**Chapter 251: Elder Lich Subjugation Battle (2)**

A fierce wind made me furrow my brow every time it hit my face.

Flying through the sky was very romantic and something ordinary people could never experience, but it was far from my taste.

Should I say it feels unstable because my feet aren't touching the ground?

Thanks to my excellent sense of balance, I didn't show any unseemly appearances like falling, but it wasn't as enjoyable as I had thought. I'm also getting a bit motion sick.

If there's one good thing, it's that the strong wind is pushing away the hot and humid air of the 17th floor.

"Hey kid. Can't you fly straight?"

-Crunch!

"Kieeek!"

When I pulled the iron chain, a sharp cry immediately rang out.

It was a sound from the wyvern whose mouth was chained like a racehorse by Nuer's binding magic.

I quietly placed Bunny on the nape of the broken-toothed wyvern that had now become our party's mount.

"Kieek..."

The monster, sharp-witted for its kind, seemed to sense that the axe could slice its neck in an instant and closed its mouth, beginning to fly at low altitude.

"This is my first time riding a wyvern..."

"Mine too."

"...this is also my first time."

"It's my first time too. Take it easy. Hoot..."

"Ah, Jubeel..."

Behind me controlling the wyvern like a jockey, party members who all claimed it was their first time sat in a line with their hands on each other's waists.

Though none of them seemed eager, they had no choice but to avoid falling.

Ellie and Rubia watched the quickly passing forest with sparkling eyes.

Nuer was slightly surprised by the new experience, and Jubeel was just being Jubeel.

Denshi threw cautious glances at the monsters and explorers looking up at us from below.

"Everyone be alert! The wyvern... huh?"

"...what? Did I just see things?"

"Those people on that low-flying wyvern, they're really humans right?"

"What kind of dragon knight is that? Wearing dragon scale armor and even riding a wyvern...with such a huge axe on their back?"

"Not even a necromancer...I've never heard of anyone controlling monsters like that..."

Since we weren't flying very high, the explorers who looked like dwarves, if not ants, gaped their mouths.

Fortunately, all of them showing surprised expressions didn't have the courage to fight with the wyvern.

The explorers who just stared at us with faces full of questions were pushed back by the fast-flying wyvern and disappeared behind us.

"There's a portal ahead!"

At Denshi's voice, I raised my head and saw the descent portal to the 18th floor ahead.

We had fallen at the entrance of the 16th floor, so the distance to the portal was quite far.

Considering that the 16th floor was wider than other floors, it might have taken not just half a day, but several days of walking.

However, riding the wyvern, we broke through the 16th floor in less than eight hours.

After that, we fell to the middle of the 17th floor and reached its edge in four hours - truly an amazing speed.

Since we needed to get to the 19th floor quickly, meeting the wyvern had turned out to be tremendous luck.

"Keeeek...!"

But that luck was starting to run out.

Facing the portal, the wyvern twisted its body with a pained cry.

"W-what?"

"Why is it suddenly resisting like this...!"

When a body as large as a wyvern twisted, those sitting on top naturally were affected.

To those party members who each grabbed the wyvern's scales to avoid falling, I said:

"I tried to cross the descent portal like this, but this guy is desperately struggling!"

Even though I had half-embedded the axe in its neck beyond just holding it there, the wyvern continued its desperate struggle, refusing to head toward the 18th floor.

That resistance was stronger than imagined, and since it would be terrible if anyone fell, I had no choice but to move the wyvern's reins elsewhere.

When I tried to go somewhere other than the portal, the creature regained its composure and landed on the ground.

I quickly got the party members off the wyvern's back.

"Keeeek!"

The wyvern that had dropped us off in front of the portal immediately flapped its wings and flew away in the opposite direction.

"Why did that bastard suddenly act like that? Ugh, my stomach..."

Seeing Jubeel complaining of motion sickness while rubbing his chest, Nuer answered.

"It refused to move between floors. Wyverns have quite high intelligence. It probably didn't want to leave its territory."

"But it just crossed from the 16th floor to the 17th floor, didn't it?"

"There was your threat, and it probably thought the 17th floor was still within its safe zone. Even if it hasn't reached full maturity, wyverns are among the upper ranks of monsters in the 16th and 17th floors."

But it seems the 18th floor is different.

"To begin with, monsters crossing floors isn't common in the middle floors, let alone the lower floors. Let's give up, leader. Just getting past the 16th floor like this is enough of an achievement."

Nuer was right.

Though it was disappointing we couldn't bring the wyvern along, just skipping the 16th and 17th floors for free was enough of an achievement.

After checking our equipment for anything we might have dropped while settling our upset stomachs, we headed back to the portal.

Fortunately, where we made our emergency landing wasn't too far from the portal.

After walking for about ten minutes, we reached the edge of the floor and crossed the portal again.

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After crossing the portal to the 18th floor, my first impression was: did we really cross a portal?

That's how similar the environment of the 18th floor was to the 16th floor.

The weather was terribly hot and humid making us sweat naturally, and tall trees formed a forest.

However, there was one difference.

"Why is the ground so mushy?"

It was ground that sank like a tidal flat.

Every time we took a step, the swamp's muddy bottom gripped our feet and stuck to them.

Almost up to our ankles.

As a result, not only did our pace slow down, but our stamina dropped rapidly with every movement.

The weather was already hot and humid, and now I couldn't even walk as I wanted - irritation came flooding in.

The labyrinth's evil intention to exploit cracks in the party due to this was clear.

"It'll be like this all the way to the 19th floor. The 19th floor, where everywhere is swamp terrain, is worse than here, not better."

I heard the 17th floor was similar too, but since we only spent time on the wyvern's back there, we never got to step on the ground.

I nodded along, figuring it must be so since this was coming from Nuer, who had the most labyrinth experience in our party.

She had created a weak barrier around her legs, worried that her childish yellow fashion might get dirty with mud.

Her steps also looked a bit lighter, appearing quite refreshed among the party members who were all sweating profusely.

"Hey. Why is Nuer the only one using that good thing?"

"Because magic I use on myself consumes little mana. Using it on all of you would consume too much mana. Then I wouldn't be able to use magic when we encounter monsters."

"...really?"

"Yup."

Seeing Nuer sucking on her pacifier necklace with nothing more to say, I sighed.

The heat of the 18th floor was clearly different from the desert-like heat of the 13th floor.

It was like the heat of a tropical region during monsoon season - full of humidity that raised the discomfort index and made it hard to breathe.

I drew up mana pooled in my heart to drive away this heat.

After drinking the 21st floor mountain mana potion that Nuer had given me, my mana took on the properties of cold.

When I first awakened this property, my mana was strong enough to freeze a whole inn room, and it grew even stronger after receiving the dragon's heart blessing and investing free points in wisdom stats.

And after creating the mana armor, my mana control ability had also risen to quite a decent level.

As I operated the cold mana little by little inside my body, the sticky heat clinging to my skin instantly retreated and my steps became lighter.

-Crackle!

I could only understand why even my steps became lighter after looking at the ground.

The swamp's muddy ground where I was about to step had frozen like a midwinter lake.

"Wow. What is this, master? Did you freeze the ground?"

Denshi, who was behind me, exclaimed in admiration while stepping on the ice floor.

Though Denshi wore light armor to utilize her agility, her body weight wasn't very light due to the solid fat mass on her chest and plump thighs.

However, the ice floor was easily supporting Denshi.

Come to think of it, given that it supported me, the heaviest in the group wearing full armor, it was natural that it would easily support Denshi who wasn't even half my weight.

"It's like a degraded version of Ice Age..."

"What?"

When I turned my head at Ellie's mumbling, she tilted her head slightly.

"It's an applied magic that ice mages usually use...you didn't know when you used it, right?"

"Nope."

"I thought so. It feels like you just froze the surroundings with your mana's property and scale rather than using magic."

"That's good, right?"

"It is good. Mother's mana property is ice-type too, right?"

If it's good, that's fine.

The important fact right now was that my cold property mana would make the stuffy and slow floor exploration faster.

Just before my armored feet touched the swamp bottom, the cool icy mana froze the ground, creating an ice floor.

Though I couldn't instantly freeze the entire surrounding area, it was enough for the party to walk on the ice floor in close formation.

Although mana was continuously consumed, it was only at a level that could be covered by natural recovery.

Even if the mana consumption was large, I had the mana recovery herbs that Fusilini had given me before, so there wasn't much to worry about.

"...by the way, isn't this too smooth?"

Jubeel expressed doubt while fiddling with her scabbard.

Indeed, something did feel strange.

"There aren't many monsters."

Whether explorers heading to deeper floors had swept everything away, or if there were other explorer parties nearby, despite walking through the 18th floor for quite a while, we hadn't encountered many monsters.

Compared to hearing news about monsters wielding magi running wild before entering the labyrinth and even seeing that devastation, it was eerily quiet.

You could call it an explorer's intuition but all of this didn't seem entirely normal.

In other words, it could also be described as a strangely chilling feeling down your spine.

Not just me, but the party members were also gradually feeling this sensation.

"Master."

And that strange sensation was confirmed by Denshi's voice.

"We're being tracked from 6 o'clock. Judging by the footsteps, it's five women and one...creature?"

"Everyone be alert."

At those words, all party members tensed up.

"Everyone stick close to me. I'll use a blessing."

Nuer said while storing binding magic stock in her wand.

Though there was a condition that we had to stay still, Nuer possessed a concealment blessing.

And that concealment blessing applied to those in contact with Nuer.

"I'll be the bait first to test the waters."

Everyone nodded at my words.

Since we didn't know the names or purposes of those following us, it made sense for me, who could hold out the longest among the party members, to meet them.

Though Rubia was a tank, if the situation turned bad and the followers attacked the concealed party, she needed to protect them, so we couldn't rashly expose her.

However,

"What are you saying?! We can't–"

"Miss Ordia. Trust the master. This is the right choice now."

Denshi pulled back Ellie, who was the only one panicking at those words.

When a party faces an emergency situation, they must completely follow the leader's judgment.

I gave a small thumbs up to Denshi who controlled Ellie, and confirmed that Nuer had used the concealment blessing.

Turning away from them who were only faintly detectable even with perception, I focused my awareness toward those approaching us.

"...what?"

However, when comparing the energy and presence of those approaching through the mud, I could only tilt my head in confusion because I never thought they would come here.

Eventually, those who had only been felt within my perception range appeared before my eyes, pushing through the swamp forest.

"...what? Balkan? Why are you here...?"

"Dduruddu parapappa!"

The human mage Fusilini who recognized me immediately despite my full armor and helmet, and the mud-covered wet slime beastkin Aldente.

And beside them, the giant horse beastkin Kentarina, and the eyepatch-wearing black mage and necromancer Amel Drexia riding on her back.

Behind them were also the temple's female paladin and the priest Hope who was said to have become a shut-in after receiving a great shock.

The one-eyed Amel Drexia wearing an eyepatch turned toward me.

"...Balkan. Your party should be enough."

She spoke to me in a desperate voice after muttering quietly.

"Could you perhaps help us?"

"Help?"

"Yes. Help. I'll definitely repay the debt, please."

I thought for a moment and nodded slightly.

It was a gesture indicating I would at least listen.

Amel Drexia swallowed for a moment, then carefully stated her business.

"The black mages who went on an expedition to the 19th floor have all gone missing."