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

Chapter 51 : Taken (5)

Taken (5)

There were several steps Ian had to take in order to catch the puppet master, Rudeus Delmora, who was involved in Yuria's kidnapping.

'First, I need to find out where that bastard's workshop is located.'

At present, Ian does not know the location of Rudeus's workshop.

Ian raided Rudeus's workshop in his previous life when he was 25 years old.

That's an 11-year difference from now.

Because of that, most of the information from his past life probably doesn't match with the present.

Everything from Rudeus's current area of activity, major business partners, and even the workshop's location would be different from Ian's previous life.

Dark mages, by nature, have many enemies and are pursued by the law, so it was extremely rare for them to remain in one place for long.

'But that doesn't mean I need to wander around randomly.'

Just knowing Rudeus's name gave Ian practically unlimited ways to track him down.

Even just checking the business partners connected to the Dark Mage Association would yield countless sources of information on Rudeus.

'Of course, I can't just go poking around everywhere, either.'

Rudeus wasn't a fool.

If Ian made a scene and started investigating everywhere, word would quickly reach Rudeus that someone was after him.

At that point, the guy would immediately flee and hide himself. It would become extremely difficult to find him.

To prevent such disaster, Ian had to approach as discreetly and efficiently as possible.

'At times like this, it's best to use that place, after all.'

There was an information organization that Ian had frequently made use of whenever he needed intel, even in his previous life.

'Nightingale.'

It was an intelligence guild operating on a supranational scale; in reality, it was as close to number one in the intelligence industry as you could get.

No matter what you asked, they'd almost always have an answer, and they were famous for thoroughly protecting the privacy of their clients.

There were only two significant drawbacks.

One was that the guild's locations were hidden, and you needed to know a password to get in, so using them was very tricky.

Naturally, as an organization handling sensitive information about numerous power brokers, secrecy was essential to avoid being exterminated, and so they had to operate in the shadows.

The other drawback was the price; it was extremely expensive.

Since operating in secrecy meant fewer clients, and the limited profits meant they couldn't maintain or update such a vast amount of information without high fees, the cost of using their services was inevitably steep.

'But for me, neither is a problem.'

Whether the location is hidden, a password is required, or the price is high—it didn't matter to Ian.

Thanks to his past life's experience, Ian knew both the locations of Nightingale's branches and the passwords well enough.

And he had a special way to solve the problem of the high price, too.

If he used 'that method', he might even be able to use their services for free.

Even if, by any chance, 'that method' didn't work the way Ian expected, he wasn't worried.

When it came to funding, Javier, the leader of investigation division standing at his side, would take care of it.

"I need to stop by Nightingale first."

"... Excuse me? Nightingale? You mean..."

At Ian's words, Javier's eyes widened.

'The young master knows about Nightingale?'

Nightingale was operated in strict secrecy; most people wouldn't have even heard the name once.

Only veteran specialists who had spent years on missions involving tracking or reconnaissance ever knew of Nightingale's existence.

And yet...

'He shouldn't have gone on any proper missions yet... He's still so young for that. So how...?'

Finding out the Nightingale's locations or making contact was a difficult task, even for Javier, the investigation division leader of the Heavenly Sword Order.

Moreover, Nightingale moved its branches periodically, and once a connection was lost, it was far from uncommon to be unable to use them again even if you wanted to.

"Hm..."

Unfortunately, the Heavenly Sword Order currently had no connection to Nightingale.

No one in the investigation department currently knew the location of a Nightingale branch.

"I'm sorry, young master Ian...? If you're hoping for us to connect you to Nightingale, we can't. Our last contact with them was already three months ago..."

"Oh, that's not what I meant, so it's fine."

Ian waved his hand.

"I'm not asking you to connect me to Nightingale. Follow me. I know the contact location."

"Y-Yes!? Y-young master Ian? Do you mean to say you know the location of Nightingale's branch?"

"Yes. No need to go far. There's one right near the main estate."

Nightingale shifted its branches regularly, but there were some branches that simply didn't move, even after a long time.

Branches embedded within major cities like the Hisperion main estate or the imperial capital were usually just like that.

It was safe to expect that every major power's central city had at least one such embedded branch.

"W-What!"

At Ian's words that there was a Nightingale branch at the Hisperion main estate, Javier's eyes grew as big as lanterns.

'There was a Nightingale branch near here!?'

Javier had been working in the Heavenly Sword Order's investigation department for nearly 20 years now and was now its leader, and yet he was hearing for the first time that there was a Nightingale branch nearby.

'...? Why is he so surprised?'

Ian, instead, was taken aback by Javier's reaction.

'Don't tell me he didn't know there was a Nightingale branch at the estate? And he's the leader of investigation division?'

Hah.

If that was the case, then Nightingale's operational secrecy was even more thorough and secretive than Ian had thought.

To think even Javier, who was responsible for the investigative powers in all of Hisperion, didn't know about the main estate branch.

'They told me quite easily, though.'

The person who had told Ian the location of the Nightingale branch in his previous life was none other than Nightingale's own guildmaster.

'Well... To be honest, at that time the world was already half destroyed, so secrets and security didn't matter much.'

It was during the height of the war with the demons, and Hisperion had already been destroyed.

At the time, Nightingale's guildmaster, Serana, had requested Ian's protection in order to recover artifacts from the branch.

Of course, it wasn't a free request.

She offered to heal Yuria, who was gravely wounded and deteriorating by the day.

Ian, with no other option at the time if he wanted to save Yuria, agreed to her terms and traveled across the continent escorting guildmaster Serana to the Nightingale branches.

'Who would have thought I'd be using that experience like this now.'

Ian may not remember the location of every branch he visited then, but he recalled most of them.

A few spots were hazy, but he was sure that visiting them would bring back the memories in full.

Most of all, the branch at Hisperion's main estate was impossible for Ian to forget.

That day, the devastating, ruined state of the main estate etched itself like a deep scar into Ian's eyes.

"This is it."

Ian led Javier and the Heavenly Sword Knights to the entrance of a sewer just outside the estate's outer wall.

"Hm..."

It was a deserted, secluded place—an ideal spot to lay a trap.

Javier had a vague sense of foreboding, but—

"Keep following. We need to go in a bit further."

"... Yes."

He followed Ian without protest for now.

After all, the odds of Ian—who was doted on by the lord of the Heavenly Sword—plotting nefarious schemes against Javier, the loyal retainer of Hisperion, were exceedingly low.

'I've never been here when it was still intact.'

Ian ran his hand over the sewer wall, covered in orange moss.

This was the entrance to Nightingale's Hisperion main branch.

In his previous life, the sewer was collapsed, and he'd had to spend ages wrestling with debris just to get in.

"..."

Before opening the secret entrance, Ian watched Javier and the four Heavenly Sword Knights closely.

Each of them was tense, warily scanning the surroundings.

'There's no need to be this nervous.'

Ian decided to hurry and open the door to put them at ease.

If the escort forces wasted their stamina being needlessly anxious, that would only be a loss to Ian as well.

–Wuuuum.

Ian infused aura into the moss.

–Grgrgrgrgrgrgr...

The bricks of the sewer shifted like machinery, opening a new passage.

"Hm!"

"What the..."

"Un...unbelievable..."

Each Heavenly Sword Knight let out a low gasp of awe.

"My goodness..."

Javier, too, stroked his dry lips.

Who would have thought there was such a secret hidden in the sewers...

Despite being in charge of investigations for all of Hisperion, he never once imagined there would be a secret space like this in the main estate's sewer.

"Let's keep going."

Ian led Javier and the Heavenly Sword Knights down the newly revealed path.

At the end of the secret passage, there was a rock door glowing with a soft light, almost like moonlight.

"What's this..."

Etched into the rock door were the shapes of a full moon and a nightingale.

"Hah... T-This! It really is!"

Javier swallowed hard, amazed.

The full moon and the nightingale—emblems of the Nightingale Guild.

Ian had really brought them to a Nightingale branch.

"Y-young master Ian! How exactly did you know there was a Nightingale branch here?"

Even Javier, one of the people who handled the most information in Hisperion, didn't know about the Nightingale branch at the estate—so how could this little boy possibly know such a thing?

Just how did he get access to this top-level intelligence?

"I'm afraid it's hard to explain here. Forgive me."

Ian bowed his head slightly with an awkward expression.

He couldn't very well start telling Javier about his previous life.

Javier was certainly trustworthy, but knowledge of his past life or his return to the past was an enormous risk, regardless of trust.

Besides, he couldn't tell Javier a secret not even Sophia knew yet.

"Ah, I see... Haa, that's regrettable, but I understand."

Fortunately, Javier backed down easily.

'I'm dying of curiosity, but...'

The important thing now was finding Lady Yuria.

Javier decided to focus on that.

"Shall we open the door, then...?"

Javier placed his hand on the stone door.

–Wuuuung!

–[I shine on the world without a body, and when I disappear, all the world hides in darkness.]

In a whisper, the stone door posed a riddle.

–[Who am I?]

Apparently, the structure was designed to open only if the riddle was solved.

"Hmm..."

Javier retreated a step, looking awkwardly to Ian.

If he answered wrong and something went wrong, it would be a problem.

Ian nodded as if to say not to worry, then placed his hand on the stone door and said,

"The answer is 'light', brother."

–[Correct. Brother.]

–Kugugugugugu...

When Ian gave the answer, the stone door ground sideways with a stony screech.

"Hm... The answer is simpler and more direct than I expected."

For such a thoroughly hidden location, the difficulty of the riddle was actually low.

"It looks that way when you know the answer."

Obvious, direct answers always seem more difficult when you don't know them.

And in situations where caution is required, the easier the answer is, the more suspicious it tends to seem.

"Let's go in."

"Yes. We'll follow."

Ian's group strode boldly inside.

Beyond the rock door, it looked rather like a private room bar.

Right in front was the lobby and counter, and beyond that, doors lined a narrow corridor.

"Welcome."

As Ian and his party glanced around, a figure in a deep purple robe approached from inside and gave them a bow.

"Welcome. Knights of Hisperion, young master Ian, and Sir Javier."

The voice belonged to a woman.

"... Did you know we would be coming here?"

When the robed figure spoke their names, Javier questioned her in a wary tone.

"Hardly."

The figure in purple shook her head.

"I noticed you as soon as you entered the sewers. The only reason I know who you are is because your faces are so famous, even I know them."

"I... I see."

"Yes. But I absolutely did not expect you to open the way and come in here."

For a moment, a cold silence fell between them.

From beneath the purple robe, sharp eyes flashed toward Ian.

"How is it that you know our location and the password, young master Ian?"

Chapter 52 : Taken (6)

Taken (6)

A sharp gaze flashed toward Ian from beneath a violet robe.

"How did you come to know our location and password? Young Master Ian?"

Though the speech was polite, there was a distinct undertone of vigilance in the voice.

'I expected this kind of reaction.'

Naturally.

Nightingale was an organization that prioritized intelligence and security above all.

Ian, who had no prior connection with them, not only knew the branch's location but also personally deciphered the password to enter, so their caution was only natural.

Of course, since he had anticipated this reaction from the start, he had already prepared an answer.

"....."

Ian quietly stared at the violet robe, then opened his mouth with a gentle smile.

He spoke in the unique language only members of Nightingale could use.

"Kuru-tan be-mi-o saer-nak dor-nuu. (There's no need to be so cautious.) Kar-ne. (Brother.)"

"Gasp...!"

The moment Ian uttered Nightingale's language—"Voice of the Night"—the air in the room instantly froze with silence.

"....?"

Javier and the Heavenly Sword knights standing behind Ian cocked their heads in confusion, question marks forming above them.

"....!!"

The violet robe was so shocked that their jaw dropped as far as it could go, unable to hide their astonishment.

"Men-ra nokta-mion saer-bak tar-ku-mon sa-riev. Ne-jumon kar-nuu. (I am an Apostle of the Night, and a member of the Crescent. I am the New Moon.)"

The terms "Apostle of the Night" and "Crescent" meant the highest-rank executives of Nightingale, and "New Moon" was a unique codename for one such executive.

"N-noktamion saerbak nejumon tarne-bu! (A-Apostle of the Night, New Moon, it is an honor to meet you!)"

The violet robe hurriedly knelt on one knee before Ian, offering respect in Nightingale's "Voice of the Night."

"Jenta Kurion tarnebak berin judakuu! Ma, marnev Kurion saertak bor-nuu! (To think I would meet you so unexpectedly...! It is an honor to make your acquaintance!)"

However, despite speaking the same language, Ian's intonation and the violet robe's intonation were distinctly different.

Naturally.

The intonation of Nightingale's Voice of the Night changed according to rank.

Ian was using the intonation reserved for the highest-rank executives of Nightingale, while the violet robe was using that of the middle-management level.

'That perfect pronunciation...! The accent!'

Thus, the violet robe had no choice but to fully believe Ian, who claimed to be the Apostle of the Night.

'T-there is no doubt! This is truly the Apostle of the Night, the New Moon! If not, such perfect pronunciation and intonation would be impossible!'

Ian's pronunciation was even more fluent and clear than the violet robe, who had over ten years of experience with the Voice of the Night, and his intonation matched perfectly with that of the highest-ranking executives—the Full Moon—whom the violet robe had heard at major Nightingale events.

'To think I've met the dream and idol of all Nightingale members so suddenly...!'

Each member of the Crescent—the highest rank of Nightingale's executives—was shrouded in mystery and secrecy.

Even other Nightingale members rarely knew their faces, let alone their names or genders.

'Who would have thought that Young Master Ian, recently famous as a guest of House Hisperion, would actually be one of Nightingale's top executives...'

The violet robe's lips trembled with excitement.

'Someone that young... No, perhaps that appearance is only a disguise...! I can't judge real age by their looks.'

Swallowing dryly, the violet robe pondered.

'Did the reason why the supposedly hopeless Young Master Ian suddenly became the Heavenly Sword Lord's chosen guest have something to do with his Nightingale rank? I see...'

'So, it works.'

Watching the violet robe bite their lip in deep thought, Ian smiled inwardly with relief.

'Looks like I can handle this.'

Ian's ability to use the Voice of the Night and to perfectly mimic the highest-rank executive's intonation was thanks to a certain event from his previous life.

'Thank you, Serana. It's all because of you.'

In Ian's previous life—during a time when he had escorted Serana, the Guildmaster of Nightingale, and gathered relics scattered among the branches.

Serana had once given Ian a runestone as a gift in the holy land of Nightingale.

- What's this?

- Can't you see? It's a runestone. You can use it for magic enchanting, and you can also absorb stored skills...

- No, I mean, what exactly does this runestone do? Why are you giving it to me?

- Hmph. I never imagined I'd end up giving this to you.

What Serana had placed inside the runestone was "proficiency in the Voice of the Night".

If you broke the runestone and absorbed the magic power stored within, "the ability to speak the Voice of the Night" would be etched onto your soul instantly.

- I was saving this for a special direct hire, to recruit a Nightingale executive... But there's no more need for it now. I'll give it to you.

At that time, Nightingale was as ruined as the fallen Hisperion.

It was the age when more than half of humanity's territory had been destroyed by the demons.

- Hmm. Serana. Isn't it a waste to use up a runestone like this? You might need it later on.

- Oho~ Are you worried about us now, Ian Greysel?

- No. I'm just stating the facts.

- ... You're always so blunt. Then, how about this?

Serana had flashed a sly smile and made a proposal that remained vivid in Ian's memories even now.

- You become our new Nightingale executive.

- What?

- Then everything's solved, right? Anyway, that runestone was meant to be used to hire an executive. If you become one of us, it's a perfect use.

- No, Serana, that's impossible. I'm the retainer of the lord. I can't belong to another group. You know that.

- Ayy~ Usually Nightingale members hold multiple identities at once. Back in the day, I had at least ten—merchant leader, knight, mage tower master, adventurer, assassin, even lord. I was always so busy~

In the end, Ian accepted Serana's proposal.

- If you promise even more support for Lady Yuria's treatment than now, I accept your offer.

- Wow... You really do revolve around that woman, huh? You must adore her. I'm so jealous.

- Serana. She is not "that woman"—she is Lady Yuria, Heavenly Sword Lord.

- Ah, got it, got it! Well, direct hires are just conditional deals anyway. All right. We'll take full responsibility and make sure Lady Yuria returns to her original healthy state! We'll search the whole world to find any medicine or healer to cure her! You can trust us! You won't be disappointed!

- If you keep that promise, I'll also protect Nightingale—no matter what.

- Oho... Kyah~ So reliable! Okay, it's decided! From now on, Ian Greysel, you're the new New Moon of Nightingale! That seat's been vacant for so long, it's truly ironic for it to be filled now. Puhaha!

A nostalgic memory, perhaps.

In any case, the "Voice of the Night" skill he had branded onto his soul with that runestone continued to work perfectly, even after traveling fifteen years back in the past.

'Wh-what is going on?'

Meanwhile, Javier and the Heavenly Sword knights standing behind Ian were racking their brains to understand the situation.

A violet robe who was obviously part of Nightingale suddenly knelt before Ian and bowed, while Ian smiled benevolently as if he were her superior.

'It definitely felt tense at first.'

When they entered alongside Ian by decoding the Nightingale password, the violet robe who greeted them was clearly wary of Ian and Javier's party.

'But after a few words in some bizarre language, suddenly their hierarchy was made clear...'

Javier's mind raced.

'I don't get it. Just what is going on here?'

But he couldn't make heads or tails of the present circumstances.

Not even a sliver of conjecture was possible.

'But one thing is certain. Just one thing.'

Ian definitely had some tremendous background that warranted this level of deference from Nightingale.

'Just who are you, Young Master Ian...'

Javier gazed at Ian with new, bewildered eyes.

The four Heavenly Sword knights standing behind Javier all wore nearly identical expressions as they looked upon Ian.

"....."

Ian, feeling the prickling stares from behind, stepped toward the violet robe.

"I'd like to know your name."

"Yes, Young Master Ian. I am Vivian. This is my fourth year managing this branch."

"You're the branch manager. It's a pleasure, Vivian."

As Ian held out his hand, Vivian took it in both her hands and bowed her head.

"It's an honor, Young Master Ian."

"The honor's mine, Vivian. I'm here because I need information. Would you help me right away?"

"Of course. I'll prepare everything so you can view all the information stored here."

All the information here?

Ian quickly shook his head.

"No, there's just one piece of information I need. I'm looking for someone. His name is Rudeus Delmora—a dark mage specializing in puppetry, using humans as materials. I'm searching for his workshop."

"Rudeus Delmora. I'll check right away. I'll gather the relevant information within five minutes. Please make yourself comfortable while you wait."

—Nod.

When Ian nodded, Vivian hurried off backward in a small bow.

"Young Master Ian, what was that just now?"

As soon as Vivian left, Javier's big eyes blinked as he bombarded Ian with questions.

"She seemed so guarded when we first arrived, but how did she suddenly become so docile? And what was that language you used? What is your relationship with Nightingale? Does the Heavenly Sword Lord know about this part of your background, too?"

Ian answered that barrage of questions awkwardly.

"That's too many questions, Javier."

And unsurprisingly, he couldn't explain his past life.

"I'm afraid it's also difficult to explain everything here and now."

Ian swept his gaze over Javier and the knights.

"Sir Javier. I would like to ask all of you to keep what you saw of me here today secret. I'm showing you this on the assumption that I can trust you. I assume that won't be a problem?"

At this, Javier and all the Heavenly Sword knights swallowed nervously in sync.

"Of course. I promise on my honor. I'll keep this matter absolutely confidential."

"Truthfully, as someone favored by the Heavenly Sword Lord, I never intended to disobey you, but now I feel even more compelled not to cross you."

"Same for me... Not only are you favored by the Heavenly Sword Lord, but you deal with Nightingale as with subordinates—I'd never dream of making you an enemy. I will keep this secret."

At their reliable responses, Ian nodded and continued.

"Also, you must not share the branch's location with anyone else. I brought you here, but this is a secret hideout. If too many people find out, Nightingale will relocate the branch."

"Understood."

"We'll remember that."

"But..."

Ian paused for a breath, then spoke.

"It's fine for all of you to use this branch yourselves. It should help bolster Hisperion's investigative powers."

Javier was a follower of Heavenly Sword Lord Darkan, making him trustworthy, and the four other knights were his close subordinates, so they were relatively reliable as well.

If he increased their investigative capabilities, it would become far easier to detect and counter the machinations of Hisperion's other bloodlines before they could hatch any schemes.

"To establish a connection with Nightingale... This is an inexpressible help, Young Master Ian."

Javier bowed his head in thanks.

"Thank you. I will never forget this favor and will surely repay you."

"Don't mention it. For now, let's focus on finding Lady Yuria."

"Yes, of course."

Though he said that, Ian certainly hadn't intended this favor to be one-sided.

He'd just secured a debt from Javier.

And could now make use of the Heavenly Sword knights' investigative powers to counter other branches of House Hisperion.

"Noktamion saerbak dor-nuae beri-suu. (Apostle of the Night, sir.)"

At that moment, Vivian returned with the information.

"I've gathered the current activity region and location information for Rudeus Delmora, as you requested."

"Finally..."

Ian's eyes lit with determination as he looked at Vivian.

It was finally time to go after Rudeus Delmora, who had kidnapped Yuria.

Having connection to an Intelligence Guild in his previous life is quite convenient but isn't too far-fetched...

Chapter 53 : Taken (7)

Taken (7)

Thanks to the information obtained from Nightingale, Ian was able to pinpoint the area where Rudeus Delmora was active.

The most recent sighting of him was in the city of Kartai, located in the western part of Hisperion.

It was a city managed by Ian's family, the Greysel, but since Hugo came to power, public order had collapsed and it had become a den of criminals.

'Certainly, if it's there, it's a perfect place for dark mages to trade smuggled goods like human flesh or narcotics. It's somewhere Rudeus would settle down.'

However, they had not yet figured out the exact location of his workshop.

The information Nightingale provided only included accounts of Rudeus' smuggling activities and transaction spots.

Rudeus, affiliated with the Dark Mage Association, had placed orders for human flesh and magical clay through the association, and the records in the ledgers made it possible to identify his area of activity.

The place where Rudeus's smuggled goods were delivered was an inn in the city of Kartai.

Most likely, that establishment was an inn in name only, and in reality, functioned as a gathering place for dark mages to order or receive items through the association.

'I should start investigating from there.'

Ian immediately headed for the Kartai city inn, accompanied by Javier and the Heavenly Sword knights.

Since the goods Rudeus ordered passed through there before being delivered to him, if they raided the place, they would be able to find out his workshop's address precisely.

"Hya! Hya!"

"Dagdak! Dagdak! Dagdak!"

Riding at full speed, passing through the warp gate, they arrived at Kartai city, where thick fog filled the air.

Since the city was built on swampland, even the stone walls of the buildings were covered in moss and mold.

"It's so dark..."

The area was shrouded in fog, it was night time, and the weather was overcast, making it almost oppressively dark.

At least, dim yellow lanterns hung here and there on the street, barely making the road visible.

In the glow from the lanterns, the buildings that could be glimpsed looked like ghosts clad in black robes, vagrants sprawled every few steps along the street, and there was an ominous air and a sense of killing intent in the alleys.

If Ian had been an ordinary person without aura, he wouldn't have been able to stand even five minutes in this place.

It was an extremely eerie city.

'Kartai wasn't always like this. It only turned into this cesspool after Hugo took over.'

Originally, Kartai was a lively and beautiful city, known for cultivating specialty mushrooms and various herbs in its clean wetlands, which made it a favorite among alchemists.

But once Hugo became the head of the Greysel family, the budget for public safety in Kartai was drastically cut, and the gaps were filled by criminal organizations, which took root like mold so deeply that now the city had reached a point where it was impossible to fix without cutting out the whole area.

'Where did Hugo spend the budget he siphoned from Kartai?'

Most likely, it was squandered on luxury goods and pleasures to feed his own vanity.

The citizens of Kartai ended up paying the price for his foolishness, their lives sacrificed.

"Young master Ian."

While Ian was deeply lost in thought, taking in the city, Javier called to him and came up right beside him.

"It's best not to stray from me. This place is very dangerous."

"Yes."

Kartai, turned into a cesspool by Hugo, was notorious for poor security in all of Hisperion.

A young and delicate boy like Ian wandering around alone could easily become a victim of human trafficking.

Of course, Ian was not weak, so even moving separately from Javier wouldn't really be a problem, but from now on they couldn't be too careful.

If Rudeus was here, then most of the others involved in Yuria's kidnapping would be with him.

And, if the mastermind behind this incident was Theo, the eldest son of Hisperion, there could very well be someone of Swordmaster level or higher among those with Rudeus.

Javier and the four Heavenly Sword knights were there as a precaution against this very possibility, so it would be best not to separate.

"Sir Javier. If we happen to encounter enemies of Swordmaster level while searching for the lady, I'll ask you to handle them."

At Ian's current level, he could barely handle lower-level Swordmasters, but from the middle ranks up, even with Vladiark present, he couldn't guarantee total victory.

"Of course, young master Ian. That's the reason I came with you."

Javier had reached the level of a senior Swordmaster. Not only was his martial arts honed and remarkable, but his equipment was also extraordinarily high-class, so he could easily handle most master-level opponents.

A truly reassuring escort.

"Good. Then let us hurry. Let's find Lady Yuria before dawn."

"Yes!"

"Dagdak! Dagdak!"

Ian crossed the foggy streets of Kartai with the Heavenly Sword knights.

"Dagdak! Dagdak..."

"Prrr!"

Without pause, pushing their horses onward, they made it to their destination quickly.

The inn at the center of Kartai: 'Skull Candle Inn'.

According to the information given by Nightingale, this place was highly likely to be a dark mages' congregation point.

Before entering, Ian addressed the Heavenly Sword knights.

"If we all go in, it'll attract too much attention. Only Sir Javier shall come with me. The rest of you stay outside and keep watch."

"Yes, sir!"

"Understood."

Having instructed the four Heavenly Sword knights to handle the horses and stand watch, Ian pulled his robe's hood low over his face and entered the dark mages' gathering place, 'Skull Candle Inn'.

Creeeak...

The sound of worn hinges echoed in place of a doorbell.

Though the night was far advanced, there were still a few customers seated at tables.

Each of them was wrapped in bandages, or so pale as to be unnatural, their eyes half-crazed—clearly not the attire or expression of ordinary townsfolk.

They were probably dark mages affiliated with the association, corrupted spellcasters.

"Welcome."

When Ian approached the bar, the middle-aged bartender greeted him brusquely.

Perhaps he was wary, as Ian and Javier were unfamiliar faces in the area.

"Looking for a meal? Or a room?"

"I'm looking for someone."

"Ah. So you're not a customer."

The bartender's expression soured.

"This is an inn, not a detective agency. If you want to ask around, go somewhere else—"

Thud!

When Ian placed a heavy pouch of gold coins on the table, the bartender fell silent.

"Huh?"

"Fifty gold."

Fifty gold was about two months' wages for an average city dweller.

It was a substantial sum.

"Answer a few questions and it's yours."

"T-take that away! Put it back!"

The bartender raised his voice awkwardly.

But from his glances, he was subtly signaling toward the customers sitting behind him.

Apparently, with association people watching from behind, he couldn't openly provide information to outsiders.

"I'll wait for you in the back alley then."

Ian whispered to the bartender and left the inn.

"Mm-mm!"

Within five minutes, the bartender appeared in the back alley.

"You obviously know what you're doing, so let's not play games. You know what this place really is?"

"Dark mages' meeting place."

"Right. You know. Just keep your voice down—if the people inside hear, that's trouble. Anyway, money first."

"Here."

Clink.

"Heh heh... it really is gold."

"Now talk. I'm looking for a man named Rudeus Delmora. He's been trading goods through here."

"Ah, so that's who you're after? Of course I know him, noisy bastard."

"I need the address of his workshop. If you help me find him, I'll give you an extra 150 gold."

"One-hundred-and-fifty gold...!?"

That was about half a year's wages for an average city dweller.

A hefty sum.

"Hmmm... I'm not the kind of man who usually sells out my customers..."

The bartender coughed awkwardly, then spoke in a low voice.

"His workshop isn't in this city. Go to Morbeng village. All the goods he orders get sent there."

"What's the exact address?"

"There's an old manor on the outskirts of Morbeng village. Address is 3rd Street, no. 12, Morbeng village. For now, everything's being delivered there. I can't say for sure it's his workshop, but the place is definitely his territory."

The bartender said cautiously.

"You'll know as soon as you go inside. They usually bring the goods to the basement..."

"It's probably a field of corpses, right? Dismembered, dried piece by piece like fish?"

"Hm. So you even know that? You're well informed. But why are you after that man?"

"That's none of your concern."

"Ah, right!"

When Ian turned to leave, the bartender grabbed him urgently.

"Keep it a secret that I told you this! You get it?"

"Don't worry. I'm terrible with faces anyway."

"Th-that's a relief!"

Though he said that, Ian would not forget the bartender's face.

Someone who could be milked for inside information with money was a very useful source.

If he needed it next time, he'd use it; even use this transaction to blackmail him if necessary.

"Our next destination is set."

Ian immediately shared the information obtained from the bartender with the Heavenly Sword knights.

"Manor at 3rd Street, no. 12, Morbeng village. That's either his storeroom or workshop. We'll move at once."

"Yes, sir!"

"Understood!"

"Dagdak! Dagdak! Dagdak!"

Leaving Kartai city, they headed for Morbeng village.

Ian, Javier, and the Heavenly Sword knights traveled without rest.

Morbeng was a village near Kartai city.

Pushing their fine horses hard, they arrived in about an hour.

"It's foggy here too."

As it was a village surrounded by marshes and lakes, it was as humid here as in Kartai.

"3rd Street, no. 12... An old manor with a basement..."

Ian's party navigated their way using signposts toward their destination.

As the bartender had said, the house at 3rd Street, no. 12 was on the outskirts of the village, but since the village was bordered on three sides by swamps and lakes, it was practically the innermost part of the village.

To reach 3rd Street, no. 12, they had to pass through the entire village.

'If there are enemies lying in wait here, it's the perfect place for an ambush.'

And, of course...

"Stop right there."

Before long, Ian and his party were surrounded by more than a dozen men.

Front, back, both sides of the alley, even atop the rooftops.

Armed men emerged, blocking all avenues of retreat.

"Oh..."

A textbook ambush.

It was a grave situation.

Smile.

But instead, Ian and the Heavenly Sword knights smiled.

"Seems like we've found the right place."

"Yes, it appears so."

For a small village like this to have such a well-organized group of mercenaries was as good as proof something was hidden here.

'He's stationed mercenaries to prevent anyone from getting near the manor.'

Rudeus himself probably hadn't posted these men.

If it were him, he would have used puppets instead of people.

Most likely, these were mercenaries hired by someone behind Rudeus.

'So there really is something inside the manor?'

Based on the situation, this might be Rudeus's workshop.

Yuria could be in there as well.

'Now then...'

Ian calmly assessed the mercenaries' aura.

'These guys... I don't think they'd be that hard to deal with.'

There were a few capable ones, but at best, only expert level.

Most appeared to be below aura user tier.

'But... there's no need to fight if I don't have to.'

If a commotion broke out, all their efforts tracking Rudeus here would go to waste.

If fighting broke out and caused too much noise, Rudeus might end up escaping.

'It's better to withdraw for now and try a covert approach.'

With that thought, Ian quietly raised both hands.

"What are you doing, sir? All of a sudden."

A man who'd been blocking their way stepped forward.

He was a rough-looking fellow with an eyepatch over his right eye.

"You've trespassed on private property. Remove your hoods and identify yourselves and your affiliations, now."

"We're just travelers. We'll leave right now."

"No. Once you've come in here, you can't just walk away. Take off the hoods and identify yourselves. If you refuse, we'll use force."

The man was quite forceful.

'Not letting us go so easily.'

Their demand to identify themselves was probably not to judge if they were enemies.

Rather, it was a judgment to see if it was "safe to kill" them.

If they killed someone wealthy or noble, it could bring search parties, which would cause trouble, so this was about minimizing those risks.

If Ian and company had been ordinary citizens, the moment they announced their identities, they would have been cut down.

'Look at the bloodstains on the axe.'

You could tell from the axe slung over his shoulder.

The blood was dried on—the weapon had been wiped, but only haphazardly.

Maybe thinking it would get bloodied again soon anyway, so he'd only wiped it roughly.

'He's definitely killed a few already.'

If it was just ordinary civilians, there was little chance for an investigation in an area where security was such a mess, and it was easier to kill to prevent rumors about mercenaries stationed in Morbeng from spreading.

'I wanted to approach quietly if possible.'

But with them coming out this forcefully, there was no helping it.

The only option was to kill them all and break through quickly.

It's still stealth if you leaven no witness behind...

Chapter 54 : Taken (8)

Taken (8)

"This is your final warning."

The mercenary with an eyepatch spoke, adjusting his grip on his battle axe with both hands.

"Take off your hood and reveal your identity, now. If you don't comply within three seconds, I'll strip you down to your underwear by force."

— Kukukuk...

The mercenaries snickered nastily.

"And if you turn out to be nobodies... we'll show you what an axe feels like on your arms and legs, as punishment for annoying us."

— Thud... Thud.

The eyepatched mercenary, wearing a grim expression, tapped the handle of his axe against his palm.

A blatant threat.

Dried blood on the axe gleamed in the torchlight.

"Three."

The mercenary's countdown began.

Ian threw a glance at Javier beside him.

"Two."

Javier was looking at Ian as well.

His lips seemed to be asking, 'What should we do?'

Having followed Ian all this way, it was clear he wanted to defer to Ian's decision even now.

"One."

Ian nodded slightly and said,

"Let's clear them out and move on."

"Yes."

— Slrng! Slrng! Slrng!

At Ian's words, Javier and the four Heavenly Sword knights drew their swords from their waists without an ounce of hesitation.

"W-what!"

The six men before them, who had only thought of them as pushovers, suddenly drew their blades as one. The eyepatched mercenary, who was counting down, bit his tongue in panic.

"D-damn it! Shoot! Shoot them!"

— Piung!

— Shushushuk!

With the mercenary's shout, the archers on the rooftop fired arrows at Ian's group.

— Ting! Ping! Tiding!

Ian blocked the arrows lightly with the broad blade of Vladiark and said,

"Don't let a single one escape."

"Yes!"

"Understood!"

"Haaap!"

— Phababat!!

They hadn't even discussed a battle plan, yet the Heavenly Sword knights sprang in different directions as if they had planned it from the start.

— Chwaaaak!

— Wha-What!?

— Kyaaaaagh!

It was the beginning of a one-sided hunt.

* * *

"H-heuaaaargh!"

— Seokeok!

— Chwaaak!

"Keugh!!"

Of course, a dozen or so mercenaries stood no chance against Ian and the Heavenly Sword Knights.

Just Javier alone was a late-stage Swordmaster, and the captain among the Heavenly Sword knights was an exceptional swordsman at the entry-stage of Swordmaster. The other three were all senior knights of the Heavenly Sword Order, top-class experts.

With just a few mid-level experts among them, and the rest only at the level of regular users, no matter how many times the dozen mercenaries fought Ian's party, they would lose a hundred times out of a hundred.

"P-please! Spare me! Aaaaagh!"

Just two minutes ago this guy acted like a seasoned veteran, but now he was crawling away on all fours, having flung aside his own eyepatch.

A yellow liquid dripped between his legs.

— Crunch!

Ian blocked the escapee's path with the massive Vladiark.

"H-hiiik!"

Right there, the man fell backward, further soaking his trousers.

Ian looked down at him dispassionately and spoke.

"What were you guarding here?"

If possible, it would have been best to kill him right away and rush straight to their objective, the mansion at No.12.

But if he couldn't find Rudeus or Yuria there, it would be a huge setback, so he needed to extract some information from this guy first.

There was a possibility the mansion was just a warehouse, or that this man knew the true location of Rudeus's workshop.

"A-aah! Aaah!"

But the one-eyed mercenary was so consumed by terror he could barely breathe.

There was no way he'd be able to answer any questions.

"Tch."

Ian clicked his tongue briefly and raised Vladiark.

He was about to strike the mercenary down and turn him into a pulp when—

"Ah! I'll talk! Wait! I'll talk, okay?!"

Miraculously, the mercenary found his voice.

"Hmph."

— Chk.

Ian rested Vladiark on his shoulder and looked down at him.

"Then hurry up. What were you doing here?"

"W-we were on guard duty, ugh...! We were told not to let anyone approach... I-I was just doing what I was paid for...!"

"I don't care about your story. Shut up."

"U-ugh...!"

"If you were on guard duty—what were you guarding?"

"The mansion! That mansion with the blue roof over there!"

With a trembling finger, the mercenary pointed toward the end of the main street.

Following the direction, Ian saw a large mansion with a blue roof at the end of a long hill.

'Over there...'

The address the bartender at Cartai Inn had mentioned as Rudeus's delivery point.

It seemed to match 12, third Street, Morbeng Village.

So these guys had been guarding the mansion at No.12.

"Who's inside that mansion?"

"I-I don't know..."

"You don't? Then you die."

Ian raised Vladiark.

"Aaaaagh! It's true! I swear! We've never even been inside!"

"Then who hired you? You must have had a leader at least."

"T-the captain! Yes! Barbarian! Well known! Pink hair!"

Desperate to save his life, the mercenary waved his arms wildly as he spoke.

"He's called the Crimson—"

Just as the mercenary was about to say the commander's nickname,

— Shweeeeak!

— Baaang!!

"Blergh!"

A spiked mace flew from the roof and smashed the mercenary's head like a watermelon.

"What the..."

It was so fast that even Ian couldn't react in time.

— Shweeeeak!

At that moment, the air was split again with a sharp sound.

"Ugh!"

Ian quickly looked toward the noise. A spiked mace was hurtling straight toward his head.

'Damn!'

He was too late to dodge—it was too fast.

Too late to block, too. In the brief instant as the mace drew nearer—

— Kaaang!

A broad back appeared, swatting away the mace aiming for Ian.

"Young master Ian! Please stay behind me!"

It was the back of Sir Javier, a late-stage Swordmaster.

"Sir Javier...!"

"There is an enemy on the roof!"

At Javier's words, Ian looked up.

"Crazy..."

Atop the building's roof behind Javier's back were five huge black silhouettes lined up.

Just their massive, muscular shapes were enough to say it all.

All of them were barbarian warriors.

"Hrhrhrh..."

The barbarian standing among the giant group shrugged his shoulders and laughed.

"I threw it to kill you on the spot—yet you somehow managed to deflect it."

An immense aura was obvious even at a glance.

He was clearly the one who had thrown the mace, and likely the barbarian commander the mercenary had almost mentioned before dying.

— Bounce!

The gigantic barbarian commander leapt from the roof.

— Kuung!

The ground trembled as if a giant boulder had landed.

— Wharuk...!

The tremor made the torchlight flicker, illuminating the barbarian's face.

'That bastard...!'

Ian recognized him.

Pink hair, dark skin, thick lips, body covered in red tattoos...

'Crimson Yaksha...! Dorca!'

He was a top-rank barbarian warrior with whom Ian had fought to the death in the civil war of Hisperion in his past life.

'To think I'd run into that bastard here again...'

That pink-haired brute had also been part of the eldest son of Hisperion's faction in his previous life.

'At this point, it's a hundred percent. The culprit behind this kidnapping is Hisperion's eldest son... That bastard Theo's handiwork.'

Ian gritted his teeth and tightened his grip on Vladiark.

'Things have just gotten dangerous...'

The Crimson Yaksha Dorca reached the level of grandmaster in his past life—a top-tier powerhouse.

Of course, this was ten years before that, so he'd be much weaker, but still, he'd have easily surpassed the entry-stage of master.

At the very least, he was sure to be intermediate or higher.

Couple that with the barbarian's mighty physical strength, and Dorca's pure combat abilities could rival Javier's or even surpass them.

'Moreover...'

There were still four more barbarians on the roof, observing the situation.

'Yaksha Squad...'

They were mercenaries under the Crimson Yaksha—his Yaksha Squad.

The Yaksha Squad was a small elite group of berserker mercenaries, each a monster rivaling the Crimson Yaksha.

Of course, they were a few steps below their leader, and, currently, all were much weaker than in Ian's previous life. Still, every single one was at least at the entrance level of master.

Some among them might have already reached the intermediate level of master.

'We can't win as is. We lack force.'

The enemy: five barbarians. All at master level.

Their side: six humans—two masters, four experts.

Though Ian's pure combat strength as an expert exceeded the early-stage master, their side was still outnumbered in terms of power.

The other three experts, even if they charged a single master barbarian together, would not stand a chance.

That meant a power deficit equivalent to two master-level combatants.

'Furthermore...'

If they fought these guys here, it would turn into a drawn-out battle.

If, during the battle, Rudeus at the mansion escaped with Yuria, or if their trail was lost, it would be a disaster.

'I have no choice but to gamble.'

To overcome this overwhelming disadvantage, he had to shoulder an equivalent amount of risk.

[Sir Javier.]

Ian called Javier with an aura message.

"!?"

Javier's shoulders flinched in surprise.

[Y-Young master Ian!?]

Javier answered in a visibly flustered tone.

[Th-that was an aura message just now! Did Young master Ian send it!?]

Aura messaging was a technique that transmitted words silently by vibrating one's aura—a skill that only those with master-level understanding of aura could use.

Which meant—

[H-how could Young master Ian... use aura messaging...?]

[I understand your surprise, but there's no time for explanations. I'll cut to the core.]

[Y-yes! Understood.]

Javier kept his gaze trained on Dorca as he gripped his sword tightly, acting as if he was focused on the enemy so the others wouldn't notice the aura message exchange.

Ian took advantage of Javier's act and quickly relayed the essentials.

[With our current strength, we cannot defeat them head-on.]

[So you have judged as much...]

Javier, being a skilled expert, could sense that the enemy's presence vastly outmatched his subordinate knights.

[Yes. But there is a way. Here's the key point.]

[Yes, I am listening.]

[I will lend you my greatsword.]

[Your greatsword, young master Ian...?]

[Yes. My greatsword has the ability to absorb aura. It can kill an expert-rank opponent in a matter of minutes, or less, depending on how much aura it absorbs. Once absorption begins, it won't stop until the mana circuits are severed. With this, you'll be able to take them down without much trouble.]

The mana absorption of Vladiark was a power that even Darcanjo, the Heavenly Sword Lord who reached demi-god level, found troublesome.

Barbarians at mere master level would have no way to resist Vladiark's mana absorption.

[Indeed... with such power, this blade could be the decisive factor in overturning this battle.]

[But, there is a caution.]

[A caution...?]

[Yes. This sword's aura absorption distinguishes neither friend nor foe. If you infuse your own aura into it, you could lose your life.]

[T-that's...]

[So just use it as a blunt weapon, but the moment the enemy releases enhanced energy or sword energy, hit only those points with all your might.]

[B-but, young master Ian...]

Javier glanced over at Ian's expression before continuing.

[If you don't infuse aura into the sword... it might break against their enhanced energy.]

[No. Don't worry. The core of my sword is harder than adamantium.]

Vladiark was a sword that had once shattered even the divine blade Genesis in Ian's past life.

It couldn't be broken by something as trivial as a master's attack.

'Even if, by chance, it should break...'

Vladiark was a sword that restored itself more perfectly the more mana it absorbed.

As long as its core remained intact, Vladiark could be restored endlessly.

[The blade might chip off, but the core will be unharmed. So feel free to use it.]

[If you say so... Understood.]

— Whirlik!

Javier spun his sword deftly, gripping it in reverse as if to hand it over to Ian.

[Then, young master Ian, I'll lend you my own sword instead.]

[No.]

Ian pushed Vladiark's hilt into Javier's empty hand.

[It would be better if you wielded both swords to utterly suppress the enemy.]

[But Young master Ian, then you'll be left unarmed!]

[It's fine.]

Ian had the Authority of Projection.

— "Authority of Projection" —

◆ Item

[Elegance Armory Longsword Lv.53]

———————————

A 5,000-gold, state-of-the-art weapon, the pinnacle of modern smithing.

Ian had long since projected Sophia's longsword.

Even if he ran short on mana, he could summon the consumable [Iron Sword Lv.10] as much as needed. Ian was never truly unarmed.

[Don't worry about me, just focus on cutting down those barbarians.]

[Then what will you do, young master Ian...?]

[I'll head directly to the mansion at No.12.]

With the possibility that Yuria was imprisoned there, they couldn't afford to be held up by the barbarians.

Someone had to reach the mansion before the kidnappers could escape with Yuria.

It was both the most dangerous and the most crucial task.

[If Yuria and the kidnappers are there, I'll leave traces behind as I pursue them.]

Ian would plunge alone into the very heart of the enemy's base to rescue Yuria.

[Sir Javier, take care of the barbarians with the Heavenly Sword knights and then follow my trail.]

That was Ian's gambit.

Chapter 55 : Taken (9)

Taken (9)

In a situation where he should have immediately dashed to the mansion, Ian found himself held back by five Master-rank Barbarians.

If he got tied up here like this, the kidnappers at the mansion side could take Yuria and escape.

Someone had to continue chasing after Yuria before they could run away.

Straight into the very heart of enemy territory.

[I'll head towards the mansion at Number 12.]

Ian volunteered for this most dangerous and crucial role.

[If Lady Yuria and the kidnappers are there... I'll leave traces as I pursue them. Sir Javier, please take care of the Barbarians with the Heavenly Sword knights and follow my trail.]

He couldn't entrust this vital role to anyone else.

[Wh-what are you saying...!]

But from Javier's perspective, Ian's suggestion seemed reckless.

The mansion at Number 12 was highly likely to be enemy base camp at this point.

In effect, Ian's words meant he would jump right into the heart of the enemy forces all by himself.

[Absolutely not! How could I possibly send Young Master Ian alone! You even gave me your greatsword! And you have no weapon right now!]

[Sir Javier. Please calm down. There's no need to worry that much.]

While it was just a probability, there was a high chance that, at present, there was no opponent at the mansion who could put Ian in a tight spot.

No matter if the mastermind of this incident was Theo Hisperion, the eldest son of the Heavenly Sword Lord, he couldn't keep deploying an infinite number of Master-rank combatants.

Most likely, the only Master-rank powers stationed in this village were those five Barbarians.

'I can't say it's 100%, but it's a possibility worth betting on.'

Theo was used to dealing with multiple enemies at once. There was no way he would concentrate all his forces on kidnapping Yuria.

He would have to reserve strength to protect his business from the enemies of Hisperion, and deploy separate teams for the other ongoing operations against external forces.

Thus, the Master-rank experts dispatched here were probably just those five Barbarians.

There was a high chance that the mansion side was almost devoid of strong forces.

There would at least be some guards, but if they were only at the Expert rank, they would never stand a chance against Ian.

At this point, Ian's pure combat power exceeded even a early-stage master.

'As long as I don't face a mid-stage master or higher, I can easily overwhelm them with the Frenzied Insight Style and Authority of Projection.'

He couldn't use Vladiark since he'd loaned it to Javier, but anything at or beneath lower Master-rank could be crushed with ease.

[Trust me. Sir Javier.]

Ian sent an aura message, brimming with confidence.

[The method I suggested is the best way to break through this situation.]

[Y-you...]

Javier wetted his dry lips and hesitated.

'It's true... If we all get tied up here, all our effort chasing after Lady Yuria will have been for nothing.'

As Ian said, someone had to continue chasing after Yuria.

But...

Sending such a young boy alone into the mansion—was that really the right decision?

'No, in that case, perhaps I should go myself instead...'

Rejected.

If he left this spot, the remaining members would be completely wiped out by those five Barbarians.

'Then... What about sending the Heavenly Sword knights instead of Young Master Ian?'

Again, instantly rejected.

He couldn't trust the high-ranking, but merely Expert-level knights for such a risky and crucial mission.

Sending a squad leader who was at Swordmaster level would be no different—once Javier left, the disparity with the Barbarians would be too great and handling them would be impossible.

'Then... There really is no choice but to send Young Master Ian.'

At least, Ian's combat ability... posed no problem.

He had just seen Ian fight the mercenaries as well as a squad leader could.

'What about his other abilities?'

Tracking kidnappers required more than just strength.

Quick judgment according to the situation, information gathering skills, tracking ability, composure, and experience were all needed.

'These... are impeccable as well.'

Ian had no shortcomings in any of those areas.

The information gathering and judgment he'd shown at the hospital incident.

The composure he'd displayed when facing the Nightingale branch manager and the bartender at the Kartai Inn.

His strength and calmness when fighting the mercenaries.

'If you consider his young age, it's an unbelievable feat, but...'

The overall ability Ian had shown up until now was, honestly, even better than Javier himself, who was the Chief of Investigations.

While Javier had been at a complete loss with this case all morning, Ian had tracked down the culprit's identity and location and chased them all the way here in just half a day.

'And...'

Reflecting back, Ian had never once shown signs of distress or fatigue in all this time.

That is to say, not only had he demonstrated exceptional ability thus far, but he might even have plenty of stamina left.

Moreover, that composure remained even when facing five Master-rank Barbarians now.

While even Javier was biting his lip in frustration, Ian boldly presented the next plan and showed no signs of shrinking back.

'Come to think of it... I shouldn't be the one worrying about Ian at all...'

Rather—

'It's time to trust and rely on Young Master Ian.'

The fact that they'd tracked the kidnapped Yuria this far was 100% thanks to Ian.

It was clear that Ian's proposal, given with such confidence, also meant he had another sure means at hand.

Besides, Ian still had reserves of strength that they couldn't even gauge.

If he unleashed that hidden power, in addition to all he'd shown so far...

Perhaps breaking into the mansion alone to track the kidnappers and rescue Lady Yuria wouldn't be so difficult after all.

Having reached this conclusion, Javier sent an aura message.

[... Thinking it over, you're right. Your proposal is the best. I'll follow it as you suggested, Young Master Ian.]

But—

[Don't be too reckless in pursuing them. We'll wrap things up here as quickly as possible and follow, so if you're in trouble, please wait for us.]

[Yes, I'll act cautiously too, so don't worry.]

Ian had no intention of throwing away his life carelessly.

Rescuing Yuria was important enough to risk his life, but if Ian himself died, Yuria's future would be doomed as well.

Sacrificing his own life was to be the very last and final measure.

[Then... Oh, one last thing before I leave.]

Ian gave Javier one final piece of important information before departing.

[When you face the pink-haired Barbarian, aim for the right leg.]

[Yes...?]

[He's known as Crimson Yaksha (紅夜叉). His right leg was severed by a cursed sword in the past. He can't infuse aura into it.]

This was something Ian had learned in his previous life while gathering information to hunt down Crimson Yaksha.

When Crimson Yaksha was still an Expert, a swordsman wielding a cursed blade had cut off his right leg.

Though he managed to reattach it, the mana circuits there necrotized and never recovered.

[If you attack from his sides—left or right—he'll have trouble responding.]

[H-how do you even know that...!]

Because Ian had killed Crimson Yaksha Dorca himself in his past life.

— Ssweaeeek!

Just then, suddenly, a morning star whistled through the air towards Javier's head.

— Kaang!!!

Even while conversing with Ian, Javier skillfully deflected the weapon with Vladiark.

"How long are you going to just stare at me?!"

Perhaps bored after such a long standoff, Crimson Yaksha roared.

"Come on, let's fight!"

[Looks like he's running out of patience.]

–Ssshhk.

Javier lowered his stance, holding Vladiark in one hand and his beloved sword, caladbolg, in the other.

[Then, I'll...]

Just as Javier was about to say his final words to Ian before throwing himself into battle.

— Tatatat!

"?"

Ian was already sprinting towards the mansion.

"Huh."

Javier glanced at the retreating figure, his conviction strengthening.

Young Master Ian only looked like a fourteen-year-old on the outside.

While he couldn't guess exactly who was inside, he was at least sure it was some veteran who'd seen countless battles.

'There's no way any real fourteen-year-old could move with such speed and decisiveness.'

No matter how elite a Heavenly Sword knight was, the younger ones would freeze or hesitate when quick judgment was required.

Even those who entered after completing all sorts of hellish real combat training would sometimes falter, yet Ian had immediately and seamlessly acted to handle his tasks from the moment the situation started.

'Young Master Ian... Just what are you, really...?'

A secret weapon hidden by the head of the Heavenly Sword Family in the Greysel House?

"Damn! One of them is running away!"

Seeing Ian sprinting toward the mansion, Crimson Yaksha shouted to the Barbarians on the rooftops.

"Don't let a single one reach the mansion! Get him!"

–KWAANG!

At Crimson Yaksha's command, four Barbarians leapt as one, pounding the ground.

They soared toward Ian.

–KUNG!

–KWAANG!

The impact of their leap smashed the buildings' rooftops like cookies.

The four Barbarians flew through the air like rocks launched from catapults.

"Where do you think you're going...!"

Seeing them, Javier quickly raised his beloved sword high.

His role was to tie up those Barbarians while Ian made his dash to the mansion.

As a knight, there was no way he could allow them to hinder Ian.

"Release the Sword Spirit!"

Release the Sword Spirit.

A special secret technique that only those bestowed with the prestigious swords of Hisperion could use.

By calling the true name of the sword, it unleashed the sword's true power—a technique reserved for decisive moments.

"Caladbolg!"

–KWARUNG!!

As Javier called the name of his beloved sword, a massive bolt of lightning struck down upon his blade.

And at the same time—

–KWAGAGAGAGAGA!

"Guh!!!"

"Graaaaagh!!!"

As if divine judgment was being delivered.

Countless bolts of lightning rained down upon the heads of the Barbarians arcing toward Ian.

–KWAGAGAGAGAGA!!!

"Keo-o-o-ogh!"

"Keok!"

The four Barbarians were flattened into the ground as if struck by a giant's mace.

"Huh, huh?"

At the sight, Crimson Yaksha Dorca's eyes widened in shock, showing his teeth.

"He looks like a pushover... but turns out he's pretty tough!"

Dorca licked his lips greedily with his gluttonous tongue.

"That sword... I want it!"

–Uuuuuuuung!

Dorca crouched, beastlike, as if he might explode into a charge at any moment.

Ominous light began to gleam from the tattoos covering his body.

That crimson glow was the reason Dorca was called Crimson Yaksha (紅夜叉).

A tattoo engraved with the blood of a powerful foe he personally hunted—a unique tribal secret technique that allowed him to steal and use a portion of his prey's strength.

"And your blood...!"

It was a Bloodline Tattoo.

"I want it!"

–KWAANG!

Crimson Yaksha stomped the ground violently.

The earth shattered as if struck by a massive shell.

"Hmph!"

Javier also lifted Caladbolg in response.

–KWARURURUNG!!

Bolts of lightning rained down in focused volleys upon Crimson Yaksha.

It was the beginning of a life-or-death struggle between Masters—like a force of nature itself.

Chapter 56 : Taken (10)

Taken (10)

A dark basement where Yuria was imprisoned.

- Bang!

Someone kicked open the tightly shut iron door and entered the basement.

"Miss! Where are you?! Miss Yuria!"

A high-pitched woman's voice.

"This is your nanny! It's Dellen! Miss!"

The nanny who had cared for Yuria since she was just a year old.

It was Dellen Meslow.

"Nanny?! Nanny Dellen!"

Leaning against the iron bars and dozing, Yuria's eyes flew open, her face lighting up.

"Miss! You were there!"

"Yeah! Nanny! I'm here!"

"I'll get you out right away!"

"Yeah! Ha, haha...! I'm saved! I really thought I was going to die here..."

- Crash! Crack!

Dellen tore out the iron bars with her bare hands.

A truly tremendous strength.

As expected of a nanny responsible for raising and protecting a young direct descendant of Hisperion.

"Come out! Are your legs all right!? Can you run?"

"Yeah...! My legs are fine! They're a bit numb, but..."

"That's good enough! We have to hurry! Let's get out quickly!"

"Yes!"

As Yuria stepped out of the cage, a sound could be heard.

- Ugh, uh...

- Us too! Please let us out too!

Victims still trapped in the cages, groaning.

"... Nanny! Let's take these people with us too!"

"Pardon?"

Dellen looked at Yuria with a flustered face.

"Th-there's no time for that! Miss, if we're to move quickly, just the two of us need to go!"

"N-no... we can't just leave them...! Ah! The people who can walk can carry the injured! Then we can all escape together!"

"A-ah, really...!"

Dellen bit her lower lip and then sighed deeply.

"Phew! Miss, your stubbornness really drives me crazy!"

Muttering so, Dellen approached the locked cage padlocks.

"Dellen..."

Just as Yuria felt both trust and love for her nanny—

The nanny before her disappeared.

- Crack!

At the same time, a dull, chilling shock struck the back of Yuria's neck.

"... Huh?"

A blow so strong it felt like her spine would snap.

Yuria's legs buckled and she collapsed on the spot.

Her face slammed into the floor; her vision whirled violently.

As she desperately lifted her gaze, she saw Dellen looking down at her with cold eyes.

"Del...len?"

"Sorry, miss. Once you get stubborn, it's hard to make you yield. It's too difficult to take you away like that."

- Thwack!

Dellen kicked Yuria in the head again.

"Ghk!"

"..."

Her consciousness faded.

.

.

Blinking several times through dizzying confusion...

.

.

"Ugh..."

Before she knew it, the background had changed from the basement to a forest.

Thick mist, so humid that even the moonlight couldn't be seen—a dark night forest.

- Squeak!

Both Yuria's wrists were still bound tightly.

"Del...len...?"

Lying with her cheek on the dirt, Yuria called out to her nanny's name with a groaning, sickly breath.

"Yes, miss. I'm right here."

Seated in the darkness, Dellen slowly stood up and approached Yuria.

In her hand was a chillingly blue blade, held straight.

"I... I don't understand, Dellen..."

- Groan.

Yuria laboriously sat up.

"Why would my nanny do this to me...?"

Nanny Dellen had never laid a harsh hand on Yuria in the thirteen years she'd raised her.

She'd never even used a rod on her.

She'd only ever petted Yuria with warm hands.

Why...

That kick just now... The blow to the back of her head, what was that...?

"No, no...!"

This can't be happening...!

Y-yeah!

"I must've accidentally hit my head somewhere! Maybe I foolishly passed out by myself and dreamed something! R-right?"

Yuria looked up at her nanny with trembling eyes.

"I-I had a scary nightmare, Dellen...! Now that I think about it, it's ridiculous... Will you hug me?"

"Pfft."

Dellen scoffed, spitting at Yuria's face.

"... N-nanny?"

"Even your sturdy body turns foolish if the head's hit, it seems."

"Huh...?"

"Aigoo. Poor Miss..."

Dellen sighed and squatted in front of Yuria.

"Do you still not understand the situation?"

"W-what... I don't know what you're saying, Dellen. Please, stop joking. I'm serious."

"Haaa..."

"Dellen... Nanny...?"

With a half-dazed expression, Yuria looked up at her nanny.

Dellen's eyes were cold and indifferent—an expression Yuria had never seen from her nanny.

That look made the recent memory feel not like a dream at all...

"No... stop... wait, don't tell me..."

It couldn't be.

Because the nanny was...

Like a real mother to me...

- Swoosh...

"...?"

Mumbling nonsense, Yuria's head listed under Dellen's warm touch.

"Nanny...?"

The moment she tried to lift her head to feel that warmth,

"Ke-keh! Kihahahaha!"

Dellen suddenly pulled her hand away, laughing like a madwoman.

"Nanny?"

"Haaa... Miss Yuria. So cute and so lovely... Do you know how long I've waited for this moment?"

Dellen edged closer to Yuria, her face twisted into a smile Yuria had never seen before.

"I raised you since you were just one year old. Changing your diapers, feeding you milk... Thirteen years have passed, miss."

"Uh, um?"

Dellen gently stroked Yuria's head while she gawked, bewildered.

"Though I didn't give birth to you, for over ten years, I've served and thought of you as my own daughter."

And likewise, Yuria had thought of her almost as her real mother.

To Yuria, who lost her real mom early, Dellen was no different from a mother.

"Y-yeah. I thought of you as my mother, too. D-Dellen! So let's just go back, okay—"

"No."

Dellen raised her palm to cut Yuria off.

"Our little role-play is finally over. Why would we go back?"

"W-what?"

"I only took care of you all this time because it was the first young master's order."

"First... young master?"

The first young master—that would be Theo Hisperion?

Why bring up that detestable man all of a sudden...?

"It's not because I loved you that I cared for you all this time."

"...?"

Though not difficult words, Yuria couldn't comprehend them and just blinked.

"I did whatever the first young master told me. That person... I truly love him."

"...?"

"Can you see? This face, grown old while playing your mother."

Dellen ran her hand up and down her face.

She had raised Yuria for thirteen years.

Human youth is fleeting.

Dellen, who began caring for Yuria in her maiden years, was now approaching an age most would call 'aunt.'

"To gain Theo's favor... I did whatever he asked, just to catch his eye. But while I played your nanny, he didn't look at me even once, and now I'm old."

"..."

Dellen spoke on, like a madwoman.

"I started to get anxious. My eyes wrinkling, my laugh lines deepening, cheeks hollowing, hair thinning, the old vitality fading... I kept worrying, 'If I lose even my woman's charm... what if he never notices me?'"

"..."

"But! It's finally over! He'll finally keep me close!"

In Dellen's gaze, obsession and madness churned like swarming insects.

"Once this is over... Master Theo will surely take me in. After all, I've done a great deed, haven't I? I, with my own hands, dealt with you—the young lady who summoned the Founder's divine sword. When credit is given, I'll confess my feelings! He'll surely accept me! Well, maybe as a concubine... though I'd rather be legitimate, my background is just too poor... Hehe..."

"D... Dellen... Nanny...?"

Yuria's eyes grew hot with pain.

"Del—leeeeen!"

Yuria squeezed her eyes shut, biting her lip hard.

The taste of blood, sharp enough to raise chills.

Proof this wasn't a dream.

A reality far worse than any nightmare.

Scalding tears slashed down her cheeks.

"I—I really thought of you like my real mother...!"

Memories flashed through her tightly shut eyes.

Even when, years ago, a maid disguised as a friend poisoned her food...

Even when the guard she trusted as a mentor turned out to be Aris's spy...

Even when the history teacher she saw as a sister was really a heretic who'd infiltrated to brainwash her...

Time after time, she'd been hurt and betrayed by those around her, but never once doubted Dellen.

With Dellen—she truly thought of her as family.

"You..."

Yuria cried in a voice wet with tears.

"I thought you loved me! I trusted you more than anyone! I thought you loved me like a real daughter!"

Nanny Dellen was like a mother to Yuria.

Most of Yuria's childhood memories were with her.

Dellen was the one who told her the name of her favorite flower, marygold,

The one who baked her favorite treat, walnut pie,

The one who always hugged her when she was lonely,

And every birthday, never once forgetting to throw her a party and give her a gift—Dellen was the only one.

"Sniff..."

But Dellen gave no answer.

In the end, hot tears poured from Yuria's eyes.

"Tsk, tsk..."

Dellen clicked her tongue with affected pity.

"Why are you crying, miss?"

But there was not a shred of understanding in the words that followed.

"After all I've sacrificed for you... Did you want me to sacrifice even more?"

"Stop... please stop... Dellen..."

Every time Dellen hugged her warmly...

Yuria had felt love and happiness.

In this world full of lies and betrayal...

At least that warmth, she thought, was real.

She had been grateful, moved—she had dreamed and sworn every day that, when she grew up, she'd give Dellen even more love than she'd received.

Yuria loved Dellen.

Whenever she drew as a child, the main character was always her nanny, and her diaries were filled with stories about Dellen.

And yet—

"Silly Miss, what did you ever see in me to trust me so?"

To think all of it was a lie.

"You must have been lonely. Like me. That's why you clung to me and let yourself dream."

"Please stop..."

Each of Dellen's words was a nail, too painful to bear.

"It's so awful... So cruel, Dellen..."

"Is that so?"

"...."

"Well, enough. Let's stop. It looks like time's up."

Dellen glanced at the watch on her wrist.

"The mage was supposed to arrive by now, but they're not here. So we'll go to the next step."

- Swish.

Dellen raised the sharp sword in her grip high.

"You'll have to die here, miss."

"Ugh... sob..."

Yuria sobbed quietly.

"... Poor Miss."

Dellen rested the blade over her shoulder.

"I'll let you say your last words, at least."

"Sniff..."

Yuria looked up at Dellen.

Her face wet with tears and snot.

"Nanny Dellen...! Can't you just stop, even now?"

"...."

"Everything you just said...! I can pretend it was all a dream and forget it! So can't we just go home, together...? I'll do better, I promise! I'll do whatever you want, whatever you ask...!"

Dellen shook her head.

"... Shouldn't have let you talk. I'm short on time as it is."

And with that, Dellen lifted the sword again.

"Unfortunately, miss, you don't have what I want. My only desire is for Master Theo."

- Fwoom.

A subtle aura rose from Dellen's sword.

"If you care so much for me, then be born as my child in the next life. When you were little... You were so adorable then. Barely cried, always smiling. Easily taken care of."

Dellen's lips curled up slyly.

"An infant born between Theo and me. The name... Let's name her after you—Yuria. How about that?"

"..."

"Even as a ghost, you'll come to my wedding, right?"

- Clench!

The hand gripping the sword tightened, veins bulging.

"Well then, my little Miss. Farewell."

- Slash!

At last, the blade fell like a guillotine.

"..."

Through her blurry vision, Yuria watched the approaching blade.

Time slowed, each second split into a hundred parts.

The blade sped toward her.

'Dellen Nanny... was... going to...'

As she witnessed her own death, an inner monologue surfaced.

'I believed... I really believed...'

What overwhelmed Yuria, more even than the blade, was the aching sense of betrayal by Dellen.

'Those warm hands, that cozy embrace, the lullabies she sang each night...'

All of that love...

In the end, was it an act to slaughter her so utterly?

The warmth she thought was real ripped apart, and the blade before her became ever clearer.

'No way...'

She did not want to believe it. She couldn't.

But...

The blade was still hurtling down on her, mercilessly.

There was no sign of hesitation, no mercy in the swirling sword aura.

'...'

Beyond the flickering blade, she saw Dellen's eyes.

Icy cold, with a faint sneer.

Even if she did not want to realize it, the truth forced itself upon her.

'Shit...!'

A hot something began to roil within Yuria's chest.

Raging betrayal and sorrow were forced aside, and a primal anger sprouted.

The wounds made her blood boil.

- Bubble bubble!

Anger rising, a sound echoed from deep inside.

'Dellen...! That bitch!'

She glared at the sword.

"Kh!"

She could not die for a traitor.

Yuria clenched her teeth and twisted her body.

She had no aura, so could not perfectly evade, but even if she couldn't avoid a wound, at the very least she would bite that filthy traitor.

Her arms tied, poisoned by San Gong Poison, she couldn't fight properly, but at least she would leave that woman—who drove a nail in her heart—with a wound that would never heal.

"Kugh!"

Yes. She would bite off her nose.

The moment she resolved to do so and grit her teeth—

"Ah..."

Happy memories of her nanny flashed before her eyes.

The smile, the face, the beaming grin, the times they'd laughed together.

- Slaaash!

Now the blade was close enough to touch.

'No use...'

She could not bring herself to hurt her nanny.

Even if her nanny tore her into ten thousand pieces...

Dellen was still the one who'd shown Yuria true love.

Even if that love was false...

'Hah...'

- Thud!

Dellen's sword split her forehead and touched her skull.

'Ah...'

Even so.

Her body did not move.

'I'm going to die.'

By the hands of the nanny she trusted and loved most.

'In the end, there was really no one by my side...?'

Even the nanny she loved and trusted inside was out to kill her.

Were others the same?

Her father, even Kayle?

Anyone?

'Well...'

Even she herself was not trying to save herself.

Who could have truly been sincere with her?

'Yes...'

Everything settled.

Even the anger that had begun to swell was snuffed out.

At the moment she let it all go, ready to be crushed by sorrow—

- Kaaaang!!

"?"

A metallic clang rang so loud it rattled her head, and the icy sword aura pressing on her brow suddenly vanished.

Her vision flashed, all sensations suddenly blanketed in ash-gray numbness.

"I'm late."

Then, a quiet, slightly familiar male voice.

- Drip.

Yuria felt hot blood drip from her forehead and snapped her eyes open.

"You, you're...!"

Before Yuria's eyes stood the back of a boy about her size.

Though it was dark, Yuria, born with night vision, could clearly distinguish the color of his hair.

Ash-grey, as if from mudflats.

"Ian Greysel?!"

"Yes, my Lady. I have come..."

The one whom Yuria had trusted and loved most in her previous life.

Ian had come to rescue Yuria.

Damn, such a sad chapter...

The thing that Ian wanted to prevent.

Unfortunately, it was bound to happen sooner or later.

I hope that Yuria will take this experience to grow stronger.

Chapter 57 : Taken (11)

Taken (11)

— SHWAEEEAK!

Right before Dellen's sword split Yuria's head in two—

— KKAANG!!

A shadow suddenly leapt in, fiercely deflecting Dellen's sword.

"What!?"

— CHUK!

Reacting to the third party's intrusion, Dellen quickly leaped backward, widening the distance.

"Who are you...!"

Dellen's eyes widened as she glared ahead.

The forest was as dark as the deep sea, but as a master with refined senses, Dellen too could pierce through such darkness easily by focusing her aura in her eyes.

"A boy?"

The shadow standing protectively in front of Yuria was that of a boy.

He wasn't very tall, had a slender build, and a young, boyish face.

And also...

His hair was ash-gray, like the mud of tidal flats, and he had that peculiar, calm gaze.

"You're...!"

Dellen recognized him too.

She had seen his face at the Sword Dragon Training Hall's entrance exam.

"I—Ian Greysel!?"

The boy who'd recently drawn the greatest interest and affection from Lord Darkan, head of the Heavenly Sword Family.

Not only did he earn the acknowledgment of the head at a young age and become a guest of House Hisperion, but at the Sword Dragon Training Hall's entrance exam, he'd even overwhelmed Yuria—hailed as the greatest genius in the history of Hisperion...

Lately, he was the number one topic of conversation in the Heavenly Sword Palace.

"Cr—damn!"

Dellen looked around wildly, backing away.

The fact that this boy had shown up here... Could it be!?

'Have the Hisperion bastards already chased me down here!?'

She had already guessed that Javier—the leader of Investigation Division of the Heavenly Sword Knights—was somewhere nearby.

While waiting at the mansion, she'd heard that tremendous thunderclap, so loud it ripped through the clear sky.

That unmistakably hefted, chilling thunder was the sword sound of Caladbolg, Javier's trademark weapon.

The moment she heard that sky-shredding roar, Dellen immediately fled here with Yuria.

Originally, her plan was to meet the dark mage Rudeus here, open the escape portal he had prepared in advance, and flee somewhere else.

But Rudeus hadn't come, Dellen didn't know how to open the portal, so—pressed for time—she meant to kill Yuria and escape alone.

Yet.

'Tch...!'

She'd only been hiding here for less than five minutes.

Yet somehow, she'd already been found.

'What the hell are those five Barbarian muscle heads doing?!

They should have been holding off the Hisperion bastards for sure!

'Any other enemies...?'

Dellen scanned all directions, raising her senses.

"... Huh?"

But oddly, she sensed no other presences at all.

— FWOONG!

Even spreading her senses wider, she got nothing.

'Huh?'

The only presences she felt here were Yuria and Ian, right in front of her.

'What, he didn't come with the knights?'

Then...

'Don't tell me he came alone?'

Dellen cocked her head.

"Sheesh?"

An early-stage Swordmaster herself...

And Ian, likely just at the Expert rank, actually came here alone to confront her?

'Why?'

If Ian was only an Expert, all coming here alone could accomplish was dying together with Yuria.

'What is this?'

First came confusion, then curiosity...

Then a thought struck her.

'Wait a second...?'

Something felt strange.

'What's going on?'

For that boy to be here alone meant he'd tracked her himself, following her trail.

'... How?'

Dellen had erased every trace she possibly could while coming here.

She'd set fire to Rudeus's mansion—where Yuria was held—in order to destroy clues, used the lake to slip out of the village unnoticed, and even took extreme care not to break so much as a single blade of grass or twig while crossing the forest.

'Then how on earth...?'

How had that boy tracked her all the way here?

He was just fourteen.

Way too young to have learned proper tracking skills.

It's not like he had eyes in the sky!

How in the world?

Unease at the strangeness crept over her, and chills ran down her spine.

— CHUK!

Dellen glared with her Four White Eyes, pointing her sword at Ian.

"You...! How did you get here!"

Normally, with the risk of the Sword Knights barging in at any moment, it would be best to just kill Ian and run.

But if the Hisperion bastards had some method for tracking her, running farther wouldn't help.

'I need to find out how he tracked me, first!'

Only knowing that would allow her to shake off pursuit and escape properly.

'Hmph.'

In answer to Dellen's question, Ian clicked his tongue calmly.

'She's not attacking immediately, huh.'

He found it surprising.

He'd assumed Dellen would see his young face, underestimate him as a fourteen-year-old, and rush right in.

— SWISH.

Ian relaxed his prepared counterattack stance—Frenzied Insight Style: Reversing Heaven.

"How did I get here, you ask...?"

Honestly, it wasn't much.

'I had to find Yuria like this many times in my past life.'

During the Hisperion civil war, during the Human-Demon War...

There had been many chaotic times, and he'd often been forced apart from Yuria. He had to keep finding her again and again.

So he'd developed a unique technique to conveniently track Yuria down.

'Frenzied Insight Style: True Heavenly Tracking.'

It was a technique to sense and track Yuria's unique light aura—Heavenly Energy.

To use it, he needed to spread a large amount of aura and focus for a few minutes, and if Yuria was too far away, he couldn't sense her at all, but if they were in the same town or city, it worked pretty well.

'I was surprised that Yuria was closer than I expected.'

The moment Ian saw mansion no.12 catch fire, he used Frenzied Insight Style: True Heavenly Tracking, and immediately sensed that Yuria was on the other side of the village's lake.

Following the presence he sensed with True Heavenly Tracking, he swam across the lake and cut through the forest, arriving right as Dellen was about to split Yuria's head—saving her by a hair's breadth.

'Whew...'

Thinking about it now, it was truly a heart-stopping moment.

Ian let out a silent sigh of relief and glanced back to check Yuria's condition.

'She's bleeding...'

The long wound on her forehead was painful to look at.

The only consolation was that it didn't seem life-threatening.

"Ian...?"

Yuria looked up at him, her face half out of her wits.

"Y-you... How are you here...?"

She had a thousand questions to ask, but—

— KAANG!!

"Ugh!!"

Suddenly, Dellen rushed in like a lightning bolt, clashing swords with Ian.

— KKAANG! CHAENG! KAGAGAK!

Once, twice, not just one or two, but three and four times.

Ian barely managed to block Dellen's endlessly fierce sword strikes.

"Lost focus, did you?! I asked! How did you get here?!"

Dellen had no intention of giving Ian and Yuria pause to exchange words.

The Sword Knights could barge in any moment.

She had to wring the tracking secret from Ian and escape.

"Answer me!"

— KKAANG!

Dellen brought her sword down, four White Eyes blazing.

"How did you know I was here?!"

— KKAANG! KANG! CHAENG!

"Ugh!"

Relentless attacks rained down.

The [Elegance Armory Longsword Lv.53], copied using Authority of Projection, was incredibly sturdy and blocked every strike, but a master's sword was still heavy and fearsome.

The nannies of Hisperion, after all, directly served and protected the head's children; each one was a master or stronger.

No matter who Ian was, Dellen was not a foe to be taken lightly.

'I thought I could buy some time with conversation...'

It seemed Dellen had chosen torture, not dialogue, to satisfy her curiosity.

— KKAANG! KANG!

"Ugh...!"

Sword strikes poured like a monsoon rainstorm.

It seemed as if Dellen wouldn't stop until Ian lost an arm or a leg.

However.

'Still, this is doable.'

— KKAANG!

Dellen was not using the Swordmaster's special technique: enhanced energy.

— HWARUK!

— KKAANG!

All that shimmered on Dellen's blade was faint, wavering sword energy.

If she used enhanced energy, the massive aura shockwaves would immediately reveal their location to the Sword Knights—she was mindful of that risk.

— KKAANG!

But mere sword energy alone couldn't break Ian's defense.

— KAANG! CHANG!

Already, Dellen's sword strikes had been blocked more than ten times.

'W-how...!'

The murderous glint in Dellen's eyes faded—replaced by distinct confusion.

'Wasn't he just an Expert...? This is Expert-rank...? N-no! That's impossible!'

Ian was supposed to be the same age as Yuria—a mere boy of fourteen.

A child being an Expert was strange enough, but for a mere fourteen-year-old to be parrying a Master's sword like this...

— KKAANG! KANG! KAANG!

Dellen sped up, but it made no difference.

— KWANG! KOONG!

Even putting more weight behind her strikes, he countered-nimbly.

— HWIRIK! SHIIIK! KKAANG!

Mixing in plenty of feints only backfired.

— KANG! KWANG! KWACHING! CHAENG! KWAANG!

The number of sword exchanges Ian blocked was already well over thirty.

"N-no way..."

Yuria, sitting behind Ian, was just as astonished.

Her mouth was agape, as if she were in a daze.

— KKAANG! KANG!

Dozens of exchanges had occurred, yet Ian's defense showed not a hint of an opening or any sign of wavering.

As far as Yuria knew, Ian was at the Expert rank.

Could an Expert really parry the sword of a Swordmaster that perfectly?

That degree of skill was a distant level even for Yuria—called the greatest genius in history, with heaven-sent talent, and at the center of everyone's expectations and caution.

'W-what is this...'

She'd been planning to at least grab some dirt and help Ian.

Even if her feelings toward Dellen were in turmoil, she couldn't just sit by while Ian risked his life to save her.

But...

— KKAANG! KANG!

Watching Ian's meticulously calculated sword routes, she simply couldn't interfere.

If she did, it seemed she'd only disrupt his flawless movements.

— KKAANG! KANG!

In less than a minute, more than fifty sword exchanges had already flown by.

So far, Ian had only defended.

'I could do this all day.'

If Ian attacked, he might open himself to risk, but if he focused solely on defense, he could block Dellen's sword strikes endlessly.

'It'd be great if I could keep stalling like this.'

Although Ian clearly had the advantage over Dellen in swordsmanship, he still wanted to avoid a direct showdown with her if possible.

'That sword she's using...!'

Because of the sword Dellen wielded.

'That was the sword Yuria's nanny used...?'

Flostilla.

Once its sword spirit is released, it could summon countless petal-shaped blades and freely control them, like cherry blossoms in full bloom—one of Hisperion's famed swords.

'Damn...!'

In his past life, Ian had used this sword himself.

'If this person is wielding that... I might not even win unless I risk a serious injury!'

Up to early-stage Swordmaster, Ian could overwhelm anyone using Frenzied Insight Style and Authority of Projection, but if that Swordmaster wielded a famed sword of Hisperion, it was a different story.

'If possible, the best move is to play defense until Sir Javier arrives here.'

But.

'That might not work...!'

Dellen wasn't a fool.

She wouldn't keep swinging, repeating ineffective strikes, until Ian's backup arrived.

— CHUK!

Indeed—as soon as their sword exchanges reached about one hundred...

Dellen suddenly leaped far back, putting great distance between them.

'She's changing tactics now.'

Either using enhanced energy or the sword spirit release.

She'd take out something Ian couldn't easily counter.

"Kuh...!"

Her teeth gritted, Dellen glared at Ian.

'Cocky brat...!'

At first, she'd thought she could take Ian's limbs in three moves—an absurd underestimation.

In under two minutes, she'd unleashed over a hundred sword strikes, the last ten or so at near full power (just without enhanced energy), yet none had broken his defense.

In other words, unless she used advanced techniques, she could never defeat him by wielding her sword alone.

'He's 14...? An Expert...?'

No, that was impossible.

From a swordsmanship perspective, it made no sense.

No matter his talent, that level of composure was impossible for a fourteen-year-old, nor was his aura control at a level an Expert could achieve.

'If I get careless, I'll lose!'

Dellen no longer underestimated Ian.

'Can't be fooled by that kid's looks! He's at least a Master! Whether it's enhanced energy or the sword spirit release—it's my only option!'

At first, she hadn't wanted to use either technique.

If possible, she wanted to subdue Ian without revealing either, and that was still the case.

Both techniques caused enormous aura shockwaves and could easily expose her location.

But...

'That kid tracked me down alone. That means...'

There might already be a way for the Heavenly Sword Knights to track her beyond normal means.

If her location was already blown, there was no reason not to use enhanced energy or sword spirit release.

And if she must pull out a big move, the stronger, the better.

A technique to crush Ian quickly and surely.

"Sword Spirit Release!"

— PWAT!

— HWAAAAAA!

With Dellen's shout, a vast silver flower field bloomed instantly across the earth.

"Flostilla!"

In response to her command, silver petals surged up like a tidal wave.

Chapter 58 : Taken (12)

Taken (12)

"Flostilla!"

When Dellen awakened the true name of her sword, silver petals in full bloom upon the earth surged upward like an eruption.

— Swaaaaaa!

— Kagagagagagak!

The tiny blade petals clashed violently, sparks flying, creating a rending cacophony.

'Ugh...! My ears will fall off.'

Ian gritted his teeth, regripping his sword.

'That's not how you use it...!'

Ian knew Flostilla, the sword Dellen wielded, very well, as he had often used this famous blade in his previous life.

'If she were skilled at handling Flostilla, there's no way it would make a sound like that.'

That dreadful noise was the result of failing to properly control each blade petal individually.

If one truly knew how to wield Flostilla, such a sound would not be made.

Instead, there would be a clear and regular chime.

'That nanny...! It looks like she can't handle Flostilla well. Seems she hasn't practiced much with it.'

Perhaps it was because the Hisperion's nanny rarely had occasion to face real combat, given her duties.

Even considering that, her technique was exceedingly crude.

No matter how much a nanny might spend nearly 24 hours with the direct lineage, she should still have some personal training time.

It seemed she had utterly neglected practicing with Flostilla.

'What was she doing during her personal training...?'

Did she just train her aura recklessly, without any skill?

'Well, it's fortunate for me either way.'

Whatever the reason, Dellen's lack of skill with Flostilla was an advantage for Ian.

'This won't be as hard to deal with as I thought.'

If Dellen's handling of Flostilla was only at this level, it wouldn't be impossible to withstand the Sword Spirit's release without a scratch.

'Plus, since Flostilla is a sword I've used many times before.'

Ian knew all the typical weaknesses and gaps that tended to occur when using Flostilla for Sword Spirit Release.

'As long as I move only focusing on those gaps, Dellen will never land a decisive blow on me.'

Especially with Dellen's poor control of the blade petals—there would only be more gaps.

— Kagagagagak!!

The disharmonious noise from Dellen's messed-up manipulation of Flostilla echoed through the forest.

The blade petals, spraying sparks, shot upward into the sky.

It was as if a whirlpool was rising from the ground, coiling hungrily and merging into one.

'She's clumsy at drawing the petals together, too.'

If Ian were using Flostilla, it wouldn't have even taken a third of the time it was taking Dellen to gather the petals into one.

'But it's nearly complete. She'll attack soon.'

At the moment when all the blade petals in full bloom on the earth gathered together, Dellen would whip the mass of blades, which had risen like tentacles, down onto Ian's head.

'I have to move before she draws all the petals together!'

— Tadat!

Ian dashed toward Yuria, who was standing a couple steps behind him.

"Huh...!"

Yuria stiffened, holding her breath as Ian suddenly rushed her way.

"Miss Yuria! I'm sorry! Please excuse me for a moment!"

"Wait, what! Huh?!"

— Whump!

Without hesitation, Ian wrapped his arm around Yuria's waist and lifted her over his shoulder.

"Wh-what are you doing!?"

"I'll dodge together with you like this!"

"I-I can avoid it on my own! Put me down!"

"No. You mustn't move!"

Ian knew Yuria could move as if flying, even without aura.

After all, her body was blessed with 'True Heavenly Blood', just like the founder of Hisperion, giving her abilities far beyond a regular person.

'However...'

But merely having a strong body wasn't enough to completely avoid Dellen's Sword Spirit Release.

No matter how clumsy Dellen was, it was still a secret technique of a Master-rank expert.

Even if Yuria were in perfect condition, Ian would have picked her up all the same.

No matter how much of a genius Yuria was, she was only at the level of an Expert, and since she couldn't read the flow of Flostilla, it would be impossible for her to completely avoid those steel petals.

"I-If you do this, you're in danger too...!"

"Be quiet! You'll bite your tongue!"

— Shweeeeeeee!

— Kwagagagagagak!!

At last, it began.

The tentacled spray of petals that had soared into the sky whipped down over the heads of Ian and Yuria.

'If that hits, we're dead.'

— Fwsh!

— Kwaaaang!!!

Ian jumped to the right just as the blade tentacle whipped down onto the spot where he'd been.

Mud exploded, and trees shattered to splinters.

If a person had taken that hit, not even their form would remain.

— Kwagagagagak!

But the blade tentacle did not stop with that one swing.

Churning like a shredder, the mass of blade petals rolled towards Ian.

— Kwajik! Kwang! Kwagagak!

Rocks and trees in its path were sucked into the blades, instantly reduced to powder and sawdust.

'If it catches us, we won't even have bones left.'

— Tatata!

Ian, gripping Yuria tightly on his shoulder, ran in the direction opposite the blade tentacle.

— Kwajik! Kwagagak! Kwang!

Even at full speed, the sounds of destruction grew closer to the back of his head with every moment.

"I-Ian! Behind you! Behind!!"

At Yuria's shrill cry, Ian glanced back.

— Kuuoooooo!

Before he knew it, a towering wave of blade petals was rising like a tidal wave.

"Tch."

— Kwagagagagak!!

— Kukwaang!!

The blade petals formed an arched ceiling, blocking Ian's path and crashing down.

In an instant, Ian and Yuria found themselves trapped inside a tunnel of blade petals.

— Kigigigigik!

— Kwagak! Kagak! Kak!

Sparks flew in all directions as the blade tunnel rapidly narrowed, closing in on them from all sides.

"H-hah!"

Yuria swallowed her breath.

Right now, the only way out was the hole at the end of the tunnel.

But the end was so far off.

If it were just Ian, maybe—but with Yuria over his shoulder, it seemed impossible to escape before they were shredded by the petals.

"Run, Ian!"

"... Hmph."

"I'll be fine, just escape on your own!"

"I need to concentrate, so stop saying nonsense!"

To throw away the purpose of his life over an attack like this?

What a ridiculous thought.

"... Sss."

Calmly, Ian darted his gaze about, quickly scanning his surroundings.

— Kwagagagagak!

Even now, the tunnel of blade petals churned like a vortex, closing in on Ian and Yuria.

"Ian!"

As Yuria kicked on Ian's shoulder, trying to forcibly get down—

'Found it!'

Ian's eyes flashed sharply.

What he had spotted: a gap in one corner of the blade tunnel.

'There!'

Amid the storm of swirling blades, a tiny fissure would open and close intermittently.

'When one cannot properly wield Flostilla, such a gap often appears.'

That was a weakness caused by Dellen's inability to control Flostilla correctly.

'I'll break through there! Timing is everything!'

Even a moment's mistake in timing, and they'd be minced into paste by the blade petals.

— Kwajik! Kwagagagak!

The wild clashing of blade petals.

Sparks flying everywhere.

The tunnel was fast growing narrower.

— Kurururururu!

Even the ground under Ian's feet was trembling.

It felt as if any moment, blades would burst upward from beneath him too.

There wasn't much time left.

"Miss Yuria! Hold on tight!"

"What? Wh-what do you—whoa!!"

— Fwaat!

Before Yuria could even finish speaking, Ian gathered aura to his toes and struck the ground powerfully.

— Shweeeek!

An art that focused aura to an extreme point in a single place for explosive movement.

A supersonic advance, applying the principle of Frenzied Insight Style's Extreme Point.

With Yuria over his shoulder, Ian triggered a sonic boom, dashing toward the gap in the blades.

However—

— Kwagagagagak!!

If they tried to squeeze through that narrow fissure with only their bodies, their skins would be stripped off.

So—

— 《Authority of Projection》 —

◆Skill

[Magic Shield Lv.10]

————————

Ian cast the spell 'Magic Shield', his reward from the Authority of Projection tutorial.

— Kwajazazazak!

As soon as he wedged it into the gap between the blades, the Magic Shield shattered like a cookie.

The gap widened a little, but it still wasn't enough for Ian and Yuria to slip through safely.

But that wasn't a problem.

'If once isn't enough, then do it ten times.'

If ten times isn't enough, do it a hundred times.

— Kwajazazazazazak!

— Kwaching! Kwaching! Kwaching! Kwaching!

Spells cast using the Authority of Projection required neither incantation nor calculation.

He stacked Magic Shields dozens of times per second, forcing open the tiny gap.

— Shweeeeeee!

Soon, a sizable enough opening.

'That should do it!'

— Fwaaash!!

Ian held Yuria tightly and hurled himself through the widened gap.

"H-hah!"

Yuria clung desperately to Ian's collar.

— Kwajazak!

— Shweeek!

The instant Ian and Yuria escaped from the tunnel of blade petals, the gap snapped shut once more.

Had they been even 0.1 seconds slower, they'd have at least lost an ankle.

Just imagining it was terrifying.

— Chuck!

Ian landed smoothly on the dirt, letting out a sigh of relief.

'Phew. Made it.'

Thankfully, Yuria hadn't suffered a single scratch either.

— Kagagagagak!

— Kwaaaang!

The blade petals compressed to their limit, then collided and twisted, exploding apart.

— Shweeeek!

Sharp fragments scattered in all directions.

'Tch...!'

Ian hurled himself and Yuria behind a boulder.

— Ting! Taeng! Kang!

Fragments bounced harmlessly off the rock with metallic clangs.

"W-we're alive...?!"

"I'll set you down now."

"Y-yeah!? Ah, r-right..."

As Yuria got down from Ian's shoulder, her lips trembled.

'W-what on earth was that...?'

Given the situation, there was no time for leisurely questions and answers, but inwardly, Yuria was reeling from everything Ian had just done.

'What did he do just now...?'

When the blade petals had encircled them, she'd thought for sure they were dead.

'D-definitely, in the middle... th-that was magic, wasn't it?'

And that wasn't the only strange thing about Ian.

'He found a gap in that chaotic whirlwind of blades!'

He'd widened the gap with magic, then passed through it at a speed so fast that even Yuria could only replicate it by invoking Extreme Sense, the 4th form of the Heavenly Flow.

'J-just who are you, Ian...'

Yuria couldn't begin to make sense of what she'd witnessed.

She already knew Ian possessed incredible talent comparable to her own, yet what he'd shown just now was well beyond that.

'Even I couldn't read the flow and spot a gap in that insane vortex! That's almost superhuman... And—what? He uses magic too!?'

And it wasn't just ordinary magic.

This was a mysterious spell cast dozens of times a second, without incantation or calculation.

'I—Ian was a magic swordsman? No, wait—can humans really use magic like that?! What is he?!'

Yuria wanted to ask him everything, right that moment, but—

— Sssssssss...

Dellen appeared, standing amid the settling petals.

With the enemy still standing, there was no time for idle conversation.

"H-how...! How did you!!"

Dellen gawked at Ian and Yuria, who sat by the boulder without shedding a drop of blood, after escaping the blade tunnel.

"Ggr...!"

She ground her teeth, backing away.

Just what was that gray-haired brat—a ghost?

She had completely surrounded him with blade petals, leaving no gaps—so how was he perfectly fine...?

"Haha...!"

Dellen laughed, as if her wits had left her.

Originally, she'd intended to capture Ian alive and torture out his secret.

'To capture him...! What a foolish thought.'

That monster not only blocked her sword energy with ease, but somehow, even unraveled Flostilla's Sword Spirit Release without suffering so much as a scratch.

If she tried anything more now, she might end up the victim herself.

'I should have gone all out from the start! This time, he dies! I'll kill him as quickly as possible and get out of here!'

Dellen lowered her stance drastically.

At the same time, kill intent filled her eyes.

'Never did I imagine I'd have to use this against children!'

The stance Dellen took was her secret ace in the hole—one never before shown in real combat.

"T-that's...!"

Yuria gasped at Dellen's stance.

'Heavenly Flow, 4th form!?'

Dellen's preparatory form was the Hisperion family's secret martial art.

A stance for the Heavenly Flow's 4th form: Flash, which focused everything on speed.

"H-how does Dellen...!"

'A Hisperion nanny knows the Heavenly Flow...?'

Ian was just as surprised.

The Heavenly Flow was a secret art passed down only to direct heirs of Hisperion; anyone else learning it was strictly forbidden.

'Did she watch and copy when Yuria was practicing...?!'

If so, Dellen too possessed truly terrifying talent.

However—

'If she's using the Heavenly Flow, that's even better!'

That, too, was an advantage for Ian.

'I've researched and researched ways to counter the Heavenly Flow 4th form since my past life!'

He'd gritted his teeth, desperate to defeat Yuria in his previous life and poured all his energy into studying this technique.

'Back then, Yuria's level was Grandmaster, right?'

And Dellen?

At best, a low-tier Swordmaster.

'If a low-tier Swordmaster clumsily mimics the Heavenly Flow's 4th form...'

Honestly, it was laughable.

'The next exchange will be the last.'

Rather than catching Ian unprepared, Dellen had only presented her neck to him by revealing her trump card.

Ian's eyes gleamed sharply as he regripped his sword.

The moment signaling the battle's end was at hand.

We already know that Ian knows how to counter Heavenly Flow when he fought Yuria in the exam...

Dellen just unlucky...

Chapter 59 : Taken (13)

Taken (13)

— Fwshrk!

A small spark of sword energy bloomed like a flame from the tip of Dellen's sword.

— Fwoooooosh!

The fire, which started as a small flicker, instantly swelled up and blazed fiercely like a dragon's breath.

— Wooooong!

Soon, the wild flares gradually subsided, and the raging flames became one dazzling flash of light.

— Wng. Wng. Wng. Wng.

A straight beam of light.

Luminescence gracefully wrapped around the blade...

'E-enhanced energy...!'

Yuria's face turned pale.

'The 4th Form of Heavenly Flow... and even enhanced energy...!'

Yuria instinctively grabbed Ian's collar.

"N-no...! Ian! T-that's not good...!"

If the 4th Form of Heavenly Flow, the secret martial technique of House Hisperion, was combined with that level of enhanced energy, facing it head on would be tantamount to suicide.

The 4th Form of Heavenly Flow overwhelmed the opponent with speed, and enhanced energy amplified a sword's power so much that it could slice even solid steel like tofu...

If the two were combined, not only evasion but even defense would become impossible.

No matter how astounding Ian's skills had been so far, this was an entirely different level of problem.

To react to the 4th Form 'Flash' of Heavenly Flow from a master-level swordsman, you needed at least high-rank master-level senses and speed.

And to block a master's enhanced energy, you needed either equivalent enhanced energy or at least armor made of adamantium or higher metals.

'But...'

Ian had neither.

'If Ian were a master, he would have already brought out his enhanced energy...!'

And then...

Yuria's trembling gaze landed on the sword Ian held.

'Elegance Armory...!'

It was the most expensive equipment you could get on the market, but now it was utterly useless.

'That won't work...! There's no way he can block that!'

Unless it was a longsword made of pure adamantium.

With that sword—just a blend of mithril, magic tower alloy, and a tiny bit of adamantium—it would be impossible to withstand the enhanced energy of Dellen's historic famed sword, 'Flostila.'

"Ian! R-run...!"

Just as Yuria gripped Ian's collar tightly to cry out for him to flee...

— Thud!

Ian firmly clasped her hand with the one that wasn't holding his sword.

"... Ian!?"

Yuria called his name with trembling lips.

"..."

Ian didn't answer.

He just quietly nodded, still keeping his gaze fixed on the enemy.

"..."

That was all.

Yet that single motion gave Yuria an unfamiliar sense of calm, oddly comforting her heart.

"Ian..."

Her heart, which had just been pounding with anxiety, felt relieved—as if she had entered a fortress' solid walls.

"A–are you alright?"

— Nod.

Ian nodded again.

"... Alright."

Yuria also bit her lower lip and nodded back.

'Honestly, I have no idea what Ian's thinking...'

From all she knew, there wasn't a single way out of this situation, not with common sense.

The combination of the 4th Form of Heavenly Flow and enhanced energy was a technique that even accomplished master-level swordsmen struggled to counter.

No matter how skilled Ian was, unless he suddenly brought out enhanced energy, he wouldn't be able to cope with Dellen's attack.

It wasn't a matter of skill in martial arts—this was just physical limitations.

But.

'Still, if it's Ian, I feel like there might be a way only he knows.'

During the entrance exam at Sword Dragon Hall, Ian had countered her 4th Form of Heavenly Flow with techniques she could never have imagined.

When Dellen unleashed Sword Spirit Release just now, not only had he found an opening in the midst of those frantic blades, but he'd also cast magic in a way Yuria had never even seen before, overturning all her expectations and common sense.

"I'll trust you. Ian...!"

Yuria whispered with conviction.

— Nod.

Ian nodded one last time, as if to set her mind at ease.

'Enhanced energy...'

Ian wet his dry lips, glaring at Dellen.

'She's coming at me with both the 4th Form of Heavenly Flow and enhanced energy.'

Both required immense concentration.

Unless one had thoroughly mastered one or the other, using both at once was tremendously challenging.

'... Hmm.'

From Ian's clashes against Dellen, her proficiency was just early-stage master rank.

There's no way she has fully mastered enhanced energy at that level.

So it's likely that the 4th Form of Heavenly Flow, Flash, was the one she had truly honed...

'She must have dedicated herself to secretly learning it.'

When Yuria improved the 4th Form of Heavenly Flow to fit herself while training—

Dellen must have watched and picked it up.

'This is a moment that demands resolve.'

Ian swallowed dryly, tightening his grip on the sword.

But, of course, he wasn't remotely thinking of betting his life here.

No matter how much Dellen brought out both the 4th Form and enhanced energy, to Ian, she wasn't a worthy enough threat to risk his life.

Still—

'I'll have to brace myself to take a proper stab for the first time in a while.'

He'd need to be ready for an injury that bordered on life-threatening.

Only then could he decisively gain the upper hand against Dellen.

— Fsshhhh...!

At that moment, a faint plume of dust rose behind Dellen's heel.

'She's about to come.'

Ian also had to prepare to receive Dellen's strike.

—《Authority of Projection》—

◆Skill

[Magic Shield Lv.10]

————————

— Kwaching! Kwaching! Kwaching! Kwaching!

Ian overlaid Magic Shields on his sword as much as his magic power and stamina would allow.

Dozens of layers per second.

— Kwaching! Kwaching! Kwaching! Kwaching!

He piled them on relentlessly.

'What's that...?'

Yuria swallowed as she saw the overlapping Magic Shields piling up behind Ian.

'Enhanced energy...?'

Layer upon layer of magical barrier stacked onto Ian's sword blade without pause.

The brighter and more intense the light grew, the more it resembled enhanced energy.

However.

'No. That's not it. It's not enhanced energy.'

She felt none of the overwhelming condensed power of enhanced energy.

To Yuria, it just looked like a plain magical barrier layered over Ian's sword.

And her judgment was correct.

'With this shield... As long as I can somehow weather this one blow...'

Ian was aiming to withstand Dellen's 4th Form and enhanced energy with a sword layered with hundreds of Magic Shields, just to block her attack even once.

But.

'Is he... Is he planning to block Dellen's enhanced energy with that...?'

To Yuria, it was reckless to the extreme.

'I-it's impossible...!'

No matter how many layers of magical barrier he stacked, before enhanced energy, it would be shredded apart as easily as paper.

Sure, he could dramatically reduce the force of enhanced energy, but at that level of defense, he'd eventually get struck anyway.

'W-what are you thinking, Ian Greysel...!'

Once again, anxiety welled up inside Yuria's chest.

She wanted to stop him immediately but—

"... Nngh!"

Looking at Ian, focused as he confronted Dellen, she just couldn't interrupt.

If she broke Ian's concentration now, and Dellen leapt in and cut him down, it would be catastrophic.

'The choice is already made...!'

Yuria had already decided to trust Ian.

Now it was time to take responsibility for that choice.

— Fsshhhhhh...!

The dust at Dellen's heels began to intensify.

Her aura was clearly visible, starting at her toes, flowing up her calves, then climbing all the way to her waist.

— Wooooooong...!

Even Dellen's enhanced energy stopped vibrating, its form stabilizing further with each moment.

'It's almost time.'

When Dellen's aura reached to her waist, the 4th Form of Heavenly Flow would strike.

'Then, I need to be ready too.'

The Magic Shield was sufficiently stacked now.

Next—

'Frenzied Insight Style, Extreme Sense...!'

A martial art that hyper-focuses aura into the body's sensory cells, pushing reaction speed beyond the user's own level.

— Fwoooooong!

In an instant, Ian's presence changed—becoming as deep and dark as the depths of the sea.

'Let's share the final move!'

Just as Ian glared at Dellen with both eyes wide open—

— Kwaaaaaaang!!!

The ground beneath Dellen exploded as she unleashed the 4th Form of Heavenly Flow.

— Shweeeeeeeek!

"Die!!"

Light and supersonic speed.

An incomprehensible swiftness, somewhere between the two, brought Dellen before Ian as if she'd teleported.

— Shweeeeeeeek!

Her blade, wrapped in enhanced energy, fell toward Ian's head at that same blinding speed.

— Fssssss...!

Ian's body moved reflexively.

Yuria was behind him.

So, first and foremost, his body moved instinctively to shield Yuria.

— Kwajajajajajajak!

The sword he barely managed to raise clashed with Dellen's enhanced energy, spitting blue flames.

— Kwajajajajajajak!

Like a sugar cookie shattered by a saw blade, the Magic Shield wrapping Ian's sword was broken apart by an incredible force.

— Kwajik!

When the Magic Shield finally disappeared, even the blade of the Elegance Armory cracked.

— Tcheonng!

With a short death rattle, Ian's sword snapped in two.

"It's over!!"

"Guh...!"

Ian abandoned his sword and threw his body aside.

It was impossible to fully avoid Dellen's sword.

All he could do was take the blow meant for his head with his shoulder instead.

— 《Authority of Projection》 —

◆Trait

[Gargoyle's Petrification Lv.32]

————————

He pushed the gargoyle trait to its extreme.

— 《Authority of Projection》 —

◆Skill

[Magic Shield Lv.10]

————————

At the same time, in the brief instant allowed, he stacked as many Magic Shields over his shoulder as possible.

— Kwajajajajajak!

"Ku, ku, kuuuuurgh!!"

But even petrification and Magic Shield were pierced far too easily by Dellen's enhanced energy.

— Seok!

— Kwadeuk!

Dellen's sword dug right into Ian's trapezius.

"Kuugh...!"

— Kkwadeudeuk!

Shattering his collarbone, smoothly cleaving his lung as it descended.

— Kkwaaaaak!

Just as Dellen's sword was about to reach Ian's heart,

Ian grabbed Dellen's blade with both hands.

— Kkwaaak!

"Kku, kkuugh!"

The price of grabbing pure enhanced energy bare-handed was brutal.

— Paak!

— Hudududuk!

More than half his fingers were severed and sent flying, and the mana circuits in his arms burst, tearing his forearms to shreds.

"Haaaaghhhh!"

The pain was enough to make him lose consciousness on the spot.

But Ian, to the end, gritted his teeth and forced Dellen's sword away.

— Kwadadadadadak!

His muscles, blood vessels, and mana circuits were all snapping, shredded by Dellen's enhanced energy.

And soon—

"Ah, aah! Ian...! Aaaaah!"

— Fsshhhhhh...

Ian's arms sagged limply.

— Thud.

His knees hit the ground.

"Kku, kuuuurgh..."

— Gulp!

"Urk!"

A death rattle and a spurt of dark blood welled up from his mouth.

"Kuh, kuh... Hehehe."

Dellen, burying her sword in his chest, began to laugh.

"Kuh! Puhahahahahaha!"

Her maniacal laughter shook the sword, sending jarring pain through Ian's nerves as his body convulsed in agony.

"Ugh... urgh...!"

"Pff. Puhahaha! The best you could do was act as a meat shield!? Puhaha!"

Dellen even wiped a tear as she openly jeered.

"Haaa... I actually got nervous for a second, thinking you might have something left up your sleeve."

In the end, a kid was just a kid.

Genius talent of the century, but—

"Well, too bad."

She'd met someone like herself, a strong fighter, far too early.

The greatest talent of the era was destined to become a star in the heavens today.

"So long, young lond Ian."

Just as Dellen gathered enhanced energy into her sword again, aiming to blow Ian apart right then—

"Kuh, kuuh..."

With a low groan, Ian's eyes widened and he shouted,

"Sword Spirit Release(劍令 解放)...!"

There was still no trace of defeat in his gaze.

First real life and death fight...

Chapter 60 : Taken (14)

Taken (14)

"Sword Spirit Release...!"

"What?"

At Ian's shouted cry, squeezed out with desperation, all traces of a smile vanished from Dellen's face.

— Wooong!

At the same moment, as if responding to Ian's call, Flostilla vibrated faintly in his grip.

"Wh-what...!"

That vibration was unmistakably the precursor to the release of a sword spirit.

'No way...!'

Ian Greysel, releasing the sword spirit of Flostilla...?

'D-damn!'

For an instant, a spine-chilling, ominous premonition seized Dellen.

'I-I have to kill him quickly!'

Dellen strengthened her grip on the sword hilt.

Just as she was about to slice Ian in half right then—

—Grab!

—CRAAACK!

Yuria's hand shot out like lightning and grabbed the tip of Flostilla's blade.

"W-what...!"

"Nngh...!"

The sharp blade dug deeply into Yuria's palm.

"S-such...!"

Thanks to that brief opportunity Yuria made, Ian was able to speak the sword's true name safely.

"Flostilla—!"

—KWAH!!!

With Ian's Sword Spirit release, a field of silver blossoms flourished across the earth.

"T-this...! Kuh!?"

As she witnessed the blossoming field, Dellen's eyes widened impossibly.

Laid out before her, with no room for doubt, was the perfect release of Flostilla's Sword Spirit.

—Swooooosh!!

In no time, the blossomed petals began swirling, soaring skyward in a storm.

"Kh...!"

Dellen immediately let go of Flostilla's hilt and leaped backwards, widening the gap.

—SHEEEEEEEE!

A savage current of petals then swept viciously across where she had been standing only a moment ago.

"K-kgh...!"

If her decision to let go of the sword had been delayed even a single second, her body would have been left in shreds.

—CharrRRRR!

—Sha~ sha~!

The silver petals gathered in an ever-growing, melodious swell, fusing into one like beautiful musical chimes.

"C-crazy...!"

Soon, a breathtaking blizzard of petals expanded, blanketing the sky.

An ocean of silver radiant in the moonless night.

"H-how...!"

Dellen's voice trembled.

The mighty silver wave before her was the pinnacle of Flostilla, a realm even Dellen, Flostilla's master, had never managed to reach.

A Sword Spirit Release performed at a far higher level of mastery than what Dellen could achieve, despite her over twenty years wielding Flostilla.

"N-no way... No way...!"

Dellen's eyes quaked with despair and confusion.

'How...! How can that brat... Flostilla...!'

There were three conditions necessary to release a Sword Spirit.

First, knowing the true name of the sword.

Second, that sword must be in contact with the wielder's body or aura.

And the last, third—

A long communion with the sword, building up deep understanding.

'Then how!'

Dellen could accept that Ian Greysel knew Flostilla's true name—he had just heard her say it when she attempted the release.

He could also meet the second condition: the sword making contact with one's body or aura—Flostilla was lodged in his chest even now.

But...!

'What about the third condition...!'

A deep communion over many years, accumulating extreme understanding of the sword.

'I haven't even achieved that perfectly myself!'

It had been over twenty years since Dellen was chosen to wield Flostilla at the Sword Spirit ceremony.

Even so, she still could not perfectly control Flostilla's Sword Spirit Release...!

'Ah... Ahh...'

Dellen gazed blankly up at the true pinnacle of Flostilla's sword spirit, displayed before her eyes.

Petals leaping skyward, gleaming like a brilliant Milky Way, dancing in the light.

'Impossible...'

How could anyone reach such an extreme realm of Sword Spirit Release...!

—Ssshhh...

Under the dancing petals, Ian slowly raised himself.

—Shlurrrp...!

He smoothly drew out Flostilla, which had been embedded in his chest.

— 《Authority of Projection》 —

◆ Item

[Highest-grade Healing Potion Lv.50]

◆ Trait

[Ghoul's Regeneration Lv.34]

————————

Simultaneously, before his guts and blood could spill, Ian hurriedly activated the Authority of Projection.

The gaping wound across Ian's chest rapidly began to close.

—Crunch, crack!

—Snap! Snap-snap!

Broken bones mended, muscle and skin grew anew over them, locking tightly together like spun thread.

"...!"

Dellen's face blanched at the sight.

"W-what the...!"

A shriek, as though in agony.

"What the hell are you!!!"

Terror clearly blossomed in Dellen's eyes.

"T-this monster! Freak!"

The Sword Spirit Release alone was enough to drive her to madness with confusion.

To that, add the bizarre regenerative power that instantly healed what should have been a mortal wound...

'This goes beyond logic, rank, anything—it's unthinkable...!'

That was no human.

What was the true nature hiding behind that boyish shell...!

"U-ungh! Nghhh!"

Dellen's teeth chattered, shuddering in fear and confusion.

'I-if this keeps up, I'll die!'

She had to do something! Anything!

She needed to act before that brat completely coalesced Flostilla's petal blades into one.

—KWAANG!

Dellen stomped the ground in haste.

The earth split in an explosive leap.

—Sheeeee!

Dellen dashed at Ian like an arrow loosed.

'Just one hit...!'

Clenching her fist, Dellen wound up for a solid blow.

'If I can just land one good shot...!'

If she could just crack him in the head hard enough to break his neck, she might at least buy time to escape.

However—

—CharrRRRR!

The Flostilla's petals were faster than Dellen's fist.

—SLAASH!

"What...?!"

The petals floating in the sky instantly became chains, snagging her fist.

—CharrRRRR!

Like rotary blades, the petal chains drilled into Dellen's forearm.

"G-gyaaaah!"

—SLAASH!

Dellen's blood spurted into the air, her scream echoing through the forest.

—Thudthudthud!

Next came the sound of muscle tearing and bones twisting, ringing in Dellen's ears.

"G-grrgh!"

Frothing at the mouth, Dellen yanked her arm to pull free, but it was impossible.

"Grk!?"

The chain of bladed petals had already bored into her very bones, gripping her tight.

"G-gyaaaah!"

An excruciating pain stabbing into the marrow.

'Got her...!'

Ian didn't waste the chance as Dellen writhed in agony.

—FWASH!

Ian slashed Flostilla in his hand dramatically, like a conductor's baton.

—CharrRRRR!

The massed petals in the sky split into five chains, rocketing toward Dellen.

—SKREEEE!

Her left leg was the first to be seized by the tentacle-like blades.

"N-noo! Aaaagh! Don't...!!"

At Dellen's desperate scream—

—SLICKK!

"Gyaaaaah!"

Her left leg, soft as sausage, was severed cleanly.

—CharrRRRR!

But that was just the beginning.

—Slice! Stab! Crack!

The chains of petals bound one limb after another, invading her body and feasting on her blood.

"Gkh! Khak!"

Dellen was hoisted into the air, firmly bound by the petal chains.

—CRACK! CRASH! CharrRRRR!

For a while, like piranhas devouring prey, the blade petals ravaged Dellen until she was in rags.

—Thud!

"G-grgh..."

At last, she crashed to the ground, scattering blood—a wretched wretch.

Her right arm and both legs were utterly shredded, her guts reduced to mush leaking out like snot, and foamy blood kept bubbling from a hole in her chest.

The only part left mostly intact was the left arm caught in the petal chain.

Even then, all the nerves and mana channels were severed, leaving only the barest twitches possible.

—Thud!

"Haa... haa..."

Only when Dellen collapsed in ruin did Ian, too, finally let his legs give out beneath him.

From healing his body with the Authority of Projection to releasing Flostilla's Sword Spirit with his past life's skills...

Each one demanded extreme aura consumption, but he'd used them relentlessly in succession—no matter how tough Ian might be, his body and mind were at their limit.

'T-this is my limit...'

"Ian!"

Yuria rushed over in panic.

"A-are you okay...? Ah, your wounds...!"

She gaped, realizing how Ian, so close to death only moments earlier, was all but healed.

But Ian lifted a hand to stop her.

"I'm alright."

He then turned his head to indicate Dellen.

"... Go to your nanny. She's still alive, but she won't last long."

Ian looked at Yuria with calm eyes.

"If you want to say goodbye, this is your only chance."

"...!"

Yuria's eyes trembled.

Ian continued steadily.

"It's come to this, but I know what that nanny means to you. Go, say your last farewell."

At that, Yuria's eyes welled with tears.

Yuria seized Ian's hands tightly in gratitude.

"Thank you. Thank you, Ian...! I'll be sure to repay this debt."

Ian nodded silently.

He badly wanted to cough blood, but held it in.

He didn't want to distract Yuria or disrupt her final farewell with Dellen.

"Thank you... really, thank you, Ian."

Yuria squeezed Ian's hand one last time before heading to Dellen.

Ian watched her receding figure and quietly spat out the blood he had been holding back.

—Uweh.

—Drip.

'... Will she be okay?'

Ian looked at Dellen, lying in a pool of blood.

Both her limbs torn off by Flostilla's fury, her mana circuits all severed.

Probably all Dellen could do now was barely twitch the remaining left hand.

'That should be enough, but I still can't afford to be careless.'

Ian didn't take his eyes off Dellen.

His aura was totally depleted, and he felt he could pass out any moment, but he strained to catch even the smallest suspicious movement from Dellen.

If there was even the slightest odd sign, he would have to use even his innate energy to save Yuria.

"Del... len...?"

Yuria approached the fallen Dellen.

Dellen's face, fallen on the cold earth, was torn open to the bone.

Her once beautiful face was gone—now mangled, like prey partly eaten by a beast.

"Miss..."

"..."

Yuria knelt in silence beside Dellen.

She had so much to say.

But it felt pointless to speak at all, so the words wouldn't come.

"Hrk...!"

All Yuria could do was weep.

The betrayal of a nanny she had thought of as her birth mother.

And now the death of that nanny she had thought of as a mother.

Both were too much for fourteen-year-old Yuria to bear.

"Sob...! Dellen...! Nanny, whyyy!!"

Hot tears soon poured down, landing on Dellen's wounds.

"A-ahh... Miss..."

Yuria sobbed piteously.

'It's been so long... since my lady cried like this.'

Yuria, at age six.

Even then, Yuria had wept bitterly like this once before.

On Dellen's birthday.

Yuria had given many gifts to Dellen that day.

A necklace made of flowers, a drawing of Dellen's smiling face, a scarf made while pricking her fingers on a needle.

Dellen was astonished by the presents.

She hadn't realized, despite spending nearly all day with Yuria, that her young charge had secretly prepared so much.

Yuria must have scavenged time at night, sacrificing sleep to do it all.

She often nodded off in lessons—it must have been because of that.

Back then Dellen thought she just needed more sleep for being a child.

She never guessed Yuria had so earnestly prepared for her birthday.

Because of crowded lessons, Yuria had even less free time than her peers, and yet...

'Oooh...!'

But on that day, with all those gifts, Yuria looked as if she would burst into tears at any moment.

'M-miss?! Why, what is it?! Miss!?'

'I, I...! I...!'

It turned out Yuria had wanted to give Dellen even better gifts.

Her drawing, her scarf, her flower necklace.

She felt they fell short as presents for her beloved nanny.

She couldn't draw better, couldn't knit the scarf with finer yarn, or use fine jewels rather than short-lived flowers...

She had so little, no great patron like the direct line, so all her hard work and sleepless nights... resulted in only these meager things.

'Uwaaahh!!'

In the end, Yuria had sobbed in Dellen's arms.

Even though those gifts were the only birthday presents Dellen received that day.

Yuria wept because she couldn't give her nanny something better.

'Miss...! Please don't cry! Oh, goodness! Why are you crying after giving me such wonderful gifts!? See, look at this!'

Dellen hurriedly wrapped the scarf around her neck and carefully put on the flower necklace.

'See, miss! Does it look good? The scarf is so warm, and the necklace is beautiful! I'll treasure them forever! Thank you so much, miss!'

'Really? You'll really treasure them forever?'

Yuria, wiping away tears, looked up at Dellen.

Dellen gently hugged Yuria, careful not to break the necklace.

'These are the best presents of my life. Miss, I'll treasure them forever.'

'O-okay! Nanny! I love you! You're the best! Happy birthday! Let's always live together!'

'Haha... Of course, miss. My whole life is dedicated to you.'

Back then, Yuria in her arms was warm and soft.

—Drip. Drip.

—Throb!

Yuria's tears fell on Dellen's chest wound.

Hot and painful.

"Dellen! Dellen...! Do you hear me...!? U-ungh...!"

'Ahh...'

Dellen lamented.

'What have I done...'

She saw the child she'd nurtured crying so bitterly.

She had made her cry.

She had torn into the heart of the only one in the world who loved her, leaving a scar that would never heal.

'For what... for what purpose...'

Someone who loved her so must was already by her side, shining so sweetly...

'How...'

Why did she cling to faded obsessions from the past...

Why did she let it come to this...

"A... Miss... kuh!"

—Cough!

I'm sorry, miss. So sorry.

She wanted to apologize.

But her throat clogged with blood, leaving her voice strangled.

"S-sor, ah, aaah! Kugh!"

Each squeezed word made her consciousness slip away.

'Haaa...'

Right to the end, so disgraceful and pitiful, Dellen.

To wound someone you love so deeply and not even get to apologize.

'... It was always like this for me...'

Always sullen, always greedy.

Never doing anything right.

That's why I die this way.

'Please, miss, don't forgive me...'

No, just hurry and forget this pitiful woman.

Someone as lovely as Miss shouldn't waste a thought on trash like me.

She would soon have good and worthy people around her.

Someone truly devoted, not a lying wretch like her...

For example, yes...

'Like Young master Ian, over there...'

And trash like herself should just sink to the bottom of hell.

Dellen suppressed her wretched sobs, her lips trembling.

At that moment—

—a flash!

Her vision changed.

"What...?"

Blue fields. Bright moonlight. Grasses gently swaying in the cool, soft breeze.

The pain suffusing her body disappeared. The burden crushing her chest was gone.

"What is this..."

Then, she felt something soft in her palm.

Looking down, she saw six-year-old Yuria holding her hand, rubbing her eyes and yawning.

"Fwaaa... Dellen... I'm sleepy..."

"..."

Only then did Dellen remember what she was doing.

"Ah, that's right."

She was taking Yuria for a walk at night.

Sometimes Miss couldn't sleep deeply without a nighttime stroll.

"Carry me. Dellen. Hehe."

"Always the spoiled one, aren't you, miss? So clingy."

Still, Dellen offered her back willingly.

"Hehe... Dellen piggyback... So warm and cozy. I like it..."

"Hehe... hmm hmm."

Yuria's face nuzzling into her back.

Dellen smiled gently.

—Step, step, step.

With Yuria on her back, Dellen quietly wandered the field for a while.

"Nanny Dellen... Stay with me forever... I'll make you happy..."

"Of course, miss."

Dellen spoke softly to the sleeping Yuria on her back.

"You're like a daughter to me, miss."

"Sniff...sob..."

"...? Miss?"

"Dellen... Don't go, Dellen...!"

"Miss, your nanny is right here, not going anywhere, okay?"

It seemed Miss was having a nightmare.

"Oh dear...! No tears~ No tears~"

.

.

.

"No tears... please..."

Dellen whispered with ragged breath.

"Dellen...?"

With effort, Dellen's left hand rose shakily.

That hand wiped Yuria's tears—

—Thud.

And dropped limply back to the ground.

"Nanny Dellen...!"

Her hand had wiped Yuria's tears, but left a long stain of blood behind.

"When Miss cries... I hurt so much too... it makes me so sad..."

"Huh...?"

"Miss... my little, pretty Miss..."

Dellen's eyes were dull and empty.

A close look revealed her skull had split at the temple, brain matter leaking with the blood.

"Nanny...?!"

Dellen now seemed to be seeing a distant past, not the present.

"N-no... This isn't right... Nanny...! Nanny Dellen!"

Yuria desperately tried to stem Dellen's flowing brain, hugging the nanny's cooling body to herself.

"Don... cough...! I'll sing to you, so don't cry. Fuuu..."

When the moonlight shines

An angel comes.

At the corners of Miss's eyes

Pearl-like tears form.

"Hng, ghh..."

Dellen's lullaby continued, faint as death.

It was the lullaby Dellen used to sing to Yuria every night when she was very small.

"Ngh, ngh... Nanny...! Nanny...!"

Can you hear my voice

Sleep well, my Miss.

No more tears.

Under the moon and stars.

Sleep well, my Miss.

My beloved child.

My precious Miss forever.

"Nanny..."

Listening to that lullaby, Yuria hugged Dellen tightly.

Even in the vision Dellen was seeing, Yuria hugged her.

"Miss..."

As the song ended, Dellen, with a trembling left hand, caressed Yuria's cheek.

With effort, she lifted her lips, as if to kiss Yuria's forehead...

"My..."

—Thud.

But that last kiss never finished; Dellen's feeble warmth finally left her.

"Hrk, ngh.. ngh...!"

For a while, Yuria couldn't move, clutching Dellen to her chest.

Feeling the body of her nanny growing cold.

Thirteen years of memories flickered by in a rush.

Love covered in betrayal.

Truth ripped by lies.

Motherhood twisted by obsession.

All those things tangled together into the tragedy's end.

Yuria felt something inside her chest vanish forever.

"Mama..."

The moment a massive emptiness was born in Yuria's heart.

Fuck you Dellen.

You don't betray someone who treats you like a mother and get to repent.

Drop dead, bitch...

I feel no sympathy for traitors...