**Chapter 29: I want to go to the second floor (1)**

I woke up at the crack of dawn.

Maybe I was just nervous, but I woke up a little earlier than usual.

I glanced outside and saw that the explorers hadn't started marching yet.

"Off!"

After the usual routine of stretching, cleaning, and meditation, I got ready to arm myself.

In the past, I would have worn only the basics of a shirt, pants, and a backpack, but this trip to the labyrinth is a little different.

‘Gaiters worth six silver coins. ‘

Depending on the level, these will provide some warmth in the basically cooler environment of the Labyrinth, and will also keep debris out of my shoes.

‘Battle Axe, 17 silver coins.’

The blade is a bit smaller than the axe I've been using, but it's much sharper than the firewood chopping axe.

Hwoong-!

I swung it once in the air, and the sound of air being cut resounded coolly. The grip on the handle isn't too bad either.

If this is the appetizer, now it's the main dish.

‘A breastplate worth 40 silver coins!’

Even if you hit it dozens of times with a goblin knife, there won't be a scratch on this breastplate...

Finally, the Great Helm, which seems almost impossible to value.

It was only two and a half silver coins when I got it from a weapon shop that only flies dung beetles, but now I know it's the most valuable piece of equipment in my arsenal.

Carefully, I put the helm on and adjusted the angle.

The only flaw is the lack of a chin strap, which makes it less secure, but otherwise it's flawless.

I've packed everything I need, supplies, and food.

"Good morning. Balkan."

"Good morning, Diana."

I greeted Diana, who was up early as always, and we chatted for a while before she handed me something.

I take it, and it's a thick pouch. The fabric was shiny and looked luxurious.

"What is this?"

"Hoo-hoo. Speaking of which, I made one the other day, but I don't know if you'll like it."

I untied the string and opened the pouch, and a salty, savory smell hit me.

Inside was jerky. I can tell just by smelling it. This is definitely good jerky.

"Diana!"

I remembered that I had said that in passing and thought of Diana, who must have made the jerky a few days ago, and I felt a little tear of emotion.

"Really. I'll eat it and be right back!"

"Woohoo. Okay. Don't get hurt, and come back alive. I still have a lot of cooking to do."

Unfortunately, I had to pass on breakfast.

I waved to Diana, who waved me off with a worried smile, and I was out the door before I could catch sight of Grumpy.

Bow in hand, dagger and map at her waist, a good-sized backpack on her back, and a quiver of arrows slung at an angle for easy access, she was the typical archer and guide.

"Are you ready to go?"

"Are you better equipped than last time?"

Grumpy looks at my fully leveled up gear and opens her mouth in disbelief.

"Sometimes there are outlaws who don't know what they're doing and want to loot other people's gear, but I think we'll have to watch out for them this time."

Social evils like outlaws, looters, and slave hunters were always a cause for alarm.

"Let's go, don't start off with a bang."

"Yep."

Naturally, I grabbed the leash she handed me and headed for the labyrinth's entrance.

The streets, which had been deserted in the early morning, were now crowded with the procession of people heading to the Labyrinth.

-Thump-thump-thump.

I spotted a fancy carriage, richly decorated, with a high ranking person in it.

“The new year is in two weeks. Will the ritual begin soon?”

"No. It hasn't happened in nine years, so the Labyrinth must have calmed down a bit. If it does come again, it's not for another three weeks, according to the cycle."

There was a seasoned explorer muttering something unintelligible, but it wasn't enough for me to pay attention, so I turned my head away.

"I'll bet everything I have on this expedition!"

"That just means you're going to fuck your life up without looking back⋯"

"No, we can do this, don't be intimidated by being a novice explorer!"

I look over at the leveled area and see a group of new explorers, eager and excited about the Labyrinth.

"No⋯ no⋯ I'll fight hard. Watch me, no. Watch me⋯!"

Among the crowd, I spotted Jeremy, muttering to herself in an uncharacteristically furtive tone.

"Jeremy."

"Brother."

As soon as she spotted me, she ducked her head. Her complexion was darker than last time.

"⋯Did you sleep well? Are you ready to enter the labyrinth?"

"Yes. I'm in excellent condition. I think I can kill five goblins at the same time right now."

As she said that, Jeremy stroked her backpack fondly.

There was a strange madness in her gesture that made me want to keep my distance.

Still, the three of us walked straight to the labyrinth's entrance.

"Holy shit."

There was a long line of people waiting to check their ID cards at the entrance.

The last time I was here, it was around lunchtime, so it seemed to be relatively quiet.

I'd already been waiting for thirty minutes and had barely advanced a few meters. It was comparable to a highway during the holiday season.

‘I'm an orphan, I've never been down to the country to see my parents.’

The line didn't move quickly, even though it was as simple as a quick glance and an "okay to pass".

"Ah, Ms. Adeline, you're having a hard time. Come on in!"

"Oh, no. I'm just here to see what's going on."

"Adeline?

For a moment, I thought it was Serif, because Adeline was her last name.

As I poked my head out at the familiar name in front of me, I realized that the guard was dealing with someone who looked like the opposite of Serif.

If Serif was a white cat, she was a black cat.

‘I'm mistaken.’

The angle showed only a glimpse of her back and head, and I couldn't see her pointed ears, which are characteristic of cat girls, so I assumed she was someone with the same surname.

More colorful carriages and what appeared to be seasoned explorers passed through the labyrinth entrance without waiting in line.

No special procedures, just a straight high pass. To be honest, I was a little jealous.

"What are they doing, just going through without waiting in line?"

"You can't tell by looking at them. They're high ranking explorers, or mid to high level explorers. They're not in our league."

After about an hour of waiting amongst the explorers who cast them envious, slightly admiring, and jealous glances, our turn finally came.

"Maybe next time we should come around lunchtime like before."

The morning's tedious wait in line had taken its toll.

- In the morning, intermediate and advanced explorers are moving quickly down the labyrinth, killing or dodging all the monsters as they go, and if you go right after that, you'll be relatively safe.

I remembered Adolf's advice. Indeed, this was another reason she had asked me to come to lunch.

Though her body may be dead and fallen prey to the goblins, her advice will be a great lesson and take root in my heart.

Then Grumpy looked at me in disbelief and said,

"What are you talking about? High-level explorers break through the upper levels in no time at all, and by the time lunch rolls around, there will be nothing but novice explorers and the slave hunters who are after them. Isn't that a much more dangerous case? If there are any high-level explorers left, they might be able to get some help."

"⋯Yes."

Come to think of it, Adolf, that bitch of a priest was expelled from the temple for sodomy. I'll have to keep coming in the morning.

We stood hand-in-hand to enter the portal.

Jeremy held her spear in her left hand and I held my axe in my right, ready to take on any monsters as soon as we transitioned.

"Why are you all so tense?"

"⋯Because we don't know."

"Ah. One would think we'd encounter a monster as soon as we enter the labyrinth. How rare is that?"

"⋯⋯"

"⋯⋯"

The smirk on her face faded as she looked at me and Jeremy, who remained silent.

"⋯Really?"

She asked regretfully.

"Because I had a shitty experience in the Labyrinth."

She faltered at the affirmation.

"Eh, ah. I've been an explorer for over five years now, and I've never heard or seen anything like that."

If a normal beginner explorer fell into such a situation, they'd usually just get wiped out, so there was no one to spread rumors about, right?

"Well, let me share some of my luck with you then, I've had a bit of good fortune, at least in the Labyrinth."

As she said that, she gave my hand a little squeeze.

"If my master's luck is bad, my good fortune will make it a wash."

Perhaps to ease the tension, the she-cat purred.

I tugged once on the leash in praise, and then resumed my thoughts.

Goblin lair battles, rape events, gatecrashing party members, battles upon entry, trouble with outlaws.

Every trip into the Labyrinth has always been followed by an incident.

Would this time be any different?

‘No. Absolutely not.’

Surely something shitty would happen again.

"Are you all ready?"

"Of course!"

"Yep. Brother."

I said it to my party, but I also said it to myself.

Nam Soo-jin, are you ready? I'm ready. Even if I go into a tiger's den, as long as I keep my wits, I'll survive. The labyrinth is no different.

With a clear mind, I stepped toward the portal.

"What the hell?"

Nineteen hours after entering the Labyrinth.

"Why, why, why?"

I muttered quietly to myself as I stood for the umpteenth time.

"Nothing happened, right?"

We had made it to the second floor without incident.