The Genius Son-in-law of the Swordmaster Household—Blessed by Authority

Chapter 41 : Vampire Ruins Gate (2)

Vampire Ruins Gate (2)

Gate.

A naturally occurring portal connected to another dimension.

For adventurers, it was a reliable means of making money, and if lucky, a place of opportunity where one could aim for a windfall by obtaining the supreme treasure.

'But.'

As always, where there is light, there must also be shadow.

A gate was not just a place of opportunity and romance.

'Despair and death coexist there, too.'

There was the risk of betrayal by other adventurers, getting stranded after falling behind, hunger, pain, conflict, and so on...

Only an adventurer who overcame all those dangers could earn the gate's sweet spoils.

'If we could just stampede in with numbers, it would be much safer...'

If the state could take the lead in gathering high-level experts to clear a gate, there would be far fewer casualties, and the spoils would also be secured more reliably, but unfortunately, that was impossible.

A gate was a rift created by the collision of dimensions.

By nature, it was extremely unstable.

Thus, even a small stimulus of magic power could trigger a significant backlash.

A strong fighter with powerful magic power would cause a fierce backlash just by approaching the gate.

Of course, there were a few gates where even high-level masters could enter, but those cases were rare.

Most gates were so unstable and sensitive that even experts of just barely the expert level could barely get in.

'Moreover.'

The restriction on entering a gate wasn't determined solely by magic power level.

'There's also a limit on the number of people who can enter.'

If too many people try to enter at once, the gate overloads.

A gate is a portal connected to another dimension.

It's a warp path linking distances unimaginable for humans.

With that, the magic output generated by each person entering is astronomical.

That enormous mana output, occurring within an already unstable gate, inevitably leads to overload.

'And if the person passing through the gate possesses strong magic power, the overload happens even faster.'

For this reason, the party had to reduce the number of powerful experts in the raiding group.

That's why, in this gate raiding party of 18 people, most were weak porters.

If the whole raid team comprised only high-rank experts, the gate would have overloaded so fast that not even five people could have entered.

Of course, with four or five high-rank experts, clearing the gate itself would be no problem, but with no porters, many of the spoils would have to be left behind, making the raid much less worthwhile.

'If you increase the ratio of experts, the success rate goes up, but the rewards decrease. On the other hand, if you increase the ratio of porters, the risk rises, but you can bring out much more loot.'

In that sense, Ian was quite cost-effective.

His official rank was high-intermediate-stage Expert, but his pure combat power was almost enough to be compared to master level.

There was probably no one on the continent as cost-effective for raiding this gate as Ian.

In fact, the overwhelming number of porters in this raid was thanks to Ian's presence.

As soon as the guildmaster in charge of organizing the raid heard of Ian's extraordinary abilities, he trusted Ian and significantly increased the share of porters.

'With so many porters, we'll be able to scrape up everything, even from the very bottom.'

Sometimes, during a thorough sweep, one might discover an unexpected treasure.

Would such luck follow this raid?

"All right, raiding party members! Enter the gate now! Enter!"

At the moment Ian was quietly nurturing his sense of anticipation, the gate entry began at last.

"Y-young master! W-we'll be able to return safely, right?"

Sophia nervously wetted her dry lips and trembled all over.

"Don't be too nervous, Sophia. As long as you don't stray too far from me, you'll be fine."

"Don't worry about that! Even if you don't like it, I'll stick to you like a cicada!"

"Good. And you remember what I said earlier, right?"

—Whisper.

Sophia pressed her hand to her mouth and spoke in a whisper.

"You mean, to be careful of those five who were glaring at us just now, right?"

"Right. Once we're in the gate, whether quickly or slowly, they'll definitely try to start something. Don't ever respond. I'll handle it. Got it?"

"... Well. I trust you one hundred percent, young master. But at least tell me what you're planning."

"It depends on the circumstances, but at first, I might need to let them hit me a bit."

"Huh? L-let them hit you?"

"Yeah. That way, I can beat them up in self-defense. You'll be fine. Since I'm the guy, they'll target me first. No matter what, don't get involved, even if I start getting hit. I'm letting it happen on purpose."

"U-umm... Is there really no other way? Do you really have to take the hits yourself...?"

"This is the simplest and easiest method. Those guys' punches are as soft as down. Remember—if you interfere, things will get much more complicated."

"... Um. Since you really emphasize it, okay. I got it. But since I might not know if you're just acting or really getting beaten, let's set up a help signal."

"I doubt I'd ever really be in trouble. But if something truly dangerous happens, I'll shout for help."

"O-okay. Make sure to shout! And if you can't, then at least send me a desperate look!"

"Sure, sure. But there's really nothing to worry about. That won't happen."

As they chatted, it soon became Ian and Sophia's turn to enter.

"Ian Greysel from Hisperion! Sophia Marygold! Please enter!"

—Woooong!

Passing through the gate felt... how to describe it.

At first, it was as if pushing through a thick cobweb.

Then, your body suddenly got sucked in, and your view changed in an instant.

"Wow."

The sunny forest vanished, replaced by a massive underground cavern.

"It's so dark..."

The ceiling loomed so high it was dizzying, and the raid party's torches were the only source of light.

"My... Young master, look at that."

At the far end of the cavern stood a gigantic stone gate, reminiscent of a temple entrance.

That was the entry to this raid's stage: the Vampire Ruins.

'Ha... This brings back memories.'

The scent of this ruin.

Shouldering Vladiark, Ian savored the nostalgia of his previous life.

Memories of countless gates and dungeons he had conquered flashed through his mind.

It was fun.

The time spent with Yuria and his comrades.

Time to forge trust and friendship.

"Hey! You two there!"

Then, a shout rang out from nearby.

Turning his head toward the sound, Ian saw a villainous face striding toward him and Sophia.

One of the five thugs who had been glaring at them before entering the gate.

It was Johnson, a former knight and an adventurer of low expert rank.

"U-uhm... Young master! He's coming already! It's right as soon as we got in!"

Sophia looked at Ian with a tense face.

"Sophia. Don't ever step in. Even if I get hit. Got it?"

"Y-yep!"

Sophia stammered.

Ian nodded slightly as if to reassure her.

"You two brats!"

Johnson strode up and looked down at Ian and Sophia, arms crossed, as if to intimidate them.

"Did you come as porters or as swordsmen!?"

Ian answered shortly.

"Swordsman."

"Swordsman? Then don't dawdle at the back—hurry up to the front!"

Johnson suddenly grabbed Ian by the collar with his rough hand.

Ready to yank him forward and throw him publically.

'It's easier to cow these little punks with strength from the start!'

Picking a fight like this and placing psychological pressure on the kids would make it much easier to control them throughout the raid.

Once tamed, he could use them as he wished, then, when the timing was right, get rid of them—dispose of the bodies, and pocket that expensive sword.

However,

'Uh, huh!?'

"....."

Johnson's plan unraveled right from the start.

The boy.

He looked so small and skinny, so weak that Johnson thought a little force would send him flying.

But contrary to expectations, Ian didn't budge an inch, like a deeply rooted tree.

'Ugh...!'

No matter how much force he used, only Johnson's arms strained—only he moved.

'Wha-what is this!?'

Even after subtly drawing out some aura, it was the same.

'How strong is this brat!?'

All Johnson could do was stretch out Ian's collar a bit.

'What the hell is going on!?'

Ian didn't move a single centimeter.

'Ugh...! Is this kid wearing some artifact? Damn it! It's too dark to see!'

He'd grabbed the collar to intimidate him, but ended up only embarrassing himself.

Maybe the darkness helped a bit,

since it hid his face, flushed red with embarrassment.

"Tch! I'm sparing you because you're just a kid! Get up to the front already!"

Johnson roughly released Ian's clothes and turned away, doing his best to hide his humiliation.

"Hey, you punk-ass lowlife. Where do you think you're going?"

But Ian had no intention of letting Johnson go.

"Come back here. Now."

Even before entering the gate, Johnson had been staring at Sophia with greedy eyes, and now he was picking a fight as soon as they arrived.

This confirmed that the guy was a bandit at heart, hostile to him.

Now all Ian needed was a valid justification to beat up this bandit.

If he let this situation escalate a little, he might obtain a perfect justification.

There was no way he'd simply let it go.

"P-punk-ass lowlife? Are you talking to me?"

Johnson's temper flared at the insult.

Veins bulged on his forehead as he glared at Ian.

Ian pointed at his own collar as soon as their eyes met.

"This is a new shirt. Now it's all stretched out because of you."

"Huh?"

Johnson stomped over and thrust his face close to Ian's,

close enough to feel each other's breath.

Johnson frowned fiercely.

"So what?"

"Apologize, and compensate me."

"... What?"

"Are your ears blocked? Apologize and pay up."

"Huh?"

"Uh, E-excuse me! Sirs of the party!"

Then, a chubby middle-aged man hurriedly squeezed in between Ian and Johnson.

He was the head porter for this raid.

"P-please calm down, sirs! W-we haven't even started the raid yet, but you're already...!"

He pleaded desperately with both men, but Johnson had no intention of letting things end there.

'This little punk dares provoke me?'

In fact, he was glad.

If the other party so actively provoked a fight, then Johnson had a solid excuse to use his fists.

Johnson roughly pushed the porter boss aside.

"Don't get in my way! Get lost!"

"A-agh!"

The man fell, landing in the dirt.

—Whisper, whisper.

With Johnson yelling and the porter boss crying out, attention was locked on them.

"What's up? Is there a fight right at the start?"

"Looks like it."

"What? Already? Who... Ah, of course, it's Johnson again."

"Ah, Johnson? Man... It's amazing, his temper gets worse every day."

"But the opponent's just a kid? What's the problem this time?"

"How should I know. He picks a fight where there isn't even one."

"Shit, this stinks. We haven't even started the raid and already trouble."

"Yeah. Bad start. Will we make it out of this? It's ominous."

"Don't jinx us. Haaa. Next time, if Johnson's on the team, I'm not signing up as a porter."

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"Damn. Will you all shut up!? You all want to die!?"

Johnson glared at the whispering porters.

"Get a grip. This is the inside of a gate. If I drop the ball, you're all dead in here."

The entrance of a gate is always one-way.

You can't leave through the entry portal you came through.

Like how a human can't swim upstream against a mighty current.

Once you enter a gate, there's only one way out:

Find the gate's core and open the exit portal.

In other words, the porters' lives were in the hands of the raid party's main attackers.

"....."

All the porters quieted at that reality, so still it was like death itself had fallen.

But on the contrary, Ian smiled.

'This bastard... His reputation is garbage.'

He had deliberately escalated things to teach Johnson a lesson, but it was working out in his favor.

If someone was known to have a bad reputation, beating them up wouldn't cause much trouble.

—Crunch!

"Hey you little shit."

Johnson twisted Ian's collar again.

"What did you just say?"

"This shirt. It's worth 80 gold."

Eighty gold—enough for an ordinary citizen to save for three months.

"Apologize and pay 80 gold."

"Hah. Wow~ look at you. You can't hide you grew up pampered in a greenhouse."

Johnson rolled up his sleeves.

"Fine. You've always gotten special treatment, so you don't know how to behave in a place like this, huh? As your elder, let me teach you a lesson. In a place like this, kid..."

—Boom!

"If you act like that, you get your ass beat!"

Johnson threw a punch at Ian while grabbing his collar.

—Wham!

His fist landed firmly on Ian's face.

"Kuh!"

Ian's legs, which hadn't budged earlier, swayed for the first time.

"Y-young master!!"

Sophia gasped, covering her mouth with both hands.

"Heh!"

Johnson, encouraged by his successful hit, smirked.

He immediately followed up with a flurry of attacks.

—Wham! Thud! Whack!

Jab, jab, push, straight punch, middle kick.

As Ian bent over clutching his stomach, Johnson grabbed his hair and drove in knee attacks—knee, knee, knee.

—Wham! Thud! Whack!

It was an unrelenting display of violence, too brutal for a grown man to unleash upon a boy.

"Shouldn't someone stop this?"

"How do we stop an expert..."

"Johnson's snapped again."

"He's going to kill the kid at this rate!"

"That boy could die before this even starts. Ugh... What a mess."

The porters muttered in distress, unable to do anything but watch.

—Snap!

"Hm?"

At that moment, Ian grabbed Johnson's wrist.

"... Now anything I do will look like self-defense."

It was the moment Ian was free to beat Johnson to a pulp with justification.

Chapter 42 : Vampire Ruins Gate (3)

Vampire Ruins Gate (3)

Johnson, whose wrist had been caught, broke out in a cold sweat.

'W-what is this...?'

He absolutely couldn't move the wrist held by the boy.

He tried to pull away with his body and twist his arm, but it was pointless.

It felt as if his wrist was stuck in a tight crack of solid rock.

'What is this!'

As Johnson desperately tried to muster his aura out of panic,

- Ujeojeok!

'...?'

A sound as if a log was being crushed rattled Johnson's bones.

"Uh, uhh, uuurgh...!"

Soon after, an immense pain surged through his wrist.

"Kghh...!"

Johnson urgently checked his wrist, and his eyes widened in shock.

Like a pair of chopsticks snapped by a vise, his wrist was bent in a direction it never should bend.

'Kk-Kkgh! My wrist! My, my wrist...!'

The boy had snapped Johnson's wrist like a chopstick with mere grip strength.

"K-Kgh! Kuaaaagh! Haaah!"

Johnson, as soon as he managed to catch his breath, let out an involuntary scream.

"Don't pretend to be in pain."

But the punishment was only just beginning.

Ian had no intention of stopping at just breaking Johnson's wrist.

— Bbeok!

Ian's fist crashed deeply into Johnson's face.

"Keugh!"

Johnson's nose bone was crushed, and he flew backward, scattering nosebleed like ribbons.

— Kudangtang!

As soon as Johnson tumbled backward, Ian stomped hard on his left arm.

— Kwaak!

The wrist Ian had just broken was the right one.

Now, he planned to destroy the left arm as well.

— Ujeojeok!

"Kk-kkuuh! Kkugh!"

Ian put his weight down and crushed Johnson's left elbow.

— Jeojeok! Ujeojeok!

The feeling of bone twisting and skin being mashed came through his shoes.

"Kk-kkiek! Kkiik!"

Johnson squirmed, letting out noises like a dying pig.

Ian looked down at the scene, thinking for a moment.

'Where should I smash next?'

The decision was quick.

'First, the ribs. Then the neck cartilage. I'll break a knee, pull out his hair, and tear an ear too.'

He didn't have a reason to kill him just yet, so he must not kill him.

But he wasn't about to leave things ambiguous either.

Guys like this, if you didn't break them thoroughly, would just crawl back up in no time.

— Ujeok!

"Kuh, kuhuek!"

As planned, he stomped and crushed the ribs.

— Ttuduk!

"Ku,urk!"

He twisted the neck and tore the cartilage.

— Ttududududuk!

"Gya, kyaaaak!"

He created a bald spot in the front of his scalp.

— Jijik! Jjeojeojeok!

"Kuh, kuhuguk!"

He ripped off a nearby ear and tossed it to the ground.

— Kwajak!

"Kk-kkiheup!"

Finally, he stomped until the knee bent the wrong way.

"Ugh...! Kgrrk! Grrrk!"

Johnson foamed at the mouth and began trembling all over, nearly dead.

It seemed he was having convulsions from shock.

'This should be enough.'

A task finished in a little over 10 seconds.

"Hey! Johnson!"

"What, what are you doing!"

Johnson's party members rushed to help, but he was already half-dead.

"Gasp...!"

"J-Johnson...?"

"What the...?"

Those who rushed over belatedly recoiled in horror at the sight of Johnson convulsing on the floor.

"W-what did you just do!!"

Linda, with a pointed hat, jabbed her finger at Ian and shrieked.

"Wh-why did you do that to him?! What did Johnson ever do!?"

Ian pointed to his own face in response.

A split lip, a nose caked with blood.

All injuries from Johnson's fists and knees.

"He threw the first punch."

"St-still! No, even so, isn't this too much?! Johnson never meant to go this far with you!"

"Ha."

Ian let out a short laugh and shook his head.

The words coming from the pointed-hat girl were so predictable.

'Yeah. I knew it would come to this.'

Guys like these had the same repertoire wherever you went.

He fully expected them to play the victim.

So Ian responded exactly as planned.

"Sophia."

"Yes?"

"Bag."

"Yes!"

Ian took two high-rank healing potions from Sophia's bag and tossed them at their feet.

"These are high-rank healing potions. They won't fully cure him, but should at least get him walking again."

If that guy recovered, there was a very high chance he'd come at them again.

Most likely next time, all five would attack at once.

The second round would almost surely take place inside the ruin, away from the porters, in a slaughter match.

Ian planned to kill all five of them then, cleanly.

He would monopolize the monsters inside the ruins while they recovered, then serve the five of them to Vladiark as dessert when they followed.

"You, you...!"

Linda glared at Ian with a venomous expression.

"Do you think this is enough, after doing this to someone?! You need to compensate properly!"

"Ha."

Ian laughed again.

How could these guys never deviate from their script, from start to finish?

Every word, every action was within his expectations.

"Are you laughing?! After doing this to someone! Did you just laugh?!"

"Shut it."

"Uh, uh...?!"

When Ian coldly snapped at her, Linda's energy shriveled up.

"From the beginning, the real victim was me, not you. You got what was coming for stepping out of line. Besides, in this situation, shouldn't you be thanking me?"

"Wh-what!? Why would we thank you...!"

"I gave your idiot a very important lesson about choosing his targets carefully, and even provided expensive potions like this. All I got in return was trouble and a punch, but I

gave guidance and even saved your lives. I forgave the initial attack, and gave you all this, yet now you want more? Even shamelessness has its limits."

"Kuh... kuh...! That's nonsense...!!"

Linda tried anyway to refute Ian's words.

But—

— Murmur murmur.

"He's right, isn't he?"

"I think that young swordsman is totally right."

"Yeah, what more do they want? He's already done more than enough."

"He gave them potions—he's at a loss here, not those five bastards."

"Those five may be old, but they act like spoiled children. The young swordsman's way more mature."

"Uh... uh..."

Linda was silenced by the voices from the crowd.

— Murmur murmur.

"They get themselves beaten for their own screw-up and now demand compensation? Bullshit."

"With potions given, they should be bowing in thanks."

"If they were the type to listen, they wouldn't have gotten beaten in the first place. I always thought something like this would happen to those jerks one day."

"Phew! I feel refreshed! Worthless thugs—finally met their match!"

Public sentiment was overwhelmingly on Ian's side.

Johnson had a bad reputation to begin with, so none of the porters wanted to support him.

They also felt some gratitude toward Ian, who had decisively smashed Johnson, always a troublemaker.

"Kuh... kuht... The situation..."

"Damn, this is bad..."

"Those parasite bastards..."

"Y-you, shut up...!"

Johnson's party was about to glare at the porters—

"Hey, you beggar bastards."

Ian wasn't about to let them go after the porters.

"If you're going to beg, at least pick the time and person. Am I your dad? How much of your whining do you expect me to put up with?"

"Eek...!"

"U-urk..."

Words that were especially humiliating coming from a fourteen-year-old boy.

"You, you...!"

Normally, they'd have snapped back immediately and grabbed his collar.

"Linda, hold it!"

"Kuh!"

The opponent may be a boy, but he had taken down Johnson—their strongest—singlehandedly.

Maybe Johnson was careless, but challenging someone whose skill they didn't know was too dangerous.

One misstep and they could end up just like Johnson did, half-crippled.

"Linda..."

"For now, let's withdraw. It's not looking good."

"..."

The party members knew this, so they quietly tried to calm Linda.

"Damn it..."

In the end, Linda hung her head.

All they could do right now was fall back.

If they wanted a rematch, first they had to get Johnson—their strongest—treated.

"Just shove off already, you vermin."

Ian had no further intention of tormenting them and dismissed them.

His only purpose was to protect Sophia from them.

If he wasn't going to kill them right here, there was no more reason to keep arguing.

"..."

Linda and the other party members could only groan helplessly at Ian's insult-laden dismissal.

Right now, withdrawing when given the chance was wise.

They carried off the half-crippled Johnson and disappeared into a corner of the camp.

* * *

About an hour later.

While Ian and Sophia went out alone to scout the ruins,

The porters were setting up the base camp,

"Guh, guhugh... it hurts... damn it..."

Johnson was tending his wounds, with his party members caring for him.

"This..."

The fighter, sam, poured potion over Johnson's torn wounds, looking troubled.

"The wounds are worse than I thought."

The potion from the boy was high-rank, so most of the fractures could be patched, but only just.

Any strain and those barely-mended bones would shatter right away.

"He really did a number on you."

But even pouring potion on the hair Ian had pulled out didn't make it grow back.

The torn ear had been glued on again somehow, but in the dark they'd set it crooked.

"Damn it... fuck!"

Johnson ground his teeth, stewing in anger.

"That damn brat... I'll kill him no matter what... no matter what! Ugh!"

Getting angry made his whole body ache.

Even his bloody nose, which he'd barely stopped, began to flow again.

"Damn it..."

His right-hand tendon had healed wrong, making his shoulder tingle each time he tried to clench or stretch his fingers.

"I'll never forgive him. Before leaving this Gate, I'll pay him back double—no, tenfold...!"

Sam shook his head and soothed Johnson.

"... For now, just rest. Recover first, Johnson."

"You guys cooperate, too! I'll kill that bastard for sure—! Mph!"

As Johnson, flustered, raised his voice, Linda clamped his mouth shut.

"Shh! Keep it down, Johnson! What if someone hears? What if that boy hears about it? We're in a tight spot!"

"Fuck..."

His pride wanted to scream 'Let him hear!', but if he got punished by the boy again, he might really die this time.

Johnson took down potion like water, parched.

"Johnson, why did you get beaten so helplessly?"

"Fuck...! I just let my guard down! He hit me by surprise—I didn't even have time to draw my aura!"

"By surprise...?"

Dean, the tough guy, tilted his head.

... He got beaten in a counterattack while he started the fight, though.

Does that count as a surprise attack?

Dean thought that, but didn't bother saying it.

"If I just used my aura properly, I'd never have lost!"

Johnson felt saving his aura was his fatal mistake.

He'd wanted to conserve it, as the Gate attack hadn't even begun yet.

If he'd known it would turn out like this, he'd have used his aura fully from the beginning.

"If I'd known he'd do this, I'd have started by breaking his arms, too... should never have held back... argh!"

"... So what now?"

Linda asked.

"If we just leave, all five of us will become laughingstocks."

For adventurers, reputation was as important as it was for nobles.

Especially, one's reputation for skill must never be tarnished.

Lucrative targeted commissions came because of that reputation.

If they left the Gate like this, the story of Johnson being beaten up by a fourteen-year-old would spread quickly.

"Damn it..."

Even if they won a rematch, it'd be a joke to say they beat a fourteen-year-old.

Only way left was to kill all witnesses and shut every mouth.

An extreme measure, but they had to protect their rep for skill at all costs.

"We have to kill them. That was the plan to begin with, right?"

"So how are we going to do it?"

"... For now: clear the Gate first. Until the boss room, pretend to follow that guy obediently."

"Then what?"

"Once the clear is in sight, we do it. No need to fight fair. We do it in a way we can't lose."

Johnson met eyes with each party member, seething.

"Before going in the boss room, at the last camp. That's the time. Let one of us stand watch."

No one knew how strong that brat was, but by then he'd be exhausted.

"When that guy's so tired he collapses, the one on watch wakes us all up. Then we take him out."

Johnson's eyes glowed with a wicked smile.

"First, we kill that brat and the girl. Then the porters. Everyone. Slowly, savoring it."

All the party members' faces twisted into a grin, matching Johnson's.

"We make this attack a disaster and we're the only survivors. Better to be suspected than ridiculed openly."

True, bad rumors would make Gate matching tough, but the Gate wasn't their main source of money anyway.

They could earn in normal dungeons or labyrinth towers, with less risk.

"Anything but ridicule."

If their reputation for skill fell, not just Gates but dungeons and labyrinth towers would be off-limits for raid parties.

No more targeted commissions either.

"We were going to kill them anyway, but now we have no choice."

Killing that gray-haired boy, the brown-haired girl, and then all the remaining porters—was now necessary for their party's survival.

The five men and women's eyes burned with malice.

However—

There was one thing they missed—

— Kwajak! Kwajik!

Ian, out scouting the ruin and slaughtering monsters, was far beyond anything they imagined.

— Kwajik!

— Shuuuuuk!

Ian smashed a gargoyle's head with Vladiark and absorbed its magic power.

'Indeed, the amount of magic power I get from monsters is substantial.'

They planned to target Ian when he was tired, but with Vladiark, his strength could never be depleted.

What's more—

— Kwadedeudeuk!

"Kuh, kuoohh!"

'Wow. I can rip a gargoyle's belly open with bare hands now, and barely used aura. The Heavenly Sword family head's blood is truly something.'

For Ian, whose body was strengthened by the Heavenly Bloodline, adventurers like Johnson's party weren't even worth using his aura.

Chapter 43 : Vampire Ruins Gate (4)

Vampire Ruins Gate (4)

While Ian and Sophia went into the Vampire Ruins to scout.

— Clack! Clack!

— Murmur! Murmur!

The porters finished setting up a base camp in front of the ruins' entrance and were chatting amongst themselves.

"Those guys..."

One of the porters glanced discontentedly at Johnson's party.

"How long are they going to just lounge around like that?"

Johnson's party was sprawled in one corner of the camp, idly consuming supplies.

"I can understand the injured ones, but shouldn't the ones who are perfectly fine have gone into the ruins by now?"

It had already been nearly three hours since Ian and Sophia entered the ruins.

"I get that they're in a bad mood from just getting beat up, but they still need to do their job. Those young swordsmen went in over two hours ago. Even if it's just scouting, does it make sense for only the two of them to enter the ruins? We should follow them in before something happens!"

"Yeah, seriously. Those young swordsmen. They couldn't be more than twenty. They're much more mature and grown-up than those guys. Why did those losers even come to raid the gate?"

"Hey, keep it down. If those guys pick a fight with us just because they're pissed off, it'll be a real headache."

The other porters snickered at that.

"Come on. How would they hear us from here? If there's ever a time to gripe, it's now. Honestly, I felt relieved earlier. To see that thug Johnson finally get taught a lesson like that."

"Exactly. When I heard Johnson's group would be leading this raid, I thought we were screwed—thought we'd spend the whole time tiptoeing around them. But you never know how things will turn out in this business. Look at this situation now."

"Those young swordsmen—they said they were from Hisperion, right?"

"Yeah."

"Damn... No wonder the swordsmen from there must be on another level. For all his faults, Johnson's a seasoned veteran of the trade. Yet some kid who probably hasn't even started shaving just flattened a silver-rank adventurer like him in a matter of seconds."

"... Hey, but isn't Johnson an Expert? Can a kid who's not even fully grown overpower an Expert just like that? At their age, even the best would be high-rank user at most."

"Mm... It's tough, but not impossible. I hear the good families in Hisperion get you started on advanced martial arts from a young age. It's not the same as someone like Johnson who learned whatever from the streets. They're different from the root."

"Still, the age difference must be at least fifteen years. Even with great genes and insane martial arts, how do you flatten a veteran with fifteen more years of experience? And it's not like Johnson just got surprised. He started the fight, then got crushed himself."

"Now that you mention it... maybe he had some sort of artifact?"

"That's possible. But even that's unlikely. Artifacts powerful enough for a high-rank to crush an Expert aren't something you bring into a gate like this."

Gates were fundamentally extremely sensitive to magic power.

The stronger the artifact, the more magic power it contained.

If someone did bring such a high-powered artifact into a small gate like this, there would surely be an overload.

"If it wasn't an artifact, and it wasn't overwhelming martial arts or aura, then... what was it? How did that young swordsman trounce Johnson?"

"If we knew, would we still be hauling boxes for a living? We'd have quit and gone off to be full-time adventurers or knights ourselves."

"It's a mystery, that's what it is."

"True nobles must have some secret advantage."

For a moment, silence lingered among the porters.

"... Hey. Those young swordsmen—how long has it been since they went in?"

Another porter next to him checked his watch.

"Just... over three hours now."

"Already? Huh... Shouldn't they be coming back soon?"

"Yeah. For a first scout, most would return in under two hours."

A fleeting anxiety passed among the porters.

"Do you think something happened to them inside?"

"Johnson's crew still don't look interested in going in... Maybe we should go check?"

"What, are you crazy? Stay put. Let's just wait a little longer."

"If anything happened to those young swordsmen... that'd be bad. Johnson and his punks would definitely use that chance to get back at us."

"Ugh! Don't say such unlucky things. I don't even want to imagine it. If those young swordsmen aren't here, we'll have to depend on those thugs for the whole raid."

"That's a nightmare. Just thinking about having to suck up to them makes me sick."

"And they're probably pissed as hell now that they've been humiliated. God knows what kind of trouble they'll cause... haaa..."

"... They'll come back, right?"

"They'll come back. They have to. They must."

"Please..."

* * *

Deep within the Vampire Ruins.

"Young master! Above you!"

Sophia shouted, pointing at the ceiling.

"Kyahhh!"

A ghoul dropped from the ceiling, lunging down at them.

"Nice support."

Ian swung Vladiark as if he were slamming a ball that had come flying at him.

— Pow!

"Grrk!?"

— Boom!!

The ghoul, struck in the side by Vladiark, burst like a water balloon in an instant.

— Splaaash!

— Dripdripdrip!

The foul-smelling blood and entrails rained down on Ian and Sophia.

"G-ugh! Uegh!"

Sophia gagged as the sharp stench stabbed into her nose.

"Ugh..."

Ian found it unpleasant too.

Wiping the blood from his face, he checked on Sophia.

"Sophia. Are you okay?"

"Urgh! W-what's that smell...! Ueghhh! Eugh!"

Man, she's really struggling.

"Sorry, I couldn't hold back."

The more monsters I slew, the more Vladiark grew by absorbing their blood and flesh...

To avoid making monsters explode like this, he'd need to adapt and gradually hold back more as the weapon grew—but this wasn't easy yet.

"Urk...! Y-You, are you okay, young master!? Ugh, ueehh!"

The closer Ian got, the harder Sophia gagged.

"Hm..."

Ian looked himself over.

He immediately understood why her reaction was so intense.

If Sophia was splattered as if by a shower, Ian was soaked as if caught in a torrential downpour.

"Y-Young m-urgh! Young master, a-are you all right?"

Sophia, face contorted with disgust, kept gagging but still looked worried about Ian.

Caught off guard, Ian waved his hand and couldn't help smiling.

"No need to worry about me. Just breathe slowly—I'll wait until you get used to it."

"H-how can you...! Urk! T-This is really... too much... Urghhh!"

...

Of course it's bad.

This was probably one of the worst smells a person could ever encounter in their life.

But Ian had gotten used to these things after so many times covered in filth in his previous life.

'This takes me back.'

Seeing Sophia like this reminded him of his own rookie days in his past life.

'I used to be just like Sophia. Now that I think about it, that was at a gate too.'

There was nothing unusual about it.

The only places one had such filthy experiences were on the battlefield or in gates like this.

'Of all places, I slipped in a rotten swamp.'

It was in a lizardman gate, and he'd fallen into a poisonous swamp full of monster droppings, debris, and parasites.

'I threw up more than twenty times that day.'

All things considered, Sophia was holding up remarkably well.

A ghoul's blood and entrails stank like rotten corpses.

Yet even after being drenched in that, all she did was gag—she didn't actually throw up, which meant she had a sturdier stomach than past Ian.

"Ah, right."

He remembered he'd brought something for this sort of situation.

"Sophia, let me open the bag."

"Urk... y-yes!"

Still gagging, Sophia handed over her backpack.

Ian rummaged around and soon found what he was looking for.

'Slime tissue!'

A hygiene item made from slicing up the soft bodies of slimes that feed on mold and filth, then combining them with cloth.

They were excellent for soaking up grime from the body or clothing—an invaluable item in a place like a gate, where there was nowhere to wash up.

"Sophia, use this to wipe your face. You'll feel much better."

Ian offered the slime tissue to Sophia as she crouched over, retching.

"U-urg... y-you should wipe first, young master!"

"I'm fine—"

"Nnhh... Give it to me. Face! Hold still! Whew, hnnnnhh..."

Sophia snatched the tissue and grabbed Ian's chin.

"S-Sophia?"

"Hnnngh...!"

Holding her breath, she started wiping Ian's face first.

"..."

I said I'm fine.

It's a consumable, after all—best to use it sparingly.

The more you use it, the less it absorbs.

— Swipe...

As Sophia went to wipe Ian's clothes too, he frantically waved her off.

"That's enough. Just the face is fine. Now you wipe yourself."

"U-urg... Yes!"

Only then did Sophia finally rub her own face vigorously.

"Phwah! Whew! That's so much better! Huuuh..."

"Right? It neutralizes the smell and sanitizes too. Make sure to clean your hands and hair well."

"Yes...!"

Sophia scrunched her face as she carefully wiped her head and sleeves.

But as a 'tissue', it had its limits. It could never clean as thoroughly as a proper wash.

'If only we had a cleansing magic artifact...'

But artifacts were hard to bring into gates.

'She's still having a hard time.'

Sophia snuffled at her clothes, looking miserable at the lingering odor.

"Tough, huh?"

"Huh? Ah, n-no. Whew... It's not that bad. Just the smell is... urgh."

...

It looked pitiful, but this was just another step toward becoming a Swordmaster.

'It pains me, but she has to adapt now or it's worse in the long run.'

If you go easy or try to coddle them, training becomes inefficient, which just leads to more pain later.

Better to let her adjust to this as much as possible while it lasted.

"You'll get used to it soon."

"Nnnh... Okay... I feel queasy."

Sophia honked her nose into the slime tissue.

"But young master, how are you so okay? You've never even cleaned a bathroom before... Eh? Don't tell me you're hiding something good for yourself!?"

Suddenly, Sophia started patting Ian down and pulling at his collar.

"H-Hey! What are you doing! There's nothing!"

Ian recoiled in horror.

"That's strange... Your face would go pale with just a little dog poop, but now... Is this the difference that aura makes?"

...

Ian just stayed quiet.

He didn't want to risk blurting out it was thanks to a past life, and he didn't like telling clumsy lies.

It was best to change the subject.

"A-anyway, let's hang in there a bit longer. We'll find the gate core soon enough. Let's just think about getting back to the inn and washing up."

"H-huh!? We're going further in!?"

"Yup. Even if we turned back to camp now, wouldn't we still feel gross? And there's nowhere to get properly clean..."

"N-no! I mean, I'm not worried about that—it's you, young master! You're not just trying to rush out because of me, are you!?"

"Hm?"

"We've already killed multiple monsters coming this far! I'm more worried about your condition than mine!"

"Oh."

So that's what you meant.

But for him, there was nothing to worry about.

"I'm really fine. I mean it."

Thanks to Vladiark, his stamina was basically limitless.

'If anything, I'm even more energetic than when we entered the ruins.'

Absorbing magic power from monsters and meditating had left his dantian brimming with aura, far fuller than when he first entered the gate.

'And...'

———————

◆Properties absorbed by Vladiark

-[Gargoyle's Petrification Lv.32]

-[Ghoul's Night Vision Lv.28]

-[Vampire Bat's Echolocation Lv.24]

———————

Vladiark had absorbed not just magic power, but the very abilities of the monsters.

Night vision, echolocation—everything was proving tremendously useful in these ruins, making the raid go smoothly.

Honestly, Ian would be disappointed if he stopped now.

"Really? Young master, are you sure you're okay? Are you sure you aren't hurt somewhere without realizing? Are there any aches or pains?"

"I said I'm okay. Do I look hurt or tired to you?"

"N-no... Actually, you look more energetic than I do..."

"Right?"

"Yes! If you're okay, there's absolutely no problem on my end! I'd rather just get out of here fast!"

"Good, but tell me if it gets to be too much. We can always rest if we need to."

"Oh come on~ I haven't exerted myself at all. I've just been following you. Sniff... Ugh. And I'm actually starting to get used to the smell."

At Sophia's words, Ian nodded.

"Great. Then let's keep going. Let's hurry up, finish this, and have a nice cold soda at the inn—plenty of ice."

"Ooo! Yes! I'm getting a double helping of ice cream too!"

Despite saying she felt queasy seconds ago, Sophia's eyes sparkled at the thought of food.

At this rate, finishing the raid by the end of today shouldn't be a problem at all.

'When I walk out of this gate, I'll have quite the haul.'

From the Blood Demon Jade and Blood Light Mushrooms needed to make Elder Vampiric Sense, to all the aura and abilities absorbed from slaughtered monsters.

'If I get more aura here, I'll extract Dark Hook Throw from Vladiark right away.'

Dark Hook Throw (鷹葛投)—the assassination art of the assassin who broke into Ian's annex a few weeks ago and was devoured by Vladiark.

It was a technique that formed hooks of aura to snatch distant objects.

'With this, I can extend Vladiark's attack range by a huge margin.'

Swinging a hook of aura linked with Vladiark would increase its effective reach by at least fivefold.

'Johnson, was it? Those punks picking a fight actually worked out in my favor.'

That pathetic adventurer party that tried to steal Sophia's sword.

Because they were sulking and not coming inside, Ian could monopolize all the monsters and loot.

'Let's make sure to devour everything before they come in after us.'

Ian strode deeper into the ruins.

Sophia, after adjusting her backpack, hurried after him to match his pace.

For an ordinary adventurer party, this raid would have taken at least three or four days.

But Ian thought he could finish everything—from defeating the boss to organizing the loot—as soon as today.

Is there such a thing as too OP?

In a power fantasy like this, I don't expect the MC to struggle against mobs...

Chapter 44 : Vampire Ruins Gate (5)

Vampire Ruins Gate (5)

It had been five hours since Ian and Sophia entered the ruins.

"... Those bastards aren't coming back?"

The Johnson party, who had been lazing around in a corner of the base camp, was now starting to consider moving.

"If it was just a scouting trip, they should have been back by now. No way they started an assault with just the two of them."

"... Aren't they dead? Both the boy and the girl looked like brats, probably lacking experience. Guess they died showing off."

"Should we check? We were about to head in anyway."

Johnson, who had been lying down all this time, let out a groan as he got up.

"Johnson. How's your body? You okay now?"

Linda asked, glancing at Johnson.

"Don't pretend to care. I'm fine."

The injuries had already healed, thanks to that boy's potion.

The dose wasn't very generous, so he wasn't fully recovered.

If he moved too roughly, his bones and wounds would reopen right away.

Some tingling aftereffects still lingered.

But even so, he couldn't just let the brats' group do all the scouting.

'Can't let them just split that expensive sword among themselves.'

The Johnson party's target was the ultra-expensive longsword the girl had.

If those youngsters died in there, getting the sword would be as easy as pie.

If Johnson didn't tag along, it was obvious the others would just keep the sword for themselves.

'And besides...'

He also owed the gray-haired boy a fist—so he felt the urge to at least vent on his corpse.

"What about those guys?"

The thug Dean, tightening his knife belt, gestured toward the porters with his chin.

Johnson glanced coldly at the porters and spoke quietly.

"We'll kill them. After we deal with the brats first."

If the rumor spread that Johnson had been beaten so badly by that young boy, he'd have to kill all those porters as well.

That kind of pride and reputation was essential in this line of work.

"Leech-like bastards."

Even though the porters had badmouthed them during their rest, Johnson and his party had endured it.

It was because of the boy and girl said to be from Hisperion.

If they started something with the porters and ended up clashing with those brats again, they could really end up dead.

Outwardly, the five members of the Johnson party looked down on the young boy and girl, but inwardly, they knew the two were above them.

After all, the strongest in the party, Johnson himself, had been thoroughly wrecked by that boy, and he knew firsthand how fierce his punches were.

Besides, the brown-haired girl behind the boy seemed to be about as skilled as him.

Actually, since she looked older than the boy, maybe she possessed even more advanced martial prowess.

Honestly, he wasn't confident facing even the boy—just thinking about taking on both was terrifying.

Until they had a sure way to deal with those two, they had to minimize any conflict triggers.

"If you're ready, let's get moving!"

Johnson and his party skillfully put on their equipment and threw themselves into the ruin's darkness.

"Urgh...!"

They hadn't gone far when the thick smell of mold and the stench of rot hit them hard.

"Damn. My nose is going to fall off."

"What the hell is that smell..."

Holding back their nausea, they passed through the dim, humid corridor, and soon a staircase leading underground appeared.

— Footsteps. Footsteps.

Their footsteps echoed as they descended.

The deeper they went, the thicker the mold and rot became.

"Give me a handkerchief."

"What? Didn't you bring one?"

"... No."

"I only have one! Just use your sleeve! Ugh, urgh!"

"Damn... ugh!"

"Shut up, you idiots! We're in the ruins here!"

As they bickered their way down, the stairs soon ended.

"... What the hell."

At the entrance to the underground, they immediately spotted the source of the stench.

"Gargoyles?"

Two grotesquely mangled gargoyle corpses lay side by side on the floor.

But it was too dark to see them clearly.

"Bring the lantern!"

"Y-yeah."

Thug Dean held the lantern over the gargoyles.

The light revealed their brutal state in stark detail.

"My god..."

Johnson's pupils trembled at the gruesome sight.

"Have, have you ever seen anything like this...?"

One gargoyle was almost split in two from shoulder to chest, as if hacked by an axe, and the other had its skin peeled from chin to lower belly, spilling its guts like a split tangerine.

"How do you even do something like this...?"

Gargoyles were monsters with bodies tougher than most logs.

Even with aura, blades struggled to cut them, so you'd normally need a blunt weapon to fight one.

"These gargoyles are shredded like paper."

Johnson gritted his trembling jaw.

Meanwhile, dean examined the wounds more closely.

"Shit... Both were done in a single blow."

The bisected gargoyle was split cleanly, with no repeated strikes. The skinned one's flesh was torn in a single line as well.

"How strong do you have to be for this to even be possible?"

This level of performance... You'd need to be at least a peak-stage Expert.

Could those kids really be masters of that level?

'N-no. That's absurd.'

The most talented knight Dean knew from his connections barely reached intermediate-stage expert in his early thirties.

Even if those two were from the great Hisperion, there's no way brats barely in their mid-teens could hit peak-stage Expert.

Unless they were direct heirs of Hisperion, maybe.

But those two didn't look like direct blood relatives.

The Hisperion line only ever had snow-white silver hair, radiant blond, or flaming red hair.

But the boy's hair was faded ash, and the girl's was just plain brown—so they likely weren't direct descendants.

'No, wait.'

Even if they were, it still doesn't make sense to reach peak-stage Expert in the early teens.

'Then... Artifact?'

Did they have an artifact that gave them superhuman strength?

'No, that doesn't add up either.'

For a small gate like this, you barely had room to bring magical lanterns.

If they'd brought such a powerful artifact, it would've overloaded the gate and half the people here wouldn't have been able to enter.

'Then, how the hell did they... do this to the gargoyle...?'

Besides, the distance between here and the base camp wasn't even that far.

It was odd that no one heard a single sound despite a fight happening so close by.

That must mean the battle ended quickly and quietly.

Not a single scream or shout, just done cleanly—like blowing your nose.

'...'

Johnson touched the blood with his fingertip.

Slightly cold and sticky.

Looked like they'd been dead for exactly five hours.

Which matched when the boy and girl entered the ruins.

Meaning these weren't previously dead bodies, nor was this done by some other monster.

'Shit... This is scary.'

So really...

Even at the highest estimate, kids barely in their mid-teens did this to a gargoyle in one hit...?

How?

Dean's thoughts grew more complicated.

"Dean. Get up. Let's keep going for now."

Johnson grabbed the dazed Dean and pulled him up.

Seeing the gargoyles like this sent chills down his spine, but it wasn't enough to make him run away just yet.

First, they had to check whether those two were dead or alive.

"Give me the lantern."

Johnson took the lantern from Dean and led the way.

The other four followed behind him.

"What the..."

"Shit, damn..."

"Ugh, fuck..."

Every corridor they passed was strewn with bodies, just like the earlier gargoyles.

Man-eating beetles splayed out against the walls and ceilings, as if hit by a windmill.

Vampire bats squashed into the floor like chewed gum.

Skeletons and ghouls shattered as if hit by cannonballs.

With each gruesome scene, the expressions of the Johnson party stiffened further.

"Did they really do all this with just the two of them?"

Even if the Johnson party went all-out, it would've taken days to subdue those monsters—now, still-warm blood proved they'd all died nearly at the same time.

And the boy and girl hadn't just blasted through; they'd looted everything, too.

"... Only the best loot is gone."

Jars and chests that might've contained treasure were empty;

The rarest mushrooms and plant roots had been picked clean from the walls and ceilings;

Pricy materials like the gargoyle's jewel or vampire bat ears were all taken.

"W-what kind of brats have this level of strategy..."

It wasn't just that they cleared fast—they took all the choicest loot as well.

Johnson gulped nervously.

'Even platinum-rank adventurers wouldn't be this skilled...'

Maybe only the most legendary adamantine-rank adventurers could've handled it this well.

But those two were still kids, not even in their twenties.

And yet their dungeon-crawling skills far exceeded those of the Johnson party, a party of silver-rank adventurers.

'N-no way...!'

"Are—are they heading all the way to the boss room?"

"That can't be, right? You think those kids can clear a gate in a day? It'd take us at least a week!"

"Y-yeah, but still..."

"Let's just focus on finding the bodies. They probably died showing off."

Damn it. Shit!

Johnson chewed on his growing inferiority complex as he quickened his pace.

But the boy and girl's corpses, which Johnson hoped for, didn't appear.

Instead, there were only the even more brutally mangled bodies of monsters.

The gargoyle, once in two pieces, was now smashed into three; the gouls that had already been torn apart had burst like water balloons.

"W-what the hell is this..."

Johnson, sweating cold, jaw trembling.

'The deeper we go, instead of getting tired, they're getting even stronger...'

— Gulp!

The bodies grew more numerous deeper in.

The chill crept deeper into their bones.

How long did they walk like this?

— Crack! Tak! Crack!

At a turn in the corridor, Johnson heard the faint sound of a campfire.

"Stop."

He halted the party and hid at the corner, peeking past the wall.

"... Found them."

About 50 meters ahead, the boy and girl sat by a campfire.

The girl was roasting marshmallows, and the boy sat hugging a greatsword, seeming to meditate.

"They're alive..."

Damn it.

"They're resting?"

"So they don't have infinite stamina, after all."

"Wait. Doesn't that mean they're tired right now?"

"... Hmm. If we're going to ambush them, now's the time."

"So what's the plan, Johnson?"

All eyes turned to Johnson.

"Hmm."

For once, Johnson actually pondered.

Usually he would've attacked without thinking, but...

Having suffered a beating already, and after what they'd seen of the monsters...

Even if those two were tired, he honestly felt scared charging in.

They might have more numbers, but he didn't feel they had any chance of winning.

In fact, he had a gut feeling that if they acted rashly they'd be slaughtered.

'Especially that girl...'

She was roasting and eating marshmallows, covered in the monster's disgusting blood.

Didn't even seem fazed by it.

'Must have some guts...'

It was obvious she'd had countless dungeon runs.

Otherwise, how could she be so relaxed, roasting marshmallows like she was in her own home?

'Maybe the real powerhouse is that girl.'

She looked a bit older than the boy, so it was likely her skill was even greater.

If they'd grown up in the same environment, she'd have trained even longer.

'Ugh! This is chilling.'

For a moment, Johnson imagined getting slaughtered by recklessly taking them on.

"... We don't attack now."

Johnson gritted his teeth and shook his head.

"Now's not the right time."

"Then what?"

Johnson let out a shallow breath and continued.

"No need to join up with them, either. If we leave them alone, they'll make their way to the boss room. We'll wait somewhere suitable, and take another shot at an opportunity..."

He was about to finish the sentence when—

"You should speak up if you're here, you know?"

"W-what!?"

Suddenly, Ian popped out from behind the wall, causing Johnson to bite his own tongue.

Chapter 45 : Vampire Ruins Gate (6)

Vampire Ruins Gate (6)

"Ku, kgh!?"

At Ian's sudden appearance, Johnson bit down hard on his own tongue.

Something warm and wet seeped from his mouth, and when he wiped it with his hand, it was blood.

"U-Urgh...!"

His tongue stung, as if it had been crushed.

"Ugh! Y-you scared me, you little bastard!"

Johnson screamed at Ian as he turned around.

He was so creeped out that goosebumps prickled all over his back, but he was putting on an angry act to hide his trembling.

'Ugh! That freak! H-he didn't overhear what we were saying, did he?'

They had been talking nonstop until now about ambushing and attacking the other party, waiting for an opportunity.

They had said nothing that would sound strange even if the other side started swinging their swords any second now.

"You came at just the right time."

Fortunately or not, the boy showed no sign of hostility.

"We were just needing more people."

"M-more people?"

At Ian's words, Johnson gulped down the bloody saliva.

Up until now, the two of them had been overturning the ruins just fine by themselves.

And now, they suddenly needed more people?

Was there actually something in this gate capable of stopping those two?

What on earth was ahead?

"To open the way, we have to solve a puzzle that requires five people."

"Oh, a puzzle."

If it's blocked by a puzzle, it makes sense that they'd have trouble progressing.

Puzzles required not only simple combat prowess but also intelligence for problem-solving, and, depending on the situation, as now, even a certain number of people.

But still.

Just what kind of puzzle is it that you need as many as five people to solve it?

"You'll understand faster if you see for yourself. Follow me."

Ian gestured and took the lead.

"W-what should we do, Johnson?"

The party members turned questioning eyes to Johnson.

Their stares clearly asked, 'Are we going to follow him?'

Meeting their gazes, Johnson let out a sigh and nodded.

"We have no choice but to go along for now."

If they acted out and a fight broke out, they'd be in serious trouble.

Having already been caught by this boy, there was no other option but to comply.

Hadn't they seen enough on the way here?

Monsters butchered so mercilessly that their corpses looked like rags.

If a fight broke out, they'd end up in the same shape as those bodies.

"Follow quietly. And don't provoke them for no reason."

"Tsk."

"We have no choice."

"Got it."

Johnson and his party trailed about five paces behind Ian.

— Thud, thud.

Their footsteps echoed along the ruin's deep, dark corridors.

"Haa..."

Following Ian, Johnson was struck by a delayed sense of regret.

'I shouldn't have gotten caught like this.'

He should have run straight back to camp the moment he confirmed that the boy and girl were alive.

'Looks like my chance to steal that expensive sword is gone.'

That top-grade longsword the girl had was still tempting, but unless they ambushed them, there was no way to deal with those kids.

He had no hope of winning in a head-on fight.

'I was hoping they'd just end up dead from the monsters.'

If so, he could just quietly swipe the expensive sword and equipment from their corpses – things would've been much easier.

Honestly, he'd come down here clinging to that slim possibility.

But the boy and girl were both alive and kicking.

If he'd known they'd survive, he would've returned to camp the moment he saw those monster corpses.

His greed had been excessive, and now he had wound up with a noose around his neck.

'So what happens now?'

Will he end up teaming up with them to take down the boss after all?

Do they bear any hard feelings about the earlier fight when they entered the gate?

Or are they secretly planning some sort of revenge?

'I can't read this kid—makes me nervous...'

Various thoughts ran through his head, but in the end, all Johnson and his party could do was follow Ian's lead.

"Young master. Shall we go in now?"

As they passed near the campfire, Sophia called out to Ian.

"Yeah. We'll go right in as soon as the door's open, so pack up in advance."

"Yup."

'Young master?'

Hearing Sophia's title for Ian, one of Johnson's eyebrows rose.

'So that boy has a higher status than the girl.'

Almost unconsciously, Johnson glanced over at Sophia.

She paid no attention to Johnson's party and was shoveling roasted marshmallows into her mouth as if she didn't care about them at all.

Even though the people they'd had a big fight with were walking right past, she showed neither agitation nor fear.

'She must be that confident in her skills.'

The brown-haired girl was probably a knight who came along to guard the boy.

'If she came as his bodyguard, then the girl's probably even stronger than the boy.'

Johnson was glad he hadn't tried to take them by surprise.

Though the situation wasn't good for him now, at least he hadn't provoked the girl, so he'd avoided the worst.

"Young master! Make sure to call me as soon as the door opens! Don't go in alone!"

"Don't worry."

"And you lot!"

Sophia glared at Johnson's party, eyes blazing.

"If you try any funny business with the young master, I'll run you through on the spot. So behave."

"U-Urgh...!"

Hearing that, Johnson's throat bobbed.

He had barely escaped death at the hands of the boy—it was obvious that if the girl stepped in as well, he might end up crippled for good.

At least before, mercy had let them get a potion during the fight with the boy, but a second time, there'd be no such luck.

"Guh...!"

"U-Uhh..."

His party members' faces turned pale, as if they felt the same.

"W-we came to help too!"

"Yeah! O-our first meeting wasn't great, but we're all on the same team, right?"

"That's right! Why are you being so hostile?"

At that pitiful spectacle, Ian shook his head with a faint smile.

"If you came to help, great. Follow me, I have something for you to do right now."

Ian kept leading Johnson and his party.

The third-rate adventurers nervously followed Ian.

Past the campfire, over a stone bridge spanning a deep chasm, a gigantic gateway appeared before them.

"T-this is...!"

The boss room.

"Why the face?"

Ian looked at Johnson, who was staring in shock.

"Ah, n-nothing!"

Johnson forced himself to act calm.

'No way—the puzzle we're supposed to solve is for the boss room door!?'

If they solve the puzzle, what happens next?

Do they all go in to fight the boss together?

If so, then within a few hours, they'd be out of the gate.

'... Yeah. That's probably for the best.'

He had seen and felt far too much on the way here.

The option of fighting those two was gone a long time ago.

'The fact that I can walk out alive after confronting them is basically a miracle.'

Money and reputation were important for adventurers, but those could never come before a person's life.

In the end, everyone just wanted to stay alive.

"So after solving the puzzle, we just fight the boss together, right?"

"Hm? No?"

Ian looked at Johnson as if asking what nonsense he was spouting.

"You guys just have to open the door, that's all."

"What? What about the boss fight?"

"That's nothing for you to worry about. Look over there."

Ian pointed ahead with his finger.

As they followed his hand, they saw three small pedestals in front of the massive gate.

"Pedestals?"

On each pedestal, a hand-shaped indentation was carved.

Apparently, you were supposed to place your palm on it.

"So it was just a puzzle that needed enough people."

Three people were needed to cover all the pedestal handprints.

Those kids must have been stuck because there were only two of them.

"Hm?"

Looking closer, there was a blade rising in the center of each handprint.

It seemed to be a device that opened with human blood.

"Tsk. This'll sting a bit."

"We need three people for those pedestals, and there are two more behind them."

Ian pointed a little higher.

"Hm?"

Following his finger, they noticed two large stone-face statues attached to the gateway.

Enormous sculpted faces modeled after ghouls.

The faces had their mouths wide open, and inside was space for a person to fit.

"This feels... really ominous—don't tell me..."

"Come on, I'll show you up close."

— Thud. Thud.

"Ugh!"

Johnson peered inside the mouth of one of the face statues and cursed.

"Damn it! Fuck!"

Even at a glance, this was no simple device that just drew blood.

The ominous spikes embedded in the roof of the mouth were proof enough.

"T-this is...!"

Anyone going in here would definitely die.

"Shit! Just my luck!"

This was a type of puzzle that only showed up when you were really unlucky.

A door that only opened with a sacrifice.

"W-wait! We'll go get some porters to go in for us!"

"Porters? What the hell are you talking about?"

Ian grabbed Johnson by the scruff as he tried to run.

"U-Urgh!?"

"The sacrificial lamb has to be one of you."

"W-what!?"

At Ian's words, Johnson and his party all gasped in horror.

"W-what are you saying!?"

"You want us to go in there!?"

"Wh-why! Why us!?"

"You're just saying we should die!"

The third-rate adventurers protested like they were having seizures.

Of course, this was to be expected.

No adventurer would just calmly give up their life in a situation like this.

But Ian wasn't negotiating.

"If not you, who else should go in? You want me to do it?"

He was just informing them how it was going to be.

"N-no!"

Johnson and his party wailed.

"We could use porters instead! We'd be useful in the boss fight!"

"T-that's right! You're just a kid, so maybe you don't know, but it's customary for porters to take on these risks!"

"Yeah! That's what porters sign up for—taking these kinds of risks!"

Ian gave the third-raters a cold, contemptuous stare.

"Looks like I was right to choose you for the sacrifice."

Not only had these bastards been after Sophia's sword since before entering the gate, now they were trying to sacrifice innocent porters without a second thought.

Rotten to the core.

Even if they survived, they'd be nothing but a blight on others for the rest of their lives.

For people like these, dying now was a contribution to the world.

Ian never considered himself a good person, but looking at fools this openly trashy filled him with murderous intent.

"If you can't go in on your own, I'll throw you in myself."

— Whoosh!

— Chk!

Ian pointed Vladiark at Johnson's party.

A stance like he would run them through at any moment.

Faced with that hair-trigger tension, Johnson and his party froze, unable to swallow.

'Shit, fuck...'

With that gigantic sword, still crusted with the blood and flesh of monsters, leveled at them, his whole body went rigid and his mind went blank.

At that moment—

"Wh-why are you doing this to us! Is it because we fought when we first entered the gate!?"

Linda, the 2nd-circle mage, burst out in a last-ditch protest.

"Johnson's the only one who fought you! Why punish all of us!?"

"Wh-what?"

Johnson looked at Linda with a face twisted by betrayal.

"Y-you—!"

But that sort of appeal had no effect on Ian.

"Bullshit."

To Ian, all of them were just the same trash.

"You're all the same. You were all after my companion's sword even before entering the gate."

"... What?"

"... Huh?"

— Thud!

The hearts of Johnson's party dropped to the floor.

The misunderstanding that Sophia was stronger than Ian.

It made me giggle.

Chapter 46 : Vampire Ruins Gate (7)

Vampire Ruins Gate (7)

"You're all the same bastards. You were after my companion's sword even before we entered the Gate."

"... What?"

"... Huh?"

— Thud!

At those words, the hearts of Johnson's party sank to the floor.

"You're not even denying it."

"Wh-what...! No!?"

"It's just... such... such an absurd thing to hear!"

"Y-yeah! What kind of nonsense is this!?"

"Do you have proof!? Are you paranoid or something?!"

"Proof?"

At the word 'proof', Ian let out a chuckle.

Was that important here?

This wasn't a courtroom but a Gate.

Inside this lawless land ruled by the law of the jungle, where if you didn't like someone, you could just kill them—what use was proof?

'Well, even so...'

Proof or whatever.

If they wanted it, it wouldn't be impossible to make them a parting gift for their trip to the afterlife.

"So, are you saying you're innocent?"

"O-of course we are!"

A barefaced lie came out with not a shred of hesitation.

"Why would we want your comrade's sword? Is it that expensive or something?"

"Yeah, exactly! W-what, is it worth hundreds of gold or something? There's a limit to paranoia! That's an illness!"

"Quiet."

Ian brought his index finger to his lips.

"This is your warning. If you tell even one more lie from now on, you'll regret it."

"Ugh...!"

"... Mmph!"

The moment Ian glared at them as though he might swing Vladiark at any second, Johnson's party, who had been lying with such excitement, shut their mouths tight.

Johnson's party, faces stiff, mouths clamped shut like clams.

A brief silence followed.

"Wh-why are you doing this to us?!"

Linda was the first to break the silence.

"We just wanted to help you once we recovered from our injuries...!"

— Crack!

— Snap!

At that moment, an abrupt cracking sound, as if chopping firewood, cut off Linda's words and echoed throughout the chamber.

— Thump!

"Huh?"

Simultaneously, Linda dropped down, plopping onto her butt with a confused expression.

She tried to get up right away but no strength came to her legs.

Wondering what happened, she looked down at her own legs...

"Guh!?"

Linda's knee was bent backwards.

"Ah, aaaarrrgggghhh!"

The moment she realized her bone was broken, horrifying pain spread through her body.

It felt as if every bundle of nerves in Linda's body twisted around her knee.

"A-augh! Aughhh!"

Even just breathing sent jolts from the top of her head.

Linda couldn't catch her breath and froth dribbled from her mouth.

"What the hell are you doing!!"

Dean screamed, nearly hysterical, grabbing for the dagger at his belt.

About to draw it—

"W-wait! Dean!"

Johnson, the party leader, barely managed to stop him.

"Johnson!? What are you doing!? That bastard just wrecked Linda's leg!"

"If you draw your weapon we're all dead, idiot! Stay put!"

"K-kill him! Kill that brattttt!"

"Linda! Shut up! Dumb bitch! What does it matter if a mage loses a leg!"

"Khh!? J-Johnson!? You... arghhh!"

Linda clawed at her throat, wailing.

"Damn..."

Her cries echoed noisily through the chamber.

Johnson covered one ear and watched Ian anxiously.

Ian looked back at him with eyes empty of all emotion.

A boy so utterly bland and calm, even after crippling a person.

No anger, no excitement, no guilt. He felt absolutely nothing.

As if he had just done his duty, his expression was purely businesslike.

'Is this kid really just a child...?'

He couldn't be fifteen yet, but he was this cold-blooded?

Just how did those Hisperion people educate children for their kids to be so utterly cold, as though not a drop of blood would come from them?

'No, wait! That's not important now!'

Johnson gulped, clearing his throat.

'I have to keep my wits about me from here on out!'

That monster of a boy probably already decided to use them as sacrifices.

Proof or anything else was all wordplay here.

'At times like these, the quickest-witted survive.'

Fighting that boy was not an option.

Even with all five Johnson party members banding together, the odds were low. Plus, Linda's knee had just been smashed, dropping their fighting strength to four.

Even if, by some miracle, they beat the boy and captured him, at least two would die, and the survivors would be severely injured.

And what if they had to face the brown-haired girl after that?

They'd all die—no questions asked.

'If you die, nothing means anything.'

Even if he had to lick the soles of the boy's shoes.

He had to avoid being used as a sacrifice to open the gate.

"Su-surrender! I surrender! I'll do whatever you say!"

Johnson threw his hands up high.

"Gray-haired kid! You were right about everything. We were in the wrong. We were after your comrade's sword from the start, and we followed you in here with dirty intentions."

"J-Johnson!?"

"What are you doing!?"

His party members gaped at Johnson's abrupt solo confession.

Johnson snapped his head around and shot them a fierce glare.

"Shut up! Idiots! If you don't want to end up like Linda!"

"Wh-what!"

"Ugh!"

"Ahem..."

Faced with Johnson's outburst, the others fell silent.

— Nod.

Ian nodded, apparently pleased by Johnson's attitude.

"Go on. Depending on your testimony, I might change my mind."

"... Ugh..."

Sweating coldly, Johnson continued.

"We'd been eyeing your sword since before we entered the Gate. It looked valuable. And when we came in here, we hoped you'd be dead. We were just planning to take the sword off your corpses..."

"And? That can't be all."

"U-ugh..."

Johnson swallowed dryly over and over.

Nothing good would come of admitting to more...

'Damn it... That kid's eyes...'

If he claimed this was everything, that he had nothing more to say, this boy might snap Johnson's knee just like he did Linda's.

"T-There's more, of course!"

Johnson continued, almost by instinct.

"We... we were going to vent our anger on your corpse a bit..."

"And?"

"U-ugh... The porters too... We were going to kill them all as well, so no rumors would get out that we'd been beaten so badly by you..."

Johnson confessed everything with a servile expression.

"Johnson..."

"You..."

His party members looked at him with scornful faces.

"I see."

— Clack!

For the first time, Ian revealed an expression as he rested Vladiark on his shoulder.

A cold smile.

— Crack!

"Ke-hack!?"

Suddenly, a black light flashed before Johnson's eyes, and instantly his knee, too, was bent backwards like Linda's.

"AHHHHHHHHHH!"

"Goddamn it!!"

"This crazy bastard!"

"You can't reason with a psycho! Let's get him!"

The moment Johnson collapsed, the third-rate adventurers each drew their weapons.

"A-aaah!"

The first to charge was the monk Sam, at the head of the pack.

He swung a heavy fist toward Ian's face.

— Whoosh!

A full hit would be enough to burst a person's head—an expert low-rank fighter's punch.

But—

— Whoosh!

To Ian, it was such a sloppy blow there was no need to use a single Frenzied Insight Style technique.

"W-what!?"

Ian grabbed Sam's trained arm with one hand and snapped it like a biscuit stick.

— Snap!

"Aaaaarrrrgh!"

— Slice!

Then, swinging Vladiark in his other hand, he promptly severed both of Sam's legs.

"Guoorrk!!"

— Thump!

Sam collapsed to the floor like a sack of leather.

— Swish!

The moment Sam fell, two throwing daggers hissed toward Ian.

They were Dean's.

— Clang!

Ian easily blocked them with Vladiark and reached out with his left hand for Dean's neck.

'Dark Hook Throw.'

A technique to link a hook using aura and snatch a distant target.

It was a killer technique extracted from monsters' magic power using Vladiark during his trek so far.

— Whack!

The Dark Hook Throw bit into Dean's neck cleanly.

"U-uh!?"

— Shaaa!

Dean instinctively clutched at his neck, but it was useless.

When Ian yanked his arm backward, dean was pulled as if by telekinesis and flew straight into his grip.

— Snap!

"Kugh!"

— Twang! Twang!

Almost simultaneously, the archer Harris's arrows flew at Ian.

Ian simply tightened his grip on Dean's neck and raised him like a shield.

— Thwack! Thwack!

Arrows sank into Dean's lungs and spine.

"D-damn it! Dean!"

"Ku, kuhurk!"

"Pathetic."

— Whoosh!

Ian hurled his meat shield at archer Harris.

— Whoosh!

— Thunk!

Harris was bowled over and pinned down by the 70 kg hunk of meat that was Dean.

— Swish!

Ian promptly threw Vladiark at the pile of Dean and Harris, stacked like a lump.

— Thud!

— Boom!

"K-keh!"

"Ggurk!"

Vladiark, flying like a cannonball, pierced through Dean and Harris together, embedding itself deep into the ground.

That was the end of the fight.

"K-kuh... why! Why the hell!!!"

Johnson, clutching his knee, screamed with bloodshot eyes.

"I told you everything! I said I'd do as you said!!! So why! Why the hell!!!"

Ian looked down at Johnson's outrage and let out a small laugh.

"I killed you because you told the truth."

"Wha-what!?"

Ian squatted before Johnson so their eyes met.

"You provided the reason yourself—for why you should die."

Grabbing Johnson's hair with a rough grip—

"Gah!"

He slammed Johnson's face into the ground.

— Thud!

"Ke-huk!"

"You tried to kill me and Sophia from the very start, didn't you? And you thought you'd get out of here alive?"

"You... kuh... you bastard...!"

Johnson, his cheek ground against the dirt, felt a rage swelling up from the depths of his chest.

But even more overwhelming than his anger was fear so deep he couldn't even bring himself to look at Ian.

"Heu... huukk... uuugh..."

All the emotions swirling within burst out as tears.

"You brought this on yourself."

Ian let out a shallow sigh.

"If you hadn't harbored evil thoughts, we could have cleared this and left together."

— Thud!

— Drag...

Ian grabbed Johnson by the hair and dragged him toward the stone statue's face.

He was about to use him as a sacrifice to open the gate.

"N-no! Aaagh! Stop! Sto-op! Uuugh! Just once! Please, forgive me just this once!"

Johnson sobbed, begging for a last-minute reprieve.

The agony made him feel like his knee would tear off and his mind would fade, but the fear of death forced his groggy mind to cling to life.

"It'll all be over soon."

But that desperate plea for his life never reached Ian's heart.

"For you, it's a more merciful death than you deserve."

As soon as they reached the face-shaped stone statue, Ian stuffed Johnson into its mouth.

"N-no!"

Johnson tried to scramble out—

— Thud!

"Oof!"

Ian stomped down on Johnson and slammed the statue's mouth shut.

— Thud!

— Uh! Uuuu! Uuuu!

Johnson's muffled voice could faintly be heard from inside the statue, but the wall was so thick it was impossible to make out what he was saying.

"Let's finish up and get out of here."

With mechanical steps, Ian picked his next sacrifice.

That fighter would do.

Simply because he was closest.

Since he'd kill them all anyway, it didn't matter whom he chose.

To Ian, these bugs were nothing more than tools to open the gate, and not an ounce of emotion colored his hands as he worked.

The only thing on his mind was getting to an inn with Sophia as soon as possible and getting cleaned up.

That was a ruthless execution...

Damn...

Chapter 47 : Taken (1)

Taken (1)

After solving the boss room puzzle using the corpses of B-tier adventurers, the gate raid proceeded swiftly and smoothly.

The boss lurking behind the massive gate was the Abomination.

It was an undead golem, alchemically created by joining together the bodies of ghouls and gargoyles like patchwork.

Its combat power was almost on par with the peak-stage Experts.

However—

— BOOM!

— CRASH!

— KUWOONG!

The Abomination couldn't withstand even five attacks from Vladiark before its head was smashed, never to rise again.

This was the result of Ian connecting Dark Hook Throw and Vladiark, spinning and throwing them like a chained sickle.

"Y-young master, you're using alien-like techniques again...! How did you do that? Magic? Aura? Ugh, ugh... I really don't understand at all now... Young master, what are you?"

"I'll explain everything slowly later. For now, help me clean up these corpses."

After extracting the gate core from the Abomination's body, they disposed of the Johnson party's corpses by throwing them off a sheer cliff.

"You were absolutely right, young master! Not that I doubted you, but... These guys were total villains! I had a bad feeling from the very first impression!"

Ian thought Sophia might scold him for going too far by killing the whole Johnson party, but thankfully, that was just needless worry.

It seemed that after her experience being kidnapped by bandits, Sophia understood that sometimes killing for one's own safety was the cleanest and surest way.

"These evil bastards! It was outrageous enough they tried to steal my sword, but they even tried to kill the porters! Young master, you carried out justice!"

Most importantly, Johnson's long, drawn-out confession before he died had echoed around the area, and Sophia heard the entire thing, which likely made her more accepting of the killings.

"I'm glad you understand."

"Why are you relieved over something like this! I'm always on your side, young master!"

"Yes, you always have been."

After exchanging these heartwarming words and finishing up the cleanup, they returned to base camp.

"I-I never imagined you'd complete the raid in less than a day..."

The leader of the porters gaped in awe as Ian brought back the gate core in less than a full day, and then hurriedly offered him a business card.

"Sir swordsman! If you ever enter another gate or dungeon in the Serion Kingdom, please contact us at this address! Our porters will serve you better and cheaper than anyone else!"

Once back at camp, they had to wait a bit before leaving the gate.

They needed to give the porters time to gather up the loot from the ruins.

—Move the moss over here!

—Check the size and weight of the gargoyle hide!

Until all the relics from the ruins were gathered, no one asked Ian about the whereabouts of the Johnson party.

Their deaths were merely recorded briefly in the raid report.

Disappeared during the raid. Presumed dead due to traps or monsters. End of report.

No one mourned the Johnson party's death, so no one made an issue of it.

After the raid ended, they immediately got a room at a nearby hotel and washed away all the filth.

"Whooaa! I feel so refreshed! Huh? Young master, you washed up really fast!"

"After a bath, milk is a must. Here, this is for you too."

"Wow! Milk! Haah~ So cool!"

They spent the night there and then returned directly to Hisperion.

They returned with their bags full of the ingredients for the ultra-sensory potion 'Elder Vampiric Sense', which was the main goal of this raid: Blood Demon Jade and Blood Light Mushrooms.

The Blood Demon Jade, especially, extracted from the chest of the Abomination, was an exceptionally large, top-class specimen.

With this, they could surely produce a high-quality 'Elder Vampiric Sense'.

"I've brought the ingredients. Please make one bottle of Elder Vampiric Sense as soon as possible."

As soon as Ian arrived at Hisperion's Heavenly Sword Palace, he headed straight for the alchemy workshop, handing over the ingredients and placing his order for the ultra-sensory potion.

"Oh... Blood Light Mushrooms and Blood Demon Jade. These ingredients are very fresh and of outstanding quality! And you brought so much! With this amount, we can probably make at least three bottles."

"One bottle is enough. You can keep the leftovers. I owe a lot to Hisperion, so I'd like to contribute in some small way."

"Th-these precious ingredients! You must've gone through a lot to get them... Th-thank you, sir Ian. Actually, we received an order for Elder Vampiric Sense from the north and didn't have any ingredients, so we were in quite a bind. We'll gratefully use what you gave. I'm sure the head of the Heavenly Sword family will be delighted with your generosity."

After putting in his order at the workshop, Ian immediately headed to the Heavenly Sword Palace medical center.

"Gasp...! You're going to the medical center!? Did you get hurt, young master!? Why didn't you tell me!"

"No, no. I'm not hurt—I'm going for a checkup. After going through a gate, it's good to get looked at once."

Especially if you've gotten smeared with undead blood, a checkup is a must.

Ghoul and gargoyle blood wasn't just stinky—it was basically a mass of bacteria.

Even if you had no symptoms now, after the incubation period you could develop a cold, dermatitis, or, in the worst case, severe pneumonia.

Putting off a checkup out of laziness could just make things much worse later.

It was better in every way to get checked while you still felt fine.

"Aha! So that's it! I thought you were actually hurt... You startled me!"

"By the way, you're coming too. They'll take blood—so prepare yourself."

"B-blood? Hey, I'm not a kid! Blood is no big deal..."

"They need to take it five times."

"Wh-wh-what!"

Yuria was probably still at the medical center.

She was likely still hospitalized from the injuries sustained during her admission test.

She was a strong girl, so her external wounds must have healed long ago, but she was likely still being treated for internal injuries.

Since he was visiting the medical center for a checkup anyway, Ian planned to check on Yuria while he was there.

Chatting with Sophia as they walked, they soon arrived at the medical center.

"Huh?"

"What...?"

But at the main entrance to the medical center, a problem emerged.

The entrance was completely blocked off with "No Entry" signs.

"What is this...?"

There were two Heavenly Sword knights standing guard on either side of the entrance.

It was clear that some kind of incident had occurred inside the medical center.

"Hm..."

A sudden chill of foreboding swept over Ian.

... Could something have happened to Yuria, who was still hospitalized?

"Sir."

Ian approached one of the guards.

"Why is the medical center sealed off?"

"Hm?"

The knight blinked at Ian's sudden approach, then recognized him and saluted.

"Ah! Honor! You must be Sir Ian. My apologies for not recognizing you sooner."

"It's fine."

Suppressing his growing anxiety, Ian asked again.

"What happened inside? Why is the medical center sealed off?"

"Ah, well..."

The knight looked troubled at Ian's question.

As if struggling to find the right words.

"I'm sorry, sir Ian. All matters currently under investigation at the medical center are classified... I'm not authorized to tell you anything. At the very least, however, the medical center won't be available for several days—"

"No. Hold on."

Ian took a deep breath and continued.

"There's only one thing I want to confirm. Yuria should have been inside. Is she safe?"

As long as Yuria was unharmed, Ian didn't care if the medical center was sealed off or even blown up.

It was unfortunate about the checkup, but there were other medical facilities in the main city.

As long as she was safe, Ian planned to head to the main city with Sophia instead.

"Ah, well..."

But the knight didn't answer immediately.

"....."

— Gulp.

Ian's lips went dry.

He swallowed hard.

Why can't he answer right away?

Yuria's safety is something he should be able to confirm regardless of the issue being confidential or not.

— THUMP! THUMP! THUMP!

The ominous feeling running through his whole body grew stronger and stronger.

Was this what a mother bird felt like upon returning to her nest and finding her eggs are gone?

It felt as if his heart had dropped off a cliff.

"Sir, why can't you answer?"

"I—I'm sorry, but I have no authority—"

"I'm asking if something has happened to Lady Yuria! Sir!!"

Frustrated, Ian unconsciously raised his voice.

"M-my lord! Please, lower your voice!"

The knight, flustered, looked around nervously.

The sealed-off medical center meant there weren't many people nearby, but several maids and servants were still passing by.

If rumors of such a scene spread, it could be a disaster for the Heavenly Sword Knights.

The higher-ups had ordered that this incident not be exposed externally, so they had to keep it under wraps no matter what.

"Why can't you just say it?!"

But none of that mattered to Ian.

"I'm asking if something happened to Lady Yuria!"

"Uh, ugh! My lord! Please...!"

As Ian's voice grew louder, the knight broke out in a cold sweat and just waved his hands uselessly.

At that moment—

"What's this commotion?"

A knight in ornate armor appeared from inside the medical center.

"A-ah! Chief of Investigation! Salute!"

"Salute."

The man, called the head of investigations, accepted the guard's salute with a nod and turned to Ian.

"Hm? Ah, you must be Sir Ian. It's a pleasure to meet you."

The knight in ornate armor extended his hand for a handshake.

"I'm Javier Gardner, head of the investigation division of the Heavenly Sword Knights."

"Haa..."

Ian wasn't exactly in the mood for handshakes, but he clasped Javier's hand anyway.

"I'm Ian Greysel, guest of the head of the Heavenly Sword family."

"Yes, nice to meet you. I'm honored, but I must apologize—the situation is unsettled. Please understand if we can't show you proper hospitality at the moment."

"No..."

Ian massaged his throbbing temple.

The moment he met Javier, he was sure—something had happened to Yuria.

The position of division head in the Heavenly Sword Knights was just below deputy-commander—a very high-ranking post.

If someone at that level was handling the matter personally, it could only mean something involving the direct line.

Yuria, who had been hospitalized, must have been involved.

— Swish.

Ian rubbed his face from temple to chin.

The situation was shocking, but there was no time to be lost in despair.

First, he had to accurately assess the circumstances, and, if there was any way he could help, move decisively.

"What happened to Lady Yuria? Was it a kidnapping? Attempted poisoning? Or... don't tell me, was she attacked?"

Or maybe... maybe...

He didn't want to imagine it, but... could she be dead?

If that were the case, Ian wasn't sure he could stay sane.

"Hmm..."

At Ian's question, Javier stroked his chin for a moment.

A boy suddenly shows up asking after the youngest lady of Hisperion with such heat.

His intensity was as if he'd lost his own daughter.

There had been rumors recently that he'd grown close to the head of the Heavenly Sword family.

Was it because of that connection that he was so fervent about the fate of the youngest daughter?

"If you're asking about Lady Yuria..."

By regulations, no matter how much of a guest Ian was to the head of the family, Javier shouldn't divulge information.

His supervisor, the deputy-commander, had specifically ordered that the matter be handled quietly, out of the public eye.

If word got out that security had been breached at the Heavenly Sword Palace, more assassins might think the security was lax and try to invade—that was the deputy-commander's reasoning.

But that was only the deputy's thinking, and Javier was the sort who only obeyed unreasonable orders halfway at best.

When a direct-line member was in trouble, you needed all the help you could get.

Why hide the truth in a crisis?

"It'll be faster for you to see the scene yourself. Will you come with me?"

Javier removed the barricade at the entrance and, with a polite gesture, invited Ian inside.

He'd been frustrated by the lack of reports from his team for almost an hour now anyway.

Perhaps showing the scene to this boy—and seeing if he knew anything—couldn't hurt.

He was still just a fourteen-year-old boy, but he was personally invited by the head of the Heavenly Sword family.

In a world full of special skills and powers, maybe this boy had something unique to offer.

"Thank you. Please show me immediately."

Without hesitation, Ian strode into the medical center.

'Yuria, what on earth happened to you?'

Ian's mind raced with every possible scenario as he headed for the scene.

Was she kidnapped? If so, even if it cost him his hands and feet, he'd search the world to find her.

Was she grievously wounded? Then he'd scour the world for every miracle cure and heal her.

Could she possibly be dead...? If so, he would find the culprit and inflict upon him the most horrific agony and despair in human history, and then, whether by bartering with gods or devils, devote his life to returning to the past at any cost.

Ian loses his cool whenever it concerns Yuria...

Chapter 48 : Taken (2)

Taken (2)

"I'll guide you. This way."

Head Investigator Javier briskly led Ian and Sophia to the scene of the incident with long strides.

Ian closed in next to Javier and asked,

"Please tell me as we go. Sir Javier, what has happened to Lady Yuria?"

"... Hmm."

Javier hesitated for a moment, as if considering his words, then replied.

"Lord Ian, before I speak, I ask just one thing of you. The same goes for Lady Sophia as well."

"... What do you want us to promise?"

"Everything you see and hear here is classified. You must not divulge it to anyone, no matter how close your relationship."

"... I don't find that particularly difficult, but why is this investigation being conducted in such secrecy?"

He didn't know what they were investigating, but handling matters so secretly would surely make the process much more complicated and cumbersome.

Why go to such trouble to keep things this secret?

"I can only say it's an order from above. There are many things I don't understand myself, so I apologize."

"'Above' meaning where, exactly?"

"From Deputy-Commander Jonathan Feldro of the Heavenly Sword Order. He said that if it's revealed to the outside world that the Heavenly Sword Palace's security has been breached, even more enemies will target us."

"Ah..."

Jonathan Feldro.

One of the two deputy commanders just under the commander of the Heavenly Sword Order.

A formidable powerhouse of Grandmaster rank and a core figure in the Hisperion firstborn faction.

'Jonathan, the firstborn's right-hand man, made such a decision... What's his intention?'

But more pressing—just what happened to Yuria?

"I understand, so please just tell me now. What exactly happened to Lady Yuria?"

"... She has gone missing."

"Ah."

Damn it.

Even though Ian had somewhat anticipated this, the moment he heard it an intense wave of anger and curses boiled up inside.

"And you're conducting the investigation in secrecy? This is a situation where even a public nationwide search wouldn't be enough!"

"I feel the same way... I have no excuse."

"Sss... Hah..."

Ian calmed his rising fury with a deep sigh.

There was no point directing his anger at Javier.

And it was Deputy-Commander Jonathan who'd issued these orders?

What was his purpose?

In a situation where even a public alert wouldn't be enough, they were keeping everything locked down?

'Don't tell me that bastard of a firstborn is behind this?'

The first son of Darkan, the Heavenly Sword Lord.

Theo Hisperion.

Even in his past life, theo was obsessively intent on ruining Yuria, and had been a ferocious rival during the Hisperion civil war.

'He used to seize every opportunity to reach out his clutches toward Yuria, back then too.'

Could he be behind this incident as well?

If so, jonathan's insistence on secrecy makes sense.

Using the excuse of "security breach," the investigation is being hampered on purpose, making it harder to find Yuria.

Jonathan was the one trying to support Theo as the next lord of Hisperion.

He was probably moving to eliminate Yuria—a strong competitor—before she could fully grow.

Ian asked to confirm.

"... Was it a runaway, or a kidnapping?"

"Based on the circumstances, we're treating it as a kidnapping."

Yeah, that figures.

The odds that Theo, the firstborn, was behind all this seemed very high.

"You'll see for yourself at the scene."

"Then it seems we don't have time to walk. Let's run."

"Yes. That's best."

Ian and Javier quickly ran across the medical wing's corridor.

"Huff...!"

Sophia also hurried after them, unwilling to be left behind.

"This is the scene of the incident—the private room Lady Yuria stayed in."

Javier spoke before opening the door.

"Once again, please understand: Even bringing you here was beyond my authority. Please strictly keep security."

"Yes."

Ian answered shortly, nodding.

— Creak.

The door to the hospital room opened as Javier touched it.

Beyond the door was a wide and luxurious single room.

"... Hmm."

He had expected the room to be in complete disarray.

But the room where Yuria had been kidnapped was perfectly intact, as if nothing had happened.

And then—

'What is that lying on the bed?'

He had expected the bed to be cold and empty, but something blonde was lying face-down on the bed.

"Take a closer look."

"Then I'll go in first."

Ian moved past Javier and approached the bed to check what was lying there.

"... A magic power puppet?"

What lay on the bed was a puppet made from magic clay.

The puppet had brilliant golden hair and red eyes, almost as if to imitate Yuria's appearance.

But—

"Ugh..."

Sophia shuddered as she looked at the puppet.

The puppet's face and body were melting grotesquely, as if doused in acid.

It was clearly not the form of a living person.

Aside from the hair and eye color, little resembled Yuria.

The magic power that had kept the puppet's form was depleted, causing it to collapse.

"... When was this puppet first discovered?"

"This morning at 4:15 a.m. The head nurse on duty found it when she came to check the room and the patient's temperature."

"To check the temperature... How long has the puppet been melting like this?"

"I apologize, but... it was already like this when it was discovered."

"... Ah, damn."

Ian barely restrained the curses about to escape his lips.

If the puppet was already melting at the time of discovery, then Yuria had been kidnapped long before that.

Maybe yesterday, perhaps the day before, or even earlier.

At the very least, over a day had passed.

If things were bad, it might have been over a week already.

They were now very late in responding.

'Damn it...'

What had the Heavenly Sword Order and the medical staff been doing?

Why didn't anyone notice Yuria had been replaced by a puppet, right up until it started melting?

'Perhaps... they're all in league...'

If Theo Hisperion was really behind this, then many in the Heavenly Sword Order and among the medical staff might have colluded in Yuria's abduction.

'But...'

Even as the firstborn, he couldn't possibly buy off every single knight and staff member in the medical wing.

There wasn't only one faction within Hisperion, after all.

'If that's the case...'

"Who was the last person to visit Lady Yuria?"

Ian suspected that whoever directly carried out the kidnapping was someone close to Yuria.

That person probably colluded with Theo, deceived those nearby, and kidnapped Yuria.

If it was someone close to Yuria, they could easily lower the Heavenly Sword knights' guard and act more freely inside the room.

"The last visitor was... Lady Yuria's nanny, Dellen Meslow, around 4 p.m. yesterday."

"Where is that person now?"

"... She went missing immediately after that last visit."

"As expected."

— Nod.

Ian barely kept his growing anger under control and nodded.

"Then she's your leading suspect."

It was too soon to conclude that she was the criminal, but her disappearance made her the most likely suspect under the circumstances.

Yuria's nanny abducted her, left the magic power puppet in her place, and then vanished.

"Yes. We have also narrowed our investigation and are focusing on the nanny as the main suspect."

"Hmm..."

But the fact that the Heavenly Sword Order still hadn't found the nanny probably meant she'd already escaped to somewhere she could really hide.

There was little point in trying to trace her now.

The fleeing nanny would have laid plenty of smokescreens and traps in her trail.

'If that's so...'

It would be better to look for clues on the magic puppet itself.

'Let's see...'

Ian carefully examined the magic puppet, which was still slowly melting.

'This clay... It's from the black market.'

Legally distributed magic clay from the mage tower carried a unique mana pattern.

That pattern acted like a fingerprint or serial number, making it easy to trace who bought it and when.

But this clay didn't have any such unique mana pattern.

Clay without a unique pattern could only be obtained from the black market.

It was contraband.

'Troublesome.'

If the magic clay came from the black market, tracking it down would be much harder.

"Did you track down the mage who made this puppet?"

"... No."

As expected.

Head Investigator Javier shook his head, sighing softly in frustration.

"We've sent people everywhere from the black market to the puppet masters' Guild, but...it's shameful to say we haven't found even the slightest lead."

— Nod.

Of course.

With so few clues, it was hard to even know where to start.

They were basically searching everywhere they could, from the black market to the puppet masters' Guild, hoping for a miracle.

But that way, they'd never find the culprit even after a hundred days.

Even searching only the black market in Hisperion would turn up hundreds, maybe thousands, of illegal puppet masters—how could they possibly investigate them all?

'What should I do?'

Of course, Ian didn't have any good ideas just yet.

He, like the other Heavenly Sword knights, was just an examiner.

The only things that set him apart were being a regressor and having the Authority of Projection.

'The Authority of Projection, huh? Wait—?'

Suddenly, an idea hit Ian.

'Maybe I can get a clue with the Authority of Projection!'

A magic puppet, after all, was ultimately an artist's work, imprinted with the personality and technique of its maker.

'If I try to project onto the puppet itself...!'

Like with [Sophia's dantian & mana circuit Lv.27], maybe the name would show up.

Through projection, he might learn the puppet master's name.

'Let's try it right away!'

Staring intently at the puppet, Ian activated the Authority of Projection.

The target was—

[Target selected: Remains of Rudeus's magic power puppet Lv.12]

'Damn! Got it!'

Rudeus.

The name of the person who crafted the Yuria lookalike puppet was Rudeus.

'Rudeus?'

Coincidence, or not...

No, more like inevitability.

Ian knew a puppet master named Rudeus.

'Rudeus Delmora.'

In his previous life's Hisperion civil war, he was a dark mage aligned with the firstborn's faction—and one of the enemies Ian had personally killed.

'Could it really be him?'

Ian picked off a melted bit of the puppet and touched it.

A squishy, sticky texture.

'His puppets felt just like this.'

Each puppet master had their own style—some made hard turtle-shell skin, others leathery—but that guy always obsessed over this slimy, sticky feel.

His sense of déjà vu was growing stronger.

'Let's see... How about the taste...?'

Ian put the piece of the puppet in his mouth and chewed.

"Eek!? Young master! Why are you eating that!? Spit it out right now!"

"L-Lord Ian!?"

—Munch, munch.

Ian waved to Sophia and Javier, signaling he was fine, and focused on tasting it.

A metallic, bloody taste.

A coating of grease on his tongue.

And a faint hint of cinnamon.

'Damn. Looks about right.'

The metallic taste was human blood. The grease, lard. The cinnamon, that guy's favorite snacks.

All items he'd seen in that guy's workshop in his previous life.

'Half... No, I'm basically 100% sure.'

If the firstborn of Hisperion was behind this, it became even more certain.

Rudeus was a puppet master in the firstborn's faction.

'If they only realized it was a puppet after it started melting, then it must've been an extremely lifelike replica.'

He was notorious for his realistic puppets.

'It can only be him. I'm sure of it.'

— Ptew!

Ian spat the chewed bit on the floor, then spit again to clear his mouth of the remnants.

— Ptew!

'Damn it, Rudeus Delmora. You son of a bitch. I'm coming to kill you now.'

Another bloodbath, after the Johnson's party?

Chapter 49 : Taken (3)

Taken (3)

Ian had identified the puppet master who had participated in Yuria's abduction.

Rudeus Delmora.

In Ian's previous life, Rudeus was a dark mage belonging to the faction of Hisperion's eldest son, theo.

Ian himself had once raided that bastard's workshop during the Hisperion civil war.

He was a truly twisted and vicious man.

Rudeus crafted puppets using living humans as materials, and the process was unimaginably horrific.

He would extract internal organs while they were alive, slice off limbs, skin and strip the flesh, mince the bodies, dissolve them in a corrosive acidic solution, and mix them with pig fat until they became a jellied mass like soft yokan...

'Of all people, it had to be that bastard who's involved...'

Suddenly, Ian recalled the time in his previous life when he had secretly snuck into Rudeus's workshop.

The man was sawing a person in half with a long saw.

— Euhi! Euheehee! Euahahak!

— Seogeok! Seogeok! Seogeok!

— Kkeuaaa! Aaak! Kkeuaaaa!

The man's chilling laughter, the distinctly echoing sound of the saw, and the victim's rending screams...

Everything Ian had seen and heard in the bastard's workshop in his previous life still lingered vividly in his mind like an imprint.

People were hung from the ceiling, still alive, like butchered meat.

Others moaned, locked in iron cages with their limbs severed.

'Haa... What the hell.'

So now, this bastard was involved in Yuria's abduction?

Ian licked his lips, parched with anxiety.

'If he's involved, I have to move as quickly as possible.'

If Yuria was trapped in that bastard's workshop, it was obvious what he would do to her.

'He'll try to slice her up alive and turn her into a puppet.'

Yuria, who had received more blessings from Hisperion than anyone else, would have a body that was the finest and most unique material in the world for an evil puppet master like Rudeus.

'I can't waste any more time. I have to move even a second faster.'

However, moving alone was far too dangerous.

This incident could very well have Hisperion's eldest son behind it.

While tracking Yuria, he could end up clashing swords with a Swordmaster-class powerhouse, or possibly face an even greater Grandmaster-class entity.

Even if Ian had been a Swordmaster in his previous life and now possessed both Vladiark and the Authority of Projection, he couldn't possibly take them all on alone, so he absolutely needed support.

"I need to see the Heavenly Sword Lord."

Ian decided to visit the Heavenly Sword Lord.

If it was Darkan, he could provide capable and trustworthy knights as support.

Knights loyal to the Heavenly Sword Lord wouldn't betray Ian at a crucial moment, and if he was lucky, he might even get an extraordinary powerhouse like Kelbian.

When it came to gaining support from skilled people without worrying about factional ties, there was no backer like Lord Darkan.

"Sir Javier. Where is the Heavenly Sword Lord right now?"

No matter how isolated Deputy-Commander Jonathan of the Heavenly Sword Knights tried to keep the investigation, there was no way Darkan could be unaware that Yuria had been kidnapped.

He was surely conducting an investigation somewhere as well.

"Hmm..."

However, Javier couldn't answer immediately and pulled a troubled face.

"The Heavenly Sword Lord is currently absent. He left on an expedition through a massive gate that opened in the north... It'll be at least a week before he returns."

"Ah."

Ian's expression hardened, turning cold.

Why now, of all times...? The most reliable force, the Heavenly Sword Lord, was absent?

No...

The enemies had deliberately kidnapped Yuria while the Heavenly Sword Lord was away.

"Ian, have you found out something?"

Seeing Ian bite his lower lip in contemplation, Javier cautiously asked.

"Anything is fine. If you have any ideas, please share them with me..."

"I found out who the puppet master who made this puppet is."

"W-What...!?"

Javier's eyes widened in surprise at the magnitude of what Ian had just revealed.

"Is that... is that really true?"

"Yes. I'm 100% certain."

"One hundred percent...!"

"The one who made this puppet is a dark mage called Rudeus Delmora."

Without hesitation, Ian shared the information with Javier.

'Because this is someone I can trust.'

Javier belonged to the pro-Heavenly Sword Lord faction, and in Ian's previous life, had risen to deputy-commander of the Heavenly Sword Knights, searching for the missing Darkan until his death at the hands of the eldest son.

With the Heavenly Sword Lord absent, Ian had to get support from at least this man.

"Rudeus is an evil bastard who makes puppets out of living humans."

However, Ian refrained from mentioning that Rudeus was Theo's underling.

Rudeus had sided with Theo during the Hisperion civil war, a period that was more than ten years in Ian's current timeline.

It was impossible to be 100% certain that, ten years before the civil war, the two still had a close connection.

Rudeus might currently be working for another branch, and if Ian suggested Theo was behind the kidnapping, it could create issues of slander or defamation that would only cause future headaches.

"R-Rudeus Delmora... That's a name I haven't heard before."

Javier chewed over the dark mage's name and asked,

"He doesn't seem like a particularly famous dark mage... May I ask how you learned this?"

"..."

Since Ian couldn't talk about the Authority of Projection, he simply pointed to the puppet.

"I found the clues in the puppet."

"The puppet? You got clues from this? How could you with something like this..."

The puppet was so badly damaged, it was hard to even recognize its shape.

How could anyone get information from that?

"The texture and the smell. Every puppet master's work carries distinct characteristics."

"Texture and smell...?"

"This puppet is so melted down it's hard to find any original features, but the squishy, sticky texture, the metallic taste of blood, the heavy oil, and the scent of cinnamon all remain. It's exactly that bastard's style."

"S-Such a thing...!"

Javier hesitated before speaking.

"If what you said is true, there's enough value in investigating. It'd be rare for so many distinct features to overlap. However... How do you know so much about the characteristics of a puppet by Rudeus? Are you perhaps... acquainted with him?"

"Acquainted...?"

As if that were possible.

Ian shook his head.

"I don't have any ties to him."

Just a brief, nasty connection, that's all.

"Sir Javier. I can't explain in detail, but I have a special ability. That's how I figured out who made this puppet."

"I beg your pardon...?"

"It's probably thanks to this ability that I managed to catch the Heavenly Sword Lord's eye."

While Ian hadn't shown the Authority of Projection to the Lord, he'd displayed extraordinary talent by using it to treat his aura disorder.

"S-So that's the story... So that's why the Lord took you in as a guest..."

Ian nodded.

"I told you for understanding's sake, but please keep my ability a secret from others."

Nothing good would come from word getting out about Ian's special ability.

It would only invite jealousy, suspicion, or even indirect sabotage.

"Of course. That sort of thing is truly important inside the Heavenly Sword Palace. Thank you for trusting me with that information. I would never do anything to trouble you."

Fortunately, Javier answered reliably and reached out his hand.

"I can't say I was expecting much, but you've given us critical clues. Everything you said makes sense. We will do our utmost to track down this Rudeus."

But Ian did not take Javier's outstretched hand.

Instead, he showed his palm and said firmly,

"No. Please allow me to take charge of finding Miss Yuria myself."

"... What?"

"Finding her will require quick, situational judgment. I have more information on Rudeus than anyone – I should take the lead."

Ian had no intention of entrusting Yuria's life to anyone else.

"Could you provide some people for support? The stronger, the better."

"Uhm... You wish to act directly, young master?"

Asking for support on top?

Javier was surprised, but his hesitation was brief.

"There's no reason to decline. In fact, that would be for the best."

Ian had the ability to immediately deduce the parties involved.

With someone so talented actively cooperating, there was no reason to refuse.

"If you'll use your ability, I whole-heartedly welcome it. The investigation will go much more smoothly."

Javier considered for a moment.

"As for support..."

He decided quickly.

"I'll join you myself. That'll be the safest."

"Excuse me?"

The head of the investigation department himself, coming along?

Even Ian hadn't expected that.

Not that he disliked it – Javier was a seasoned Swordmaster.

But what about field command while he was gone?

"The frontlines...?"

"We haven't exactly been getting any proper reports. Me staying here would just mean doing nothing."

Javier once more extended his hand.

"I'd rather go track down the culprit together with you. I'd love to see your ability in action."

"... Is that so."

It was unexpected, but Ian had no reason to reject it.

No – in fact, it was very welcome.

"I will also bring one squad captain and three high-ranking knights along."

"Oh..."

The good news kept coming.

That was over half the investigation team's core fighting force moving with Ian.

'He's more decisive than I thought.'

Javier, the investigation chief, was a seasoned high-ranked Swordmaster; the captain was at the initial Master level, and the high-ranking knights were all top-tier experts.

With this much force, unless they faced a Grandmaster-class monster, they'd rarely lose a fight.

"This is excellent."

Ian gripped Javier's hand tightly.

"You'll never regret trusting me."

"But... Young lord,"

Javier said with a hint of concern in his eyes.

"If we fail in this pursuit – even by the smallest chance – neither I nor you will escape responsibility. Are you truly prepared? If you're not confident, you can still back out."

Should the pursuit waste time and end up failing to rescue Yuria, Javier would lose his position as investigation chief immediately. Ian, for disrupting the investigation, would suffer even harsher punishment.

Losing his place as a guest would be the least of it.

In the worst case, he could be executed under charges of obstructing the rescue.

"That will never happen."

Ian answered resolutely.

The Authority of Projection had unmistakably told him Rudeus was involved.

As long as he caught that dark mage, some clue would certainly emerge.

"Sir Javier. Let's move immediately. From now on, every second counts."

"Yes. Right away. I'll call the remaining members by communication stone."

"Young master! I'm ready too! Let's go right now!"

Sophia pressed close to Ian, clenching her fists.

"Mm. No, Sophia. You return to the mansion."

"... Huh? What?"

When Ian pushed her away, Sophia blinked her large eyes.

"I have to go back alone? Why? Are you returning soon?"

"No. It might take several days."

He wouldn't come back until Yuria was found.

"W-What! Then I definitely have to come, too! I'll go with you!"

"Not this time."

Now, more than ever, he needed to move quickly, and there was a chance they might face Master-class or greater threats.

Bringing Sophia along would just slow them down in travel or in battle – at present, she'd only get in the way.

"Go back to the mansion. Tell Miss Cheryl, and head straight to a city doctor—"

"No! No, young master! Wait! After coming with you all the way, you're really going to leave me behind now!?"

"Hmm?"

To Ian's surprise, Sophia grew quite upset.

"We're not going to be separated forever, so what's wrong?"

"You think I'll just be a burden! I can help too!"

"Hmm."

So that's what she was upset about.

But this wasn't something to be decided emotionally.

Objectively, Sophia's ability wasn't suitable for this mission.

"You can't even sleep alone without me! How can you go off on your own!"

"..."

Sleeping together had just been a childhood habit, and if anything she'd insisted first.

But that wasn't the point right now.

"Don't worry. I'll be fine, Sophia."

"How am I supposed not to worry!"

"Don't you skip your daily training just because I'm not there."

No matter how Sophia pleaded, Ian wasn't taking her.

The matter was too urgent, and above all, too dangerous.

If he brought her along, they'd both be in danger.

"Aish..."

Once she realized Ian was unyielding, Sophia's spirit began to flag.

She knew she was being rather stubborn.

"Haa... Fine! I'll go back! Really... So annoying..."

Sophia gathered her sword and trudged out of the hospital room.

Her voice was tinged with tears – she'd probably cry as soon as she got home.

'Sophia. She's just anxious.'

It seemed Sophia was angry she couldn't help.

'There's no need to rush.'

If she just kept following Ian as she was now, she'd become a Swordmaster without a problem.

Then, whether he liked it or not, he'd end up owing her plenty.

'I should buy her a present on the way back.'

That might help her feel better.

But first, finding Yuria came above all.

"Let's go."

"Yes, I'm ready. I've called the rest of the team by communication stone – they'll join us right away."

"Reliable. Then let's move."

"Yes!"

The target for pursuit was set, and a powerful force had joined the hunt.

All that remained was to find Rudeus, beat him, and bring Yuria back.

'Rudeus, you son of a bitch.'

You dare, not knowing your place, to kidnap Yuria?

You're bringing your end a decade early compared to my previous life.

For crossing the line, you'll pay with your pain, your screams, and your life.

— Ta dadaht!

Ian and Javier began running in search of Yuria.

I was thinking, the Heavenly Sword Lord will surely help, but wouldn't you know it, he's outside...

Talk about the timing...

Chapter 50 : Taken (4)

Taken (4)

Darkness.

— Sniff... Cough.

A damp, musty smell of mold.

— Drip. Drop... Drip...

The sound of water droplets falling.

— Ugh, ugh...

— Ahh...

Endless groans echoing from all around.

"Ugh, ugh..."

Yuria awoke from her sleep.

"Ugh...!"

The moment she opened her eyes, a dull ache and numbness throbbed through her neck.

"Ow..."

Apparently, her head had been bent over for a very long time.

"Ugh..."

Yuria tried to move her hand to massage her numb neck.

"Huh?"

— Creak!

But her hand wouldn't move, as if bound tightly by something.

"What the..."

After wriggling her arms a few times, Yuria's mind instantly sharpened, and her eyes flew open wide.

"Where am I...?"

A world submerged in darkness, not a glimmer of light.

— Uhhh...

— It hurts... It huuurts...

Groans of pain resonated from every direction, impossible to tell front from back.

"What, what the...!"

Yuria tried again to move her hands.

— Creak!

A suffocating pressure wrapped tightly around both her wrists.

Something was firmly binding her wrists together.

"Ugh! Damn it!"

— Creak!

No matter how much strength she used to wrench free, it was impossible.

"What is this...?"

Yuria, bearing the strong blood of Hisperion more than anyone, had enough strength to break most iron chains like pulling up grass roots.

— Creak!

"Ugh!"

But whatever was binding Yuria's wrists now, no matter how hard she tried, it neither broke nor even stretched.

Was it made of adamantium?

— Clang! Clang!

When she struck the cuffs binding her wrists against the ground, a dry metallic sound rang out.

Was it really adamantium?

'Damn... What the hell happened?'

— Ugh.

Yuria straightened her body from where she'd been pressed to the floor to assess the situation.

'First, let's figure out where I am.'

Narrowing her eyes, Yuria looked around.

Though everything was pitch dark, it didn't matter.

The Hisperion bloodline had night vision as sharp as any vampire's.

This level of darkness was trivial for her to pierce through.

'Iron bars?'

The first thing she saw were the iron bars confining her.

She was surrounded on all sides by iron bars—just like a cage for a wild animal.

'Damn it...'

Yuria widened her view, peering beyond the bars around her.

"Ugh!"

Without realizing it, a gasp of horror escaped her lips.

'What is this place?!'

All around her, people were locked in cages just like hers, but not a single person was uninjured.

'This is bad...'

Some, missing arms and legs, crawled along the ground like caterpillars; some were shuddering, skin peeled from their bodies; and some appeared already dead.

'Shit.'

Her assessment of the situation was immediate.

'Why am I in a place like this? Kidnapped...? By whom? When?'

Yuria closed her eyes and traced back her last memory.

Her last recollection was cultivating her aura in the afternoon.

'Did I get hit while concentrating on my cultivation?'

Being attacked during aura cultivation would make even a high-ranker defenseless.

Cultivation required intense concentration, as mistakes could lead to energy deviation.

It seemed likely that someone had knocked Yuria out and kidnapped her while she was focused on internal healing.

Given how stiff her neck was, she must have been struck on the back of the head and lost consciousness.

'How could this happen...'

Yuria furrowed her brow.

'There were surely Heavenly Sword knights guarding me. Did they break through all that to kidnap me?'

How?

'Hm.'

Yuria's expression darkened bitterly.

'If the Heavenly Sword knights on guard were in on it, it's not impossible...'

Could knights loyal to her siblings have aided in her abduction?

Yuria gritted her teeth.

'Who's the culprit...? There's no way to find out just yet. What about the time...? Damn, my neck hurts... How long have I been out?'

Yuria scowled and looked around beyond the bars again.

'No windows. Underground, maybe? No idea what time it is. Haaa...'

But she couldn't just sit here.

'I have to escape.'

— Thump.

Yuria leaned against the iron bars.

"Ha!"

She gathered strength from her lower abdomen to her waist and pushed with all her might.

"Ugh!"

— Sizzle! Sizzle!

But all that happened was her feet slipping against the floor—the bars didn't even creak.

'Why are these this sturdy!?'

Ordinary steel would snap like a corn stalk.

These seemed like magically reinforced alloy, probably made in a mage tower.

'Haaa... Guess I have no choice.'

Though she was still in pain from internal injuries, she'd have to use her aura.

If she summoned her Heavenly Energy, even these reinforced bars would at least bend enough to let her slip through.

"Hrrrr!"

Yuria focused to draw the aura from her dantian.

"Huh?"

But there was no trace of aura felt in her dantian.

Without thinking, Yuria's mouth fell open in disbelief.

"What the..."

Why was her aura like this?

As she stared in confusion at her lower abdomen—

— Brrring! Brrring!

Suddenly, a loud alarm bell blared throughout the cell-lined chamber.

— Thud! Thud! Thud!

At the same time, heavy footsteps pounded above from the ceiling.

— Thud! Thud! Thud! Thud!

Someone was clearly rushing down in response to the alarm.

— Squeak! Squeak! Squeak! Squeak!

Soon after, the harsh stomping of someone hurrying down old wooden stairs followed.

— Ugh, aaah!

— No! Nooo!

As the footsteps drew close, the detained people began to scream and wail.

Those horribly wounded thrashed in agony.

Only the corpses slumped in cage corners remained silent.

'Tsk.'

Clearly, whoever was coming was bad news.

— Thud!

As Yuria glared at the heavy iron door at the end of the row, it banged open violently.

"Ha, haah! Finally, finally you've woken up! Yuria!"

A shadowy figure appeared from behind the door, arms outstretched, voice hoarse with anticipation.

Though the face was shrouded in dusk and backlight, the thick, rounded outline made it clear the figure was a man.

"I kept waiting for you to wake up! You slept so long! It was driving me crazy!"

The huge man strode toward Yuria, grabbing hold of the bars with a clang.

"Aaaah...! Yuria! Yuriaaa! I can hardly wait to start working on you!"

"... What is this?"

Yuria looked at him coldly.

As her eyes adjusted, the man's face became clear.

A face riddled with warts, thick glasses, eyes gleaming with madness.

"Who are you?"

Yuria had never seen him before.

"Me? Hah! Are you curious about me!? So you are interested! Fine, I'll tell you!"

The man giggled and introduced himself.

"I am! Ruuu! Deus Delmora!"

"....."

"I'm the most outstanding artist in this whole city!"

— Klang!

The man stuck his face almost through the bars, as if trying to squeeze past them.

"Ahhhh...! To think I can talk with you like this! Feels like a dream come true!"

"... I see. Rudeus Delmora."

Yuria wanted to smash his face right there with a headbutt, but she held back for now to extract information.

"Where is this? Did you bring me here?"

"Huh? Whattt?"

Rudeus recoiled from the bars, as if he'd seen something filthy.

"Who tells you that sort of thing in a place like this? Are you stupid or something?"

"....."

A vein bulged on Yuria's temple.

'This bastard...'

"A-ahh! Not good! You can't be stupid! You're supposed to be the ingredient for my life's greatest masterpiece! If I use a fool as a material, I'll only get a foolish result!"

Rudeus scratched his head in agony.

"I thought you'd be more perfect!"

Then, he suddenly froze like a paused video.

"Hm? Maybe it doesn't matter? A puppet doesn't need intelligence anyway. That's right. As long as the body is perfect. Mm."

— Wobble, wobble.

Rudeus began to hum and dance awkwardly.

"... Ingredient? Puppet?"

Yuria frowned and asked, and Rudeus answered while twisting his head creepily.

"Yeah! You'll definitely become the greatest puppet of our age! I'll use every strand of your hair, nothing wasted!"

"... You mean you'll turn me into a puppet?"

"Oh! Not just yet. Timing is important for a true masterpiece!"

Rudeus pointed a finger at the ceiling.

"In two days, the full moon will rise! When magic power is most abundant in the air! That's when I'll turn you into my beautiful puppet, Yuria!"

"....."

Yuria realized she'd been kidnapped by a profoundly deranged man.

"Hah. He really thinks I'm some kind of pushover."

— Klang!

Yuria slammed against the bars.

"Eek!!"

The boom was like a lion battering a cage—so deafening that Rudeus fell over onto his butt.

"Open this cage. Now, you filthy worm."

Yuria's red eyes blazed like coals in the thick darkness, staring down Rudeus.

"You'd better open it. If I break out, I'll pluck out those disgusting eyes first."

"H-hee! Heeheeheehee!"

Rudeus laughed as he met her gaze.

"So chilling! Yuria! I almost wet myself!"

He shuddered as if covered in goosebumps.

"I poisoned you with Hollow Peak Poison, and cast a Weakening Spell! How are you still so monstrous? You're a freak! Yuria! Hehehe! Ah! I can't wait to make you my puppet! You'll be my greatest masterpiece ever!"

Rudeus started to reach out to Yuria, then quickly retracted his hand.

"Oh! I can't touch you! No!"

He grinned slyly.

"Not until the full moon rises, Yuria! You must remain pure! In two days, you'll be completely and only mine—just as you are! Ohoho!"

With those words, Rudeus vanished from the basement.

"Ha, haah..."

Yuria stared at the closed door, sighing deeply.

"... He said two days?"

He planned to turn her into a puppet on the night the full moon rose.

'At least I have two days.'

She had to find a way out in that time, no matter what.

'Ssss...'

But...

'Hollow Peak Poison? And a Weakening Spell?'

That pervert had just mentioned Hollow Peak Poison and a Weakening Spell.

'So right now, hollow Peak Poison is in my system, and a Weakening Spell is also in effect?'

Hollow Peak Poison was an especially vicious toxin that scattered the aura inside the body, and the Weakening Spell, as the name suggested, sapped the target's physical power, sometimes so much that they couldn't even use a fraction of their strength.

'No wonder, damn it!'

She was unable to draw on aura or strength at all.

'Haaa, shit... How the hell am I supposed to escape?'

She pondered awhile, but couldn't think of any solution.

'Damn... This is really the worst.'

A suffocating sense of hopelessness pressed in, and anxiety gnawed at her.

Yuria's shoulders began to tremble.

'No... There has to be a way...'

Though she told herself so, her body trembled ever more violently.

No matter how much tough training had disciplined her will since childhood, she was, in the end, only a fourteen-year-old girl.

Even Yuria was not used to such extreme situations, and, like anyone, she grew anxious when no way out was in sight.

"Ha, haah..."

What should I do?

What am I supposed to do?

As time passed, Yuria's spirit slowly weakened.

At the same time, fear and despair began to bloom inside her.

Those emotions began to flicker in her heart like embers.

* * *

Yuria had been kidnapped a few times in her previous life, but this incident was unprecedented.

This event was a butterfly effect of Ian returning to the past 15 years ago.

In other words, Yuria's kidnapping was essentially caused by Ian having knocked her out.

'I was too complacent.'

Just a month ago, Yuria had been chosen by Genesis, putting her under even greater scrutiny by the other direct descendants.

Her talent was already subject to immense wariness, and now she'd pulled the founding patriarch's Divine Sword—no wonder.

Those who feared Yuria's growth would have been watching for a chance to eliminate her.

She should have predicted something like this might happen, and remained vigilant at all times.

'Still, though...'

Ian, honestly, felt a bit wronged.

Who would have imagined she'd be abducted right in the heart of Heavenly Sword Palace, the seat of Hisperion?

Was there nowhere Yuria could truly rest in safety?

To be kidnapped the moment the Lord left his seat.

'No, no! Now is not the time to be thinking about this.'

Ian shook his head vigorously.

'Now, focus on finding Yuria.'

If there was any small blessing, it was that Ian was a master at tracking people, thanks to the countless real-world situations he'd experienced in his past life.

'Rudeus. Now that I know this bastard is involved, finding Yuria is only a matter of time.'

No matter what, he would find her within two days.

'Let's hurry.'

"Hyah!"

Ian spurred his horse.

— Clatter! Clatter! Clatter!

A fine steed raced swiftly toward the Warp Gate.

"Hyah!"

"Hiyah!"

Behind him, swordmaster Javier and four elite Heavenly Sword knights followed close behind.

Yeah, butterfly effect...

Also, Yuria no longer has the Authority of Projection, so she couldn't escape using it, like how Ian escaped in the early chapters...