**Chapter 26: Settlement (3)**

I pulled on Grumpy leash and arm, dragging her roughly.

"Ew! Why, why are you doing that?!"

"Noisy. Follow me."

As soon as I realized that Grumpy was under the puppet's curse, I went to the temple.

- Would you mind if I periodically check on Mr. Balkan's blessings in the future? Of course, for free.

After listening to Serif's 'request' at the temple, I remembered one of the small 'paybacks' she suggested.

At least Serif didn't feel like messing around with blessings or curses, so I went to the temple to see if I could get a look at the curse on Grumpy.

"The temple is closed this week!"

The news came like a thunderbolt. The temple was closed.

As I hurriedly arrived at the temple, a large group of explorers were exiting the temple area, grumbling and complaining.

"No! Why can't we go in?"

"I'm sorry, but it's an internal matter. Explorers, who have come to have their blessings and curses assessed, and those who have come for healing, please come back next week!"

Some argued, but the priests and paladins guarding the temple were adamant.

"Those guys chattering up ahead. How new are they?"

"I don't know. Judging by the gear they're wearing, they're probably first or second level explorers."

"Tsk tsk. Don't they know the temple holds a purification ritual once a year when the New Year approaches? Sometimes it even lasts a whole month, but they seem clueless about that."

"We forgot about it, too, and we came to get our blessings confirmed."

"Aha."

The more experienced explorers sneered at the lesser explorers standing in the doorway of the temple.

Grumpy, who had been quietly listening to their conversation, glanced over at me.

"See, I told you, the temple isn't open this week. Didn't you know?"

"⋯I didn't know, I'm new to the Labyrinth City."

"Eh. Really? I thought you were at least a second- or third-level explorer because of the way you fought the goblins."

"What the hell."

I've been nearly skulled by goblins so many times, I still shudder to think of them. But that's it.

"You're not eating something wrong, are you?"

The suddenness of the question causes her expression to change.

"What⋯? Yeah, what⋯? I mean, I can't afford to eat three square meals a day, but I'm not rummaging through the trash⋯."

"You're not rolling around in some weird place, are you?"

"I always slept on the stable weeds... it's definitely a strange place if you think about it. It smells."

"Are you sore or anything?"

"⋯I mean, are you worried about me?"

Heh.

Grumpy looked up at me with a small open mouth, and then chuckled.

"Hmph. I'm impressed. Don't worry too much, though. It's just me, Denshi. I'm a healthy girl who's never caught a cold in her life."

She puffed out her chest and placed her hands on her waist, as if to announce some great accomplishment.

Maybe it was the pose, but I couldn't help but notice her outfit.

A fashion sense that would make her practically a slut, even by Earth's standards.

Her breasts dangled precariously from a single piece of fabric without a bra.

Micro pants that showed her ass, and a black thong that slid over her hips and didn't do the slightest bit of panty work.

Admittedly, it's a wonder she doesn't catch a cold while dressed like that.

‘There's no way the curse is infectious.’

Afterward, I asked a few questions, but I still couldn't figure out how or where she got the curse.

However, once she became infected, one theory was confirmed.

‘Outlaw territory. There must be something there.’

"Hmph. I don't know what's going on here, but did you drag me to the temple because you're worried about me, or do you have a sense of ownership or something?"

Grumpy laughed nervously, suddenly amused.

"But I'm afraid coming here has only added to my wounds. Look at this. You tugged so hard that my neck is red."

She lunged at me and lifted the leash slightly.

The scent of her body suddenly sneaking up on me made me turn to look at her.

Her neck was red from the friction of the rough leash pull.

Underneath, I could see pure white skin, a collarbone line that was nothing like the reddish neck, and a good-sized chest that revealed more area than the cloth covered.

"Wow."

"It's similar to the sting, but different, hmph, it's a fresh stimulus, this is like this again⋯"

After entering the labyrinth, I was tired and had a lot of things to think about, so I didn't have much libido, but the sudden stimulation woke me up.

I immediately slapped myself across the cheeks.

'Wake up, Nam Soo-jin. What do you think you're doing, ogling a girl's breasts?’

You're in the middle of growing up and have a lot to worry about. If you can't control your libido, what are you going to do about it later? It's a fact of life that you have to take care of things early on so that it's easier later on. You know that. Even in this world, this is not the time to be concerned with girls, so please look away.

But it's not easy.

I've been celibate for a month now. I have a conscience, too, and I couldn't indulge my lust at Diana's inn. It would be like excreting my libido in her favor. But it's too much to bear. Only men who can hold back their lust in the presence of Diana can throw stones at me.

"Don't bring your abomination to my brother."

"Ugh-"

My chest jerked backward. The next thing I knew, Jeremy had yanked Grumpy head by the scruff of the neck and pulled her away from me.

I barely had time to look away.

I came to the temple to check the curse, but it was closed.

'For some reason, it feels like what Grumpy received is more of a blessing than a curse...Is it the difference between the ten-thousands and the thousands?'

There was no way I could dig deeper into the curse without any special tools at hand.

We eventually headed back to the Explorers' Alliance. On the way, we had a quick update.

"Anya can survive."

Jeremy said she'd spent a fortune casting an incorruption spell on her skull.

She didn't look happy, as if she'd lost a lot of money but her eyes were shining with hope.

"I've heard rumors that a miracle of resuscitation sleeps on the 19th floor."

It seemed that Jeremy had finally gotten her hands on the information after her dogged search.

The information might be true, but his⋯ no, her⋯ purpose would be the 19th floor.

"Master. Please sign!"

As soon as we arrive at the Explorers' Alliance and sit down at the table, Grumpy hands me a piece of paper.

I glanced at it and realized it was a slave contract. The space for the master's stamp was blank.

"This used to have Deluna's thumbprint on it. It's gone because she died."

The paper used for slave contracts is special, and when a party dies or the contract is canceled, the signature or imprint disappears.

The slave entry below still had Grumpy’s stamp.

"As long as my name is on the slave line, I'm still a slave, and I'd rather be your slave a hundred times over than to be enslaved by those bastards again."

I looked at the document and felt a strange sensation.

How could I, a modern man, treat people like slaves? This is immoral and inhumane.

‘Fuck you.’

[Currently Owned Slave: Denshi (LV.7)]

I glanced at the status window once more.

Even though she was beaten in the past, and even though she's a stubby slave with a strange new curse I don't recognize, I'm pretty sure that won't be the case now.

"You are my slave⋯"

As Grumpy touched the slave contract with the charm she had prepared, a strange glow emanated from the paper, and it expanded into two sheets.

The paper shimmered and stretched into two sheets, one for each of us.

"Hmph."

With a puzzled look on her face, she hugged the papers tightly.

That was the end of the situation.

"Now, let's settle the bill."

Their ears perked up at the mention of money. After all, money is the one thing that humans are bound to pay the most attention to, especially for lowly explorers like us.

One silver coin and six copper coins for slaying goblins.

Deluna was a rehabilitated explorer, but she proved to be a bad one who fell back into lawlessness, so we were rewarded with 4 silver for capturing her.

This time, the harvest totaled 5 silver coins and 6 copper coins.

"I admit, I don't have much of a stake in this, I didn't fight Deluna's party, and I only helped them out a little at the last minute to get out of the Labyrinth, so I'm afraid I don't get to keep it!"

Grumpy took a step away from the table, her eyes never leaving the silver coin, a look of lust on his face.

"I⋯"

Jeremy kept her mouth shut, even though she already seemed to be struggling with money.

"I can't say I've done the same as my brother, and I've been nothing but a nuisance from the start, so I'd be⋯ grateful for a minimal share."

I shook my head, took a step back, and offered an 8-to-2 ratio. Of course, I was the 8.

I stared at the money on the table in silence.

Honestly, this labyrinth. I think I carried it from start to finish.

I definitely deserve this money all to myself.

‘But will it be the same for the next labyrinth, and the next, and the next?’

Why do most mid- to high-level explorers travel in parties? The reason is simple.

Going alone will inevitably get you stuck at some point, whether it's a trap gimmick that can't be disarmed alone or a powerful beast.

If you don't stick together as a party, the going gets tough.

‘It's not a bad idea to invest a little bit of money for those times.’

Yes. It is an investment.

An investment in a spearman with an experience efficiency buff and a bowman/guide with a +25 overall stat potential for some reason.

I don't have a lot of money, but I have money from Zelvin and money from the inn.

‘And the classic investment is to buy low.’

You have to buy it when it's a little bit cheaper. And this stock is at a low right now.

The help you get when you're successful doesn't mean much, but the help you get when you're begging stays with you until the day you die.

We're looking a little further into the future here⋯

"You guys. Be good later."

I redistributed the money with an unnecessary grimace.

"Ugh.

"Hmph. I'm pretty sure I've got one good eye on my master, huh?"

Jeremy’s goofy voice, followed by Grumpy’s confident voice, echoed around the table.

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~East Explorers' District~

The masked woman walked from the line of fancy weapons shops, like a department store, and entered a dingy weapons shop that only attracted flies.

"Hey, owner."

"Yes? What's going on?"

As the woman rummaged through the crates of cheap, unshelved weapons, she realized something was amiss and called out to the shopkeeper.

"Did you happen to see a clunky-looking Great Helm in here?"

"What? Mmm⋯ ah, you mean the cheap Great Helm?"

"⋯What? No, I said clunky, when did I say cheap-"

The woman's voice turned sharp at that moment.

Her jaw dropped at the owner's next words.

"...Really? It got sold? Do you know who bought it by any chance?"

"Hmmm. Well, it was a tall man, with a frighteningly good body. I couldn't make out his face because he was wearing a helmet, but his walk was that of a novice explorer⋯But why do you ask?"

The woman stared at the owner, then sneered.

"No, I don't know who he is, but he bought it for a bargain."