**Chapter 282: New Contract (1)**

Black particles scattered across the sky.

As I stared into the air while placing my axe on the ground, something falling at my feet awakened my mind.

When I absentmindedly lowered my gaze, a soul stone fused with black demonic energy was rolling on the ground.

'...Why did this come out?'

Karelos was a chameleon beastman not a monster, yet a soul stone, that thing that only monsters spit out appeared.

Does this mean that the being I just cut was closer to a monster than a human species?

[If she accepted that much of the demon's power, she can no longer be called human.]

-Gulp.

Bunny muttered with a voice that salivated.

It was different from the unpleasant hallucinatory whispers that Karelos had shown.

I never thought I would come to appreciate Bunny's voice.

'Well, the voice itself was always nice, but...'

I smiled bitterly and tucked the soul stone into my pocket.

I'll think about how to handle it later, but for now.

"My disciple."

When I turned my head toward the voice, Idelbert was grinning with a faint smile.

"You've grown quite a bit."

"Just 'quite'?"

When I shrugged my shoulders and asked, Idelbert chuckled and approached, flicking my forehead.

"Don't be too arrogant. The Envy Worshipper is the weakest among the demon worshippers in terms of physical power. It was difficult to pinpoint her location because she lived in hiding, but her actual power doesn't compare to the others."

That was true.

Aside from the disgusting mental attacks, Karelos' combat power was only slightly higher than that of Cleassia, her subordinate.

"Well. Even so..."

-Pat.

Something soft landed on top of my helmeted head.

Idelbert put her hand on my head and stroked it vigorously as if she was proud.

"Just for today, you may be as arrogant as you want."

That voice mixed with laughter made me smile too.

The recognition from a master who had taught me for a time that was short yet long...it was truly sweet.

"Thank you for conceding to me."

"What concession?"

Idelbert chuckled and turned her head.

Seeing that, I became more certain that Idelbert had suppressed even her desire for revenge and conceded Karelos' head to me.

Whether it was because I had taken a place in Idelbert's heart similar to Serif's level or as she said, because Karelos had shown the worst hallucination.

[The Curse of Rejecting Lousy Dicks]

Or perhaps it was due to another goal that remained for Idelbert after punishing even the one who had brainwashed her sister.

[Nam Soo-jin LV.51]

[Stamina:(17+18) Strength:(17+11) Agility:(17+11) Wisdom:(8+14-3) Finesse:(21+16)]

[Free Points: 8 points]

What mattered was that the status window that appeared showed evidence of new growth.

'I've exceeded level 50.'

That enormous number felt unfamiliar beyond imagination.

This labyrinth expedition had steep growth because I fought such creepy enemies.

Getting stronger in this perilous labyrinth city is definitely a good thing, but that doesn't mean I should be dragged around without properly wielding my power.

'I need to strengthen my foundation for a while.'

With that thought, I followed Idelbert and subdued the unconscious guards by binding them.

"What happens to them now? Will the brainwashing be undone?"

"I don't know. It's my first time killing an Envy Worshipper."

Idelbert spoke as if she didn't know either.

"In the first place, there have been hardly any successful eliminations of demon worshippers in recent years. Even when we occasionally caught underlings, we often lost track of the source and let them go."

"Is that so?"

"Yes, disciple. You've done something more remarkable than you think. You might receive a reward at the kingdom level. No, I'll make sure you get rewarded."

I smiled bitterly at Idelbert, who spoke as if she would uproot a pillar of the royal palace, and hoisted the guard on my shoulder.

Since they were also high-level explorers and paladins, they could become useful human resources if their brainwashing was undone by Karelos' death.

With that thought, when we joined Diana and Serif who were supporting from the rear.

"...Serif?"

We realized that we had been making a far too hopeful assumption.

~15th Floor, Temple Eden Branch, Private Treatment Room~

"......"

Senior Priest Coolid, who was looking at the snow-white cat beastman Serif lying demurely on the bed, swallowed and shook her head.

"Explain."

-Grind.

Idelbert, who was grinding her teeth, spoke while keeping her gaze fixed on Serif lying in the hospital room.

"Give me...a proper explanation."

"......"

"Why is she just lying here with her eyes closed?"

Idelbert gently stroked Serif's cheek with trembling hands.

Despite that warm and careful touch, Serif didn't respond at all, continuing to breathe softly as if in deep sleep, with her eyes closed.

After searching for words for a moment, Coolid finally sighed and answered.

"She's being stubborn."

"What?"

"That Envy Worshipper bitch was being stubborn until her dying moment."

Having roughly heard the situation, Senior Priest Coolid also seemed troubled as she rubbed her face.

"Everyone lives with their own mind in their heart. The collection of unconscious thoughts, will, beliefs, desires, wishes, and so on is called the mental image."

Coolid's words reminded me of the space I fell into when I first gripped Bunny.

It was a space that had become empty because endless hunger had consumed everything, a space that was like a blank canvas with only myself remaining alone.

Bunny had called that place his mental image world.

"I know from seeing victims of the Envy Worshipper several times. Fantastic dreams...the Envy Worshipper either plants false fantasies in the mental image to break a person, or completely subjugates the mental image to make them their faithful servant."

Karelos had the ability to corrupt that mental image through miraculous grace.

Like falling into a trance, the upright mental image becomes polluted and twisted by the turbid demonic energy (magi).

"Lady Serif is still fighting the vile fantasies left by the Envy Worshipper."

That was why Serif couldn't regain consciousness and remained asleep.

"What's the possibility of recovering? When can she wake up?"

"...I don't know. It's a matter that Lady Serif must overcome herself. She might wake up tomorrow, or it might take...several years."

Coolid, who glanced aside, turned her eyes to the other guards. Those who had been completely brainwashed were in similar situations.

No one knew when Serif would be able to wake up.

"...I'm sorry. I should have protected Serif more firmly..."

"......"

Diana, with a grief-stricken expression, carefully placed her hand on Idelbert's shoulder.

Idelbert bit his lip because it couldn't be said to be anyone's fault.

'Since Serif cast mental barrier miracles on everyone...'

Serif had continuously bestowed the miracle of mental barrier during the battle.

From me and Idelbert who were closest to the influence of Karelos' mental attacks, to Diana and Serif herself who were in the rear.

Though she didn't handle fancy equipment or directly participate in battle, it wouldn't be an exaggeration to say that Serif was the MVP of this subjugation.

Moreover, at the end of the battle, the fact that I could escape the brainwashing hallucination that squeezed all of Karelos' demonic energy wasn't just because my mental strength was exceptional.

Just before delivering the final blow, I felt the mental barrier miracle becoming even stronger.

Serif would have withdrawn even the mental barrier protecting herself, and in that brief moment, poured her strength into me.

I couldn't lift my head due to the rising sense of guilt.

Clench—

The strength in my fist wouldn't release.

"Don't blame yourself, disciple."

Idelbert, who glanced at me, patted my shoulder.

"My sister may seem fragile, but she has a strong mind. Fortunately, she grew up to be that kind of child. She's not one to be broken by false hallucinations."

Though she must be the most saddened, Idelbert's expression was as natural as possible, as if trying to ease our worries.

"...You really worked hard today. Go back and rest now."

Idelbert said she would stay at the temple for a while to monitor Serif's condition.

Diana and I, who returned to the inn, went to our respective rooms to organize our belongings and finish the exhausting day.

"Bunny."

While lying on the bed and staring blankly at the ceiling, I suddenly had a thought and asked the axe placed at my bedside.

"Like when you helped me, couldn't you help Serif?"

At the sudden question, Bunny immediately clicked his tongue.

[I have no intention of helping such insignificant creatures. It's difficult to do so anyway. It was possible with you because we are connected by a contract. She can't make a contract in that state.]

"...Then, can't you save Serif like when Ellie and Denshi were being possessed by the succubi?"

[...Hmm...]

To my desperate question, Bunny reluctantly seemed to be thinking.

[It's different from the succubi case. They invaded the dream world, not the mental image.]

"Are they different?"

[They are. The mental image is located much deeper than the dream world, so if you touch it incorrectly, you'll become a vegetable. Very few insignificant creatures among succubi have reached a level that can touch the mental image.]

I sighed as even Bunny, a demon who had lived for ages, said there was no answer.

Is it really impossible to do anything but watch Serif lying asleep in hallucinations?

"Wait. What did you say?"

[Huh? What, what do you mean?]

"What did you just say?"

[Oh. Very few insignificant creatures among succubi have reached a level that can touch the mental image...]

"Does that mean, succubi can enter the mental image?"

[Y-Yes...Oh.]

As Bunny stopped speaking, I hurriedly opened the closet in the room and looked in the mirror.

Near the temple of the man looking in the mirror, there were small, reduced horns.

When I focused on them, the shrunken horns eventually returned to their original size, becoming the symbol of a mighty succubus.

[◆Curse of the Nightmare]

– You gain the power of an incubus.

– Your breeding and regeneration abilities are greatly increased.

– You are currently in a [Sexually Frustrated] state.

The man in the mirror gaped blankly.

"...I'm a succubus right now."

My mind cleared as if struck by lightning.

—There was a reason the master ordered me to find that man! He is the real male, the real incubus...!

—We will awaken you as a true incubus. From how to use that power to techniques that will make all females kneel before you.

What came to mind simultaneously were the suspiciously friendly succubi I had met previously.

"...Perhaps."

I might be able to find a way to save Serif from the hallucinations.