**Chapter 280: Hallucinations (1)**

Karelos, the Envy Worshipper, looked at the gauntlet flying toward her face and the axe attempting to slice through her upper body and beyond them, to the faces of those targeting her.

The closest one was a black-haired, red-eyed cat beastman warrior.

A squint-eyed woman and a snow-white cat beastman whose invisibility had been broken, the ones who had sniped him.

Karelos knew all of their names, that's why she could notice that she had fallen into a vicious trap.

She didn't wonder where the trap had begun. More precisely, she had no time to think about it.

Swish—!

The blue sky is reflected on the sharply extended axe blade.

'This is...'

A beautiful aura. Her gaze briefly fell on the axe blade with powerful magic firmly embedded in it.

As if unwilling to give even the slightest opening, the axe enveloped in a brilliant light grazed Karelos' left eye.

Slash!

"Kuh—"

In an instant, half of her vision turned red before going dark.

Red blood splattered into the river that reflected the blue sky, staining it murky.

Gritting her teeth and enduring the pain of blindness, Karelos released the magi she had extracted in that fraction of a second.

-Fwoosh!!!

Black smoke spread in all directions instantly but these weren't people who would just stand still watching her.

Idelbert's fist immediately accelerated.

Whoosh—

The simple but heavy punch pushed away the air along with the smoke, and the black cat's pursuit, hunting for its prey, headed toward the one who had broken through the smoke.

"She's going to the fountain!!!"

At the edge of the multiples of 5 floors, the fountain where healing water springs forth and Karelos, who had been severely injured, was being carried by a guard toward that place.

"Where do you think—!"

Balkan pulled out an artifact hand axe from his waist and filled it with the magical power of cold.

Immediately, the hand axe coated with a blue cutting energy traced a smooth trajectory toward the fountain.

He made an explosive throw that squeezed the muscles of the entire body, including the waist, arms, legs, and torso.

-Whoosh!

The guard protecting Karelos tried to turn her body to avoid the throw, but.

"Don't dodge, block it!"

Following the command that burst from her lips, the guard twisted her body abnormally to execute her master's order.

-Clang!

The moment the guard's sword collided with the axe blade, the guard's sword and the right arm holding the handle were covered in cold magical power and instantly froze.

Karelos glanced at the man wearing gray scale armor.

'Clever.'

The trajectory of the axe was aimed not at them but at the fountain.

If that axe had passed through and stuck in the fountain they would have been in a situation where they had to lick the healing water that had frozen like ice due to the cold magical power but she had brainwashed subordinates who would follow any dangerous order.

The brainwashed ones willingly sacrificed their own bodies for their master.

The will of the brainwashed? Such a petty thing was meaningless. Perfectly brainwashed servants could not defy their master's words.

The guard with a frozen hand and sword rushed toward Balkan swinging his sword, and Balkan immediately swung his axe. And then.

"...I don't want to."

Just before the axe blade met the guard's neck.

"I don't...want to die..."

Deep in the dull eyes of the brainwashed person, he came face to face with a woman crying out that she didn't want to die like this.

-Stop.

The axe blade halted.

A piece of trash who tramples on others' lives and free will, exploiting them ruthlessly to fulfill her own selfish desires.

He couldn't kill someone who had become a sacrificial lamb for such a being.

Balkan barely managed to twist the axe blade.

The suddenly redirected strike lodged in the guard's shoulder, and the brainwashed guard burrowed into Balkan's embrace, stabbing him in the abdomen with the sword.

-Clang!

The sound was loud, but his abdomen was not pierced.

The sword, frozen by the cold magical power, shattered instantly upon hitting the Zirnier scale armor, and the brainwashed guard, having lost both sword and one arm, still tried to grab Balkan's ankle somehow.

-Thud!!!

Balkan raised his fist and struck the temple of the guard in his arms.

Not killing meaninglessly didn't mean he wouldn't subdue them.

Though the guard was wearing a helmet, the heavy fist that slightly dented the helmet shook the skull, causing the guard to faint and collapse.

-Splash!

Hearing the distant water sound, he raised his head and saw Karelos, carried by another guard, reaching the fountain and quickly recovering from her injuries.

The mysterious healing water was a ray of hope for those in danger in the labyrinth, and unfortunately, its infinite benevolence did not discriminate between good and evil.

"Pfft—"

Karelos, who spat thick blood into the fountain, looked around while caressing her eyelid that had been cut by the axe.

Explorers' Union Leader. Saint. Retired explorer.

A strange warrior whose name she didn't know but who had considerable battle sense, wielded holy power, and carried an axe with powerful magi...someone who couldn't be summarized in one sentence.

Intense curiosity boiled up, but now was not the time for that.

This was too much force to gather just to catch one demon worshipper, and it was a combination difficult to assemble under normal circumstances.

In other words, she needed to give her all to survive.

"Quite impressive that such notable figures gathered just to catch little old me."

-Flinch.

The moment Karelos opened her mouth, Balkan felt a throbbing sensation near the crown of his head and his vision rippling.

As Karelos opened her mouth, the dense magi emanating from her began to dominate the surroundings.

'Is this what Idelbert warned about?'

[Karelos Lv. 58]

[Currently Karelos possesses 5 blessings and curses]

[Miracle of Emotion Control]

[Miracle of Fantasy Reproduction]

[Miracle of Memory Distortion]

Based on Cleassia’s confession and her experience, Idelbert had explained several points to watch out for when fighting against the Envy Worshipper.

"My disciple. Look at how that wench is trying to run her mouth. It's an obvious trick to buy time. Don't be swayed by the words spouting from her heart, close your ears and pick up your axe first."

She’s a being who uses all kinds of deceptive abilities so he shouldn't listen to Karelos' voice, which carried magi.

The long tongue of the chameleon beastman was a cunning tongue that could stir human emotions and pry into one's heart.

The voice that emerged from under that tongue was a sticky seduction to some, a friendly request to others, and a stimulant that induced unstoppable impulses to yet others.

—Master. I don't think we should be doing this right now.

The voice of Denshi, who wasn't present, came like an auditory hallucination.

—It's dangerous. Shouldn't we run away? I, I don't want to go through that again. Master.

That voice was filled with a will to stop this fight.

Was it pulling out the voices of precious people from memory?

—Because of you, master, a huge hole was punctured in my chest. Are you going to hurt me again? Are you planning to wound me? Are you going to make me die again because of your selfishness?

Words that Denshi would never say pierce through the ears and lodge in the mind like needles.

-Crunch.

"That bitch..."

I gripped the axe tighter, grinding my teeth.

The emotional disturbance happening now was surely not occurring to me alone.

Idelbert, Diana, Serif, everyone would be hearing similar voices from someone.

'Thankfully, I received the miracle of mental barrier from Serif.'

Without it, I might have collapsed mentally the moment I heard that voice or might have naturally nodded and retreated.

Idelbert rushed first toward Karelos, who was recovering from her wounds.

The sooner they subdued that person, the sooner this emotional turmoil would stop.

'So there's only one thing for me to do.'

Help Idelbert catch that person as quickly as possible.

—Uncle! It's dangerous! Why are you trying to fight someone like that?!

-Splash!

As I kicked away from a puddle in the glacier area, releasing cold magical power, this time I heard Ellie's voice.

—Let's just, let's not do these rough things and live peacefully together. Okay? There's no reason for you to be in such fights! Instead of rough places like the labyrinth, let's get a villa in a quiet area of the noble district, overlooking a lake, and live there together.

It was truly malicious how the voice spoke differently to each person.

—We'll have about three children, spend cozy mornings together, and when evening comes, you'll come home, we'll put the children to bed together, and spend warm nights together. Can't we live like that? Why must we be in such a bloody place...?

I ignored the voice piercing my mind, while gritting my teeth.

The instantly frozen ice sheet naturally propelled my rushing body, reaching maximum speed in a fraction of a second.

Moving forward as if sliding, I crushed another guard who was trying to ambush Idelbert from behind with a body tackle.

-Crunch!

The second guard was an assassin wearing light armor and couldn't withstand the explosive rush.

The sound of the second guard's ribs being shattered was heard, but.

-Clang! Clang! Stab!

The guard was also a considerably skilled assassin.

After the collision of bodies, I allowed as many as three stabs.

The first and second stabs were blocked by the helmet and armor, but the knife strike that precisely targeted the gap in the armor, which I had reinforced inadequately earlier, penetrated my abdomen and roughly ravaged the internal organs.

Overcoming the momentary hollow sensation of powerlessness, I grabbed the guard's head.

The guard's expression suddenly turns to confusion as she tries to retrieve her blade and distance herself using the impact of the charge.

The knife that had pierced my stomach was caught by the muscle and wouldn't come out.

"Where do you think you're going after stabbing me?"

I pulled the guard's head closer, smiling grimly.

-Thud!!

"Kagh!!"

Along with the heavy headbutt sound came the guard's scream.

The dragon scale helmet is a bit rough, so colliding with a smooth forehead would cause quite a bit of damage.

"Well done, my disciple!"

Throwing away the assassin guard who had fainted with a caved-in nose, I nodded at the praise coming from afar.

Idelbert was deflecting the combined attacks of Karelos and the remaining guard.

Support fire came from the distant Diana and Serif, with ice holy power arrows pouring down, cutting through the wind.

Everyone was in combat, and there was still more to do.

I couldn't lie down and rest just because my abs got stabbed a bit.

Kiiing—

Activating the blessing of radiance, I scraped together the holy power accumulated in my core and poured the miracle of healing onto my belly.

As I was staggering, raising my body, with my skull slightly shaken from the impulsive headbutt.

—You did well, Balkan.

Diana's kind voice was heard.

"Of course. Ugh. How are things on your end, Diana? Is the second arrow ready?"

—The battle is over. Let's go home now.

Looking around at that gentle voice saying all fighting had ended.

—What are you doing, disciple? Come follow your master quickly.

—Hehe. Balkan, really. You did great today. What would you like to eat first when we get back?

—First, shouldn't we relieve the fatigue? That, purification ritual...? Ugh... ah, it's nothing...

Idelbert, who had been fighting with Karelos just moments ago, was heading toward the portal with her unconscious body on her back.

Diana and Serif, who had been providing sniper support from afar, were naturally following behind Idelbert and looking at me with eyes that seemed to ask why wasn't I following.

I felt a sense of being left alone in a place where all battles had ended and goosebumps started to rise all over my body.

'Am I seeing things because my skull is shaken?'

It was a fantasy so natural it made me have such delusions.

The wildly beating heart, the heated muscles, the taste of blood lingering in the mouth, even the adrenaline explosively gushing from the excitement of battle gradually faded away.

I was engulfed in the illusion that all battles were over and now he only needed to return to a peaceful daily life.

[Wake up. It's all an illusion.]

Bunny, gripped in my hand, trembled and released a voice.

The tension that was unconsciously about to loosen tightened again, and I realized once more that the battle was not yet over.

[That guy seems desperate too. She's using the power of Envy, burning even her own life. Is she about to be 'assimilated'? It's a difficult state for lowly beings to achieve, but that guy is truly a special dish.]

-Gulp.

At the sound of Bunny swallowing saliva, the surrounding scenery began to blur like a watercolor painting that had water poured on it.

Even though I thought it was a fantasy, I almost wavered.

The battle was not yet over.

As I was about to move forward, gripping the axe with my recovered body.

—Oppa.

The affectionate voice made him stop in his tracks.

—Are you really going?

I know it's an illusion but even knowing, my steps halted.

My sister's voice, which I could no longer hear and along with that sweet voice, soft arms wrapped around my neck.

—I'm here. You don't have to look for me anymore. Now, we can live here together.

She embraced my head warmly as cool hands gently stroked my hair.

Slap—

I immediately struck away that touch.

—Oppa?

Looking at the hallucination questioning in surprise, I couldn't help but laugh mockingly.

Until now, I might have been confused, but this was just ridiculous.

"My So-eun hands are really warm, you know? You piece of dream trash."

At my cold voice, the frozen corners of the illusion's mouth twitched upward.

—There are very few beings who can resist my brainwashing like this without possessing magical energy of the same level.

The creature, fiddling with the rejected hand, shamelessly extended a hand of reconciliation.

—I felt it from the moment I saw that axe. That you're one of us. I'll forgive this attack. So even now...

The one who had been muttering closed her mouth.

Clearly, it was because she saw the large toffee raised in front of her face.

"F\*ck off, you chameleon-headed bastard."

Raising the axe imbued with magical cutting energy and the blessing of radiance, I declared as I swung it toward the empty illusion.

"You have done something you should never have done."

That creature had defiled my most precious memories and all the connections I had formed in this world.

-Slash!

The illusion that had been deceiving my senses was cut away by the roughly swung axe blade.

As I completely removed the whispers of brainwashing, the landscape filled with traces of battle began to reveal itself.