

Chapter 498

(Mark Gorton changed to Mark Goetten)

Burren swallowed hard as he looked at the blue light that enveloped his sword.

'Is this what astral energy is?'

He had never felt anything like it before. The wind energy that wrapped around his sword was infinitely condensed, conveying a sharpness that seemed to be able to cut through anything.

He felt a sense of confidence that he could defeat anyone, and he seemed to be able to perform techniques that he had not been able to handle before.

'Raon warned that this is when one should be cautious.'

Raon had mentioned that the most dangerous moment occurs when one believes they can do anything after breaking through the wall. He advised him to temper his excitement and remain composed.

'I can't let my guard down.'

There was no way that Raon's words could be wrong. The opponent was a Master who had reached the realm of Master much earlier than himself. Even if he was injured, being complacent could cost him his life in an instant.

"To this extent..."

The escort guard shook his lips and wiped away the sword marks on his chest.

The bleeding that had been pouring down like a downpour stopped, and the wound tightened. It seemed that he had used aura to forcibly stop the bleeding.

"Don't think you've defeated me!"

He raised his power, and the astral energy entwined in his sword deepened like blood.

"I don't entertain such thoughts."

Burren lowered his stance and raised his sword to the top.

"Until I cut off your neck!"

"You brat!"

The escort guard rushed to the left. As he showed a sudden movement, blood dripped from his wound again. It seemed that the wound was not perfectly sealed.

“In that case.’

He stepped back three steps with his footwork. He placed his left foot on a rock and extended his right foot as he drew his sword down.

The astral energy coiled around the blade transforms into five streams of wind, extending outward.

It was the *Revolving Wind Strike*, a special technique of the *Barren Wind Sword*, which he had practiced countless times but never achieved.

“Kugh!”

The escort guard, who was charging like a boar, raised his sword barrier.

Kyaaaaah!

It seemed like he was about to charge while wielding astral energy, but the astral energy contained in the *Revolving Wind Strike* caused a fierce rotation and broke the escort guard's sword barrier.

Blood poured out again from the sword marks on his chest.

“This, this bastard!”

“You're still far from it!”

Burren held the sword with both hands and swung it down like a wagon wheel. The astral energy gathered on the blade stretched out like sunlight reflected on the surface of the water and shot towards the escort guard's heart.

Zzzzzz!

The escort guard could not defend himself properly this time either and retreated, leaving deep footprints on the ground. His left knee trembled violently as the shock was severe.

“You dirty bastard....”

‘There's no need to fight close up.’

The *Barren Wind Sword* is a swordsmanship specialized in long-range attacks, and the opponent swordsmanship was superior than him. There's no reason to abandon the advantage and engage in close combat.

‘But this side is also in a hurry.....’

Currently, it is Runaan who is maintaining the formation. It must be a great burden to bear the center that the three captains should have held onto by herself.

However, the first thing to do now is to kill this guy for sure. If he attacks carelessly and is defeated, the Light Wind division will be literally annihilated.

‘Just hold on a little longer.’

Burren extended the vigorously vibrating astral energy, biting his tongue.

“I’ll be back as soon as possible!”

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A faint moan escaped Runaan’s lips.

“It’s hard.”

Since she was the only one holding the center of the *Great Wind Formation*, which was supposed to be held by three captains together, her bones and muscles began to scream.

It seemed that she had also suffered internal injuries, as her lower abdomen was aching.

In between, she had to block the Master’s slashes that tried to crush the formation, so she didn’t even have time to catch her breath.

‘But I have to hold on.’

Burren was fighting against someone stronger than the Master on this side, and Yua and Yulius were also filling in the gaps in the formation, swinging their swords hard with their little hands. She couldn’t just let them all die.

“And...”

Runaan quickly shifted her gaze to Martha, who was carried on Dorian’s back.

I can’t let the Naachal (*untamed*) girl die like this.’

She couldn’t bear to see her first female friend die while she was asleep. She had to endure it even if her bones were broken.

“Whoosh!”

Just as Runaan was gathering her resolve in the midst of the throbbing pain, the black-haired escort guard rushed to the right and swung his sword down.

A sharp blade flowing with astral energy. If that slash were to fall, the bodies of the Light Wind members would be cut in half.

Without hesitation, she stepped on the footwork. She moved like she was sliding on ice and stopped in front of escort guard, concentrating the power of frost and unleashed it.

“Cheeeeeeeek!”

The frigid barrier couldn't withstand the force of the astral energy and shattered, creating a small storm of frost.

“It's weak...”

She was also unable to launch a proper attack, as she was also consuming aura and mental strength to maintain the formation.

“Trash.”

The escort guard scoffed and easily sliced through the storm of frost with astral energy that he wrapped around his sword.

She extended the Snow Flower Sword that she had held back to block the astral energy that came out from the storm of frost.

Cheweureurong!

The power of astral energy was indeed overwhelming. Her hand ached as if it would be torn apart by the crude shock that crushed her aura blade.

“Uh...”

She was confident in her patience, but she couldn't help but moan at the overlapping pain.

“Your screams are not very delicious.”

The escort guard, who put his sword on his shoulder, clicked his tongue briefly.

“What do you mean?”

“Your face is pretty, but your screams are boring.”

His eyes began to glow red.

“I love the screams of trash more than swordsmanship!”

The escort guard giggled and ran to the left. He was targeting Yulius, who was leaning over to catch his breath.

“Eeek!”

Runaan frowned and chased after the escort guard. He swung his sword down at Yulius’s head with a terrifying smile. The immense pressure seemed to push her body away.

‘Stick in!’

She inserted the Snow Flower Sword between the escort guard's sword and Yulius.

Cheweureurong!

The shock was severe. It wasn't a properly-positioned and executed swordsmanship, so her shoulder and wrist shook as if they were going to break

“Kugh....”

“Captain...”

Yulius trembled his chapped lips. He wanted to say that he was fine, but his mouth would not open because of the shock.

The black-haired escort guard came forward, stroking his head with his left hand.

“Even then, it's just a little moan? You're really boring, woman.”

The black-haired escort guard frowned with his chin tilted.

"And stupid.”

“If you hadn't blocked it, you wouldn't have suffered such severe internal injuries.”

He chuckled, pointing to the blood dripping from her mouth.

"This time...."

The black-haired escort guard rolled his eyes and licked his lips.

"Let's go over there!"

He roughly kicked the ground and headed towards Yua.

Krein and other members tried to block the way, but the astral energy unleashed by the black-haired escort guard created a ripple, causing the formation of the members to stagger.

“Ugh....”

The exhausted members were pushed back, groaning and coughing up blood.

"Screams are music to my ears!"

The black-haired escort guard, with an even darker smile, stood before Yua.

"I wonder what the young lady's screams would be like..."

"Shut up."

As soon as Runaan stepped in front of Yua, the black-haired escort guard swung his sword from the left side, as if he had been waiting for it.

Swoooosh!

"This is the end for you!"

Runaan was thrown back again. A thick stream of blood oozed from her tightly closed lips.

"Runaan unnie..?"

"...I'm fine."

Runaan forced a smile. She didn't know if she was laughing or crying. Her head was spinning, and her vision was slowly blurring.

"Even like this, no screams? You're quite something."

The black-haired escort guard shook his head mockingly..

"I've heard you're a stubborn one."

"....."

Runaan didn't respond, but pointed her sword at the black-haired escort guard.

"This would have been boring if it were any other day,"

The black-haired escort guard lightly patted his cheek and grinned.

"But today is quite fun, so I think I'll do something different."

He slipped into the center of the cracked member formation with a chilling voice. His gaze turned to Dorian, who was carrying Martha.

"I'll stab that girl! I've been watching her since earlier, you two must be close right?"

The black-haired escort guard's sword rushed towards Martha. His speed increased as the formation cracked.

This time, even Dorian's fastest footwork wouldn't be able to escape from him..

“Argh!”

Dorian gritted his teeth and backed away. It was a wise move to stamp his footwork and bend his lower body to escape the escort guard's sword strike.

However, the escort guard's sword had gathered enough strength to block all of Dorian's escape routes.

“Ah...”

However, the escort guard's sword was imbued with such powerful energy that it blocked all of Dorian's escape routes.

‘I have to stop it. I have to stop it, but...’

There was no way. Her vision turned white as if all the accumulated shocks had burst at once.

‘Stop it? How? With what? And...’

Why did she have to stop it?

Even the question of why she had been focused solely on defense until now arose.

When the world turned into a blank canvas, a back appeared.

It was not an adult's, but a small, young back. And it was a back that she had never forgotten until now.

‘Raon.’

In her trainee days, when she was about to be overcome by the fear of Syria again, the back that had first saved her was still deeply etched in her mind.

‘That's right. I...’

She had trained in defensive-oriented swordsmanship because she wanted to protect others like Raon, and she had taken on the role of holding out in the formation.

She made the decision herself to protect the colleagues she cared about and to eventually overcome her brother's clutches.

‘So...’

She shouldn't give up yet.

The moment the young Raon's back turned into Raon's current appearance, a blue storm raged in her mind.

The world returned to its original form, and she saw the black-haired escort guard's sword that was about to stab Martha and Dorian.

Runaan raised her hand. She unleashed the surging energy of frost, which seemed to burst her dantian.

Kuwaaaaa!

In an instant, the coldness that rushed through the mana circuits created a thorn-shaped ice wall between Martha and the black-haired escort guard.

It was a magnificent size, as if it had frozen an entire mountain.

Chejejejejeok

The overwhelming scale stopped the black-haired escort guard, as well as the Holy Sword Union swordsmen and White Blood fanatics that were pounding the formation.

Runaan shot the astral energy of frost gathered in the Snow Flower Sword towards the top of the ice wall.

Upon contact with the ice wall, the densely concentrated astral energy immediately spawned numerous cracks, leading to a colossal explosion.

Kwa-kwa-kwa-kwaang!

The bursting ice wall didn't simply vanish into thin air but transformed into silvery astral energy, unleashing a storm of frost that pierced through the enemies' hearts.

"Cough!"

"Kyaaaaah!"

"What the hell is this!"

"Run! It's all astral energy!"

"Ugh...."

Runaan's frost storm became the executioner's warrant that brought death to the fanatics of the White Blood Religion and the Holy Sword Union swordsmen.

On the other hand, not even a small piece flowed to the Light Wind members and civilians.

“Guk!”

The black-haired escort guard was also busy clearing the falling pieces of frost. The fog that spread around him slowed his hand down as well.

“Is this for real? What is this awakening? Oh?”

As he was clearing the last piece of frost and taking a breath, Runaan came in, cutting through the white fog and penetrating the space.

“I’ve been waiting!”

The black-haired escort guard smiled with a murderous look on his face and swung his sword down. He didn’t seem to be careless, and his posture as he swung his sword had no gaps.

“Die!”

However, the astral energy he extended cleaved through Runaan, and the moment it did, her figure disappeared like a fleeting ghost.

“What the hell is... cough!”

At the moment the black-haired escort guard opened his mouth wide, Runaan’s sword, which had emerged from the left, pierced his left chest.

“Guarrghhh!”

“You like screams, right?”

Runaan twisted the sword that was stuck in the black-haired escort guard’s chest and pulled it out. Blood gushed out like a fountain, which could not be stopped.

“You, you....”

"Hear your own scream."

“Damn it....”

The black-haired escort guard collapsed with bloodshot eyes, never getting the chance to hear the scream he enjoyed.

“Ugh....”

Runaan spat out blood and collapsed to the ground. Her head was also dizzy, and her body was heavy. She felt like she couldn’t do anything anymore.

As Runaan exhaled, the scent of blood lingering in the air, she turned her gaze to the right. There, she witnessed Burren beheading his opponent before collapsing. He, too, appeared to be drained of strength.

"Now all that's left is...."

Runaan raised her chin and looked ahead.

* * *

"Cough...."

Mark Goetten looked at the sword scar that cut his left waist and groaned.

"I know who you are."

The one who appeared to be the leader of the escort guard nodded slowly

"Mark Goetten of the Sword of the Fallen Flower. He was called a genius at first, but he was a lazy fool who could never escape the Master beginner level for the rest of his life."

He nodded slowly. There was no mockery. It was just a matter-of-fact tone of voice that simply recited the facts.

"I heard you became a mercenary and wandered around, but I didn't expect you to be here."

"I know who you are too."

Mark Goetten twisted his lips as he looked at the sword scar on the escort guard leader's nose.

"Balven of the Erasing Sword."

The scar across his nose and witnessing the resolute swordsmanship like an iron wall made it clear that he was the former mercenary, the Erasing Sword, Balven.

"That's right."

Balven didn't seem at all surprised. He nodded calmly.

"Isn't it interesting? You, a knight who was once renowned has fallen to a mercenary, and me a mercenary known for excellent defense has become a swordsman of the Holy Sword Union."

"Not really."

"Back when I saw your swordsmanship, I thought it was unstoppable, but now it seems light enough to push away with one hand. Quite disappointing."

"Shut up. And I'm not a mercenary, I'm a swordsman of Zieghart."

"Oh, that's right. I see."

He nodded slowly when he saw Zieghart emblem on Mark Goetten's uniform.

"Was Raon Zieghart in a hurry? To pick someone as lazy as you."

"Don't speak his name so casually!"

"It's not wrong, is it? It's a fact that you're lazy, and it's a fact that you can't penetrate my sword."

"Hmm..."

Mark Goetten bit his lip. Balven's sword was as solid as a wall, as he said. He couldn't penetrate it even with all of his Wallan swordsmanship.

"The situation has gotten a little out of hand, but..."

Balven glanced back and rubbed his chin.

"Nothing will change. The Light Wind division will be killed and..."

He turned his gaze to the direction where Raon and Cloud had left.

"Cloud-nim will be back soon."

"That's wrong."

Mark Goetten exhaled hot air. He wiped the blood off his waist and straightened his back.

"You may be able to kill me, and my companions behind me may also fall to you. But..."

He shook his head firmly at Balven.

"Sir Raon is different. He will return after killing your master."

"Khahahahahaha!"

Balven, who had been calm like water, burst into laughter, clutching his forehead.

"You're stupid. It's not for nothing that you became the Sword of the Fallen Flower."

"You must have heard who Cloud-nim is, right? He's the disciple of the Holy Sword Union leader. He mastered countless martial arts, reaching the realm of Grandmaster. Without

even seeing it a few times, he can elevate others' swordsmanship to a superior level. A person with unparalleled talent. Losing to a mere Master..."

"That doesn't matter."

"What?"

"Even if your master has reached the Transcendent Realm, sir Raon will not lose. And his talent is superior."

Mark Goetten's pupils remained steady, unwavering.

"Sir Raon said he would be back soon, and his words are never wrong."

Up to now, Raon's words had never been proven false.

From the first meeting, it has been like that.

He said he would help me to the best of his ability, even if I might not be able to get stronger, and he did as he said.

Countless words had come his way, but those who spoke them sought only his power as mediocre Master level.

Except for one – Raon.

He didn't exploit me, instead, he assisted in my training in various ways, just as he said he would, and the results actually showed.

Raon, who brought me back to the goal that my family, friends, and even I had given up on, was like a god to me.

"I have said something wrong."

"I thought so. Raon defeating Cloud-nim is...."

"No, that's not what I mean."

Mark Goetten slowly raised his chin. A different light flickered in his eyes.

"Sir Raon asked me to. I must live until he comes back, for myself and the ones behind me."

He stomped his foot and raised his sword.

"Come!"

"This trash."

Balven twisted his lips and swung his sword, which he had held to the side.

“Kreeeeeeeeeeeeong!”

The impact echoed through his shoulders. His sword was no longer specialized in defense. His attack had also become firm, enough to push through the sword.

“If you lack skill, you don't deserve to talk.”

Balven sneered and swung his arm. His sword aura began to devour space from the ground.

‘What?’

Mark Goetten narrowed his eyes as he watched Balven's sword strike.

‘This form...’

Balven's swordsmanship was similar to the one Raon had displayed during their recent sparring.

[Your attacks are strong. With effective psychological tactics, you can even beat an intermediate Master level. But due to the nature of the sword, facing a defense expert might be challenging. What will you do then?]

[Then I will also strengthen my defense...]

[A sword is not that kind of weapon. You must pierce through no matter what. Even if it costs your life.]

Raon, as if demonstrating, swung down a rough sword strike and broke through the sword barrier made of astral energy.

‘I have to break it at all costs. If I don't, I'll die!’

Recalling Raon's teachings, he raised his sword. From his ankles, waist, shoulders, and wrists, he lined his entire body up like a sword and swung his sword.

But Balven's sword barrier still could not be penetrated. Still, he swung it down. He endured the pain of his breath running out and his energy center throbbing, and he drew his sword endlessly.

"This, this bastard!"

Wrinkles appeared on Balven's face at the attack, which was not only not stopping, but was getting stronger and faster.

"You'll be the first to die at this rate!"

"Uwaaaah!"

Mark Goetten responded with determination. As per Raon's advice, it was a resolve to die if he couldn't pierce through.

The life-or-death battle, the important instructions entrusted by his master, and newfound confidence in his own abilities emerged, shedding the layers of hesitation until now.

His head cleared and his hands became lighter. It might be the last flash of light before death.

As if the candle that was about to go out was burning with flame again, his body and energy center were filled with strength again.

He laughed. He had the strength to swing his sword one more time.

"Kyaaaaah!"

Mark Goetten let out a shout that shook the earth. He poured out his entire body, aura, and spirit, and struck down the sword that was dividing the night sky.

The astral energy coiled around the blade gleamed like rising moonlight, swift and resolute.

"Too slow!"

Balven bit his lip and kicked the ground. The sword blade wrapped in intense astral energy was fired towards Mark Goetten's heart.

"What?"

But his sword stabbed Mark Goetten's shoulder, not his heart.

"This, this is...!"

Balven's eyes widened. His wrists were shaking like a paper boat in the wind.

His hands and wrists were also damaged by having to block Mark Goetten's endless sword strikes.

Gooooooooooooo!

Mark Goetten's shoulder was torn off, but his expression did not change.

He stomped his foot and swung his sword. The Wallan Sword's ultimate technique, *Sky-Wall Lightning Slash*. The lightning energy gathered in the sword fell like thunder that split the world.

Chiiiiiiiiing!

Balven tried to draw his sword to solidify his defense, but the *Sky-Wall Lightning Slash* was faster.

Gooooooooong!

The sword broke like it had been bitten off, and a scar like a lightning strikes was engraved on his body.

"D, damn it...."

Balven looked at the scar on his body in the shape of a lightning strikes, then fell backward.

"Ah...."

Mark Goetten drove the sword into the ground and leaned his body against it. He could realize it for himself. He had finally broken through the wall and reached intermediate Master level. Raon's promise had come true.

The tears flowed down his cheeks as he thought of the decades he had been abandoned by his family, friends, colleagues, and the world.

Thinking of Raon's face, the last one who held his hand, Mark Goetten roared towards the sky.

"UWAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAH!"

It was a farewell to his former self, who had been incompetent and lazy, and a cry of gratitude to his master, who had given him a new life.