**Chapter 20: The story of how the party fell apart (5)**

"Water."

"Yes. Master."

I told her I was thirsty, and she opened her canteen and politely poured water into my mouth with both hands.

As you can see, a full day had passed since she became my slave.

[Nam Soo Jin LV.5]

[Free Points: 5]

[Currently owned slave: Denshi (LV.7)]

The moment I took the leash from Grumpy, the status window changed.

Currently owned slave Denshi. It was a sign that she was now mine.

I don't know how this was accomplished.

It seemed far more reliable than the crude verbal agreements and tenuous trust between explorers.

Although she was only a barbarian 1 at first, eager to fuck me, she has now become my faithful servant, realizing her place and position in the world by controlling her troubled womb.

Indeed, I was pleased to see that my manners training (physical) had worked quite well.

"Clock."

"It is currently 23:11."

"Sleep."

"Here's your pillow."

She knelt down and patted her thigh.

My mind is still racing with thoughts of anguish and gagging.

"Don't fuck with me, bitch, I'm going to bed, and you're going to stay up."

"Eh. Just once for the slave's job satisfaction. It'll be nice and soft."

"Huh. Slavery is a job."

"That's a very insensitive thing to say about slaves."

"Is that how you treated Deluna?"

"She's already dead, don't you think it's okay to treat her a little rough?"

"No, that's not what I meant⋯ ha. Never mind."

"Hmph."

I felt a pain in my stomach as I looked at the sneaky grin. I felt like I shouldn't have accepted it.

‘⋯No, but it's the right thing to do for the future.’

I realized once again that I could trust no one in this labyrinthine city.

Since I took her in as a slave yesterday, I've gotten a vague idea of her backstory.

Her orphanhood, her slavery, her story.

I need to know what happened to her before I can do anything, believe it or not.

Her expression was so sincere when she spoke that it didn't seem like a lie.

- Brother. You seem to believe her, so I'll go along with it, but she's a former slave hunter, so I have to be careful⋯.

-Hand.

- Neng.

- ⋯Are you okay? You didn't hurt your head too badly when you got hit, did you?

Jeremy, who had been wary even after hearing the initial explanation, began to worry about the dog as she knelt down and grabbed his hand at my command.

At least she's earned my trust as a party member.

- Deluna, my former master, is a mage who used to lead a party for an outlaw clan called the Blurs. Her main responsibilities were slave hunting and recruitment.

I've since heard of all of Deluna's misdeeds.

The list of crimes was long, including looting, killing, and slave hunting.

This made it even more puzzling.

'Deluna, that bitch, sitting proudly in the Explorers' Union.’

Fuck the Explorers' Union, those assholes.

I thought they were cheap when they charged me 20 silver coins for an identification plaque and didn't even bother to check my ID.

- Don't worry, the Explorers' Alliance building has a special sign forbidding the 'branded' from entering.

Was that stance their way of saying that the organization is more or less accepting of criminals, as long as they aren't branded?

'Are things so bad that they're working with criminals, or are they just incompetent at their jobs⋯?'

I couldn't tell at this point, but as a fledgling explorer, I hoped it was the latter.

'Maybe they were just incompetent this time, but if the Explorers' Alliance is a criminal organization, I really have no answers⋯'

Assuming the worst, I realized that I was lucky that the party hadn't blown up in the first place.

If I had a criminal party member like Deluna, I could have gotten into a worse situation with no answers.

I nodded my head in ignorance at the idea of just matching party members, but now I realize I'll never be able to do that.

I need someone I can trust, someone I can keep exploring with.

No matter how careful I am, one wrong move and I'm done. That's why it's dangerous.

There's a reason they say to always be wary of betrayal upon betrayal.

What can you do to prevent it?

The most fundamental way is to find a trusted party member but it's also the most difficult.

"⋯Why do you suddenly look so piercing, is something wrong, do you want to punch me, are you annoyed, do you want to hit me, I'm ready, you can come anytime."

In that sense, the slave was a fairly efficient tool.

Once you gave them an order, they wouldn't stab you in the back.

They can be a little unruly, but I never felt the need to suppress them too much.

In a rigid labyrinth, having this much of an atmosphere maker is a positive mental health factor.

And best of all.

"...!"

This guy is definitely useful.

[Denshi Lv.7]

[Stamina:(2) Strength:(4) Agility:(9+0) Wisdom:(1+0) Finesse:(1)]

[Blessings and Curses currently possessed by Denshi: 1]

[◆ Blessing of the Wind]

- Extremely developed sense of hearing. Greatly increases your affinity with wind spirits.

- Dexterity +15 Wisdom +5 when maximum conditions are met (0 Wind Spirits collected to date)

Her ears perked up and she poked her head out of the goblin wall.

"⋯ Ugh. Seven, maybe eight goblins⋯? Coming from the back."

About twenty seconds after she said that, goblins came into my perceptual range with the Great Helm.

Eight, to be exact. Pretty accurate, too.

Twenty seconds was a long time in the Labyrinth.

I don't need to tell you how much you can turn the tables in your favor if you have that time to know their numbers and locations and have time to prepare.

'From our very first meeting, she naturally formed a goblin wall. Turns out it was possible because of her keen hearing?'

Come to think of it, it was inside the goblin wall that I was almost raped by Grumpy.

I gripped my axe for a moment, remembering the past.

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With enough power and preparation we easily took out eight goblins without the slightest injury.

"Die! Die, you sons of bitches!"

-Poof! Poof!

Jeremy's eyes widened at the sight of the goblin, and he thrashed its corpse.

"⋯That guy seems to have a weird head."

"Maybe you should be friends. I think you'd get along well."

"What are you talking about⋯!"

Me and Grumpy watched the scene and picked off the goblin's ears and put them in our backpacks.

Since we came from the depths of the first floor, we didn't settle down and hunt in one place, but we had accumulated quite a few goblin ears.

"⋯⋯"

I saw a human ear buried in the goblin ears.

Quietly, I tugged at the ear, revealing a human head.

[Deluna LV. 10]

[Blessings and Curses currently possessed by Deluna: 2]

[◆ Blessing of the Dull Wizard]

- You gain additional wisdom at the level of a Dull Wizard.

Good news. The status window has been extended to corpses.

[◆ Curse of the 98261st Puppet]

- Deluna has become the 98261st puppet.

Bad news. Her curse has a really bad phrase on it. Holy shit. Ninety-thousand? How is that possible?

'Puppet⋯'

When I was in an orphanage, I often had the opportunity to watch puppet shows.

I used to think it was quite fascinating to see people who were paid to perform tie threads on their fingers and connect them to puppets, and with a wave of their hand, multiple puppets would move and perform different actions.

- Do you know who's on top of me, huh?!

I remembered Deluna's words as she flailed about on the verge of death.

Suddenly, I realized that Deluna's head didn't look like a human head, but rather a mannequin's or doll's head.

"You're a bitch, how big is the Blurs Clan?"

“The work they do is dirty and the scale is not that big. At best, it can barely compete with mid-sized clans…?”

98261st is a number that would never come from a mid-sized clan.

"Then this one⋯"

I was about to ask her if she knew anything about Deluna’s curse, since she was her former owner, but I quickly shut my mouth.

‘I'm the only one with a status window.’

Normally, the only way to determine a blessing or curse in this world is to borrow the power of the temple.

It's said that highly gifted explorers or veteran explorers can intuitively know their blessings and curses, but that's only for the gifted few.

The overwhelming majority of normal explorers will stop by the temple every time they enter or leave the Labyrinth, and will spend money to see what blessings and curses they have earned.

Depending on which blessing or curse you receive, the rest of your life could be changed in an instant.

Anyway, the important thing to know now is that no one can see the blessings or curses of others except the temple itself.

If they ask, "How do you know that?!” I have nothing to say to that.

‘Let's just keep the ⋯status window a secret.’

There's no point in bragging about my powers. It's an ability that's ripe for abuse and exploitation.

‘I only need to use it for my own needs.’

"Me? What are you talking about?"

"Nothing."

I swallowed hard and stuffed Deluna's head back into my backpack.

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"The escape portal!!!"

Jeremy, now a beggar, cheered as he saw the white light in the distance.

We had made it safely to the escape portal after two more days of traveling and battling slave hunters.

The original purpose of the party was to stay in the area and hunt goblins.

When the party broke up, the immediate goal was to survive, but with the leveling of Jeremy and the addition of Grumpy, the party was somewhat strengthened.

It was tempting to go back to the original goal of hunting.

"⋯Anya's decay rate is faster than I thought."

Since the attachment head of Girlfriend Head Collector Goblin Slayer Jeremy was about to rot, we decided to leave the Labyrinth.

"Can we go to the second floor on our next trip to the labyrinth?"

We got here pretty smoothly, considering that shit happened twice.

“Please look forward to it. The second floor is my home. From there, traps will appear, so I will be much more useful.”

Rather than being subtle about it, she made her skills known.

I was just going to do it. After all, the party's progress through the Labyrinth had certainly accelerated since she'd joined.

"Okay. Good job."

"⋯⋯"

As I congratulated her on her efforts, she suddenly stopped dead in her tracks and fell silent.

-Pow!

I tugged on the leash and her body twitched.

"Come on, come on. Let's go."

"⋯⋯⋯Neee⋯"

As I stood in front of the escape portal, my voice strangely slurred and my pace slowed, I had a question.

"Do you count as part of the party?"

"Probably, since there are parties that often bring slaves to the Labyrinth⋯"

"Why?"

"Well, for relieving sexual desire⋯ to use as bait⋯ quite a bit."

Come to think of it, the last beastman party I met had a slave in the back, too. That's what they use him for.

"Hold my hand."

"⋯⋯"

"Yes, sir. Brother."

Grumpy and Jeremy took my hands.

Just like last time, and this time, every time I enter and exit the Labyrinth, I have a strange realization.

It's like a reminder of how fucked up this world is.

Monsters suck, and explorers suck even more but it doesn't matter.

I just have to be strong enough to deal with the shit that comes my way.

'The harvest wasn't bad, though.’

Goods and armor from the slave hunters, bounties for killing criminals that I don't know if I'll ever get, pay for killing goblins, and most of all.

'Two party members.’

A man and a woman.

'Although one is a goblin slayer with a dead girlfriend and the other is a perverted masochist slave ranger with sensitive ears⋯'

At least I've found allies I can at least trust.

Woooowwww-.

We stepped through the portal and left the labyrinth.

It's been a shitty ride together…I'll see you next week, Labyrinth.

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An uncomfortable feeling passed through my body.

I open my eyes to the unfamiliar, yet welcome, sight of Labyrinth City.

I checked my body, but nothing seemed out of place.

I didn't feel anything out of the ordinary. I checked my status, and there were no new blessings or curses.

I was a little disappointed since a good blessing would help me grow stronger faster.

I checked my party members and was relieved that they hadn't been cursed.

"Uhhhh..."

Grumpy bewildered voice is heard. The blessing count in her status window has increased to 2.

Grumpy has been blessed on this trip through the Labyrinth but her gaze wasn't on herself. Rather, her stunned gaze was directed to my right.

To my right was Jeremy.

A strange sense of foreboding swept over me.

‘Some curses can turn you into a monster or make you completely insane.’

I'd heard stories in the taverns of people who'd been cursed and gone mad and committed massacres as soon as they'd left the labyrinth.

I squeezed Jeremy's hand first.

A human hand, for one thing. It was not a monster's hand. Even with my perceptions, Jeremy was in human form.

‘Is it the latter?’

But a case of mental insanity shouldn't be immediately obvious⋯ so why was Grumpy so surprised?

I glanced to my right, ready to draw my axe in foreboding.

"⋯? Why are you all looking at me like that? Is there something wrong with me⋯?"

"Nu, who are you?"

"What? It's me, big brother, did you really forget me in such a short time?!"

The guy shouted, pointing at himself with a shocked face.

His voice was thin and high-pitched. It wasn't a low voice to begin with, but now it was almost a woman's voice.

It was natural for a woman's voice to come from a woman's throat.

[Jeremy (♀) LV.2]

[Blessings and curses currently held by Jeremy: 1]

[◆ Blessing of male rejection, female acceptance] NEW!!!

– All females were once males. They shed their male skin and transform into females.

- You must dress as a female, and your armor will change to fit the female form.

- Leveling up efficiency is proportional to the size of the lost manhood.

- Losing 2 cm of phallus increases leveling efficiency by 20%.

His body is now female.

"⋯?"

Jeremy (♀) suddenly realized something was wrong, and her gaze dropped to her feet.

She probably couldn't see the floor because of her breasts.

"⋯⋯⋯⋯ah."

He-no, she-opened her mouth briefly, then her eyes rolled back in her head and she fainted. She hadn't survived the trauma.

I looked at Jeremy, who would now live her life as a female, and thought.

‘Is this a blessing or a curse?’

Two party members, one male and one female, became two females.