**Chapter 309: Return to Ground (5)**

When did it start?

I slowly chewed over the doubt echoing from within.

The anger toward the one who is now arbitrarily handling my woman is not needed right now.

'For revenge, I must first understand the situation.'

Let me cool my head and analyze the enemy before my eyes.

Desperately reminding myself of this, I clenched and suppressed the fist that was about to rise.

'Just when did the Puppeteer take possession of Denshi's body?'

Recently, very recently.

Until we went to Lilith's tentacle maze, Denshi hadn't worn such neat clothes, nor had she shown any changes in her usual behavior.

She would always wake up early in the morning and fetch wash water in a bucket to wake me up.

While doing so, she would sneakily give me back hugs and play pranks.

She would also warmly help with morning preparations and inn operations to become friends with Diana, who had allowed us to live together.

With Ellie, she still maintained a subtle rival relationship so there was some distance, but when Diana wasn't around, they would cook together and those feelings seemed to be somewhat neutralized, becoming more of a love-hate relationship.

So Ellie must have also noticed that Denshi's behavior was different from usual.

'Roughly around the time I was being tortured by the dream demons?'

Originally, I hadn't told Diana, Ellie, and Denshi that I was going to Lilith.

However, Diana, who sensed something strange about me, immediately left the inn to chase after me...

With high probability, the Puppeteer took advantage of that gap to steal Denshi's body.

"...I didn't expect you to notice as soon as you saw me."

And judging from the reaction shown just now, no one else had noticed during this time either.

"Our Denshi doesn't go around wearing such neat clothes."

The Puppeteer, who glanced down at Denshi's body, finally let out a hollow laugh.

"I thought I dressed as conventionally as possible, but it backfired... I've felt this since before, but this doll really has a terrible taste."

The Puppeteer added, "This is a bit troublesome," and clicked her tongue.

Denshi's taste was indeed a bit bad.

She was half an exhibitionist, a masochist, and due to the blessing's influence, she had even developed netorare tendencies, getting excited when seeing me embrace other women.

"That's not for you to judge."

But determining what's good or bad is my domain as Denshi's owner.

It wasn't something that should come from the mouth of an entity that had illegally invaded her body.

"Why did you take control of Denshi's body again to approach me? Even calling me 'Master' so familiarly?"

"Don't look at me with such scary eyes. When we met before, you spoke politely throughout... Should I have forcibly carved the puppet's curse back then?"

The Puppeteer expressed regret with a face that seemed disappointed that I was being hostile.

Before the Puppeteer stole Denshi's first experience in the bedroom of the Idelbert mansion, I had encountered the Puppeteer who stole a girl's body with the [Puppet's Curse] in the lawless zone.

Whether you could call it coincidental, that day was also after having a bout with dream demons.

But if there was a difference from then, it was that I had become much stronger than back then.

Having slain an Elder Lich, killed a worshipper of envy, and brought a worshipper of lust to their knees.

The entity before my eyes no longer felt like something overwhelmingly powerful as it did back in those days.

"You couldn't do it then, so why would you be able to now?"

At my calm yet provocative retort, the Puppeteer's expression darkened.

If back then I was at a level where I had to dance to the Puppeteer's gestures.

Now I had grown to the point where I could break arms and legs and inflict about 8 weeks of medical treatment.

Of course, after that I'd have to risk my life too...

But I was confident that the entity before me wouldn't go that far.

—I will make you my puppet. You have quite some research value. You're interesting too.

The Puppeteer had been surprisingly favorable toward me.

This can be used.

"Then and now, consistently arrogant and bold. I suppose I should say it's fitting for a man who threatened me with suicide..."

-Thud.

The Puppeteer sat down on a table chair, crossing her legs.

As expected, I didn't feel any particular hostility from the Puppeteer who rested her arms on the table and propped her chin.

However, the very situation of her occupying Denshi's body felt quite threatening to me.

"You don't need to be so wary. I don't particularly intend to fight... And you asked why I occupied this child's body, but I'd like you to correct that. I exercised a contractor's legitimate right."

"Legitimate right? Nonsense. Using someone else's body as if it were your own can't be a legitimate right."

"No. It's correct. That was the content of the contract."

Whooom—

The Puppeteer said this while reaching into the air.

'...Personal subspace?'

Denshi didn't have a personal subspace, let alone a subspace bag.

Could it be that she used her own power through Denshi's body?

The Puppeteer pulled out an orb from the subspace.

Originally black, but now about 70% dyed white.

It was the orb that recorded Denshi's 'free activity' time, given by Intert, the Puppeteer's subordinate and Denshi's teacher.

"When this orb turns completely white, I told her to return to the Dark Street. There's not much time left now. At most about 3 months?"

"...Back then, I definitely heard the period was about 1 year."

"That was just an approximate time. This orb is also a tool that records this doll's growth. It's a joyful thing. If you've sown seeds and fruit is about to bear, shouldn't you go to harvest?"

"Denshi isn't some crop you grew."

The Puppeteer smiled with a sneer mixed in, as if she had been waiting for just those words.

"A seed that had lost its master and became half-disabled, withering away, and I poured fertilizer and nutrients into it, even making it sprout... and you say I didn't grow it? I sent her away thinking of past connections, and you really think this doll belongs to you?"

When I was separated from Denshi on the 5th floor due to an unexpected accident.

Denshi, who heard the Puppeteer's voice and headed toward her, made a contract with the Puppeteer under the desire to protect me.

On the condition of gaining the power to protect the master she would meet again someday.

The contract with the Puppeteer became Denshi's bondage.

[◆2nd Puppet's Curse]

Denshi's puppet curse, which had risen from the 30th to the 2nd place in just a few days, meant that the bondage had become stronger.

Still, I didn't give in and said:

"Denshi is my slave. My property alone."

"Contracts for buying and selling slaves can be forcibly torn apart anytime. This side, bound in the form of a curse, has the upper hand."

"...Why are you so obsessed with Denshi?"

"Huh?"

It had been a continuous question.

"At first, she was clearly like a puppet in the thousands, not even worth notice."

"......"

But now she has become a single-digit puppet.

No matter how high Denshi's talent and potential as an explorer, she wasn't in an unrivaled position.

"There must be many puppets much stronger than Denshi, right? Why do you keep possessing her body? Why?"

But what exactly does the Puppeteer see in Denshi to give her such high value?

"Tell me! Why!!!"

The emotions I had been suppressing for rational judgment burst out momentarily, and I instinctively grabbed Denshi's collar tight.

Just like when I occasionally scolded Denshi, the moment I yanked the very familiar feeling collar tight.

Paeaeaeng!

"Kheut...?!"

The taut rope pulled the Puppeteer's neck and upper body, instantly bringing her and me close together.

Soon, my reflection appeared in the Puppeteer's... no, Denshi's violet eyes.

Since Diana and Ellie had also gone to Eden's stalls to dispose of the remaining ingredients, there was no one at the inn today.

Therefore, I hadn't raised my guard as usual and wasn't wearing my helmet either.

The moment the male filled with hostility and anger glared at her as if to devour her eyes.

"...Heut...!"

Crack!

The Puppeteer, who suddenly flushed red, hastily pushed me away.

I judged this as the start of combat.

Just as I was about to draw Bunny and subdue the Puppeteer.

"Wh-what rude behavior...! Ueut...!"

The moment I saw the Puppeteer hastily creating distance and twirling her short hair with her fingers... I froze in bewilderment.

Counterattack or retaliation, nothing I had simulated in my head happened.

The behavior shown by the female before my eyes wasn't responding to or retaliating against the enemy's attack...

"H-how dare you treat me like this, heut... I've lived for hundreds of years, but I’ve never seen a male as rude and insane as you."

As if feeling an emotion like 'you're the first person to do this to me,' she was trembling.

'...Did Denshi's unconscious react?'

No, if that were the case, she wouldn't have shown such a reaction.

It was something I did to Denshi every day.

Then, could it be that the reaction just shown was...

What flashed through my mind at that moment was the image of Denshi acting cute toward me on the bed in the past.

No.

While stealing Denshi's body, wiggling her hips to seduce me...

"Indeed. To make a lowly lawless-born have the resolve to approach 'Desire,' you need this level of coercion..."

My concentration returned to the Puppeteer's quietly muttered words.

The female expression I had just seen disappeared like a hallucination, and she straightened her posture with a sharp expression.

"Desire?"

When I asked about the strangely concerning word, the Puppeteer shook her head.

"Even if I tell you, you won't understand with human emotions. Even that hero said she couldn't understand and snapped..."

Hero.

There was only one being in this world who was called that in the past.

The only god that the religious order worships and spreads teachings about.

The being who created the labyrinth that demons call the underground prison.

The Earth Mother Goddess.

Why did that being suddenly come from the Puppeteer's mouth?

No, before that.

"What exactly is your desire that Denshi has to be used—"

"So."

However, the Puppeteer cut off my words as if she had no intention of continuing the conversation.

"From now on, keep making your way through the labyrinth—"

-Rustle.

Soon the Puppeteer's... Denshi's eyes closed, and she collapsed to the floor like a puppet whose strings had been cut.

I couldn't even think of helping the fallen Denshi up and just stared down at her blankly.

Ah. It's been a while.

This sticky unpleasant feeling.

The frustration from facing phenomena I couldn't understand unilaterally.

The unpleasant feeling of being seen as prey or a tool, a target for use rather than a person...

But I mustn't be consumed by such unpleasant sensations.

In times like this, I must move forward.

"Bunny."

[...Curious about that bitch?]

I gently patted Bunny, who now understood my intentions without me having to say anything.

—How did that bastard get there...?

As soon as Bunny saw Denshi possessed by the Puppeteer, she showed signs as if she had seen through the entity inside Denshi.

If I asked Bunny for help, I could understand the Puppeteer a little better.

The anxiety that I might lose someone precious without even realizing it touched the intense competitive spirit within me.

[Hehe.]

Bunny, sensing that will, also chuckled softly.

[This might actually let us devour the same demon.]