**Chapter 194: 16th Floor (1)**

In an instant, my field of vision flipped, and a fierce wind struck my face roughly.

"Eubububuk!"

A strange sound came out involuntarily as the fierce wind suddenly entered my mouth.

The moment I opened my eyes with difficulty, clenching my teeth against the wind, what I saw was a vast jungle with dense vegetation, and white clouds.

-Whoooooosh!

Those green masses that were as small as ants instantly drew closer and grew larger and larger.

'Sky?!'

It wasn't just empty sky.

Would this be how it feels to paraglide without any equipment?

I was in free fall without any protective gear from thousands of meters in altitude.

Shit. Are they telling me to just die? They must be telling me to die.

Falling from this position with no protection, even a superhuman would burst and die becoming a chunk of meat.

"Wake up, disciple!"

Then came a shout that awakened my consciousness.

The warmth and grip strength felt in our clasped hands.

Idelbert had spread her arms wide, enjoying the wind.

"Look over there!"

She pointed her finger behind my back. When I carefully turned my head, what I heard was.

"Kieeeeek!"

The monster's ear-piercing cry.

What filled my vision was a green dragon with its jaws wide open.

No, a wyvern!

Three monsters with huge green lizard bodies about 15m long with thin wings attached bared their teeth at us.

"Two adult wyverns! One hatchling!"

"I can see them too! What do we do now?!"

"You can see them! Well, you'll have to figure out how to survive on your own!"

The two wyverns approaching in the lead, and the slightly smaller wyvern drooling below them.

The small wyvern rolled its eyes looking at me, then opened its jaws wide, as if saying I was its prey.

But that wyvern's wish.

"Heup!"

The moment Idelbert clenched her fist with a shout, it was torn apart like paper.

Woong-

When her fist imbued with black magic power like a shadow was swung through the air.

-Pueoooong!

The fist of the warrior that reached the edge of the labyrinth split the sky.

The airflow that bloomed with one punch became a gust of wind, and eventually transformed into a massive calamity that penetrated straight through the heads of the two adult wyverns that had charged in with their mouths open without knowing any better.

The two adult wyverns plummeted to the ground without even screaming, as if they hadn't even realized what had happened to them.

"...Kiek?"

Only the hatchling wyvern that had been slightly below them looked down at the adult wyverns plummeting to the ground with suspicious eyes.

"Did you see that, disciple!"

The moment I saw Idelbert who had swung her fist while holding my hand, I felt completely reassured.

Since it seemed I wouldn't die after all.

"Yes! I saw it, Master!"

"Then now you try it too!"

"What?"

-Whoooosh!

"S-shit!"

"I told you, didn't I! Figure out how to survive on your own!"

The moment I saw her face with that sinister smile, I was certain. This person is serious.

"Hey you-"

"Off you go!"

She swung her arm that was holding me and threw me.

The hatchling wyvern was rapidly approaching.

"Kieeeeek!"

It opened its jaws wide despite looking flustered.

The moment I saw those huge, sharp fangs covered in green saliva, I had a flash of Diana, Ellie, and Grumpy crying in front of my minced corpse and memorial photo.

Since it wasn't the past, it wasn't my life flashing before my eyes. Just a delusion.

That was positive news. It was proof that I still had room for idle thoughts.

I put on a positive mindset.

Getting eaten by a wyvern was a hundred times better than vertically falling to the ground.

Actually, when I first saw the wyvern group, my first thought was 'I'm saved'.

The monster's huge jaws lined up exactly with my head and feet.

"No choice. From now on, you're my mount."

"Kieeeeek!"

The hatchling wyvern that had opened its jaws wide closed its mouth with a cry.

-Thump!

My vision went dark in an instant. I had been eaten by the wyvern.

No, let me phrase it differently. I had entered the wyvern's mouth.

Thanks to my eyes that had adapted to dark vision in the upper floors of the labyrinth, I could roughly make out what was visible even in the wyvern's mouth where not a single ray of light entered.

The moment I entered the wyvern's mouth, I immediately slid down its slippery and rough tongue and stuck my huge axe between its solid teeth and gums.

-Craaaack!

Along with the sound of sharp teeth breaking and flesh tearing, the axe was firmly lodged between the wyvern's gums.

"Kieeeeeeeeek!!!!!!!"

An enormous scream surged up from deep in its throat, shaking my ears.

Fighting against the dizziness and nausea that immediately followed, I reached for my waist and gripped the artifact axe in my other hand.

I gathered strength in my hand holding the axe while aiming for the point of impact. And once again.

-Craaaack!

"Kieeeeeeeeek!!!!!"

The terrible screaming made me grip my hand tighter involuntarily.

If I let go, it would be over. I didn't want to come out through the wyvern's butthole like when I was eaten by a similar huge monster, the desert worm.

"Kieek! Kieeeeek!"

-Craaaack!

The wyvern writhing in pain twisted its body this way and that.

Though I knew well the terrible pain of having teeth stuck, this wyvern was being a bit dramatic about it.

Every time it twisted its body trying to shake me off, my brain felt like it was spinning.

"Urp-"

"Kieeek!"

Every time it screamed, my breakfast tried to climb up my windpipe from my stomach.

But the nausea easily subsided in the face of intense survival instinct.

I endured, stitching the creature's teeth with my two axes to avoid falling.

-Craaaack!

And occasionally shattered its teeth with Bunny, the huge axe.

"Kie, eeek!"

-Craaaack!!

The wyvern's cries gradually grew weaker.

It seemed to notice that its teeth and gums were being destroyed one by one every time it screamed in pain.

-Crunch!

Each time I shattered its teeth, I pressed the axes downward firmly.

Each time, the scenery visible through the broken teeth changed.

From the blue sky-filled heavens to the view of a forest dense with vegetation.

Finally, to the ground full of green weeds and damp soil.

-Crack!

"Kieek..."

The trembling wyvern opened its jaws wide as if desperately begging me to please get out of its mouth.

How shameless, considering it had tried to eat me earlier.

-Click.

To prevent the wyvern from suddenly closing its mouth, I secured Bunny between its upper and lower teeth before coming out.

Along with the strangely nostalgic feeling of stepping on ground, I pulled the axes out from between the wyvern's teeth.

"Kiek, kieeeeek!"

The green hatchling wyvern with almost all its left teeth destroyed frantically flapped its wings and flew off somewhere.

Seeing the wyvern fleeing in a hurry reminded me of one person...no, beastkin.

"...Master."

"What? You survived well as expected."

Idelbert appeared, swishing her cat tail proudly as if to say 'See?'

"No matter what, how could you throw your only disciple into a wyvern's mouth."

"I don't demand the impossible. I knew you could do it. And you did survive, didn't you?"

"......"

When she put it that way, I had nothing to say.

I looked around, swallowing my anger.

The 16th floor was a vast jungle area and the middle of the middle floors.

I hadn't noticed earlier because of the wind in the sky, but it was more humid and hot than I expected.

The temperature felt like early summer before the rainy season.

My discomfort index rose every time the lukewarm yet hot air entered my lungs, and the damp soil wet with moisture soaked my shoes.

It was the perfect place to get heat exhaustion and all sorts of diseases including mental illness if you stayed too long, but this jungle-like environment supposedly continues up to the 17th floor.

"It's quite notorious among intermediate explorers. If you can survive alone in this great forest, you'll be able to step into the upper ranks among intermediate explorers."

"I'm still a beginner though."

"You've fulfilled all the contribution requirements, so you can advance to intermediate anytime. You're not at a level to stay there anyway."

But...this was a bit sudden.

Moreover, I belatedly noticed something odd in Idelbert's words.

"Wait a minute. Alone? By myself?"

"Yes."

"What about you, Master?"

At my words, Idelbert put her hands behind her back solemnly.

"I had to step in just now because of the situation, but I'll only be keeping watch."

"What?!"

What nonsense is this now? She brought me here but now says she won't move?

I looked at my leather shoes absorbing moisture from the damp soil.

Just shoes, not gaiters.

Oh shit.

I had been dropped here without proper protective gear.

I had learned painfully through past experience that advancing through the labyrinth without armor to protect yourself was suicide.

Is it just armor that's missing?

No map to find the way, no party members to share roles with, not even food.

Having been dropped without any preparation, I had nothing needed to survive in the labyrinth.

Absolutely nothing except the two axes I always carry.

And she wants me to survive alone in a place like this?

"Well, I'll at least take responsibility for feeding you."

Idelbert said as if she had no choice when I glared at her intensely.

Still, there was much lacking.

"What about armor? One wrong hit to the head and I'm dead!"

"Build up your instincts to dodge. Or make it with magic power. You can do it. No matter what."

"This f..."

If it were as easy as she makes it sound, my wisdom stat wouldn't be so pathetically low.

"F...? Fuuu?"

Hmph.

-Paang!

Idelbert snorted and struck the ground roughly with her tail. I blankly stared at the sunken ground.

"What a badly mannered disciple. No dinner tonight."

"No, Master!"

"Hmph. Hmph. Be grateful I didn't destroy the axes you still have."

Idelbert said that while proudly crossing her arms.

-Zzzzt.

After having a brief staring contest with me, she opened her mouth.

"Your party seems quite tightly bonded."

Because she had allowed me to stay at the mansion for several days, Idelbert knew that I frequently spent time with my party members.

"Of course. They are reliable party members."

Though we hadn't been together for years, the incidents we'd experienced together were quite significant.

I thought they were sufficiently excellent party members that I could trust to watch my back even in this labyrinth.

"Well. You can divide roles as party members. No, the deeper you go down the floors, the more efficient that becomes."

"What are you trying to say?"

I couldn't understand her intended meaning.

Was she saying party members would rather be a hindrance to me now?

"Entrusting your back to someone trustworthy means lowering the risk that much, and it means growth from hardship is halved."

"Of course. But isn't it also wise to efficiently pioneer a safe path with reliable party members rather than recklessly taking dangerous paths alone?"

"Right. You understand well. If you're going to be content staying in the middle layers while making a living like the countless common explorers out there, that's fine. But."

Idelbert, who had suddenly come close, poked my solar plexus while asking.

"Don't you want to become much stronger than you are now?"

"......"

That's right.

"The edge of this labyrinth. Don't you want to reach that realm that only a select few chosen ones can reach?"

"...You're right."

I told her under the night sky that I wanted to become much stronger than I am now.

"Disciple. A flower in a greenhouse blooms beautifully. But it isn't strong. Meanwhile, a weed that grows while being trampled on the roadside boasts the toughest vitality of all."

When faced with the same danger, who would have a higher chance of survival between someone who grew up safely in a stable party and someone who survived tenaciously while being cut, torn, and crushed through all sorts of experiences?

And who could grow to reach higher places?

Idelbert was arguing it would be the latter.

My thoughts weren't much different either.

"Well, this is an extreme treatment. Experiencing it a few times should be enough. Besides, you've had plenty of experience with your entire greenhouse being torn away even while in it."

Idelbert patted my back heartily as if saying not to worry.

"Well then, let's work hard to survive this time too!"

"Sigh...Yes."

Instead of sighing, I raised my head to look at where I needed to go.

It's not the worst situation. At least I have axes to butcher monsters with.

The timing wasn't bad either.

The Earth Mother's fragment advised me to refine my powers and the blessing of radiance more precisely.

-Sling.

I tightly gripped my hand holding the axe.

The axes that now felt like they had become one with my body, beyond just feeling natural.

It was time to test myself, who had grown until now, against this labyrinth.