**Chapter 198: 16th Floor (5)**

Balkan recalled the story he had heard while standing guard at the party.

It was just a few weeks ago.

-Crackle. Crackle.

In front of the bonfire burning dry firewood, Jubeel suddenly opened her mouth, setting the mood.

"That day was truly horrible."

"Here we go again. Being dramatic."

"I only do milk drama. Listen. That day was truly horrible."

Despite Lammel’s retort, Jubeel rested her chin on her hand and recalled the memory with a serious expression.

When she was part of some nameless party.

"At first, I was happy. My god. Who would've thought we'd discover a relic storage."

Her party had accidentally discovered a relic storage near the upper floor.

For an explorer, finding a relic storage is tremendous luck.

What's the reason why the vast majority of explorers enter the labyrinth?

Strong and excellent blessings? Sure, that's part of it. Pick one good blessing and your life is set.

But surprisingly, few people devote themselves to the labyrinth solely pursuing strength.

Quite a lot of explorers don't enter the labyrinth with the purpose of exploring its depths or seeking their own enlightenment.

The reason why ordinary people look up to the labyrinth is simply, money.

Countless treasures, dazzling jewels, mountains of gold...even if they can't amass that much they can easily solve modest money problems from tomorrow's meal expenses to overdue rent, weapon repair costs, and savings for the future.

They hunt monsters in the labyrinth, advancing through endless traps that block their path and putting up their lives as collateral that cannot be returned.

"But we found a relic storage? Holy fucking sex. Amazing luck came to us."

It has been statistically proven that relics obtained after clearing the boss room at the end of a relic storage are more valuable than other relics found during labyrinth exploration.

"Whether it was beginner's luck or not, we were able to advance quite far into the relic storage. Since the difficulty of relic storage is proportional to the floor. It was fucking hard but not enough to die from."

Jubeel's party quickly advanced through the relic storage, breaking through various traps and monster encirclements.

Then in the boss room they entered, they faced the gatekeeper monster guarding the relic.

"Ugh. It was fucking tough. Two party members died but what can you do? All we could do was bury them. At least we got the relic..."

But what came next was the problem.

Excluding Jubeel, the three surviving party members looked at each other.

If they sold this relic and split the money?

It would be decent, but they'd still have to continue exploring with their lives as collateral.

What if one person was removed here?

The money they'd receive would increase significantly.

What if another person was removed?

It would increase exponentially.

What if one more person was removed?

End of hardship. Beginning of happiness.

The bloodbath for a golden future began.

Before they knew it, two people were dead.

Jubeel blankly stared at the party member pointing their blade at her while holding the relic.

At that moment, facing her former companion who still gripped their sword with trembling injured hands and showed killing intent towards her, Jubeel left the relic storage by herself.

There were no other party members behind her anymore.

"Well, that's just how it was. I'm happy being with you guys. When I'm with you, I don't think about things like that."

While the vast majority of explorers move for money, this party had less of that tendency.

They were people who knew how to lend a helping hand to each other's crises, the kind that other explorers deliberately ignored living their lives.

"When I became an Ain, everyone ran away though."

"Ahem. Hem hem!! That's different! Ah geez. The mood is ruined. I'm sorry! Hehe milk squirt!"

"Arghhhh! Jubeel!!! Put those milk jugs away!!!"

Just, that kind of thing happened.

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"Master."

"What is it?"

"Why did you suddenly step forward?"

I asked her as we passed the entrance of the relic storage and walked down the long corridor.

Idelbert had ordered me to traverse the 16th floor alone.

That order must have included dealing with various variable situations one might face in the labyrinth.

For instance, encountering outlaws attempting robbery or rape, falling into traps impossible to escape alone or suddenly discovering the entrance to a relic storage.

"Hm. Why? Do you think I would covet the relic?"

"No. There's no way you would desire such things, Master."

Idelbert possesses power and wealth befitting that magnificent mansion.

She wouldn't covet a mere relic found on the 16th floor.

"I'm purely curious. Why did you suddenly tear off the relic storage door and take the lead?"

Until now, Idelbert had followed behind me, but now I was following behind Idelbert.

It was evidence that Idelbert was more aggressive than me in advancing through this relic storage.

"Disciple. Look over there."

Idelbert, wearing a grim expression, pointed at the wall of the relic storage. My gaze followed Idelbert’s hand to face the wall.

"What do you see?"

"Well, just ordinary stone slab walls..."

As I was about to say what I saw, I frowned.

There were tiny holes visible between the stone slab gaps.

Like a mechanical device, it precisely bore the familiar form of a trap.

"...It's a poison needle trap."

"Yes. I don't need to explain why the mechanism is sticking out of the stone slab, right?"

The reason why traces of the activated mechanism remained so clearly.

"...Because it has already been fired?"

"Correct answer. There are no poison needles left in there."

The trap in the relic storage wouldn't have activated by itself.

The current situation meant one thing, this relic storage was already half-conquered.

There might be prior visitors who closed the storage entrance to keep the relic for themselves.

"Above all, the smell is fishy. Eight or nine out of ten times, there are bad ones hiding."

Bad ones, huh.

Though it was close to intuition, since it was Idelbert’s words, it probably wasn't wrong.

I thought it might be similar to the smell of demonic energy (magi) that Bunny mentioned.

"Seeing how the storage interior is intact, the boss room hasn't been cleared yet. Suspicious."

Relic storage develops cracks when the boss room is cleared, and completely collapses after a few days.

But the stone slabs of the corridor we were walking through were pristine without a single crack.

"So, you mean someone might be intentionally not clearing the boss room, using the relic storage as a hideout?"

"Yes."

Idelbert said with a confident tone.

Who would be crazy enough to use a 16th floor relic storage merely as a hideout?

At least I didn't know anyone who would pull such a crazy stunt. It wouldn't be ordinary outlaws either. Unless it was clan-scale.

"A few months ago, I received reports that a worshipper of Sloth was conducting vile experiments in such secretive places."

Sure enough, the name of a big shot came up.

"The bastard was conducting experiments forcibly breeding male explorers with monsters. Despite worshipping the demon of Sloth, they were diligently evading pursuit and conducting all sorts of bizarre experiments while changing locations."

We couldn't be certain if the Sloth worshipper was really here, but if they were, the situation had become a bit troublesome.

"I took the lead just in case..."

Idelbert glanced at me, then quietly returned her gaze to the front.

"Looking at it now, it seems it was a futile action."

I silently raised the corner of my mouth into a smirk.

So what if such a bastard was doing bad things here?

Having entered the labyrinth, I'm always prepared to die.

Even when facing a crisis, just crush it head-on.

Pain that doesn't kill me only makes me stronger.

That's why Idelbert brought me to the 16th floor in the first place.

"Still, I saw Master's heart caring for her disciple. This unworthy disciple is touched."

"...Ahem. Ah, just watch ahead properly."

Idelbert turned her head away sharply while swishing her tail.

We continued advancing through the relic storage corridor while surveying our surroundings.

After walking for about 30 minutes past the corridor where all traps had been activated.

At the end of the corridor, there was a cliff with a small wooden pole placed there.

When I poked my head over the dark cliff, I could faintly see the floor far below.

"Looks like an elevator to get down there."

"Let's ride it. Doesn't seem to be any other passage."

-Clank. Rrrrrr.

When Idelbert pulled the wooden pole, the stone elevator began rising.

-Click.

The elevator stopped right in front of the cliff, and we carefully stepped onto it.

-Tap!

Idelbert, who had also boarded the elevator, seemed familiar with this kind of structure and pressed the stone plate in the center of the elevator with her foot.

-Screeeech!

Then with a spine-chilling chain sound, the elevator began descending again.

As we went underground, deep darkness and unpleasant air began rushing in.

The smell of semen and sticky dried blood incense filled the damp and humid air.

Squelch, squelch–

Occasionally the sound of flesh hitting flesh and.

"..."

"..."

The breathing sounds of those barely alive could be heard simultaneously.

-Grip.

I firmly gripped the artifact hand axe and extra-large axe in both hands, preparing for battle.

-Screech. Click.

Finally when the stone elevator touched the ground.

-Whoosh!

There were small candles stuck in the walls all lit up at once, illuminating the surroundings.

"..."

Idelbert and I quietly swallowed.

We expected the center of the relic storage to be something like a dungeon where monsters appear in swarms, but a completely different scene entered our eyes.

No, compared to what we were seeing now, monsters appearing might have been better.

Why?

The moment I saw this place, I thought it looked more like a science laboratory than the labyrinth.

There were various samples and beakers on surrounding tables, papers with writing, thick and diverse books.

And four huge iron cages located in the center of that space.

"..."

"..."

Men who had collapsed without moving inside entered our view.

My eyes met with one of the men.

Empty eyes that seemed to wish for death coexisted with lips curved in pleasure, having become an idiot.

-Squelch. Squelch.

The man's body was shaking little by little.

Of course, he wasn't moving on his own.

"Gruk. Guk."

A Bone Jaguar was mounted on his body, extracting semen.

"Gruruk, Grek!"

"Grururuk-"

Inside that cage, two Bone Jaguars, monster seeds born superior with the man's sperm mixed in, were waiting for their turn.

The situation in other cages wasn't much different.

Monsters including small wyverns were mixing bodies with men, frantically producing monster seeds.

And beyond those trapped in such cages a woman in full plate armor caught our eye, collapsed and bleeding heavily in front of the relic storage's boss room.

"Please, save-"

That explorer who had told us the location of the 16th floor portal was desperately reaching out towards us.