**Chapter 195: 16th Floor (2)**

Balkan wandered aimlessly through the forest.

The 15th floor had been nighttime until a little while ago, but on the 16th floor, the sun was still up.

Before night fell and covered him completely, he needed to find a place to hide and locate the portal's direction.

However, Balkan wasn’t a guide.

If only I had a map, I could make something work, but I didn’t even have that resource right now.

“What are you going to do, disciple? Night will fall soon enough. From what I hear, sneaky wolves roam around the 16th floor at night.”

Even the so-called master who might have been helpful seemed more interested in teasing than assisting, so there wasn’t much he could do immediately.

So, he simply kept walking for now.

To find other explorers on the 16th floor—or at the very least, the footprints of a monster.

If he followed the direction of the footprints, he might stumble upon a camping group or a horde of monsters or something useful.

*-Swoosh!*

After thirty minutes of cutting through waist-high bushes with his artifact hand axe, Balkan spotted multiple footprints imprinted in the muddy ground.

‘An explorer party?’

At least a four-person party.

Since they were wandering the 16th floor, most of them were likely mid-tier, intermediate-ranked adventurers.

Carelessness would be dangerous.

The female adventurers in Eden were notoriously fond of men.

Moreover, this was deep within a labyrinth, far from the eyes of others.

Depending on the temperament of those they encountered, there was no harm in staying cautious.

*-Swish.*

Balkan instinctively reached up to tighten his helmet strap, only to curse while touching his head.

‘Damn it. I didn’t think being without my helmet would make me this uneasy.’

Was it because he’d worn his helmet every day for battle until now?

As his field of vision opened up and the feeling of freedom grew, an unfamiliar sense of vulnerability crept in.

“Ah, disciple. Wear this.”

Idelbert, noticing Balkan touching his face, quickly pulled out a mask from his personal storage and handed it over.

It was a mask that covered most of the face, leaving only the area around the brow open for visibility.

‘I may have just seen my disciple’s face for the first time, but I can’t let anyone else get a look.’

Though the act was driven by jealousy, Balkan gave Idelbert a slight nod as he put on the mask.

*Sniff, sniff.*

With the mask faintly carrying Idelbert’s scent, Balkan hurried his pace.

*-Zzzzt!*

Before long, the sharp sensory range Balkan had extended picked up on the presence of strangers.

There were four of them, consistent with the number of footprints.

*-Halt.*

The steps of the group heading somewhere suddenly stopped.

It seemed that one of them also had detection-type abilities.

Since both sides had noticed each other, there was no point in hiding. Balkan walked toward where they were.

“Stop!”

When Balkan looked up at the voice from a tree, he saw a man aiming a bow and a woman holding a wand.

Their levels appeared to be those of average intermediate adventurers.

“I don’t intend to be hostile. So, you two hiding behind the tree, please don’t be too wary.”

After a brief silence, two more people appeared from behind the tree—a person in full plate armor and a lightly equipped woman.

“You’re quick to notice.”

The full plate-armored person, speaking in a high-pitched voice typical of a woman, rested her hand on her sword’s hilt and asked,

“Why were you following us?”

“I wanted to ask for directions.”

“Directions?”

“Yes. Could you tell me which direction the portal is?”

“We know, but why should we tell you—"

The full plate-armored woman’s voice, sharp and wary, suddenly began to waver.

She looked at the stranger who had approached them out of nowhere.

A man with a sharp intuition wearing a mask.

Though most of his face was covered, the opening at the brow revealed intense eyes, thick eyebrows, and a prominent nose.

*-Thump.*

Her womb began fluttering as though it were a second heart, but she bit her tongue to maintain her composure.

He was wielding an axe, but his armor looked inadequate.

Though his physique was impressively muscular and solid, it seemed almost too aesthetically perfect—as if it were a body crafted just for show.

When a man with looks that could outshine the top hosts of pleasure districts or the most refined sons of noble families suddenly appeared, one of two things would happen.

‘A decoy? A trap?’

Both possibilities were plausible. The woman’s gaze shifted to the figure standing behind the man.

A body that even another woman couldn’t help but admire—a soft yet toned figure exuding both feminine allure and the aura of a trained warrior.

Wrapped in a leotard suit with a swaying cat tail above her hips.

Her piercing red eyes exuded an imposing, predatory aura.

“⋯Oh⋯”

It was a familiar sight.

Though she had only seen her from afar, this was someone she had idolized.

“⋯The Alliance⋯”

*-Shh.*

Idelbert, standing behind Balkan, raised a finger to his lips.

The woman, who was about to cry out “Alliance Leader?!,” closed her mouth tightly.

Idelbert casually lowered her outstretched hand and made a gesture of slashing her throat.

A sign not to speak recklessly and to follow his lead.

“*Ahem.* If you head north for about three days, you’ll find it. We’re here for monster hunting, so we’ll be on our way!”

Sweating profusely, the full plate-armored woman and her party hurriedly left the area.

“⋯Such kind people.”

“*Ahem.* Indeed. Now, let us be on our way as well.”

Idelbert walked beside Balkan with a nonchalant air, hands clasped behind her back.

*-Sway, sway.*

Unbeknownst to him, her tail swayed slightly, revealing her emotions.

As Balkan’s party headed off on their new path,

The full plate-armored woman’s party, panting and flustered, exchanged words.

“Wh-what? Why is the Alliance Leader here on the 16th floor with that man⋯?”

“Come to think of it, I heard a rumor that the Alliance Leader’s disciple came to Eden recently and destroyed the turf clan in the back alleys.”

“Oh, I heard that too. Something about the outlaw prison being packed full because of it. But the Alliance Leader’s disciple is supposed to be a tall male axe warrior who always wears a helmet, right⋯?”

The archer of the group murmured, and silence followed.

A tall male axe warrior obsessively wearing a helmet.

And the tall, immensely muscular axe warrior they had just seen.

“⋯Don’t tell me, the one under that helmet was⋯?”

The archer’s murmuring prompted the women in the party to gulp.

Though he tried to hide his face with a mask, it wasn’t something that could conceal such features.

Even in Eden, a place devoid of brothels, it was natural for a woman’s desires to build up.

And then, to witness someone like that⋯

“*Hnnng⋯*”

The women unconsciously rubbed their thighs together, their expressions betraying their frustration.

The archer immediately understood.

Tonight’s watch duty⋯ was going to be very challenging.

“Whew. Whew.”

I blew gently with my mouth to keep the spark I worked hard to ignite from going out.

The spark grew, transforming into a large campfire.

In the dark cave, it was the only light that would illuminate the night.

If I had a mage, this wouldn’t have been such a hassle, but alas, there wasn’t one right now.

“Are you planning to rest in this cave tonight?”

“Yes. For now, I intend to replenish my stamina.”

I nodded at Idelbert’s question.

Although the 16th floor had just become night, the 15th floor had turned dark much earlier.

It was practically the equivalent of traveling through the night without rest.

To move properly tomorrow, I needed to rest now.

I had already found the direction I needed to go thanks to the explorers I encountered: three days north. It wouldn’t be an easy journey.

“I’ll keep watch.”

At her words, Balkan nodded and laid his weary body on the cold, hard floor.

Memories from the past suddenly surfaced. The recollection of the early days of his labyrinth expedition.

How long had it been since he last tried to traverse a labyrinth alone?

Well, he wasn’t entirely alone, but the nostalgia lingered nonetheless.

**Rustle, rustle.**

As he lay absentmindedly, trying to drift to sleep, Balkan caught sight of Idelbert fiddling with something dark in front of the campfire.

“...Is that mana?”

“Yes. Didn’t you see me use it earlier to drive away the wyvern?”

He had seen it.

Well, technically, he had only *watched*.

The problem was that he had no idea how to wield it.

“Now that I think of it, earlier you told me to create armor with mana.”

“Yes.”

“How is that even possible?”

“Are you curious?”

“Yes.”

“Well, I don’t see why I shouldn’t show you.”

At her words, Balkan sat up again, his attention focused on Idelbert.

**Huff.**

Idelbert clenched the dark mana she had been kneading in her hands, and it began to wrap around her arm.

The black mana formed a protective layer, coating her arm as if encasing it in armor.

It was undoubtedly a barrier, but something about it reminded Balkan of the sword aura that Jubeel used.

“...It kind of resembles a sword aura.”

“Good observation. It’s an extension of that. Whether it’s a sword aura or a barrier, it’s about manipulating mana according to your will with strong intent. Simply think of protecting yourself, and envelop yourself in mana.”

“Hm...”

That sounded easy in theory.

Even Rubia, the tank with her signature bun hairstyle, could only create a large mana barrier and hadn’t mastered the technique of neatly coating her skin like this.

“It seems you don’t understand, so I’ll show you again.”

**Hi-yap—**

Idelbert extracted the dark mana again.

**Huff.**

Then, she enveloped her arm in it once more.

“This is how it’s done.”

“...Excuse me?”

What exactly was she expecting him to do?

All he saw was her grabbing and releasing mana.

“Sigh. Let me show you one more time. **Hi-yap—** then, **huff.** That’s it.”

“Hi-yap and then huff?”

“No, no! It’s **hi-yap—** and then, **huff.** Got it?”

Idelbert stared at him as though wondering how he couldn’t grasp something so simple.

But no matter how she looked at him, Balkan had no excuses.

After all, he had only started perceiving the labyrinth’s ambient mana after investing a point in the Wisdom stat, which had been at 1.

“Ah.”

Could it be...?

Balkan opened his status window with a flicker of hope.

It was the same window he had been admiring now and then as he gradually leveled up and distributed stat points.

**[Nam Soo-jin LV.35]**
**[Stamina: (14+16) Strength: (14+11) Agility: (14+11) Wisdom: (1+4-5) Dexterity: (5+11)]**
**[Free Points: 6]**
**[Current Status: ‘Desire-filled']**
-Stamina+5, Wisdom–5, Dexterity+10

Among my stats, one stood out—Wisdom, which had been severely tanked by the penalties of the Nightmare Curse.

1+4 equals 5. Then minus 5.

5 minus 5 equals 0.

Wisdom: 0.

Not 1, not 2, but *zero.*

“Could it be...?”

If he raised this stat...could he, too, become a master of sword aura?