**Chapter 32: I want to go to the second floor (4)**

I am an intelligent person who can make good judgments and rational decisions.

I'm not a barbarian who's ready to swing an axe and split your skull open just because you're giving me a dirty look.

What's the difference between man and beast? I think it's being able to communicate with each other and get the results you want.

We find ways to benefit each other, even if it means letting go of the greater good.

Humanity in the best sense. Not some cheesy, saccharine notion of humanity, but the kind where people care for and look after one another.

'Let's think about this. Has there ever been anyone in this damn labyrinth city who possessed that kind of humanity?'

The cold logic of my mind recalled the events of the past, and the conclusion came quickly.

'The overwhelming majority of people in this world are not people.’

Beasts and savages who only pursue their own interests. How many times have I been harmed in this labyrinth city? At least a dozen times, easily more.

'I don't know what might happen next, but shouldn't I strike first just in case?'

“Master.”

As Grumpy’s voice pulled my sinking mind back to the surface, I first reassessed the situation.

With Zelvin and Mercy on board, the odds of them being innocent explorers were approaching zero.

"They've got reformed explorer badges on their backs. They were outlaws."

Grumpy whispered quietly beside me. It was as expected.

They may have been outlaws, but they're explorers now. The reformed badges on their waists proved it.

Unless they threaten first and I respond, like during the Deluna incident, if I strike just because the atmosphere feels tense, I would have no defense if I were treated as just another outlaw.

For now, I'd have to wait and see.

I calmly asked the presumed leader of the other party.

"By any chance, are you thinking of using the transition trap?"

"Uh. Why?"

If they trigger the transition trap, we’ll get caught up in it too. And aside from that...

'Confirmed: they have no manners.'

Since my polite words were met with such rudeness, I no longer felt the need to be respectful.

"So, can you just hold off on using it until we're out of the transition trap zone?"

I looked at them as I spoke. First of all, the bitch who had just answered so snarkily.

[Derucio LV. 21]

Her level is quite high. Among the lower level explorers, she's at the top. She didn't go to the fifth floor for nothing.

The rest of them average around level 15. Zelvin and Mercy, with their hardened complexions, were eating away at the average level.

In addition,

[Current Blessings and Curses: 2]

[◆ Curse of the 26221st Puppet]

- Derucio became the 26221st puppet.

‘This asshole?’

I don't know what that curse is, but it seems to be attached to everything that is cheap and bitchy. Is that a Valerian version of the KC mark?

Not everyone with the puppet curse is evil, but most of the bitches I've seen have it.

It makes me extra vigilant. I tightened my grip on the axe, just enough so she wouldn't notice.

"No?"

Derucio's lips twitched upward as she said it. It sounded quite malicious.

"Why should we bother with you? We've got our own fucking ways to go."

"⋯10 seconds. No more, no less, just ten seconds. Give me 10 seconds and I'll be out of here."

"Okay. I'll give you 10 seconds."

What?

I was momentarily embarrassed by how easily she accepted, but it was no time to dwell on it.

I was about to take off running with Grumpy and Jeremy.

"Ten seconds, bang!"

Derucio declared, and his party stopped us. We hadn't even taken our feet off the ground yet.

"⋯What the hell are you doing?"

"Why, I gave you 10 seconds, and I'm pretty sure 10 seconds have passed since I confronted you."

It was shitty logic. At the same time, I realized. The asshole had no intention of letting us go in the first place.

"⋯What did we do to deserve this? We didn't do anything to you."

I questioned. What reason could a reformed outlaw and reformed explorer have to behave like this?

‘Actually, there's only one reason.’

I could see it in those lustful eyes.

So I played the vulnerable Balkan as best I could.

Shivering, trembling, slightly hesitant.

"⋯⋯?"

"⋯⋯brother⋯⋯"

Grumpy and Jeremy looked at me in confusion, but that wasn't the point right now.

"He's doing it again!"

Zelvin and Mercy held their heads and began to struggle, as if recalling a traumatizing experience.

"Hey, are you okay⋯?"

The attention of two lackeys around her was divided but even at the slightest disturbance, Derucio's eyes remained nailed to my forearm or thigh.

Heh. We've been in the Labyrinth for three days now, so she must have built up quite the libido.

‘Thank you, Deluna.'

Your impressive performance will go a long way toward my survival.

"We've only just made it to the second floor as explorers. If we get caught in the transition trap, we're done for..."

"That's your problem. There's no reason for us to understand or sympathize with that."

"What, becoming a 5th-floor explorer means you think you can hold something over us...!"

"Well, the equipment looks the same. But you guessed it, this kind of thing doesn't happen just by looking at equipment, right?"

Derucio ran her red tongue over her lips once. The sound of her throat clearing could be heard all the way over here.

"No matter how busy we are, we should do what needs to be done before leaving. Hey you, take off your pants."

Even if the average explorer's toughness was shitty, and the reformed explorer's was even worse, this was clearly out of line.

"I'm not going to ask you to take off your breastplate. You should have a taste for conquest. Just take off your pants. I'll be gentle. Okay?"

But she had the audacity to start threatening, as if she believed in something.

‘Either you're an asshole who goes with your instincts and doesn't think twice, or you have a backbone that believes in something.’

Common sense told me the latter was more plausible.

Zelvin and Mercy tried to do the same thing, but judging by the way they cowered under my threats, the supposed 'backer' was only favorable to Derucio.

‘If I could just capture that backer, could I possibly learn a hint about that curse?’

"You bitch-!"

Grumpy aimed with irritation, drawing her bow. The poisoned arrow I handed her took aim at Derucio's forehead.

"I can't forgive you for saying that to a ⋯man."

Jeremy gripped her spear tightly and took a stabbing stance.

"Haha. Hold on a moment. You think this will be good news for you too?"

Derucio swallowed hard and glared at me.

"As long as that guy gives me his body, I'll give you guys time to get out of the transition trap area. I'm not pulling the same stunt I just pulled, so you have a choice. Do you want to play nice and get out of here alive, or do you want to go down as a cold, dead mess?"

What got us into this confrontation in the first place?

It was because they were trying to use the transition trap, and we were about to get caught in it.

But Derucio spoke as if she were showing mercy.

"You're saying that now-"

"You brat, calm down."

"No, master, that bastard is trying to-"

"Denshi."

"⋯⋯!"

At the sound of her name, Grumpy stopped dead in her tracks.

It was the first time I had ever called her by name.

It made her eyes widen and her head twitch. Her head immediately drooped low.

-Mew.

She made a hissing sound, as if holding back anger.

Stealthily, I pulled the dagger from her waistband and slipped it into my own.

"Brother. You can't. As long as I have the light in my eyes, I can't let you do that."

Jeremy, who was male-sensitive by this world's standards, already looked like he was about to lunge at the Derucio with tears in his eyes.

"I'm okay. Jeremy."

"⋯⋯"

I tapped her on the shoulder, leaned my head close to hers and whispered in a very quiet voice.

"As soon as I get close to them, I want you to grab Grumpy and run in the opposite direction."

"⋯! Got it."

I wasn't going to be taken lightly.

The plan is simple. I'd catch her off guard, then hit her and jump.

The odds of success were quite high since the second floor is a field of traps.

‘But we have Grumpy.’

Unless they have the ability to identify traps, they won't be able to track us when they wake and if they do, the damage will be devastating.

Luckily, Jeremy seemed to catch my meaning.

"If I give it to you, you'll keep your word, right?"

I'm sure I'd keep my word, after all the shenanigans I'd pulled just a moment ago, but I let my guard down as best I could.

"Hmph. Well, then. That's a pretty tearful sacrifice, I'll bet it tastes good, eh. Why don't you put the axe down?"

Derucio laughed like a golden sun coming out of an NTR manga. She was going to f\*ck me through blackmail and send the video.

She didn't seem to realize that this was a sacrifice.

The axe clattered to the ground.

I cautiously approached Derucio, taking stock of the situation.

My stats were higher than theirs, but as a party, they had the upper hand.

But thanks to Zelvin and Mercy's seizure, two lackeys had fallen back, bringing the total to four.

Three in the immediate front.

Derucio was the strongest I'd faced so far, but she was also the most defenseless.

I couldn't be more grateful for that.

"Come on. Come here. And take it off yourself."

Derucio smiled a perverted grin as she stepped closer. Her hands began to grope roughly at my thighs.

I quietly unbuckled my belt and pulled out the secret weapon I'd been hiding in my waistband.

Derucio's smile, which had been a coy grin, quickly turned into a harsh twist.

"Hey, shit-"

You're quicker than I thought, but you're a little late.

-Puuuuuuk!

"Kaaaah!"

Derucio's collarbone was grazed by Grumpy’s dagger.

It was clearly aimed for her carotid artery, but she blocked the dagger with her left hand at the risk of having her left hand impaled.

She's an explorer, I guess, and if she wasn't in the mood for sex, she'd be a fucking nuisance.

"What the fuck do you think you’re doing!"

Two of the lackeys drew their swords and charged, but they're lackeys. I'm twice as agile as you, what good is that going to do?

"Ow!"

I drew the dagger embedded in Derucio left hand and threw it at the lackeys.

The dagger flew in an instant and landed squarely on the nape of the neck of one of the lackeys that had been approaching me. She immediately collapsed in a bloody heap.

Her fall was fortuitous since it happened right where my axe was. I ran over and equipped my axe and dagger.

I easily disposed of the other lackey that lunged at me.

"Huh, this damn bastard. If only you had cooperated quietly, we wouldn't have had this hassle!"

"Yeah, well, I told you first, give me ten seconds, and you can't wait for that, so you make this shit?"

Derucio decided better than to argue with me.

"Hey! You guys! Touch the transition trap! Go to the fountain on the 5th floor!”

"Yeah!"

At that, one of the lackeys, who had been watching Zelvin, approached the transition trap.

‘That's it.’

I immediately prepared to turn around. If I hesitate even slightly, it'll be the end. Looking behind, I saw Jeremy trying to run with Grumpy. Well done, Jeremy. I'm going soon too.

-Squeak!

"Where, grrrr. Where are you going, you little shit?"

"Fuck you!"

I'm about to run when the lackey I thought I'd left behind grabs me by the ankle tightly. True to being a little rascal, she's likely to fall dramatically, but this grip on my lifeline is intense.

I slammed my axe down on her wrist, severing it, and started to run.

-Beep, beep, beep, beep-!

A bright yellow flash erupted from behind me as an unpleasant noise that echoed through the labyrinth.

The sound alone was fucking ominous. It must mean they've touched the transition trap.

I spun around in time to see Derucio grinning wickedly as she clasped her hands together.

"You. You're fucked."

Shit.

‘There's still time!’

The trap has a 100 meter range. It takes 10 seconds from the time it's touched to the time it triggers.

And I have a whopping 17 Agility.

My Agility, move, Legs. I'm more than capable of covering 100 meters in 10 seconds! I've already lost two seconds, so I need to run it in eight!

The wind slapped me in the face as I hit the ground.

My run was so violent that tiny footprints were carved into the stone floor of the labyrinth.

A tremendous force surged from my explosively swollen thigh. Whether they know it or not, right now, even Usain Bolt wouldn't stand a chance against me.

In the distance, like the finish line of a 100-meter race, there is a line.

The inside of the line is fiery yellow, and the outside is the plain stone floor of the labyrinth. Perhaps if I cross that line, I can escape the realm of the transition trap.

I caught sight of Grumpy and Jeremy, who had caught up with me.

‘It's happening. It's close, but it works!'

I'm going to make it out of the transition trap!

Just as I thought that, the world slowed down again.

No matter how hard I stretched my legs, I couldn't move forward, and a strange calm came over me, as if time had stopped again.

What? What else? Did I just step on a trap? No. I didn't hear the characteristic maneuvering sound of a trap being triggered. I didn't step on a trap, so what the hell is wrong?

"Oh."

I see…I have an Agility of 17.

I can just barely walk across that line.

Grumpy and Jeremy are significantly slower than me.

That means they can't reach that line.

Even if I'm extremely lucky, I'll probably get caught in a teleportation trap right before escaping.

I suddenly understood why my strange calm and focus had returned.

This was not a time to recognize danger.

It was the time for me to make a decision.

What choice would I make?

Would I kill the goblin? Or make a quick getaway.

Do I risk injury and sacrifice and save my free points? Or do I invest in agility and survive?

In this case.

‘Do I abandon Denshi and Jeremy and try to escape the metastasis trap alone?’

Or.

‘All three of us fall to the fifth floor together.’

Obviously, I had to choose the former.

I'm going to fucking live and see. After all, parties don't last forever. As with any relationship, there will be parting. That was the fate of our party.

Not the third floor, not the fourth, not the fifth. You never know what kind of shit you're going to get.

‘But why am I the one in trouble?’

Three people falling to the fifth floor is just as dangerous. No, it's more dangerous for all three to go.

While I might squeak by with sheer stats, the other two ahead are different. They're like facing monsters they can't handle, and it's clear they'll struggle and die.

Even if I try to protect them, I'm likely to run into something far more dangerous than an arrow trap.

'Throw it away. Just throw it away. Do you care how long it's been since you've known them? Do it with your eyes closed. You'll forget it soon enough, isn't that what the Labyrinth City is all about?'

My inner self whispers. Go ahead, make your choice, you know what's wise.

The world began to spin again.

I deliberate, and make my choice.

Not the first, not the second but the third choice.

Soon catching up to Grumpy and Jeremy, I thrust all the strength of my legs into my upper body.

-Pow!

I shoved them in the back with my palms as hard as I could.

""⋯?!""

As if hit by a gust of wind, their bodies lifted up and flew out of the trap range.

Their expressions were a mixture of slight pain and great bewilderment.

Behind them, the yellow light began to burst more violently. It's really over now.

Thank goodness. By the time that light hits them, they'll be living outside the realm.

‘Asshole.’

I'd made a fucking stupid choice. I had chosen the survival of others over my own.

But I had to make this choice for the rest of my life.

What's the difference between man and beast?

Finding a way to benefit each other, even if it means sacrificing immediate gain.

‘In other words, the ability to accept your own losses.’

I made a human choice.

‘Sure, it's a big loss.’

Nevertheless, I have no doubt that the people I bought low will come back to me in a huff.

The overwhelming majority of people in this world are beasts and barbarians who only care about their own interests, but I doubt they will forget my favor.

It was selfish of me. I thought that if I erased my great debt to them, it might help me in the end.

"Master-!"

"Brother!"

As soon as they hit the ground, they both look back at me.

"No, no, no! Don't go! Don't go!"

Grumpy runs toward me from the distance, her face desperate, reaching out for me but she can't reach me since I've thrown them far enough.

I opened my mouth to speak, a faint smile on my face, swallowed up by the fiery yellow light.

"Goodbye."

-Beep, beep, beep.

There was a strange noise and a strange feeling of floating.

And just like that, I fell to the fifth floor.