**Chapter 203: Beg for it, Master (2)**

First, I decided to wrap up the immediate situation.

The situation hadn't been completely sorted out to begin with.

The things that happened in the relic warehouse. Like dealing with Dan Milia's party.

I was distracted by the dildo that came out of the relic box, but there were still things to take care of.

"What are you going to do now, Ms. Dan?"

"Ah. The Union Leader has shown me kindness. Since my party was wiped out, she said it would be fine to travel back together..."

Dan Milia's eyes met with Idelbert’s and she bowed her head slightly.

Idelbert waved her hand dismissively.

She who had momentarily lost her mind over the Curse Breaking dildo was now in a somewhat stable state.

At Dan's words, I instead asked Idelbert.

"Is that really okay?"

The reason I came to the 16th floor was to build up my skills by exploring the floor alone, meaning would it be okay to have an unexplained companion.

Idelbert nodded as if it didn't matter.

"If it's the Claudia Guild, we can trust their identity, and above all, I've sufficiently confirmed your growth in this relic warehouse. It's hard to expect growth greater than a life-or-death battle."

In other words, it meant that dealing with the chimera in the relic warehouse was more difficult than exploring the 16th floor alone.

I realized anew just how absurd an enemy I had faced.

If ordinary level 16 explorers had come, they would have been completely wiped out. Like Dan Milia's party members.

And I also realized how lucky I had been at that time.

The blessing of Judgment Time, the magic amplification potion I received from Fusilini, the magic defense training I received from Idelbert.

'If even one of the three had been missing...'

Just imagining it sent chills down my spine.

At the very least, it wouldn't have ended well.

"You overcame the crisis, saved others, and sought guidance from your master. The path you've walked has bloomed. You should be proud."

Idelbert grinned and patted my back.

I could feel her joy as a master proud of her disciple's achievement.

But separately.

"That's nice but...aren't you flattering me too much?"

"..."

"Perhaps, is there something you want?"

That pure, pure ulterior motive was also clearly felt.

"H-hmph. Not particularly? Don't talk nonsense."

Idelbert turned her gaze away forcefully from the relic dildo stuck in my back pocket while making a “hmph” sound.

Still, I didn't feel too bad about it.

Although there was some ulterior motive mixed in, I could clearly feel genuine sincerity in her words.

My heart fluttered for no reason.

Should I say it felt like being acknowledged as a disciple?

I had heard similar words right after taking down the chimera, but it still felt fresh.

Maybe it was because I felt that I had grown more than before.

After all, recognition from the strong is always different and thrilling.

Still, I didn't get too arrogant.

This is the labyrinth.

It was a dark maze where you never know what might happen the moment you let your guard down, the moment you take one wrong step.

I clenched and unclenched my fist.

My body that had collapsed from fatigue had been perfectly restored by Idelbert with recovery potions.

Perhaps because I had suddenly broken through wisdom, the flow of magic in my body, though not as much as then, felt much more sensitive than before.

My magic was full. And I felt confident that I could control it as I wished.

Calming my heart that was beating more intensely than usual, I took a step forward.

\*\*\*

Dan Milia stared at the scene before her.

-Screech.

The wyvern, a monster known as the disaster of the 16th floor among explorers, spreading terrible infamy, was a monster that ordinary intermediate-level explorers couldn't even think of facing unless they had particularly good equipment or could handle sword energy, and instead had to turn tail and run.

It wasn't just because of its scales that were as hard as steel.

What could be more powerless than a person crawling on the ground before a monster that rules the sky?

Intermediate-level explorers who just reached the 16th floor and encountered a wyvern had two choices.

Either fight for survival while praying to the gods, or run for their lives.

It was not surprising that those who chose the latter would be pecked and eaten by the wyvern like earthworms eaten by birds hiding in the ground.

Let alone a fully grown wyvern was hopeless.

"B-breath. It's breath...! We, we need to run...!"

A wyvern that could handle breath, the proof of growth, doubled in danger level.

How could one face a wyvern that breathes fire while flying in the sky?

It was a realm of miracles permitted only to wizards and paladins of the temple, not something an ordinary warrior could even dream of.

In that sense, Dan Milia was witnessing a miracle right now.

-Whoosh!

She was watching a man who, with just two legs, soared high into the sky.

Running along tall trees like flat ground with excellent balance, he used the trees' elasticity to fly through the air and buried his axe in the wyvern's wing.

"Kieeeeek!"

The terrible scream rang out briefly, and the man moved along the wyvern's wing like climbing a cliff, striking with two axes.

The adult wyvern thrashed around, spewing incomplete breath at the ground.

But that was the wrong judgment.

It shouldn't have given distance to begin with. It shouldn't have let him plant his axes in its wings.

Swish-

The man standing on the wyvern's neck raised his axe high into the sky.

Along with the axe blade gleaming in the reflected sunlight, transparent blue magic gathered with an even more dazzling light.

Whether called sword energy, aura, or various other names, there was one thing they had in common.

That is, it was a technique permitted only to those with the talent to step foot into the realm of high-rank explorers.

Dan Milia blankly opened her mouth.

Perhaps she was now watching the martial display of an explorer who would make a name for himself in the not-too-distant future.

'Balkan. Balkan...'

Dan Milia remembered that name.

He was a treasure.

Moreover, not even a raw gem just discovered.

-Glance.

As she turned her head slightly, she felt the gaze of Explorer Union Leader Idelbert.

Now she could understand why she had come to the 16th floor alone with Balkan.

He was a jewel being polished in real-time while receiving craftsmanship from one of the few masters in the world.

-Screech!

Soon came the sound of the axe cutting through the adult wyvern's neck.

Boom!

The wyvern's corpse that fell to the ground transformed into light particles and became a crystal.

The soul stone of an adult wyvern capable of breath was something not easily obtained anywhere due to its unique beautiful pattern...

-Gulp.

The greed unique to those in the guild surfaced.

Dan Milia etched his appearance into her eyes once more.

The Union Leader's disciple who covered his face with a mask, an Ain of unknown race with a pinky-sized horn near the temple and a giant axe warrior who would normally wear a helmet, Balkan.

"We're here."

All those thoughts were swept away by his single utterance.

Before she knew it, they had arrived at the edge of the 16th floor.

\*\*\*

Three more days passed.

We successfully made it back to Eden by crossing the ascension portal of the 16th floor.

"Thank you. As a member of the Claudia Guild, I will never forget this debt!"

Dan Milia, who had collected the equipment and belongings of her party members who were eaten by the chimera, bowed deeply.

Her skills were decent enough. Perhaps slightly below Jubeel? She wasn't a bad warrior.

Though her expression couldn't hide the bitterness of losing party members from the same guild, she didn't seem rough enough in personality to show it to the one who saved her life.

"You worked hard. Let's have a meal together sometime."

"Ah, yes, yes...! It would be an honor! Thank you!"

I offered a handshake, though it wouldn't be much consolation.

Dan Milia carefully took my offered hand, nodding her head vigorously while repeatedly bowing before leaving.

Idelbert, who had been watching her for a moment, pointed to the four foolish men rescued from the relic warehouse and spoke.

"I'll hand these guys over to the Order and give the materials obtained from the relic warehouse to Nuer. The harvest was quite good this time."

"When you're done organizing the materials, could you perhaps share them with me too?"

"Would that be alright?"

When Idelbert asked with a calm face, I let out a hollow laugh.

"Now I can't even sleep without worrying about those demon worshipper bastards. Why do we keep running into them at every turn? And you've been dropping hints occasionally too."

"Hm. Ordinary explorers rarely get involved with demon worshippers. It's just that your fate is special. Anyway, I understand. Go rest at the mansion first."

Idelbert patted my back repeatedly and headed to the Explorer Union Eden Branch.

I stared blankly at her back.

In this labyrinth expedition too, I found traces of sloth worshippers.

At first I thought it was a coincidence, but as I met more people connected to demons, it became increasingly certain.

This is no coincidence.

'The demon of gluttony Bunny. The succubi following the worshipper of lust. Belle, the worshipper of gluttony who became my slave. The demon of sloth at the fountain. And now the worshippers' laboratory? Ha.'

The lineup of those we had met so far was too suspicious to dismiss as mere coincidence.

Whether it was bad luck that I kept running into them, or good luck since I gained quite a bit each time we met them...even I couldn't tell.

[◆ Blessing of ???]

– ???

– Stamina+10 Strength+10 Agility+10

I just stared endlessly at the answer I still couldn't solve.

Serif, the saint of the Earth Mother Order, seemed to know the answer about this blessing.

But she refused to tell me, saying it would be more helpful not to know.

Should I remain ignorant like this, or should I resolve this frustration even if it means taking a loss.

-Hoo.

I let out a short breath and cleared my head.

Let's not think too complexly. Things will work out somehow.

Fatigue had built up in my body again during the three-day journey.

For now, I wanted to rest a bit.

\*\*\*

"Masteeeeer!!!"

As soon as I arrived at Idelbert’s mansion, Grumpy came running out and threw herself into my arms.

-Poof!

"I missed you...Where on earth did you go?"

She must have missed me a lot, as she buried her face in my chest and rubbed it vigorously.

Like a puppy showing affection to its master after a long time apart. Smiles bloomed involuntarily.

No matter where I went in the world, it was a joy to have someone who would welcome my return so enthusiastically.

"I was kidnapped by Master."

"Damn. That person. Dumped all the troublesome temple people on me and took only Master away...I really don't like her. Hmph."

"Haha..."

Probably because there was that time when she was beaten to a pulp under the pretext of training, Grumpy didn't view Idelbert entirely favorably.

I smiled bitterly while patting the head snuggled in my arms, and she rubbed both her cheeks vigorously against my chest.

Wait. Come to think of it, this...

Crunch!

"Kehek, hek...! W-welcome back choking... As expected, Master is the best..."

When I pulled on the collar around her neck, Grumpy gasped for breath with a flushed face.

"I heard from the mansion maid that the Union Leader came out of the portal, so food has been prepared. Bath water is ready too... Or, m-maybe me first...?"

"I'll eat first. Mine is ready too, right?"

"Yeees..."

Grumpy puffed up her cheeks with an obviously disappointed face but it couldn't be helped.

Since all I had eaten for days was stew made with Idelbert’s terrible cooking skills, I wanted to eat some proper food.

"By the way, what about the other party members?"

"Ah. Master's party members said they felt awkward staying too long, so they decided to stay at an inn near the Union."

Thinking I should apologize for messing up their schedule since the party leader disappeared without a word, I nodded for now.

I entered the mansion with Grumpy, sent her back to her room, and headed to the dining room following the servants' guidance.

"The meal has been prepared, Sir Balkan."

"Ah. Thank you."

"I only did what was natural."

They treated me very courteously. It was because all the servants now knew that I was the mansion owner's disciple.

I ate the food laid out on the magnificently set table like a possessed person.

It's incomparably more delicious than Idelbert’s stew.

I was on the verge of tears of joy every time I ate meat full of protein and fat.

A meal that couldn't be better. It was perfect.

However, even amid all that, I felt a strangely empty taste.

"Not as good as mine, right?"

"Pardon?"

When I turned my head toward the voice, Idelbert, who had finished her work and returned, was sitting at the head of the table with a shameless face, tearing into chunks of meat with her bare hands.

Her mouth moved chewing a few times before swallowing the food with a gulp.

"Well, it tastes good. But did it have as much devotion as my cooking?"

"..."

What I recalled while eating this food was Diana.

Because after returning from difficult battles, nothing warmed a person's heart like her stew.

But the moment I heard her words, something flashed through my mind.

'Devotion... is it.'

Was the empty taste I felt the absence of devotion?

Of course, the mansion's cooks would also put their heart into cooking for those who eat.

But the devotion laid out on this table and the devotion I felt while eating Idelbert’s homemade stew were somewhat different in nature.

The same goes for Diana's stew.

For some reason, I couldn't help but smile.

"Yes. Well."

"What's with that strange response?"

"Ahem. It's nothing. Master's cooking is the best."

"Hmph. Of course it is."

I just nodded and smiled because as I ate while chatting about various things with Idelbert, I felt the momentarily rising empty feeling fade away.

It was evidence that the woman named Idelbert had become someone who could affect my emotions.

After all, since coming to this world, the time spent with Idelbert was second only to Diana.

Seeing that the food laid out on the table was demolished, she naturally stood up.

"If you've filled your stomach, let's wash up."

"Yes. You go wash first. I'll rest in my room meanwhile..."

"Ah, no."

She firmly grasped my wrist as I was about to stand up and her black tail was trembling slightly with embarrassment.

Her face was also slightly redder than usual.

"..."

I quietly looked into her eyes.

Her usually fierce and expressionless eyes had softened gently.

In her trembling pupils was reflected the image of one man looking down at her.

Finally, her lips opened first.

"...Together. Let's wash together, disciple."

From her hand pretending to be calm, an undisguisable trembling was transmitted.