**Chapter 24: Settlement (1)**

I woke up on a bed. The familiar bed in room 201 of the inn.

‘Did Diana move me?’

I had no memory of being in Diana's arms. Had I just fallen asleep?

‘I'll have to apologize when I see her.’

I'm sorry, but I've just embarrassed her in the middle of her day.

I glanced out the window and saw that the sun was midday. It had been a long time since I'd seen natural light.

Stretching to wake up, I warmed up and thought about what I had to do today.

'Collect payment for the goblin slaying, prove that Deluna's party was a bunch of looters and outlaws, and collect my bounty.’

Part of me wanted to lie down and do nothing for a day or so, but I whipped myself out of bed.

I cleaned up the dirt from the labyrinth and put away my fur blanket, which had gotten completely dirty and unusable on this trip.

Then I forced myself to stretch out the mismatched T-shirt I'd bought and neglected last time.

Now that I was dressed properly, I wondered if I hadn't been living too savagely.

As I left the room and descended the familiar staircase, I was greeted by the aroma of savory soup.

I glanced toward the kitchen and saw Diana standing at the stove, stirring a pot of soup.

"Diana."

"⋯! Uh, uh, yeah, Balkan, good morning⋯"

Diana awkwardly avoids my gaze. It wasn't hard to guess why.

After what I did to her yesterday, I really thought she would accept my morning greeting.

"I'm sorry, Ms. Diana. I was out of my mind yesterday."

"I'm fine. I don't need you to apologize, and besides, it's kind of⋯"

I bowed my head, and Diana blushed red and held out her hand. She opened her mouth to say something, then clamped it shut.

"Rather?"

"Oh, no. It's nothing. By the way, are you going to have lunch? I just finished making it."

"Yes. I'll eat it. How I missed Diana’s soup in the Labyrinth."

"Well, did you⋯? Then I'll have to give you a big bowl."

I nodded at Diana's hasty change of subject and walked over to the table to sit down.

Soon Diana brought me a bowl of soup, almost overflowing, and utensils.

"It's hot, so be careful eating it."

"Okay. Thank you, Ms. Diana."

Perhaps out of respect for me in my helmet, Diana immediately moved away.

I scooped up a spoonful of the steaming hot soup and drank it, and my body immediately responded.

After days of drinking lukewarm water and eating bland, tasteless food, my body shuddered with excitement as Diana's heartfelt soup entered my esophagus.

I licked the bowl clean and was about to empty it when Diana approached me.

She looked at the sparkling bowl and then at me with a big smile.

"Oh my. You must have been really hungry, huh?"

"I've been eating your food every day for a month, so I've gotten used to it, but the preserved food didn't go over well."

"Hoo-hoo. Is that so? Maybe next time I should make some jerky and wrap it up."

After observing me in silence for a while, Diana spoke up.

"So. How was the Labyrinth?"

My body froze at the passing remark. I swallowed hard and put down my cutlery.

"⋯I underestimated the Labyrinth. I thought I was as prepared as I could be, I was in good shape, and I was alert enough.⋯But."

Even so, they lost two party members shortly after entering the labyrinth.

I could have chalked it up to bad luck, complicated circumstances, or whatever, but I didn't.

If I had been more vigilant, would things have been different?

If I'd been a little more careful about party coordination, could I have made it out of the labyrinth with four instead of three?

I'll never know. It's all in the past.

What I do know is that it's not just monsters I have to watch out for in the Labyrinth.

I am not alone in the labyrinth.

There's so much more to think about: sudden changes in circumstances, party management, outside variables.

"The atmosphere gives me a general idea of what happened."

"⋯You can tell that from the atmosphere alone?"

“Explorers usually have similar problems, especially novice explorers. Monsters ambushes, party splits, and attacks from the outside."

Diana’s big data was eerily accurate.

From the start, we lost one person to goblins, another to a party split, and finally, we barely survived the slave hunter Deluna's party.

"No one is perfect from the start, you're bound to fail and make mistakes, but what matters is what you learn from them, because there's no growth if you're afraid of mistakes and failure, if you get frustrated and stop moving forward."

Diana, who had been closing her eyes the whole time, slowly opened them and looked at me. Her amber eyes seemed to hold me in the palm of her hand and see right through me.

Then her eyes closed again.

"From that point of view, I think Balkan has a lot more growth ahead of him."

Indeed. I'm sticking my head in the mire anyway.

"In your opinion, Diana, do you think I can grow further?"

"Sure. You don't have the eyes of a frustrated person."

I wonder what a frustrated person's eyes look like.

For a moment, I wonder why Diana's eyes are closed, but then I realize there must be a story behind them.

I shake off my tiredness, my head feels refreshed, and I can see what I need to do more clearly.

"Oh, and that watch is really nice."

"You should keep it. You're still going to be in the labyrinth."

"But⋯"

I tried to give the watch back to her, but she gently refused. Her watch was back on my wrist.

We continued to talk after that. I told her about my experiences in the Labyrinth, and she listened calmly.

I didn't mention the curse of the puppet, which was only visible to me in the status window, or what happened with Serif, but I found it comforting to tell someone what I'd been through.

"Thanks for listening to my boring story."

"No, it's not. You reminded me of something I haven't thought about in a long time."

"Really? Oh, and thank you so much for the soup."

I rambled on for almost an hour.

"Ugh. I'll put the bowl away, give it to me."

As I watched Diana hurriedly collect the bowls and utensils, I suddenly remembered my days of begging in the back alleys.

I was on the verge of distrusting people due to PTSD from an attempted rape, and it's no exaggeration to say that I owe my minimal existence to her.

"As always, thank you, Ms. Diana."

At that, Diana, who had been staring at the bowl and utensils with a strangely erotic gaze, stopped dead in her tracks.

She glanced back and forth between the bowl and me, then abruptly put the bowl down and slapped her own cheek.

"Diana?! What the-!"

As I approached, surprised by the suddenness of the situation, Diana shook her head.

"What⋯?"

"Oh, it's nothing, I'll clean up the mess, go upstairs!"

I panicked at the suddenness of the situation, but I pushed Diana's back and climbed up to the second floor.

"Are you sure you're okay?"

"Of course. Don't worry too much. And⋯"

Diana hesitated for a moment.

"⋯I, for one, am glad you're back safe and sound."

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Half an hour after Diana's encounter, when my stomach had settled down a bit, I packed my backpack.

It was a backpack with goblin ears and a human head.

"I'm going to the Explorers' Alliance, but I'll be back before we open for dinner!"

"Hey, that's fine! You must be tired, get some rest until tomorrow!"

I left the inn, leaving Diana, who seemed to be working on something in the kitchen, behind.

Her kindness bought me a few moments of respite.

I headed straight for the Explorers' Alliance.

There were still tons of people and no numbering system, so I had to wait in line at the stalls in ignorance.

Still, the wait wasn't boring. There was something to see.

[Sohem LV.23]

[Jericho LV.14]

[Porcio LV.3]

[Berthia LV.17]

[Tolkien LV.2■]

The level I can see in the status window now varies from person to person, but usually around the early to mid-20s.

Then, after level 20 and before level 30, the censorship is definitive.

‘Why that time?’

Not being able to see the status window means that there's a gap between me and my opponent.

[Nam Soo-jin LV.5]

[Stamina:(4+10) Strength:(4+10) Agility:(2+10) Wisdom:(0) Finesse:(0)]

[Free Points: 5]

With the additional stats from the Question Mark Blessing, my stat total is now 40.

Though there are many variables with blessings, curses, etc.

Assuming a stat increase of 1 per LV, that's enough to match level 30 in simple math.

In the Explorers' Alliance, I had the opportunity to see a variety of Explorers, even the so-called mid-level explorers.

[Getelier Aman LV.3■]

[Dotelier Aman LV.4■]

"Hey, hey. Look. It's the Aman sisters. Damn. So it's true they came back from the middle level."

"Wow. How can a woman's breasts be like stones like that? They don't jiggle at all. There's nothing but muscle in them, so they're square like a man's?"

"It's possible."

"How is that possible, bitch?"

‘I don't see any chance of winning⋯’

But when I looked at the level 30 to 40 explorers, I could only see a future where I would get my head crushed.

The disparity was even greater than I thought.

As I continued to observe the explorers, I realized something.

'Around level 20, there's a section where the level increases dramatically.’

It felt like there was a first level, then a second level, and then a big jump in class.

'Maybe when you level up, you'll get some extra stats or something.'

That's why it's definitely censored after the late 20s.

‘⋯That's not bad.’

On the bright side, I'm only level 5, so I'm able to keep up with level 20 explorers based on simple stats, right?

If I ever reach level 20 or higher, it means that unless my opponent is exceptionally skilled at the same level, I can gain an advantage through my stats.

[Free points: 5]

And that advantage would come from my primary stats, not just miscellaneous ones.

"Hmmm⋯"

I've just crammed the information into my head.

The battle wasn't just about stats.

It was too far away for a newbie explorer, who had just entered the first floor.

As I continued to think, my turn came. I handed the teller my backpack of goblin ears.

"Fifty-three goblin left ears. Monster subjugation confirmed. Here is one silver coin and six copper coins. Oh, and next time, please use the settlement office near the dungeon entrance for monster subjugation confirmations and similar tasks."

The woman with goblin blood on her hands smiled bitterly.

Only one silver coin and six copper coins.

The party of four was reduced to just Jeremy and me, splitting the rewards in half. After giving a small share to Grumpy, who joined us later, I'll be left with only about 45 copper coins.

For two days' work at Diana's tavern, I get about double that. Well, that's just Diana's generosity.

After deducting the cost of potions, equipment, preserved food, and other necessities invested in the Labyrinth, it's a complete loss.

'⋯What the hell.’

The monsters on the first floor of the Labyrinth aren't worth the money.

It's not like I'm looking for money in the first place, but it's a shame that I didn't earn a penny after all the trouble I went through.

With a sigh, I gathered up the money and handed over the backpack, this time containing Deluna's head.

"Her name is Deluna. She was an outlaw, marauder, slave hunter, and explorer for Clan Blues. She was ambushed in the Labyrinth and killed in a skirmish."

"Were there any other victims or witnesses at the time of the attack?"

"A party member who was with me, and one of her slaves."

"I see, thanks for your trouble, it'll take us a couple days to verify, come back then and we'll pay you a reward."

The teller put away the backpack with Deluna's head in a businesslike manner, as if this sort of thing was commonplace.

It reminded me of the lightness of human life in this world.

Still, it was reassuring to know that the Explorers' Alliance wasn't just a den of criminals.

‘It's not every day you find someone with a curse like Deluna.’

And by rare, I mean they do exist.

[◆ Curse of the 86,574th Puppet]

– Zelvin has become the 86,574th puppet.

[◆ Curse of the 88,574th Puppet]

– Mercy has become the 88,574th puppet.

Several of the group's gazes were fixed on me as soon as I pulled out Deluna's hair.

"You must have been startled by the corpse, but thank you for your kind response."

"Uh, yeah."

I stood up from my seat with a gesture that made it clear I was leaving.

The enhanced perception of the helm caught their movements. They began to prepare to leave.

Quietly, I left the Explorers' Alliance and headed down a dark alley.

'The fact that I can see their curses means they're weaker than me.'

How can I subtly extract information from those sneaking up behind me?

"Hey there, male. Stop right there."

As I ponder this, I silently put my hands on my hips.

The axe knows the answer.