**Chapter 38: Farewell, Meeting (2)**

Looking at the sun, it wasn't too late. I looked at Diana's watch and saw that it was only 12 noon.

"We're going to meet the client, get paid, and then we'll get together for a drink tomorrow evening. What do you think? Do you want to go to the temple first, now that you have received a blessing?"

‘The temple.’

The temple reminded me of Serif Adeline's face, a woman who wore a suspiciously suspicious, crazy vibrating cross necklace.

The all-white cat who had given me a strangely favorable, sympathetic gaze.

- Head to the Labyrinth.

- There you will gain experience, make allies, and grow stronger. Strong enough to face whatever dangers come your way.

- That's my personal request.

She offered to appraise the blessings herself, free of charge, as part of her personal favor, but⋯

‘That's a pain in the ass.’

The status window was better than the temple appraisal ability.

As long as I had a status window, there was no reason to travel to the temple on my own unless I was looking for a special miracle.

‘After all, the reason I went to the temple in the first place was to confirm the Blessing of the Question Mark, and the second time was to confirm the Curse of Grumpy.’

I was cut off at the entrance for a pacification ritual, but whatever.

'I suppose I should go, for the future, but...'

Priests are quite a valuable resource.

Serif is a high ranking priest in the Earthmother Order, and she's even favorably disposed towards me.

It wouldn't hurt to keep visiting and making connections but that was no reason to go 'right now'.

Can I complain a bit? I'm honestly in a lot of pain right now. I want to lie on the ground, stretch my legs, and sleep right now.

'Two weeks of traveling is exhausting enough, but two weeks in a labyrinth, that's horrible.'

I didn't plan to stay this long in the first place. I was just going to do the second floor, but then I got stuck on the fifth floor and things got out of hand.

‘I'm sure Diana is worried.’

The guy who said he was going to the second floor hasn't been back in almost three weeks, so I'm sure good, sweet Diana is worried.

‘And I need to find out where Grumpy and Jeremy are.’

We'd gotten separated on the second floor, and I was a little worried about them, too.

I decided to take care of the immediate task at hand, rest for a few days, and then go see Serif.

"I'll go to the temple later. I need to get some rest today. Let's meet up for a drink tomorrow evening."

"Kahaha, sure!"

I agreed and parted ways with the Joy Hog party. We agreed to meet another time to split the reward.

I watched them walk away, then approached the guards near the entrance to the Labyrinth.

"Hmph. Moo, what's going on?"

After standing there bored, I suddenly asked the angular guard a question.

"By any chance, didn't any explorers named Grumpy and Jeremy come out of the labyrinth last week or this week?"

"Grumpy ⋯ Jeremy ⋯ ah. I don't know who Grumpy is, but I do remember a bitch named Jeremy."

Indeed. Good thing I asked the guard.

I'm glad they weren’t wasting their time checking IDs at every doorway. At least they have a good memory.

It took me two weeks to get up from the fifth floor, so they must have been-

"It was pretty loud, that suicidal chick. The bitch who just got up to the second floor got hired as a porter for the 15th floor expedition."

"What?"

What the hell is this?

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"Ah. You mean Jeremy the Goblin Slayer?"

The Explorers' Alliance, where I went to inquire about their party member's whereabouts, had even more devastating news.

"She applied for a position as a porter for the expedition to Eden, the safe zone on the 15th floor, the halfway point, and I was quite impressed with the way her eyes lit up with pride."

Since I've been transported to the fifth floor, Jeremy has left.

"Even if it's an expedition, the middle floor is where only one in a thousand novice explorers make it back alive, and even if they do, it'll be at least half a year before they return. Oh, and by the way, you said your name was Balkan? Jeremy left a letter and some things for you."

"Oh."

I dumbly took the backpack and a letter from the Alliance employee.

I carefully broke the seal and unfolded the letter.

[If you see this letter, it means that you made it back safely from the fifth floor.]

The letter started like this and I read it slowly.

The more I read, the more my head hurt, but I made it to the end.

"Huh."

I laughed out loud when I finished. Oops, my head suddenly felt hot.

To summarize the content of the letter

After I fell into the trap on the fifth floor, the two of them worked together to break through the second floor and get out of the labyrinth safely.

My sacrifice, however, must have come as a shock to them in more ways than one.

- You're still alive. You're still alive. Master, I need the strength to protect you.

'Denshi muttered something like that and left for somewhere else.’

Jeremy didn't seem to know where she went after that.

Alone afterward, Jeremy traveled through another labyrinth with another party to reach the second floor.

After three labyrinth runs, she had earned the name Goblin Slayer, but she was having trouble progressing.

- You. Be our porter.

Catching the eye of the Aman Sisters, mid-level explorers, she was offered the opportunity to join the expedition as a porter on the supply mission to Eden, a mid-level base on the 15th floor.

'I apologize for writing to you in such a one-sided manner. I have felt a great lack in my journey with you, and I cannot continue to follow your back forever. I write this letter in hopes that one day we'll be together again.’

With that, she left for the 15th floor, with the mindset that she shouldn't hold me back,

"PS. I'm leaving you with the love of my life.”

I stared at the backpack, mesmerized. Fuck. This asshole-

"Gahhhhh!"

I pulled it out of the backpack, and the employee stumbled back in horror.

It was a natural reaction. Anyone would be surprised to see a pale-skinned head with hair in a bun sticking out of a backpack.

I was so startled that I almost dropped Anya's head but I held on tight.

If I dropped it, I'd crack her skull.

'PS. They say you can keep it clean if you just splash water on the crown of her head once a month. I'll be back with good news, Jeremy Olim.'’

"Oh, no. You crazy bastard-"

I grabbed the back of my head and collapsed from the sudden rise in blood pressure.

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~The fifth floor of the Labyrinth, a cave on the third floor of a hobgoblin village~

Denshi smiled wryly at the hobgoblins, all covered in axe marks.

‘As expected, my master.’

She pulled out the map in her arms and unfolded it.

This is the right place. The place where my master fell to the fifth floor and spent the most time. He had survived the fifth floor.

But the map she was looking at now didn't show his location. This meant two things

‘Either he's dead, or he's out of the labyrinth.’

Denshi looked at the slave contract she always carried in her arms and hugged it tightly with satisfaction. Her small chest heaved.

'The contract it’s still here.’

The paper of a slave contract is specially treated so that when a party dies, the contract is destroyed and the stamp on the paper disappears.

But his mark is not gone. It was proof that Balkan was still alive.

In other words, he had made it through the fifth floor and out of the labyrinth alive and well.

"Hah!"

A sigh of relief burst out of her.

But it won't be easy to see him again. It will be at least two months before they will have a chance to meet again.

Denshi kissed her forearm without realizing it.

It was like kissing his hand and a smile crept up the corners of her mouth.

Denshi immediately tugged at the leash around her neck.

Just imagining the roughness of his gesture made her skin crawl.

"Stop."

A cold voice came from behind her.

Like a doll, a four-armed woman stared at Denshi.

"You have a long way to go. You can't grow in a place like this."

But right now, Denshi's immediate comfort was more important.

She could have used this emotion to burn with joy that her master had made it out of the labyrinth alive and unharmed.

Denshi continued to enjoy a good time for a long while, squeezing her throat and stimulating the back of her neck.

"⋯⋯"

The four-armed woman, Inert, stared silently at Denshi, then silently covered her face with her four hands.

"Did [that person] really mark this perverted woman...? Seriously...?"

The instructions Inert had received from [that person] were simple. Raise Denshi to the level of a senior explorer.

At first, she thought it would be a relatively easy task compared to her previous assignments.

The woman, Denshi, was talented. She had potential but most of all.

-My master. I want the power to protect my own master. I will never lose him again.

There was a great deal of will and determination in her, and her venomous eyes held the potential to reach great heights.

'This bitch will definitely be stronger than me,' she thought.

Indeed, when she focused on teaching her, she took to it instantly and grew at an incredibly fast pace.

Up until an hour ago, she hadn't changed her mind but now, she backed off a bit.

"⋯Haah."

This isn't going to be easy.

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"Denshi ⋯ Denshi ⋯ Hmm. I don't recall any visits to the Explorers' Alliance in recent weeks."

The whereabouts of Grumpy were unknown.

"Oh, that bitch? She packed up and left two weeks ago. I don't know where she was headed, but her eyes were glazed over, and she kept mumbling something about her master."

That's what the innkeeper at the inn where she stayed said.

"Heh."

I walked through the darkened streets of the Labyrinth City in a daze.

I'm heartbroken. There's no other way to describe my feelings.

The party broke up again. One disappeared, and one went on an expedition where it wouldn't be strange to die at any moment.

'Am I really cursed to lose my party every time I enter the labyrinth?’

How could something good not happen at least once?

What made it worse was that I thought this party was going to last a while.

Who would have known that the two I bought at the lowest point after much deliberation would explode in one go?

They say that for every breakup, there's a reunion, but this was so fucking sudden that I was just dumbfounded.

I just sighed heavily.

Do I have to party with strangers again? Do I have to continue the pointless emotional drain and boundaries? Do I have to stick my head in the labyrinth again?

‘Yes. Fuck it.’

I have to head to the labyrinth anyway. This time, the thought was even stronger.

'Portal. Fifth floor. Why does it feel like it's pointed at me?’

I had a feeling that none of this was a coincidence.

I shook my head, ventilating my head as best I could.

But just like the smell that lingered in the room, the remnants of Grumpy and Jeremy floated around in my head. It would probably take quite a while to forget them.

"Ha."

It had already happened. Instead of sighing, I looked to the future and tried to think positive thoughts.

I hear loud voices around me.

I didn't like the idea of walking down the street alone while everyone else was busy eating, drinking, and playing.

When times are tough, I need to cheer myself up.

I decided to soothe myself with a cold beer tonight and start fresh tomorrow morning.

‘I miss Diana.’

I couldn't wait to heal, I missed her warm soup so much.

I arrived at the inn to find it unusually dark and closed.

"It's closed. The curse has struck again."

A strange, all-black woman was muttering to herself in front of the closed inn door.

Black hair, styled in a high, flowing ponytail, red eyes and an expressionless face.

Pale brown skin with a subtle glow from the moonlight and a well-developed muscular body without compromising her femininity.

She wears a bold leotard with no eyes, and a black tail that tucks under her cloak.

She gives the impression of a black cat.

I don't recognize her, but I've seen her before. When was it?

'Ah. When we were lined up waiting to enter the Labyrinth.’

She was the woman who the guards were nervously responding to.

I remembered her because she had the same surname as Serif, Adeline.

But now, with her cloak, she looked even more familiar.

[■■■■■ ■■■Ne Lv.7■]

The status window gave me the answer. The suspicious duo had been visiting Diana's bar from time to time. One of them was unmasked and looked quite strange.

'The other one was Zernier and this one is⋯'

Just as I was thinking that, the woman in all black looked at me. Her red eyes locked with mine from behind her helmet and in that moment, I felt the world stop.

My vision quickly faded away. The world plunged into darkness, revealing only faint outlines.

I instinctively drew my axe.

Crunch, crunch, crunch.

My hand broke out in a cold sweat.

‘What was that? What did I almost get?’

I was instinctively sure. I don't know what the hell she just did, but I almost died.

"Oh. I'm sorry, I thought you were an enemy when you approached without a sound."

The woman apologized profusely but I was suddenly very nervous, and my head felt a little dizzy.

Her face was expressionless, bordering on glaring, but her demeanor was calm.

I was momentarily wary, but she didn't seem to have any intention of antagonizing me.

‘Well, there's no reason to be hostile all of a sudden.’

I remembered how Diana had treated the woman, and that alone made her far more trustworthy than the rest of the people on the streets.

Carefully, I tucked the axe into my waistband.

"It's all right. Are you a guest or⋯?"

"I was hoping to be a customer, but I see it’s closed today."

With that, the woman gestured toward the inn with her chin.

A piece of paper taped to the door said it was closed for the next week.

Diana had never closed the inn before, which was odd.

"You, by the way. You have a pretty good instinct."

The voice came from right next to me. It was like she was whispering next to my ear.

No, it wasn't a whisper.

There was a hint of hot breath. It was really next to my ear.

The woman had moved several meters to reach me in a split second, without me noticing.

"You've got a good sense of movement at that level. Your reaction time is excellent. There's a reason Diana recruited you."

I jerked my head around, and a pair of red eyes came into view, glittering in the moonlight.

"Diana's deal too."

The eyes gazed at me as if she was gazing at a delicious meal, or a coveted object.

"Would you like to be taught by me?"

"⋯Yes?"

I stiffened at the sudden suggestion. It wasn't that I didn't recognize the offer.

‘Deal⋯what?’

She was quite a difficult person to deal with.