**Chapter 131: Nightmare (1)**

Ellie stared blankly at the woman before her.

The dark-haired female held him tightly, the mound of her pussy pressed against Balkan's hip.

She buried her nose in his neck and inhaled deeply.

“Master...hmm...hmm...master...sniff. It's the real you, the real, real you, I've missed you, Master.”

She looked at the woman savoring Balkan's body scent with an ecstatic expression.

-Tuduk.

Ellie felt something snap in her head.

-Hmph!

The tips of Ellie's hair burned slightly.

It was a minor side effect of the sudden release of magic but not something to worry about right now.

There was a more important matter at hand.

In an instant, two fireballs formed in Ellie's hands.

Right after.

-Kududududud!

The sound of a bowstring was heard from inside the cave where the dark-haired woman had emerged.

The arrowhead glowed in the darkness and was aimed at Ellie's brow.

The party recognized it as the signal for battle, and they raised their weapons.

 “Stop!”

Balkan shouted urgently as he looked up at the woman with her cheek pressed against his chest.

Ellie's body, which had been filled with thoughts of firing a fireball and burning the woman in front of her into a handful of ashes, stiffened like stone at Balkan's words.

Her mind was filled with other thoughts, but her body was obediently following Balkan's orders.

Questions immediately followed.

Why?

‘Why do you want me to stop? She’s the enemy, she’s a bad, perverted bitch who touched oppa’s body and molested him!’

The relationship with her adoptive mother was something she could accept and understand.

Whether her stepmother and oppa were sharing a steamy, heartfelt copulatory kiss, or whether they were going to have sex someday, if not now, then someday⋯

⋯ she was a little bit jealous, a little bit envious, and a whole lot wanting to do it herself.

For Ellie, it was all within acceptable limits.

Her foster mom and oppa were sharing affection with each other before her, and she was grateful that she was included.

The other female, however, was another story.

“Balkan. Explain.”

Joy Hog asked, shield raised.

Balkan sighed and shook off the dark-haired woman in front of him.

“⋯She's a member of my old party.”

“Yes, old times. Master, I'm still one of your - kekk-!”

-snap!

Balkan casually snatched the leash from around the woman's neck.

“And.”

“⋯Heheh⋯Master⋯Keheh⋯Master⋯hasn't changed⋯”

The dark-haired woman, her throat naturally raised, choked out, her face wet with joy and delight.

“She's my slave.”

-Grrrr.

The party dropped their weapons, dumbfounded by Balkan's declaration.

The flame in Ellie's hand quickly lost its power and went cold.

“⋯?”

Only Ellie's desperate voice echoed in the sky.

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To our relief, Grumpy let us into the cave.

Considering how territorial most explorers are, this was a huge concession.

The cave was quite cozy and the warmth of the bonfire melted our frozen bodies.

“Chirp Chirp of Wind Valley?”

“That, yes. This is it!”

The party member accompanying Grumpy was none other than the tiny Chirp Chirp⋯no, the one I had met earlier.

It was the mid-level explorer, Wind Valley's Chirp Chirp.

"Isn't she a spirit archer who acts based on trust? Why with someone like that...?"

“No, it probably means that she's a decent enough person to be with that Spirit Archer.”

“Perhaps. No matter how good a woman is, she's still biologically female. They're instinctively drawn to men⋯”

“A woman can also be a bitch in front of a man⋯ but that⋯”

Joy Hog, Hitolis, Lammel, and Jubeel's gazes turned to me.

Or, more precisely, to Grumpy clinging to my side.

“Heheh……”

The expressions on the faces of the party members grew subtle as they stared at the happy, smiling Grumpy, leashed to me.

“⋯But isn't there something wrong with that?”

“It’s like meeting someone from another world, with a leash on and walking on all fours by itself.”

“⋯Is it too early for the criminal's common sense⋯”

“I'm afraid of slaves.”

Her behavior would make even Jubeel shake her head.

“Master. Other people are looking at you and me. This thrilling feeling I haven’t felt in a long time⋯ Hehe, ah, here I go, here I go⋯”

Grumpy head jerked up, her back rattling.

It was a natural masochistic perversion, lightly aroused by the scornful glances of others.

Whatever had happened in the meantime, she looked even worse than before.

The party members shook their heads and turned away from Grumpy who had climaxed.

The atmosphere at the first meeting was tense.

Grumpy behavior was not particularly hostile, and Chirp Chirp status as a spirit of the Wind Valley gave them considerable credibility.

They are not particularly dangerous.

The party members have begun to relax their guard against them, though.

However, there were still some who were still wary of them.

“⋯Oppa.”

Ellie's elf ears pricked up incredulously, and she glared at Grumpy.

“Really, are you okay?”

I laughed bitterly at Ellie's overwhelming concern.

“I'm fine. We had a party back in the day. She's pretty good, and she listens to me.”

-Tsk tsk.

I stroked Grumpy's head, and she whimpered again, her face pale.

Ellie's gaze sharpened again as she watched her. She couldn't look away.

“Still, I think we should stay away from her, just in case.”

“Hey. You little fire starter.”

 As she listened to Eli's words, Grumpy’s face turned sour.

Her piercing purple eyes reflected Ellie's confused expression.

“Fire starter?”

“Yes, you. Don't cross the line. I could have kicked everyone out of the cave except for master, but I didn't. I let you in and you should have bowed your head and thanked me, not telling others that I'm dangerous. You know what you're talking about, you little bitch!”

-Hmph!

With a single tug on the chain collar, the ferocious snarl softened into a grimace.

“Ellie. Go back and rest, warm up.”

“Ha, but...”

“Ellie.”

“⋯⋯⋯.”

I said it over and over again, and Ellie bowed her head.

Grumpy next to me smiled triumphantly and hugged me tighter.

Ellie glared at her with a mixture of anger and humiliation, but she finally obeyed me and left to join the rest of the party.

She looked like a puppy left behind by a moving family after being told they'd be back later.

I decided I'd have to talk to her later, but for now, I focused on Grumpy.

I had a lot of questions to ask her.

“You. Where the hell have you been all this time?”

“Well, it's a bit of a long story.”

With a look of reminiscence on her face, Grumpy slowly recounted her story.

When I was dropped to the fifth floor by a reformed explorer named Derucio, Grumpy realized her own shortcomings.

 “Then,” she says, ”I heard a voice asking me if I needed strength.”

“You heard a voice in the labyrinth?”

“No. Jeremy, who was with me, didn't hear it. It was in my head.”

A mysterious voice that targeted only Grumpy.

I don't know who the voice belongs to, but I have a rough idea of what it is.

[◆ The Curse of the 30th Puppet]

The first time Grumpy was cursed the number was in the thousandths but now it's up to the thirties.

Something must have happened to change her.

“I went to the place the voice told me to go, made a connection with someone ⋯and did a lot of things to get stronger⋯ but it's still not enough.”

Grumpy looked at me with a pleading face and said.

“Again, I don't want to be separated from my master like that.”

“⋯⋯”

“So, I want to get stronger, strong enough to protect my master.”

⋯Have you been struggling a lot?

She's always been bold before, but not to this extent, and somehow she's become a bit more aggressive.

Maybe the breakup was more traumatic for her.

“I wanted to come to you when I was strong enough to protect you⋯when I was strong enough to do so without offending you.”

To me, of course, this was positive news.

What other slave could be so loyal and devoted to his master?

“⋯I suffered.”

 “Heh.”

I patted her on the head, and she grinned and hugged me tightly.

-Kadadad.

I heard a thin sound in the distance.

I turned to see Ellie, her long elven ears stretched to the limit, listening in on the conversation.

“⋯⋯”

-Kwuuk-

With trembling hands, Ellie clutched the coat I gave her and buried her face in it.

“Hooooo.”

I forced my eyes back to Grumpy and got back to the point.

“So, who are you working for now?”

The 'voice' was trying to nurture her by giving her a teacher.

Although she didn't know it, I could tell that the voice had some expectations of her.

“You’re always in my heart, master.”

“Don't talk nonsense.”

“Hmph.”

The grin on her face returned to a serious expression.

“Master.”

She turned back to me.

“By any chance, do you know of a curse by the name of Puppet?”