and grunts echoed through the rigid corridor.

No one thought to move in the sudden commotion.

"You've been working for me for so long and you haven't changed a bit, now wake up."

-Poof!

Spit landed on Grumpy's cheek. Bruised and with swollen eyes, Grumpy didn't even think about wiping it off before passing out.

"Ouch. Sis. Didn't you fan her too hard?"

"What? That's what slaves are for. That's why Vesta gave her to me."

"Yeah, well, that's one thing."

The unarmored women bowed to Deluna.

As they dusted off their hands and started talking about things only they knew, I silently assessed the situation.

Seven of them.

Deluna, the woman from the Explorers' Alliance, Grumpy, and five other combatants with drawn swords.

'Deluna is the leader of that group, and the rest are lackeys. Is Grumpy Deluna's slave? And who is Vesta?'

I don't know exactly, but here's what I've been able to piece together.

I didn't really care that Grumpy was being beaten like a dog, I just thought it was a beating.

My only question is, why did they put on such a 'show' in front of us?

"Hiccup."

I soon found out why: a terrified voice came from behind me.

‘Jeremy, you idiot. You walked right into the skit.’

When people see someone getting severely beaten right in front of them, their minds instinctively tend to freeze.

It forces you to do two things: tense up and stiffen up, or make stupid noises like Jeremy did.

After all, the reason she staged the skit was to create a sense of crisis, to psychologically pressure us.

I nudged Jeremy with my heel, and he sucked in his breath.

"Hmph."

Deluna saw the action and smiled broadly.

More precisely, she looked at me gooey-eyed.

I wonder what that smile means, damn it. I wonder if this is what gaze rape feels like.

If I were a woman, I think I would have just gotten pregnant. It was fucking creepy.

"I'm sorry I made a scene. I didn't want to, but now that they got a bigger head, slaves don't listen as well."

Deluna clasped her hands together gingerly and bowed her head to me, sounding genuinely sorry.

She was a very polite and sweet woman, if only on the outside.

Perhaps if I had seen her outside of the Labyrinth, and if she and I were strangers, I would have let it slide but having seen her brutal form only seconds ago, my expression hardened.

"My name is Ellie, and this is fate, but how-"

[Deluna LV.10]

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

[Blessings and Curses currently possessed by Deluna: 2]

‘How is it that everyone I meet is this shit?’

I raised my guard even higher as I watched her blurt out a pseudonym nonchalantly.

"I don't think this is a good meeting, let's go our separate ways."

"⋯⋯"

Deluna's expression hardened for a moment at the firm reply.

"That fucking male is talking to my sister, and he dares-!"

"Enough."

The one, who was about to speak up at my words, was silenced by Deluna's restraint.

"Yeah, well, it's hard to have a good meeting in a dangerous labyrinth where you never know what's going to happen at any given moment, so let's just look forward to our next encounter. We'll pass through first."

"Sure."

We clung to the wall of the passage as best we could. They moved on, clinging to the opposite wall.

"See you next time."

"⋯"

They moved on, glancing at me the whole way.

We moved away from each other like two parties crossing. Then they were out of sight.

The distance had widened to the point where I could press my ear to the ground and not hear any vibrations or footsteps.

"Gone, gone⋯ phew⋯"

Once they were completely out of sight, Jeremy breathed a sigh of relief.

Unfortunately, the situation wasn't over yet.

"What a bunch of shallow assholes."

"What?"

"They're not gone yet. Those assholes."

"What?! Gee, are you serious?!"

My senses still pick them up.

At the edge of my perception, I felt them stop moving and stand still.

‘The beastmen I met last time passed by calmly, but these guys are a bit obsessed.’

True, she'd been looking at me funny from the time we met until they left.

'And she's 99% involved in the slave trade.’

I don’t know what can happen if I get involved. I'll be lucky if I don't end up a slave.

"Here they come."

After a long pause, they turned on their heels and started walking back this way.

At this rate, we were still quite a ways from the escape portal.

The combatants seemed to average between 4 and 6 levels, except for Deluna.

I don't know about me, but I'm pretty sure they’ll catch Jeremy.

I'm tempted to abandon him, but he follows me better than I thought.

In a world where I can't trust anyone, it's nice to have someone on my side.

Their stats make it worth it. It makes me feel better to think of them as stronger, more intelligent goblins.

I only have a short time before they come back.

"Jeremy."

"Yes, brother, I'm ready."

"Good, good, then take it off."

"⋯Yes?"

Jeremy repeated, looking dumbfounded. I shake my head. You heard me right.

"Take it off. All of it."

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"Denshi, are you insane, huh? How much shit is going down because of you!"

-Pfft!

"Kehek!"

The armed women's fists landed in Denshi's abdomen. Nevertheless, the women continued to punch her as if their anger did not subside.

 "If you hadn't told them to fucking run away, I would've beaten them up, captured them, and enslaved them!"

Denshi let out a bitter laugh as she felt the weight of a foot crushing her head.

"What, you're laughing, you're giggling?"

-Bam! Puck!

The beating continued, but Denshi smiled more and more as it went on.

"Because your fists don't hurt at all⋯

The pain no longer felt like pain to Denshi, whose tastes had become strange due to someone's etiquette training.

"That's enough."

At Deluna's command, they stilled like puppets with a broken thread.

Deluna stared down at Denshi in silence, then leaned down and brought her face close.

Denshi involuntarily avoided Deluna's gaze. It was a learned fear.

"You. You knew him, didn't you, the man in the helmet?"

"⋯⋯!"

"How?”

Denshi naturally asked. How could she know if he never told her?

"So, I'm right, after all, I've been your master for more than a decade, did you really think I wouldn't recognize the look on your face?"

Deluna scoffed in disbelief.

"I thought you were being a little mean. Why would you suddenly do something you've never done before? You've never been one to feel guilty about enslaving others.

Makes me wonder. Why would a dog that obeys my commands because it doesn't want to be beaten tell a man to run away? Hmm? Answer me this. Didn't you want to make him your slave?"

"⋯⋯"

Deluna stroked her lowered head.

It was like a master praising a puppy to get it to behave.

Her own situation was no different.

Denshi had been a slave for over a decade, abandoned by her parents and sold to a slave trader, and Deluna was her master.

"When did you meet that man? The only time I gave you your freedom recently was when I sent you to the first floor to train new recruits, and you came back alone. Did you meet him then, or maybe before? Tell me. Quickly."

"⋯⋯"

Denshi was silent.

Deluna's question had made her own head spin with confusion.

‘I... why did I tell him to run away?’

Surely, when they first met, she had intended to enslave him.

She planned to sell him as a slave and move on with her life.

She even thought of taking it further and raping him. Honestly, how could she resist a man with a body and face that made her want to ovulate?

However, something dormant inside Denshi was awakened after being subjected to a strange reverse tour and experiencing tremendous violence under the guise of etiquette education.

 -Ouch.

Denshi felt the sting of the blow burning hot.

At the same time, her head felt refreshed. The answer was simpler than he thought.

"You won't answer?"

-Boom!

Denshi's head snapped around, her cheeks tingled but now it didn't hurt so much.

In fact, there was even a faint sensation of pleasure.

Of course, it was nothing compared to the pleasure he gave her, but⋯

"Well, that's okay, why don't we go outside the labyrinth and listen to it slowly. When we get back, I'll put you in your favorite punishment cell."

Dusting herself off, Deluna tore her gaze away from Denshi and looked at the combatants.

"You've waited long enough for this, haven't you?"

"Yes. We've gotten as far away as we can without losing them, so they'll probably think we just walked right past them. They'll have been caught off guard long enough, so if we're going to attack, now's the time."

"Good. I don't recognize the helmeted man, but his body alone is good enough⋯and the guy with the spear looks like he's a fairly decent fighter, so the harvest should be good for the first floor."

"He's heading towards the escape portal instead of the second floor, so I can roughly estimate his skill. We'll finish him off on our own."

"Right. I'm going to have some fun with this slave hunt."

As Deluna smirked at the thought of the profits that would fall into her pockets once they were out in the Labyrinth, the combatants asked cautiously.

"Sis, do you think..."

Deluna looked at the women's heated faces and quickly realized what they wanted.

"Of course we'll eat them after we catch them, but can't we lose them."

"Yup, it's a unicorn!"

They said, as if they had already sealed their victory and salivated at the thought of the sweet fruit they would get after plundering.

'Assholes⋯'

In this room, there was only one person who thought they would be defeated.

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Deluna and her party slowly retraced their steps. Their footsteps muffled, they stalked their prey in stealth.

The combatants' eyes were already half-lidded with the thought of satisfying their lust.

As they passed the wall of goblins where they faced the men.

"Help, sisters!"

A naked man staggered toward them.

Deluna looked him over cautiously.

"⋯Isn't that the guy with the spear?

His clothes looked torn and raw, as if they had just been carved and he had no weapon.

"⋯I think the others must have gotten to him first."

"⋯Be careful from here on out."

There are quite a few slave hunters in the upper levels of the Labyrinth who prey on the weak and men.

There were only two men. They must have been attractive enough prey for the other slave hunters.

"Hmph. Hmph. I was so scared⋯ did you come back on purpose to save us?"

"Uh, well, yeah⋯"

The man hugged the woman in the lead and blushed.

The sight in front of the woman was enough to render her unable to think rationally.

The combatants, their brains half-frozen in lust, couldn't take their eyes off the man's body despite Deluna's warning.

Deluna, however, was far from the man.

"⋯?

Observing the current situation, she felt extremely uncomfortable.

'What is it? This feeling, it must be from somewhere⋯'

The sensation of being caught in a spider's web. She felt like she walked into a trap.

"Hmmm. Hmmm. So, were you chased by slave hunters?"

"Yep. All my equipment was taken, all my food and clothes were taken."

When people are faced with an unexpected situation, they instinctively become rigid in their thinking.

Rigid thinking paralyzes the brain, making it unable to think and act in simple ways.

It's like being nervous and stiff, or women who are blinded by sexual desire and focus all their attention on a man's body.

It narrows the scope of a person's thinking to a very narrow range, preventing them from taking a broader view.

"My, my party member also got dragged away by them⋯ Hmph, but I, I was the only one who managed to escape⋯"

"Ji, are you serious?! Where is he now?"

This is a familiar situation but at the same time, it's unfamiliar.

Deluna waited with a terrible sense of unease for the man to open his mouth.

Finally, after remaining silent, the man's mouth opened.

"Here."

Deluna couldn't even manage to scream as she stared at the axe stuck in her throat from behind.

"Cackle."

The man seemed to laugh from inside his helmet.