**Chapter 23: At the temple (3)**

As Serif moved closer to me, the vibrations of the necklace became more and more intense.

Finally, she stops in front of my nose.

She's not very tall, so the crown of her head touches my collarbone.

She lifted her head and looked up at me.

Gently swaying her tail and standing on tiptoe, she brought her face as close to mine as possible.

If it weren't for the helmet, our lips would almost touch.

Her blood-red eyes were quite eerie but some things shine more beautifully than others when they're ominous.

Serif's red eyes glowed even more brilliantly as they reflected the sunlight from the window sill.

My eyes met hers through the tiny slits in my helmet.

"⋯⋯"

Serif, who made eye contact with me, was as frozen as stone and could not say anything, just looking straight at me.

Finally, I couldn't help myself and opened my mouth.

"What the hell are you doing?"

My whole body was as stiff as stone, but only my mouth moved.

Serif's tail and ears twitched as I spoke.

She reacted as if she had been studying a piece of art with intense concentration and was upset that someone had disturbed her.

However, the facial expression was a few seconds behind the body's reaction. As if the expression was artificially created.

"Oops. I'm sorry, I got a little carried away. Did that freak you out?"

Serif flicked her wand once, and my body was free.

I was surprised too, and I just wanted to draw my axe. The axe is my friend. It always keeps me grounded.

But now it's time to take a break.

The woman in front of me is a high ranking member of the Order. I don't know what would happen if I drew the axe.

"I meant no offense, this is my mistake, I didn't mean to do this, I'm sorry."

Serif bowed her head gingerly. Serif's tail, which had been pouting, drooped.

But once my guard was up, it didn't come down easily, so I placed a hand on my waist where my axe rested.

‘Relaxed.’

Serif's demeanor was far too relaxed.

She didn't even flinch at the sight of a man with a weapon in front of her.

There was nothing strange about it.

[Serif ■■■ne LV.5■]

Her level is high and she doesn't even blink an eye.

I wondered if I was on the same level as a goblin in Serif's eyes.

That made me even more suspicious. That someone as powerful as her would apologize to me so easily.

If I were as strong as she was, I might have arrogantly raised my chin and said, "Everyone makes mistakes, no need to be so cocky." But she bowed her head to me so easily.

'I don't think she was trying to pull a dirty trick, judging by the way she apologized so meekly⋯'

Two possibilities flashed through my mind.

'Either she apologized to me because she's a good person with a good heart, or she wanted something from me and bowed easily.’

It's a bit ambiguous, but after much deliberation, I crossed out the former possibility.

'Serif stopped my movements without explanation or consent.'

No matter how urgent the situation, this is not something an inherently good person would do.

So I moved on to the latter possibility.

'Does she want something from me?’

- There was something I wanted to ask you.

- Can we spend some quality time together?

Given her previous comments, I'm inclined to think so but my speculation also makes me scratch my head a bit.

‘Why me? Why?’

Part of this is due to Serif's background as someone who has a place in the temple.

In the labyrinth city of Valerus, the Temple's power is one of the most powerful. And Serif is a very high ranking member of the Temple.

What could a woman of her stature want or ask of me, a first-level Labyrinth explorer who has been an explorer for less than a month?

I have no strength, no power, and no wealth.

All I have right now is this mysterious body.

But in this world, my body is worth more than enough.

'⋯Primarily for sexual purposes.’

My eyes flashed back to the countless figures lunging to rape me.

I was disappointed. What a world, even the priests are such assholes.

"I stopped you because-"

"Are you going to rape me too?"

I screamed in frustration.

"Is that so⋯⋯?"

Serif smiled and nodded mechanically, then looked at me in confusion.

After a moment of silence, the strangely overwhelmed mood and the mechanical expression broke.

"Oh, I'm not!!!"

Serif exclaimed with her ears standing straight up, face bright red and tail wagging frantically.

"Why would you even think of such a thing? That, that, that, that, such a thing with a male is⋯! unclean⋯! unholy⋯! unscrupulous⋯! Unbecoming of the teachings of the Great Mother Earth!"

This was a much different reaction than I had expected.

Serif no longer had that strangely mesmerizing, mechanical look on her face.

Her natural face, flushed red with embarrassment and shame, was nothing more than the idealized image of a single female.

'I just assumed she was interested in 'that' kind of thing.’

Honestly, I think it was a pretty good guess.

It's also Serif's fault for leading my imagination with the way she spoke.

It seems like just yesterday that I was almost attacked by a maiden or beggars.

“Aren’t you planning on eating me like explorers and beggars do for three days and three nights until not a single sperm comes out?”

"Oh, no, the sacred Order of Mother Earth forbids such unscrupulous and indecent behavior as a matter of doctrine⋯Now, wait a minute."

Serif's eyes shook violently, as if an earthquake had struck.

Her trembling eyes scanned my entire body in a daze.

Then Serif's eyes squeezed shut. Her bottom lip, clenched tightly, quivered.

"That, that, that, how, how did that happen, ahhhh."

Serif's complexion turned white as she looked at me.

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Serif felt her heart sink into her chest.

The reason for this was the man in front of her.

A strong sense of caution against 'indecent behavior that deviates from the teachings of the Mother Earth Goddess'.

The words sounded as if he had been victimized and traumatized by such behavior before.

Serif was a devout churchgoer who had never masturbated in her life, but she had seen many people react similarly to the man in front of her.

Explorers who have been mauled by monsters and driven insane screaming for femininity, men who have been traumatized by beggars or explorers.

These are the kinds of people she encountered in her life as a priest, and the man in front of her was showing similar wariness.

It was all too easy for Serif, as a woman and a priest, to guess what he had been through in his past.

Of course, now that she's a senior priestess, it doesn't shock her as much as it used to when she sees men who've been through 'that'.

"⋯I apologize. I asked in a way that sounded too probing, please forgive me."

"⋯⋯Ah, ah, ah, ah, ah, ah."

But now she was in for a shock that left her breathless.

Serif ran a hand through her throbbing hair and took a moment to catch her breath.

"Uhhhh..."

She placed one hand on her chest to ease her breathing, which caused the necklace to irritate her chest again.

- When the right person approaches, the necklace would alert you with a rumbling, like a magic dildo.

She remembered the demon's words, low and obscene.

Demons are cunning and clever, but they don't put 'lies' in their mouths. The necklace must be a genuine holy relic.

'⋯If this necklace is indeed a holy relic, then he⋯'

The man in front of her is really.

'⋯The right man.’

The one Serif has been searching for, the one who will change the fate of the world, based on a single line of revelation from Mother Earth. A great, dazzling blessing.

It is unexpected that such a fate would fall to a man.

'⋯Such a thing⋯that⋯you⋯have⋯been⋯taken⋯to⋯that⋯'

Serif felt an indescribable sense of frustration.

She hadn't expected to find such a dazzling blessing after all her hard work, only to find it covered in the filthy saliva and juices of women.

'If only I had found him sooner⋯ if only he hadn't had to go through 'that'?’

It was a wish in vain. The damage was done, and he would have been heartbroken.

‘⋯If only.’

"⋯May I ask your name?"

"⋯Balkan."

"Balkan. Balkan⋯"

Serif mulled over the name for a moment, then turned to the helmeted man in front of her, Balkan.

His dark, black eyes met Serif's red ones.

Serif looked into his eyes and felt an unknown sense of mission.

This man was a great blessing.

'I. I must save him.’

She wanted to heal the trauma in Balkan's heart, to separate him from those who could not see the future and would defile him only to fulfill their own sexual desires.

But the temple is not without its forces. The situation in the Labyrinth City is worse than ever.

Sadly, there's not much she can do for him.

'⋯But at least some guidance⋯'

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"Mr. Balkan. First of all, I apologize for bringing back bad memories."

"Ah. Yes⋯"

‘Something tells me she’s got a huge misunderstanding⋯’

I scratched my head as I looked into Serif's red eyes, which seemed to hold a strange mixture of sadness, pity, and anger but I didn't feel the need to correct the misunderstanding.

If she had shown hostility, I would have responded appropriately, but the gaze was so full of goodwill.

Any further explanation seemed pointless.

"The reason I stopped you, Mr. Balkan, was to ask you a favor."

"⋯You mean a favor, not a question?"

"Yes. A favor, but I'm not forcing you to do it, and there will be no consequences if you refuse, but."

Serif said, clasping her hands together nervously. Her tail and ears, which had been wagging wildly a moment ago, calmed down.

"I promise you, on my name, that if you accept my personal favor⋯that you will be amply rewarded."

Gone were the blushing, embarrassed, unclean, and embarrassed face, and her eyes were as serious and straight as ever.

"⋯Okay, let's hear it."

At this point, I was almost curious what could a level 50 high priest of the Temple possibly be asking me, someone so much weaker than her, to do for her personally?

It wasn't too late to judge once I heard the request.

Serif stared at me for a moment, then spoke in a low voice.

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"Ah. Where have you been?! I was in the middle of getting my silver and you disappeared!"

I restrained Grumpy who was panting and about to run into my arms.

"I had to run some errands."

She said I disappeared while she was in the middle of getting her silver.

Perhaps Serif had done something magical, I speculated. I didn't tell her what had happened with Serif, and I skirted around it.

"⋯Hmm. I've been getting my share of the silver coins."

As she said that, she held out three silver coins.

"Why are there only three? I thought they gave five."

"Hmph. Do you want to take them or not?"

“Would you like to take a hit? Or would you just give it to me?”

I gave Grumpy, who was shaking her shoulders and sticking out her solar plexus, a punching bag experience. I tried to keep Grumpy's share, who was effectively a slave, but as a modern person, I had the slightest conscience, so I just left it as it was.

"Where's Jeremy?"

Jeremy also left, saying he wanted to get together later and settle the harvest from the Labyrinth.

"So, what are you going to do now?"

"Well, my old master is dead, and I think it's time to close the book on the past. I'm going to rob Deluna of her slave contracts and whatever else she's stashed away, and then I'm going to start a new life in the Explorers' Zone under a new identity."

Grumpy recited her vision of the future with great pride.

"What do you mean, a new life?"

"What? Kekk-!"

I grabbed her leash and yanked.

"A slave only changes masters. Doesn't the contract just change the master's name?"

"⋯⋯!"

Grumpy, who was squeaking as her leash got caught, looked up at me as if she was wondering what kind of devilish idea that was.

 "Well, it is⋯but⋯"

"Why? You don't like it?"

"⋯I kind of like it⋯"

After a long moment of squirming with excitement, we made an appointment to meet in a few days.

He returned to the western section, the outlaw's den.

Finally alone, I made my way to the temple's window.

“The name is Adolf. The race was dwarf. ”

 I handed over Adolf's crucifix necklace and staff, and the teller nodded in a bureaucratic manner.

"Well received, may she be safe on her journey to Earth Mother."

An employee took the staff and cross necklace to put them away.

"I checked and Adolf is an exiled priest with four counts of sodomy! No need to honor her, just put it away properly."

"Yeah. Got it."

"Phew. We're in trouble. This guy shouldn't be allowed to go to the goddess."

The woman shuffling through the papers breathed a sigh of relief.

Now I understood why Adolf was acting that way.

Her carefully packed gear was tucked away out of sight because she was an outcast from the Order.

The staff didn't seem to be interested in the circumstances of Adolf's death.

I was disgusted with myself for feeling a strange sense of relief at this, but I guess I'll have to adjust and accept this world.

After all, I was going to be in this world for a while.

- To the Labyrinth, please.

I remembered Serif's 'personal favor'.

I'm both relieved and dubious since her request aligned with my own goals.

- Gain experience, make friends, and become stronger. Be strong enough to face whatever dangers come your way.

- That's my personal request.

Why did Serif have to ask me to be strong?

What the hell is the Explorers' Alliance, and who are these puppets of the curse?

Diana at level 70, Serif at level 50, and other suspicious people.

Labyrinth City was complex, confusing, unpleasant and esoteric.

Everyone sees something different and everyone has their own thoughts and intentions.

I'm into my first month in this world, and it's all so foreign and difficult.

I've just finished my first exploration, and the gap between me and them is overwhelming.

Now that I've realized my helplessness, the task ahead is simple.

‘Be strong.’

Strong enough to beat the crap out of them and survive, without thinking of any complicated intentions.

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But if I run too fast, I'll get tired.

"Oh, Balkan, you're back! Welcome home!"

"Ms. Diana!"

Diana waves with an innocent, bright smile, having spotted me while serving food at the tavern.

‘Yeah. I should take a break once in a while. I'm not going to lie, the labyrinth has been hard.’

I was too stressed and had too many things to think about, so on impulse, I ran to Diana and hugged her tightly.

"Bar, Balkan?! Yay!"

"I missed you, Diana."

"⋯⋯⋯?!!!!"

As I hugged her, the only person who didn't harbor any ill will towards me, who was like a mother to me, I began to feel tired.

"Diana⋯"

This is the real Mother Earth Goddess⋯