**Chapter 37: Farewell, Meeting (1)**

As soon as I regained consciousness, the world slowed down.

My thoughts kept drifting toward that [being], but I couldn't afford to think about it now.

For now, I must focus on the situation in front of me.

‘Where am I now?’

The top of a building with what appears to be a giant fountain.

I was soaring high into the ceiling of the labyrinth with the water gushing from it, then plummeting downward.

I was still somewhat conscious when the party from the inn approached me.

I remembered that they had approached me favorably, and that they had torn a scroll to a place called the Fountain.

'Restored me in an instant.’

As soon as the water from the fountain touched my body, I was revitalized. Even in this slowed-down world, I could feel my wounds healing in an instant.

My body naturally gained strength. Fortunately, I still had a firm grip on my axe.

I scanned the ground for a landing. There were several people shuffling about. Somehow, they all looked familiar.

The inn party and Derucio's party.

‘That bitch.’

My blood pressure was still rising at the thought of falling to the 5th floor because of that bitch.

I gripped the axe tightly and swerved mid-fall.

My eyes locked with Derucio's gaping mouth.

"Bitch⋯"

The expletive flies out of my mouth. Did I expect the map to be fucked?

-Tsk tsk tsk!

"Aaaaahhhh!"

A tearing scream rang out. It was because I was falling, swinging my axe and making a nice mark on Derucio's neck.

-Puck!

I landed hard, my left hand twisted in a grotesque fashion, but it didn't matter.

A quick dip in the fountain water and my twisted wrist was back to normal.

Apparently, the water from the fountain was far superior to any potion.

‘I wonder if the fountain has something to do with that [being]?’

Tearing off the fountain's travel scroll, I had a lot of questions, not to mention facing the being.

'I can't know right away, let's think about it later.'

I felt like I needed more knowledge and information.

"Screech, screech, screech⋯!"

All heads turned at the dying scream.

Derucio was desperately clutching her head, which was about to separate from her neck, and soaking her neck in the water from the fountain.

Perhaps because it was such a near-death wound, it was healing much slower than my wrist.

Cha-ba-ba-ba-ba

"Oh, don't, don't, don't!"

She cried out, red blood dripping from her mouth and neck as I slowly approached her, axe in hand, kicking up water from the fountain.

Derucio grabbed one hand around her throat, which was about to fall off, and ordered her men to take her away from me.

She didn't look like she wanted to fight. Well, if she fought like that, she'd be decapitated but there was no one here now who was really listening to her.

They were all staring at me as if mesmerized by something.

'It must be the light that surrounded me when I fell.’

Even I would be too frightened to do anything if a helmeted, light-bathed man suddenly appeared and took a shot at me with a blood-coated axe.

"If you're coming, come on. I'll take the first one who comes."

I raised my axe in warning, and the lackeys, who had come to their senses, each grabbed a weapon.

But time passes in meaningless confrontation, and no one gets off easy.

"⋯⋯"

The nervous, swallowing voice could be heard all the way here.

Now, in their eyes, I'm no longer the weak explorer who rolled around on the second floor, but the mysterious thing that survived the fifth floor alone.

"Ah, ahhhhhh!"

"Axe, axe⋯⋯⋯"

Not to mention the seizures of Zelvin and Mercy, whose fear of me was already at its peak.

The anxiety they caused spread to the whole flock.

"If you put down your weapons and beg for your lives, I won't kill you here."

With the right amount of threats and cajoling, they finally lost their nerve and began to lay their weapons on the ground.

"You bitches! I've paid you a lot of money for this, and you're--"

"You shut the fuck up."

Zzzzzzz!

"Off!"

Derucio screamed again, this time with the axe in her collarbone.

It was an ugly sight to see her struggling, clutching her neck and collarbone.

A face filled with tears and snot came into view.

"Heh, heh."

It was nice to see the shameless bitch's face change from spiteful to terrified.

I leaned down, mesmerized, and locked eyes with Derucio.

Her eyes, filled with terror, reflected my bloodied Great Helm.

"I have some questions for you.”

‘The mastermind and the puppet’s curse. I need to figure out at least one of them.’

 [◆The Curse of the 26221st Puppet]

- Derucio became the 26221st puppet.

She’s in the 20,000’s puppet curses.

Her level is significantly higher than Deluna, 90,000’s, and Zelvin and Mercy, 80,000’s, who didn't even realize they were puppets.

‘Was Grumpy in the 1000’s?’

She was weaker than Derucio but her numbers were higher, so it's unlikely that they're measured by their immediate strength.

So my best guess is.

‘Growth potential.’

Grumpy was blessed with a high growth potential, thanks to her time spent in slavery.

‘Even if Derucio doesn't know about the curse, I need to find out what's behind it.’

Derucio was too blatant in her arrogance, acting like a reformed explorer. Her actions were essentially no different from those of an outlaw.

This was in stark contrast to Zelvin and Mercy, who trembled at my threats to cancel their reformed explorer course.

‘She was confident, as if hers could never be revoked.’

It was a little different with Deluna, who had at least tried to keep things quiet.

She was a reformed explorer herself, and she knew that if she was found out, she would be revoked.

‘Then there was Deluna's backer, Vesta, an outlaw from Clan Blaze.’

That case proved that outlaw henchmen don't get to be reformed explorers. That narrows it down to one possibility.

'Within the Explorer's Union, there is someone backing Derucio.'

Or even.

‘Someone who may be aware of the existence of the Puppet Curse.’

Otherwise, I can't think of any reason to single out Derucio for special treatment.

It was all speculation, but it was plausible.

The truth is, we'll just have to find out slowly from now on.

"Gu, curious, g⋯?"

"Uh, yes. Questions. You'd better answer it well, if you don't want to die."

"K⋯ Well, I don't know what the hell you're going to do, but it's bullshit. You can't kill me as long as I'm drinking from the fountain."

Derucio's intelligence seemed to be diminished by the lack of blood to her brain.

What, she thinks my axe is slower than the fountain's healing?

She had a point.

‘A slap in the face.’

-Pfft!

A fist slammed into Derucio's gut and she fell to the ground, drooling a thin stream of saliva.

I didn't intend to kill her right away. The dead can't talk, right? She'll tell me everything she knows before I let her go.

"Yes. Stay in that water, it'll be your lifeline."

In ancient times, the easiest way to find out the truth was through torture.

But Nam Soo-jin, a pure man who grew up in an orphanage and was taught modern character education and moral ethics, doesn't know about such scary and dangerous things.

He hasn't hit many people before, which means he can hit them anywhere and send them to the Jordan River at once but the healing water will prevent that to some extent.

"Choose well. Do you feel comfortable telling me now? Or do you want to beg for your life?"

"No, I'll tell you. I'll tell you now. I don't know what you want me to say, but I'll tell you whatever I know!"

"What? You've got a big mouth, I'm going to give you another slap."

"I said I'll tell you-"

Derucio's mouth was quite heavy. Seriously, she didn't even blink when I slapped her more than ten times.

-Pfft! Pfft!

Each slap felt like a cool release of stress.

'Still, the pure feeling of hitting is the most delicious.’

I wondered if I'd developed a strange taste for it, having a crazy masochistic pervert around.

After an hour had passed.

"Ma, let me talk⋯ I'll tell you anything⋯"

I managed to get this silent guy to open her mouth.

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The interrogation was pretty much as expected.

"Puppet⋯? I know about the puppet shows in the Outlaw District, but I don't know about that curse."

Derucio, who was in the 20,000’s curse, wasn't even aware of the puppet curse.

"Well, that's because Grumpy, who was in the 1000’s didn’t know either.’

I didn't think I could come up with an easy answer, so I just nodded.

"Be, Baze! Baze Javan! She approached me, who was already an outlaw! She told me to live a new life as an explorer!"

I recognized the man behind her.

Baze Javan, a rehabilitation course instructor for the Explorers' Alliance.

"She told me you weren't cut out to be an outlaw, and I couldn't stand having to deal with her for days on end, so I took the rehabilitation course."

The woman who turned Derucio from an outlaw to a rehabilitation explorer.

"If I messed up, she covered it up. She wasn't high rank, but she wasn't a low-level employee either, so she could cover it up. I don't know about the other bitches, but that's how she always handled my accidents."

“Baze Javan was a deeply corrupt officer. Does the Explorers Union know what she did?”

"I don't know, I don't think so⋯Probably, which is why she still has her head."

Yeah. I doubt the Explorers' Alliance, as bad as it is, would turn a blind eye to such criminal behavior.

"Zelvin, Mercy, they're also party members she recruited. Besides us, there are quite a few who became reformed explorers from outlaws because of Baze Javan. Del...something like that."

"Deluna?"

"Uh. That's right, the asshole."

I was half-convinced at that point.

‘Baze Javan. She can confirm the Puppet Curse.’

I was intrigued. How could she recognize a curse that the cursed didn't know about and that didn't even have a status window?

I wondered, "Can she sense the curse bearer through her senses, even if she can't see it intuitively like a status bar?”

I wanted to find out. I wanted to bait her.

What if Grumpy strategically confronted Baze Javan?

Anyway, I got some good information.

I thought to myself, "This is great, I've got a rough bio on Baze Javan and all her dirty tricks. That's great.”

I was wondering what to do with this information.

"I've said it, I've said it. Now please forgive me. From now on, I'll live like a dead rat in the outlaw district."

I looked up to see Derucio on her knees, sobbing.

This bitch it’s ridiculous.

"Are you done? You got anything else to tell me?"

"Yes! Yes! I've told you everything I know, and all that's left is what my minions know-"

"Really?"

-Tsk tsk tsk!

I wiped my dirty, blood-stained axe.

"You need an example. You dared to stab me in the back. Isn't that right?"

"Yes, yes⋯"

The wide-eyed, stunned reformed explorers nodded in unison.

I walked over to Zelvin and Mercy, who looked more than terrified, they looked like they were having trouble breathing.

-Tuk-tuk.

I flicked them both on the cheeks with the bloody side of my axe.

"Report Derucio's untimely death as an unfortunate accident, a common occurrence in the Labyrinth, right?"

"Yes, yes⋯!!!!"

"And if you run away, you know?"

They nodded frantically.

As I'm slowly realizing these days, the right amount of fear is a pretty good control tool.

It's a little annoying that if I scare them too much, they pout and I have to give them carrots, but at least not now.

"⋯That's it."

I turn my head, and there they are, backs turned, eyes and ears covered, staring off into the distance, somewhere in the labyrinth.

The inn party had been doing this ever since I'd interrogated Derucio, seemingly unwilling to be caught up in the chain of events.

"We don’t know anything."

"I know Ms. Diana's staff wouldn't have done what they did without thinking⋯but I don't want to get in the middle of it, sorry."

It was a smart move on their part.

I got help at a really good time, too.

"You have nothing to apologize for," I said, "I don't know how I could ever repay you for all your help in Hobgoblin Village."

I bowed low to thank them.

In the tavern, they had been nothing more than a bunch of gossip, but in the Labyrinth, they were ideal explorers who deserved respect.

"Don't take yourself so seriously! It's a fucking dangerous labyrinth, and we're just fellow explorers helping each other out."

"If you want to pay your debt, buy us a beer!"

"Don't mix milk when you're drunk. That's seriously gross."

"Hmph. Priests are teetotalers, so drink if you can."

They chuckled for a moment, then turned to me with a suggestion.

"If you're not going to accompany those reformed explorers, why don't you come with us?"

"Together?"

"Yes. You seem to be on your own, and we've finished our business in this labyrinth, so we're about to head back to the surface. Any profits we make along the way will be split equally between the five of us."

On reflection, there was no reason to refuse.

I grasped the outstretched hand of the dwarf tightly.

"Very well. I'll take good care of you for a while. Now that I think about it, I haven't even given you my name. I'm Balkan."

"I'm Joy Hog. And as for favors, I think we could use some, considering you've been slaughtering hobgoblins."

"Certainly, it was quite a sight⋯"

"Honestly, I was so scared I almost breastfed back then."

"Take care of your mammary glands."

Hahahahaha.

We laughed, held hands, and headed through the ascent portal to the fourth floor.

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Zelvin, Mercy, and the rest of Derucio’s reformed explorers immediately fell to their knees as the helmeted warrior left.

"He's crazy, he's crazy, he's crazy, he's crazy, he's crazy."

"I, I'm so scared⋯ what are we going to do⋯"

"I don't know, fuck it⋯ it doesn't matter, shut up and follow me."

Axe. Helm. Axe. Helm. Crazy axe. Crazy helmeted axe man.

Zelvin, who had been having nightmares about that man lately, snarled at the reformed explorers.

"You all saw what he did to Derucio, and how she was beaten! If we don't do as he says, we'll all go down!"

There were no words of rebuttal as everyone felt the disparity in class.

Everyone here realized that no matter how hard they tried, they couldn't beat the man in the helmet.

A deep sense of dread settled over their hearts.

"⋯Let's stay dead rats for a while. Please."

Please, let's hope this madman doesn't strike again.

Two weeks passed.

I don't know if it's because I've been facing so many enemies or because I've leveled up quite a bit.

The fourth floor, which was supposed to be the hardest, was easier than I thought.

It was partly because the inn party was much more skilled than I expected. The level of response to the situation was different.

I realized once again the importance of an experienced party.

Then, on the third floor.

[Currently Owned Slave: Denshi (LV.14)]

I got a little bored of standing around and opened the status window, and I noticed a change in her stats. She had risen five levels since we parted ways.

'Excellent. She's my safe haven.'

I was too far away to see the blessing or curse, but it was an unbelievable rate of growth.

I wondered if this was the potential of Grumpy. It was a good thing, although it was a bit questionable because it was so fast. It's always better to invest early.

With that admiration, I passed through the second floor, where the labyrinth started to go wrong, and crossed the escape portal on the first floor to exit the labyrinth.

"⋯⋯!"

Even as I marveled at the dazzling sunshine and the scenery of the labyrinthine city of Valerus, I felt a thrill of electricity run through my body.

"What?

I reflexively checked the status window.

The corner of my mouth twitched upward.

"Ohhh. That reaction is⋯Balkan?"

"Yep."

"Well. Well, I guess we have something to celebrate."

They say hard work pays off.

[Current Blessings and Curses: 3]

The third labyrinth was particularly difficult but I have a new blessing.