**Chapter 111: Graduation Ceremony (7)**

When I saw Ellie being taken, I ran after them at full speed.

The fact that they had taken Ellie meant that Diana and Ellie were separated at the time of the kidnapping.

This meant that Diana hadn't realized that Ellie had been taken.

‘Should I tell her?’

Diana's love for Ellie is real, even though she may not be her biological daughter.

Would she be able to stay sane after hearing about Ellie's abduction?

I don't know, but it would go completely against the Academy's and Professor Mankostil's wishes to keep things quiet.

But more than that, I'm worried about the traumatizing effect on Diana.

How many parents, no matter how strong they are, can remain sane after hearing that the child they raised as their own has been kidnapped?

As an orphan myself, I don't know the heart of a parent or the heart of a child.

But I can imagine that it must have hurt Diana deeply.

'I, what should I do⋯'

Even as my mind wrestled with the question, my body instinctively made a decision.

Gelsia had told me the outlaws' retreat route.

The carriage was located in a dark alleyway just off the Academy's main entrance.

The plan was to escape through the main entrance as soon as the kidnapping was finalized but now there was little chance of that plan succeeding.

‘Professor Mankostil said she was heading for the front gate.’

Not all professors are combatants, but Professor Mankostil is strong enough to reach the eighth floor of the Labyrinth. She's not the one I need to worry about.

Even without Diana, the Blues Clan will meet their end here today.

I felt my mind sharpen to the now-familiar sensation of life slitting my throat.

I shook my head to clear my thoughts and focus on the present.

“Ah, how did you do that?”

-Hmph.

Ellie hiccupped as she spoke, her face grim.

Tears began to form at the corners of her pretty eyes.

I wanted to give her a pat on the back, but unfortunately, I wasn't in a position to do so.

-Thud.

An unexpected sound came from inside the curtained carriage.

‘They noticed.’

It's strange they didn't notice, given how bloody this place smells.

“⋯Kalino. Don't make too much of a fuss. Just knead the dough and come right back. I'll go to the front door and clear the way.”

“Kkkk. Got it, sister!!!”

Flutter!

The curtains opened and I caught a glimpse of the inside.

A sharp-looking woman was clutching a puffy-faced Gelsia tightly.

‘That bitch must be Vesta.’

At Vesta's command, a large orc woman approached me with her gauntlets clinking, she must be the last of the cadre of outlaws.

[Kalino LV.37]

[◆ Blessing of the Iron Fist]

[◆Blessing of the Iron Body]

[◆ Curse of Orc Mutation]

- Your body transforms into an orc.

Her level is 1 level higher than Gurmimi's.

Whereas Gurmimi, the rabbit hunter, was more of an assassin with a focus on agility, Kalino is more of a martial artist who utilizes the strength that comes with being an orc.

The level difference was 13 levels, but thanks to the additional stats from the question mark blessing and Diana's breast milk, I was not inferior to Kalino when looking only at my physical stats.

 ‘But you don't have to fight.’

This isn't the labyrinth, and they're the ones at a disadvantage.

To put it bluntly, if I leave with Ellie, their plans will be ruined.

“Ellie. Let me hold you for a second.”

“Uh, eh? What?!”

I quickly walked over to Ellie and hugged her.

Ellie blushed with embarrassment as I held her like a princess in a fairy tale but it quickly turned to horror.

“Oh, mister, the front, the front!”

She doesn't need to say it, I know it.

Kalino lunged forward, her fist outstretched at me and the point of impact was on the left temple of the face.

Chiiiit-!

Smoke billows from Kalino's cold gauntlets, and her punch accelerates in speed.

Her fist was about to touch my face.

-Pfft!

The gauntlet stops in front of my nose, and Kalino is pushed back slightly.

I had kicked her abdomen with my left foot just in time for her fist to make contact.

“Whaaaat?! What the⋯!”

“Get your head down, Ellie!”

I jumped off the moving carriage with Ellie in my arms.

A normal person would have been injured no matter how many times they rolled.

-Koooooow!

However, I landed on the ground with a brute force jump and my lower body had taken the brunt of the damage.

“Ah, mister, are you okay?!”

“Uh, I'm fine. You're lighter than I thought, Ellie. You're lighter than-”

-Koooow!

Before we could argue, Kalino leapt off the moving carriage.

“You're so shy, running away like that. You have a nice body, but you're still a boy at heart, aren't you?”

Kalino didn't even bother rolling on the ground in disgrace. She even added an obvious taunt.

“You must be really nervous, thinking that I might run away. Is your brain just that intelligent?”

Hearing my retort, Kalino realized that she couldn't speak, and she immediately moved.

‘We'll have to fight after all.’

As a mage, Ellie has little stamina and is a slow runner.

Even if I carry her, I'll be caught quickly so I might as well settle things now.

“Kaaak!”

I drop Ellie, throwing her behind me, and duck down.

-Whoosh!

Kalino's kick aimed at my head ended in a miss, but a follow-up came right away, so I swerved to avoid it and counterattacked with my axe.

-Kaang!

The axe I swung quickly with my right hand bounced off her gauntlet.

After a few consensual exchanges, we were able to determine each other's power.

'Strength. Agility. Stamina. All evenly matched.’

The key to victory is battle experience.

The first to be caught off guard or off guard loses.

-Crack.

Something shattered in the corner of my eye and I grabbed it as it slid straight down.

The white half-mask was split in two, centered on my forehead.

'Shit. I thought I dodged, but did the damage stack up?'

I don't even have a spare helmet now but that doesn't mean I can continue the battle while holding on to my half-mask.

Making a quick judgment call, I toss the broken half-mask to the ground.

Through the slightly wider field of vision, I could see Kalino's face, and her mouth was open in a daze.

The orc's emotions were so clear to see and after a moment of admiration, a dark smile curved her lips.

“I was planning on just half-killing you⋯ but it's too much of a waste.”

Kalino's gauntlets puffed out smoke.

“You're going to be my slave.”

I smirked and raised my axe.

“You're a good one.”

“You're a sneaky little bastard. Well, I like you better!”

-Pow!

Kalino's fist flew in with tremendous speed. Not to the face, but to the stomach.

Moreover, the power in that punch was weaker than before.

It was a fist with the intention of 'subduing' me, not killing me.

'So it was a buffalo, not an orc.’

[Blessing of the Hour of Judgment]

The world slows down as I activate the blessing.

Even in the slowed world, Kalino's fists still came relatively fast, but even if a fist with this much strength was hit, it could be withstood.

I must give flesh and take bone to ensure a more certain victory.

My gardening axe won't cut it, thanks to Kalino's blessing.

That leaves me with two options.

I must either stun her, or subdue her with my joints.

I already have my fist outstretched as the world is back to its normal speed.

 “Thud-!”

With a heavy thud, Kalino's fist slammed into my abdomen.

It was weaker than before, but stronger than I expected.

'Even so, it hurts a lot less than Idelbert's fist!!!'

I thought, remembering how much more painful it had been.

It had been much more painful and difficult when Idelbert had grabbed me and choked me with her thighs.

It was helpful to have a match with a martial artist like Kalino.

I gritted my teeth and kept my legs strong. If I didn't hold on, the shot would miss.

My patience was definitely paying off as an uppercut from my right fist landed squarely on Kalino's jaw.

“Ugh-!”

She gritted her teeth and held on. The blessing of the Iron Body prevented any direct damage, but the cost of allowing the blow to her jaw came back to haunt her.

“⋯?!”

The momentary weakness in her legs caused Kalino to stagger off-center.

Now that I had given my flesh, it was time to take her bones.

I clung to Kalino's right arm like a cicada as she failed to collect her fist immediately.

I hugged her forearm tightly, wrapping my legs around her triceps.

“Moo, what-!”

Ignoring the desperation in her voice, I twisted away.

“Kaaaagh!”

Kalino's arm twisted like a wringing rag.

Completely off-center in pain, she fell to the ground.

I quickly repositioned myself and climbed onto her back.

Grabbing the arm I'd just squeezed, I snapped it.

-Mmph!

Even with her right arm completely missing and in pain, she tried to fight back.

She turned quickly and swung her left arm at me.

It looked like she was trying to shake me off but in this situation, it was like saying, “Please take care of this one too.”

I grabbed her backward swinging left arm and pulled it towards my body.

-Aaah!

“Off!”

Kalino's desperate voice rang out, accompanied by the sound of her arm snapping.

Even so, the level difference could not be ignored.

Although she was only a mere outlaw now, Kalino had reached level 37.

She was the equivalent of a mid-tier explorer, and even if both her arms were broken, she could still stand up with determination.

“Thanks for giving me time, Oppa.”

 Hmph.

I noticed the heat from behind me and moved away from Kalino's back.

It was Ellie's signature magic, Flare, the one that had half-melted a minotaur.

Even in the face of such magic, could the Blessing of the Iron Body do its job?

Faced with a fireball as powerful as the sun, Kalino was silent, then spoke.

“⋯⋯Surrender.”

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Kalino chose to prolong her life, even if only for a moment, rather than end it immediately.

After stunning and restraining Kalino, I flopped down on the floor.

I'm exhausted. I need to get some rest. Professor Mankostil will come looking for me if this has gone well.

As I sit in the deserted alleyway, staring blankly up at the sky, Ellie waddles over and sits down a meter away from me.

“Why are you sitting so far away, are you going to get kidnapped again?”

There are no more outlaws to kidnap her.

I said it jokingly, but Ellie was more flustered than I thought.

“Uh, that's...”

“It's okay, you can come closer.”

“⋯⋯”

Ellie nodded her head in approval and immediately snuggled up next to me.

Her slender thighs and shoulders pressed against my body, overriding my hesitation.

The hand that was neatly placed on the dress trembled slightly. Ellie's head bowed deeply.

 Apparently the shock of the kidnapping hadn't worn off.

“It's okay now.”

“⋯⋯”

“The outlaws have been subdued, and there's no one left to kidnap you.”

There was a moment of silence.

Even in the stillness, we felt each other's presence strongly.

The feel of our bodies against each other, the temperature of our bodies, was so clear.

“⋯Thank you.”

After a moment of silence, Ellie, still bowing her head, spoke.

“It's what you deserve.”

“Still, I really, really appreciate it.”

The embarrassment in her voice made me laugh out loud.

I chuckled and stroked Ellie's already messy hair.

And then.

“Ugh.”

Ugh!

A red drop of blood dripped onto the back of Ellie's hand.

The suddenness of the situation caused her to stop.

“Ellie?! Are you okay?! You're bleeding!”

“Nah, I'm fine, it's just a nosebleed.”

Ellie's hand grabbed mine.

“⋯Just a little more⋯ please⋯”

As she said that, she pinned my hand to her head and lifted her head slightly.

I could finally see her face as red as an apple and her nose that dripped as I stroked her hair.

Her eyes couldn't quite meet my bare face and wandered from glance to glance.

“He, and⋯ ah, Mr. ⋯ Mr. ⋯”

“⋯what?”

I replied, dumbfounded by her bewildered reaction and I saw myself reflected back in her eyes.

Ellie's lips, looking even redder than usual, slowly parted.

“From now on…can I call you Oppa…?”