**Chapter 132: Nightmare (2)**

The curse of the puppet.

I remembered the first time I saw someone with it.

A lowly mage named Deluna, and every other scoundrel and outlaw I encountered had one.

Over the course of the next few events and encounters, I realized that most of the people in the Outlaw Zone had the curse.

Even the most recent Blues Clan leader I met had one.

'It's definitely a strange curse.’

A blessing and a curse.

Its mysteries can only be learned in the Labyrinth.

You could probably ask hundreds of explorers and get the same answer.

There is no way to obtain Blessings or Curses anywhere else but the Labyrinth.

But here, there was one exception.

Grumpy got the Puppet Curse by going to the Outlaw Zone, not the Labyrinth, without even realizing it.

How is that possible?

And why just that one curse?

Unless one possessed a blessing that could inscribe curses, such a thing was impossible.

The more I delved into it, the more questions I had, and the curse, which I had long since abandoned, came up again.

When asked where she had worked, she mentioned the curse.

“You. No way.”

She chuckled at my question.

“Of course not. I thought you, my master, would know.”

“⋯No, I don't know the details, so explain it to me one step at a time.”

She nodded at my words and opened her mouth cautiously.

“In the deepest depths of the Labyrinth City, in the Outlaw District, there is a being called the Puppeteer.”

The Puppeteer.

At least it matched the word puppet.

“The Puppeteer can impose the Puppet Curse on others through special puppets.”

“Heh.”

“The curse is in name only, so there are no special penalties, but the target of the curse becomes an object for the puppeteer to observe.”

“⋯⋯”

I opened my mouth, dumbfounded by the words that came out of Grumpy’s mouth.

It wasn't even common sense to artificially inscribe a curse, but to even be able to watch the cursed being?

“In theory, that means it’s possible to observe the entire labyrinth city.”

 “Well, maybe for a while if you use your full power?”

Grumpy one shrugged her shoulders as if she didn't know much about that.

 ‘I don't think even ⋯Diana could do that.’

Of course, it would be impossible to keep an eye on every single one of the ninety thousand or so puppet curse holders.

There are probably only a few dozen people who are actually watched but that doesn't change the fact that it's a big deal.

“The puppeteer watches over those who are cursed, and if they see any potential in them, they pluck them out and grow them like me.”

Curses, voyeuristic tendencies, and now even grooming?

“Why? Why did they give you a teacher to help you grow?”

“Oh, I heard from my master that usually, no matter how talented someone is, they don't give them a master, just a little boost.”

[1389th Puppet's Curse]

+1 to all stats when maximum prerequisites are met

I remembered the first puppet curse Grumpy got.

‘I wonder if “help” means stats.’

 “The reason I have a teacher is because I'm very talented. What do you mean, ‘suitability’ is high?”

“Suitability?”

It was an unfamiliar word.

At the same time, it was strangely off-putting.

“I think they said that the higher the suitability, the better the 'link'⋯? Master didn't elaborate.”

Suitability and links, was a word match that reeked of something.

“So this master is a puppet too?”

"I'm not exactly sure, but they did follow the puppeteer, referring to them as 'that person.'"

After listening to her for a while, I felt a strange chill and stroked her arm.

It was hard to believe that a mere mortal could do something like cast curses—this was an unfathomable mystery of the Labyrinth, after all.

‘⋯I shouldn't be so hasty.’

Besides, from what I heard, it wasn't exactly an organization of outlaws, so there weren't many people with puppet curses among the outlaws.

It just so happened that the puppeteer's area of operation was in the outlaw territory.

'But the Puppeteer isn't in the Outlaw District for nothing, there must be a reason.’

Well, it makes sense, considering this person is into voyeurism and even grooming.

“Whoa.”

I sighed unnecessarily. My head was spinning.

In the first place, even Grumpy had picked up more information than I knew.

“The real details,” I thought, ”must be with her teacher.”

Grumpy told me the name and appearance of her teacher.

Inert, a female with four mechanical arms and a figure with a disguise blessing.

“Is that really her?”

“Uh, yeah. That's right.”

I couldn't help but be surprised by the words.

‘That's the same guy I met when I went to Zirnier’s workshop to reforge Gluttony!’

-He's a guy with a good sense. He'll be great. That guy should have been taken care of, but why on earth did it take so many years for such a precious thing to be⋯

I remembered what Inert had muttered to me.

It had been a bizarre encounter with a level 60 powerhouse, and I still remembered the words.

-That bitch who was left hanging on to everything doesn't know any gratitude!

At the same time, the image of Zirnier, who had been drunk and passed out, complaining, came to mind.

It seemed that Inert and Zirnier were quite close.

I'll have to ask Zirnier more about Inert once we get out of the Labyrinth.

‘Ah. Speaking of which, I heard that Zirnier is also going to the royal inner castle to repair the armor of the second princess⋯’

“Ha.”

Damn. This never gets any easier.

“What's with all the complicated sighing? It's a simple story.”

While I was still racking my brains, Grumpy looked me in the eye through my helmet.

“I'm on your side, isn't that fact enough for you?”

Heh.

“Yeah. That's it.”

I chuckled and tugged on her leash.

With Ellie, I would have patted her on the head, but with this guy, this reaction worked better.

“Kekekeke… ehee…”

The strangled one laughed heartily.

The puppet in the top 30, Grumpy, will be watched with considerable interest by the Puppeteer.

But for her to voice her opinion in front of me like this, it must mean that her loyalty is to me, not the Puppeteer.

“Okay, enough about the puppet, why were you on the 12th floor with Chirp Chirp?”

“Ah. Well, one of my blessings is the Blessing of the Wind.”

[◆ Blessing of the Wind]

- Your hearing is extremely developed. Greatly increases your affinity with wind spirits.

- Dexterity +15 Wisdom +5 when maximum conditions are met (1 Wind Elemental collected so far)

Surely, such a blessing.

“I was traveling with Master, and I happened to meet Chirp Chirp, and somehow I made her obey me.”

 “So it's like a slave to a slave, huh?”

“Hmph. Something like that. The reason I came here is because the bitch called Master asked me to come up to the 15th floor to test something.”

“Fifteenth floor? The two of you? Is that possible?”

“Strangely enough, spirits are less likely to be attacked by the monsters in the Labyrinth, as long as you avoid them.”

After that, we spent the rest of the time catching up on each other's lives.

“The Blues Clan you were a slave to. They stupidly raided the academy and got screwed.”

“Huh… Really?! Those motherfuckers! I was just planning on fucking them up little by little while slowly drying them up…!”

It had been a long time since we had seen each other, so we had a lot to talk about.

As the conversation continued, the night sky grew darker and darker, and it was time for sleep.

“Thank you for letting me share your cave with you. There's no way I can repay you, so I'll stand guard for you, even if it's only for a few hours.”

“Mmm. Thanks.”

Grumpy nodded at Joy Hog's offer.

We had far more people than them, so it was the least we could do to compensate them for providing shelter.

“Yay! Rest!”

“No, I can't. You have to work.”

“You've gone too far! You'd better stop your unconscionable behavior right now!”

“How dare you talk back to your master? You are supposed to obey your master absolutely!”

Grumpy, acting like a master, stood up, put Chirp Chirp on guard duty and snuggled into a sleeping bag…it was my sleeping bag.

“Master. Master, come this way.”

“⋯No, that's my spot.”

“Do you know why I've never caught a cold even though I've always worn only a piece of cloth? It's because I'm a little too warm. Nobody can warm you up like me in the 12th floor wind chill. Here. Come on in. I'll warm up your tired body.”

Grumpy spread her arms wide.

It was a bit of a gimmick, but it was quite convincing.

That warm, fluffy body would be good to cuddle with.

She's a female slave with no human rights, she'd be happy to be hugged so hard she'd beg for her life.

“No, not that!”

Ellie interrupted me as I headed for my sleeping bag, mesmerized.

“Chit. We were almost there⋯”

At Ellie's interruption, Grumpy clicked her tongue and left my sleeping bag.

And this time, she actually got into her own sleeping bag and laid down.

The party's sleeping bags formed a circle around the campfire in the center.

I decided on a night watch rotation with the other party members and I was next in line after Chirp Chirp.

I quickly lay down in my sleeping bag to get some more rest.

‘⋯It's warm.’

After a few moments, my sleeping bag had warmed up to just the right temperature.

It seems that Grumpy’s words weren't entirely false.

“Balkan. Wake up.”

“No!”

Wind Valley's Chirp Chirp poked me in the cheek.

I'd fallen asleep in the blink of an eye.

Was I tired?

Or was it the warmth of his sleeping bag that induced such a deep sleep?

Or maybe it was something else.

It didn't really matter.

“Hmmm.”

“Balkan, there is something unusual."

“Something unusual?”

Yawning, I sat up, and Chirp Chirp told me what she sensed during his night shift.

“My spirit senses are screaming. I'm sensing something erotic!”

“⋯Something erotic?”

“It feels like a snail is rubbing its mucus… My lower stomach keeps jumping around!”

⋯What is this obscene spirit?

Is it actively trying to tell me that it's piling on?

“Hmmm⋯ I get it.”

I nodded, hoping it wasn't for nothing.

I didn't feel anything unusual, because my body was usually very active.

I peeked around the cave to see if there were any monsters or other explorers in case of an attack, but there was no sign of them.

After about two hours of night watch, I woke up the next person in line.

“Jubeel. Wake up.”

“Ugh, big…”

With a dying sound, Jubeel crawled out of her sleeping bag.

Zub-zub-zub-zub-zub

A giant puddle of water poured out of Jubeel's panty-winded lower half.

“Shit. Jubeel. Did you pee?”

“Ugh. No. It's saliva. I'm kind of horny tonight.”

“⋯⋯”

“Well, there are days like this, aren't there? It's been two weeks since I entered the Labyrinth. I haven't masturbated in two weeks, and if you're a fertile female, your pussy should be heating up.”

“⋯⋯”

Apparently, in the Labyrinth, you can't get your libido out in time.

There was an odd amount of liquid running down her thighs, but since it was Jubeel, I didn't mind if she was as wet as she was.

I nodded weakly and relayed what Chirp Chirp told me.

“Erotic? She must be a lustful spirit. Anyway, thanks for the trouble.”

“Yeah. Jubeel's having a hard time too.”

“Oya.”

I flopped down on my sleeping bag again.

With no time to think about anything else, I fell asleep again, this time quickly.

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It's hot.

My body is hot and my mind is fuzzy.

It's hard to move my body. I feel like I'm being held down by scissors.

Someone is pressing down on my body.

It's not just one person.

One on my left and one on my right, two people in total.

The one on the left felt strangely familiar, soft and smooth, like I'd touched it a few times before.

The right one, on the other hand, was unfamiliar but it was really hot and chewy, so it felt good too.

I struggled to open my eyes.

I saw red hair and elf ears, then black hair and a leash.

Ellie and Grumpy.

“⋯⋯”

“⋯⋯”

They were staring down at me, their faces blank.

The three of us lay in one sleeping bag, our bodies pressed together.

“⋯?”

Somehow, before I could even finish my question.

Thrust.

Ellie's and Grumpy’s hands moved to my lower body.