**Chapter 279: Hello? (3)**

~19th floor~

It took less than half a day to reach the place where memories of bloody battles with the undead army remained.

It had been less than three days since Elder Lich had hunted monsters and gathered the undead forces.

Even the labyrinth, which endlessly spewed out monsters, couldn't turn the floor into a monster field in such a short time.

With no monsters blocking the way, all that remained was to move forward.

Every time I stamped the ground, the wind split and scattered to both sides.

The swamp that filled the ground and slowed our steps couldn't hold us back.

-Splash!

As Diana and Balkan released their magic power, the swamp around them turned into ice with each step.

When the full-body armor with its heavy weight touched the ice, large footprints were left behind.

Under the control of excellent balance, the legs moved without slipping—an impossible concept.

'......'

Balkan, with a sour expression, caught his breath after running for half a day and followed the two women ahead.

'Not enough.'

Though clearly running at a similar speed on the same ice path, no footprints remained where the two had stepped.

They had achieved a level where they could run on pristine snow without leaving traces.

I looked down at my feet again. The crudely marked footprints on the ice revealed the gap between us.

Being weighed down by heavy full-body armor was no excuse.

'If I'm lacking, I must overcome it.'

To reach the goal of touching the abyss of the labyrinth, I needed to easily surpass them.

Balkan observed the two women as if studying monsters.

Swoosh—

Magic power pooled in the heart traveled along the nerves toward the eyelids.

As the magic flowed naturally, the eyelids grew hot, and crosshairs appeared in vision.

This was an application of the weakness detection magic, made possible by the simultaneous increase in magic stats and finesse stats.

The weakness detection magic, which appeared like a rifle's crosshairs, began to scan the bodies of the two women.

'See. Memorize. Remember those movements.'

Like a hunter observing prey, I etched their movements into my mind.

What movements and actions do explorers who have reached the end of the labyrinth take?

How do they breathe, how do they move their nerves and muscles, and consequently, what lines do they draw as they control their bodies?

Balkan recalled his roots.

Although he had recently discovered many useful aspects of radiant blessings and magic, the foundation of everything was still the physical body.

The ideal model for methods to move an excellent body more efficiently was right before his eyes.

-Click!

As the weakness detection magic continued its search, the crosshairs fixed on the area around the two people's feet.

While running, I absentmindedly opened my mouth.

'Has the weakness detection magic ever been fixed on these two before?'

It had occasionally flashed and disappeared, but it had never been so clearly fixed like this.

In gaming terms, it felt like landing meaningful damage on an enemy that was previously invulnerable due to an overwhelming gap.

There was no time to focus on that peculiar sense of conquest.

My eyes were drawn to the soles of their feet, where their weaknesses appeared.

'They're not running while struggling.'

Despite running for half a day, their breathing remained relatively light. They appeared much less fatigued.

Tap—

Diana and Idelbert's walker soles touched the ice, and Balkan focused on that moment.

The impact of their feet dispersed very thinly across the ice, and the two advanced faster by kicking off the floor with that rebound.

Almost as if the ice was pushing them forward.

'...The ice, the terrain. It pushes them?'

The most required ability for those exploring the labyrinth.

Strong and effective blessings, outstanding talent, resilient mentality... all were equally required.

But in a labyrinth where the environment changes drastically with each layer, the most important thing is adaptability.

The ability to move as usual in any environment.

On flat stone floors, in sticky swamps, in wavy lakes, in burning flames, on bumpy frozen ice.

When adapting to all these environments and placing even nature beneath one's feet, a body perfectly adapted to nature naturally harmonizes with the environment and becomes one with it.

The cold magic power pooled in my heart asked:

What is below you now, what are you entrusting your body to?

Ice fixed on a sticky swamp.

Cold, hard, and static in nature, yet vulnerable to shock—I kicked off from that ice.

-Swoosh!

A sudden gust of wind pushed through the eye holes of the helmet.

The intensity of the wind was different from before. That meant I was moving faster.

I slightly turned my head to check behind.

Footprints were still there.

However, those traces were noticeably shallower than before.

Naturally, with each step, one step, two steps, every time I kicked the ground, the fierce wind cut through my body, and the feedback helped my body move more naturally, adapting to nature.

With each repetition, the traces left on the ice gradually disappeared.

'It feels like skating.'

It might not be that different in terms of entrusting one's body to the given environment while moving.

The two women ahead suddenly came closer.

"Oh."

Feeling Balkan's explosive surge, Idelbert put more strength into her thighs.

Though she wanted to be caught by her disciple quickly, as a master who couldn't simply let herself be caught, she kicked the ice and moved forward rapidly.

"Can you keep up, my disciple?"

"Master, you're the one who needs to keep—"

"Heck...!"

At the rough breathing sound, master and disciple looked back.

"You, too, heck... fast, yo...!"

The white cat beastkin cleric, who had accompanied the warriors' forced march, was crawling along with her long tail drooping on the ice, panting heavily.

By now, having arrived near the 20th floor descent portal, they looked at Serif blankly.

It was truly a miracle that Serif, a pure cleric, had kept up with the warriors' movements by bestowing miracles on herself.

Soon to arrive at the 20th floor, rest would be needed to recover.

"Unexpected."

In front of the 19th floor portal, at Balkan's small whisper, Idelbert turned her head.

"What do you mean?"

"That you let Serif accompany us to hunt the Envy Worshipper. I thought you would refuse."

"...Have you roughly figured it out?"

I seemed to know what she was talking about.

It must be about the conflict between the two sisters related to the Envy Worshipper.

"Roughly. I haven't heard directly from both of you."

At that answer, Idelbert slightly lowered the corners of her mouth and leaned in.

Was it to talk more quietly from closer proximity?

As I moved my body closer to match her, I felt a breath mixed with laughter.

Whoosh—

Immediately after, a hot breath entered through the gap in the helmet below the neck.

At that thrilling sensation, goosebumps rose all over my body, and my heart pounded heavily.

As I stiffened at the sudden attack, Idelbert, seeing my reaction, relaxed her tense face and smiled slightly.

Perhaps Idelbert was also tense at the thought of confronting the Envy Worshipper.

"Focus on the battle for now. If things end well, I'll tell you everything."

~20th floor~

Following the hot, humid, and sticky tropical environment that stretched from the 16th to the 19th floors, the new location was a glacier zone with cool chilliness.

'From a hot bath that pushed the limits of discomfort to a cold bath where my toes freeze again.'

Indeed, an environment befitting the malice-filled labyrinth.

Clear water that reached the ankles, where the blue sky, which seemed to hold a refreshing clarity, was transparently reflected.

It felt like a place where polar bears that had lost their habitats might live.

The wind blowing in was filled with coldness, but none of those present were shivering from the cold.

'Diana, like me, has cold magic power and is resistant to the environment, while Idelbert and Serif brought thermal artifacts.'

"Disciple, give me the map."

"Yes."

At Idelbert's words, I handed over the map of the 20th floor.

A map with an X mark in red caught my eye.

It was the map where Cleassia had marked the hiding place of the Envy Worshipper.

"Indeed, an unexplored area."

Due to the existence of the fountain teleportation scroll, floors that were multiples of 5 remained largely unexplored.

The Envy Worshipper had chosen one such unexplored place as a hideout, and thanks to that secrecy, had remained uncaught until now.

Moreover, according to Cleassia’s confession, the security of the Envy Worshipper's hideout, the ice cave, was very strict.

The naturally formed cave in the 20th floor was itself a living maze, and the Envy Worshipper had personally installed dozens of trap spells there.

It was a veritable fortress, undeniably the front yard of the Envy Worshipper and the place where she could exert her maximum power.

We needed to draw the Envy Worshipper out from there.

"Well, I don't suppose we'll need to use the map anyway, right?"

"That's true."

Idelbert rolled up the map, put it into her subspace, and then took out a fountain teleportation scroll and tore it.

After teleporting near the fountain, we checked the surroundings first.

There were no signs of other explorers coming.

We couldn't help it if they came up from the lower floors.

Since Idelbert and Serif had caused fear about what had happened in the labyrinth while in Eden, there would be no reason for anyone to descend from the upper floors to the 20th floor.

"Yes. There's no magi nearby. It seems they haven't moved yet."

After Diana confirmed the surroundings with tracking magic, Idelbert looked at Balkan.

"Disciple, can I trust you?"

"Master, are you saying you don't trust me?"

"...I misspoke. I'm just unreasonably anxious about whether that criminal woman really sent the letter as you instructed."

On the day Idelbert confirmed Cleassia’s capture.

Under my orders and Idelbert's, Cleassia wrote a letter to the Envy Worshipper.

Perhaps due to anxiety about revenge, Idelbert, who was hesitating now, was met with Balkan's confident nod.

"Either the big fish or the small fry, at least one of them will definitely take the bait."

So the only thing we needed to do now was one.

Idelbert, whose eyes met mine, nodded as she took out a stealth artifact from her subspace.

"...Alright. Diana. Serif. Please use stealth magic and miracles. Make sure we're not detected."

Outer cave of the 20th floor.

"Cleassia sent news?"

"Yes."

The Envy demon Worshipper, chameleon beastkin Karelos, who was in the hideout filled with cool chill and darkness, tilted her head after seeing the letter brought by her escort.

Seeing the questioning look of the owner, the escort nodded with dull eyes, the characteristic dreamy eyes of someone completely brainwashed.

Deep within those eyes, a faint will of struggle remained, but consciousness sealed by the power of envy followed Karelos' words like a puppet.

"Didn't she report regularly a week ago? She said there were no problems, and the brainwashing of Jellicy was almost complete..."

"She says it's an urgent matter."

The escort said this while handing over the letter again.

"Haah. She said there was nothing wrong..."

Karelos clicked her tongue and snatched the letter.

She couldn't simply ignore it, as Cleassia was doing important work.

'Starting with the brainwashing of an intermediate cleric, I need to extend my influence to the order again...'

The Earth Mother Goddess Order, where those who followed the Earth Goddess faith and could handle divine power gathered, was a powerful danger to those who handled magi.

But at the same time, it also made her think:

'If I could just devour the temple, the greater dangers would be reduced.'

Starting with such thoughts, Karelos had reached out to the Earth Goddess Order from the past, and until a decade ago, she had achieved the feat of brainwashing half of the high-ranking clerics of the order.

Yes, she 'had' done it.

In other words, it wasn't the case now.

'Idelbert. If it weren't for that bitch...'

Karelos remembered that villainess who had completely destroyed her years of achievements in just one night and the massacre that occurred just before she was about to brainwash the saint, the symbol of the order, after spending a long time.

'It was just one night. If only one night had passed, I could have brainwashed even the saint...!'

Even now, thinking about that time made her blood boil.

As a result of her long-term efforts being destroyed in one night, even after more than a decade, whenever she thought of that bitch, a deep murderous intent boiled up from the depths of her heart.

But at the same time, she also had an innocent interest in the power of the woman who had destroyed her years of effort.

The power of a being who had reached the deepest part of the labyrinth.

The desire to possess, brainwash, and make her own that being who was strong enough to win four out of ten fights against the Wrath Worshipper Gott rose persistently from the depths of her heart.

However, that was a fantasy close to impossibility.

Karelos calmed her stirring heart and opened the seal of the letter.

She couldn't let her current affairs go awry by being stuck in the past... or so she... thought...

"Huh?"

-Blink. Blink.

Karelos, who blinked her eyelids and rubbed them vigorously, read Cleassia’s report written in the letter again.

[A battle has occurred between the Explorers' Union leader Idelbert and the Scourge of the Inn, Diana Ordia.]

[As a result, Idelbert is unconscious with severe injuries.]

[Currently, due to the absence of high-ranking cleric Coolid, the brainwashing target Jellicy is directly healing her.]

Severe injuries? That Idelbert?

What gave credibility to this absurd sentence was the person mentioned earlier, Diana Ordia.

Like Idelbert, she had reached the end of the labyrinth and prevented the revival of the Lust demon.

'I heard from Gott that she was weaker compared to before...Was that not the case?'

More importantly, the two had fought? Why?

No matter how much she racked her brain, no answer came, so Karelos asked the escort who had brought the letter about the veracity of the incident.

"Is this, is this content...really true?"

"While I'm not yet sure about the outcome of the battle, the information that a battle occurred between Diana Ordia and Idelbert was acquired two days ago."

"Why are you only reporting this now—?"

"During the last report, Miss Karelos told me not to talk nonsense."

Come to think of it, that was the case.

It made sense. Of course...it sounded like nonsense.

There was no reason for those two to fight each other to a bloody pulp.

Property? Honor? What could those two possibly lack?

A man problem?

This was even more absurd.

Those cold explorers, over a man?

'Could it be a trap to lure a demon worshipper?'

She pondered over this thought, but it didn't make sense either.

If they directly expended their power to the point of causing severe injuries to lure another demon worshipper, they wouldn't be able to withstand it.

Karelos looked at the letter delivered by her faithful subordinate of over a decade.

'No matter how I think about it, this is an opportunity.'

That Idelbert, unconscious with severe injuries?

This was clearly a unique opportunity that wouldn't come again for years and it was worth taking the gamble.

Cleassia was there, but she couldn't brainwash a strong person like Idelbert.

So...

"We will raid the temple. All escorts, gear up and assemble!"

"Are you personally going, Miss Karelos?"

"Of course."

As this was a rare opportunity, she needed to make sure.

She couldn't afford to make the same mistake and miss an even bigger opportunity.

The assembly was instantaneous, and Karelos, with her brainwashed escorts and consumed by evil, burst out of her hideout.

She had to brainwash Idelbert before she regained consciousness, or even if she did, before she recovered the power she had expended in the battle with Diana Ordia.

Every time Karelos kicked out of the ice cave, the smile on her face grew deeper.

The excitement was so intense that she felt dizzy.

The thought of getting revenge after over a decade, and that the woman who had ruined her decisive brainwashing would finally be brainwashed by her, made her smile unconsciously.

Overwhelmed with excitement, Karelos saw the portal that had now come within close reach and smiled, and then...

-CRUNCH!!!

With a horrifying sound of flesh tearing, she stared at the massive hole that had been punctured through her abdomen.

"...Huh?"

Her head turned slowly as she belatedly realized the situation, looking toward whatever had pierced through her abdomen.

Above the ice arrow coated with magic power, divine power, and miracles.

"Hello?"

As the stealth dissolved, she saw gauntlets and an oversized axe coming from both sides.