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

Chapter 101 : Obsession (1)

Obsession (1)

As soon as Ian arrived at the main manor of Hisperion by warp, he headed straight for the Heavenly Sword Palace.

At the entrance to the Heavenly Sword Palace, he handed over Kargon to the guards and informed them that the Sword Dragon Hall had been attacked.

The guards immediately relayed the news to the Heavenly Sword Knights, and the knights set out at once for the uninhabited island.

Meanwhile, Ian stopped by his own detached residence, Lunabreeze.

It was to prepare a place for Scarlet to stay while she recovered.

He had secretly brought Scarlet here, having hidden her inside a subspace storage spell.

Because simply bringing an outsider into the Heavenly Sword Palace could attract unnecessary political attention.

Moreover, if that outsider were a member of the dark clan—a vampire—various misunderstandings and rumors would quickly arise.

Vampires were, after all, fundamentally treated as monsters that preyed on humans.

Those who consorted with vampires, man-eaters lurking in darkness, were usually regarded as villains like demonic humans or dark mages.

Of course, there were exceptions who stood on the side of good, but statistically, most of them were antagonistic to humans, so it was better to bring her in secretly to avoid troublesome rumors.

'And not just for me, but for Scarlet as well.'

Scarlet, too, detested such bothersome attention.

It was hardly pleasant for someone to watch her every move, constantly calculating and even plotting schemes from time to time.

It was the right thing to do for her as well, to bring her in secretly like this.

He certainly didn't want Scarlet to become the subject of unwelcome attention from the political schemers of the Heavenly Sword Palace.

'Still, I was a little worried, but I'm glad everything went smoothly.'

Subspace is quite a fragile space—if you struggle even a little from inside, it can easily tear.

If Scarlet had regained consciousness and woken up inside subspace, she could've torn her way out, bursting into the open.

If that happened in front of multiple people, it would have been extremely hard to deal with.

Fortunately, such a disaster did not happen.

Of course, Ian had not recklessly gambled.

'Vampires' recovery sleep is rather long.'

Scarlet would probably just sleep the whole day.

Knowing that, he had transferred her into the subspace.

—Step, step.

Ian went down to the basement of Lunabreeze.

He entered a secret training chamber at the end of the corridor.

Though called a training chamber, it had a restroom and a bed, so it was practically like a studio apartment.

—Vwoom!

Ian carefully took Scarlet out inside there.

—Shoook...

Then he slowly laid her down on the bed.

She was still sleeping like a corpse.

Given how badly injured she'd been, there was no sign she'd wake up no matter what he did at the moment.

'Still, here, there's no sunlight at all, and there's plenty of mana rising from the underground...'

Scarlet's recovery would be much smoother here.

'I don't know when Scarlet will wake up, so I'd better leave a note.'

If Scarlet woke up alone and went outside, she could bump into a Heavenly Sword Knight—which would be a truly terrible accident.

To prevent such a mishap, he had to leave a memo.

—Scratch, scratch.

Ian immediately brought some paper and a pen and began to write neatly the things he needed to tell Scarlet.

First, where she was—in the guesthouse annex inside the Heavenly Sword Palace.

Since she'd been brought in secretly, a warning not to go outside alone.

And a request to wait here after waking up, as he'd return soon.

—Rustle, rustle.

He folded the note carefully and left it on the table beside the bed.

'Hmm...'

Just in case she didn't notice the note, he also filled a cup with his own blood and left it next to the note.

With the smell of blood, she wouldn't be able to miss the note.

'.....'

And, since she might be bored while waiting after waking up, he stacked some novels beside her as well.

'That should do it.'

He had finished dealing with Scarlet.

Now it was time to check on the situation at the uninhabited island again.

—Ding-dong!

At that moment, the doorbell rang.

"……?"

When he went to the entrance, a single Heavenly Sword Knight was standing there.

—Bow.

"Nice to meet you. I am First-Class Knight Gallen from the Investigation Division of the Heavenly Sword Knights."

Gallen introduced himself with a polite greeting.

"Yes. Sir Gallen. Pleasure to meet you. What brings you here?"

"I came to deliver the report regarding the uninhabited island incident you reported a short while ago, young master."

"I see."

He was just about to check on the situation; it was attentive of the Investigation Division to come first.

Indeed, the division's work was meticulous.

Gallen relayed that, fortunately, the Sword Dragon Hall's ship had already safely reached the harbor.

"Any injuries or casualties?"

There were some injuries, but no fatalities, he said.

That was a relief.

"You needn't worry. Soon, everyone will return to the Heavenly Sword Palace via warp gate."

"I see."

Then the dangerous situation could be considered resolved.

Now that they'd made it into the city, no matter what demonic humans were left, they wouldn't dare attack recklessly, and once they used the warp gate, everyone would be back at the Heavenly Sword Palace in no time.

"Looks like everything's taken care of. That's a relief."

Ian had been trying hard to remain calm, but he'd been anxious inside.

After all, he'd left Yuria and Sophia in that dangerous place.

But now that all was resolved, he was finally able to set aside his worries a bit.

"I suppose I should go and greet them."

Although the situation was mostly resolved, it wasn't completely over.

He needed to see Yuria and Sophia in person to be fully reassured.

"Yes. Then I shall take my leave. Should anything else happen, I will report back immediately."

"Thank you, sir Gallen. Safe travels."

—Bow.

Gallen bowed and left.

'Now then...'

Before going to welcome them, it was best to recover his aura first.

If some damn variable emerged and the situation took another bad turn, he'd have to rush out to fight again.

'My dantian is completely shriveled.'

Ian's body was now almost completely drained of aura.

He'd used up too much aura fighting the demonic humans, and had also consumed a lot restoring Scarlet and projecting the mana extraction device.

'But at least I have Vladiark.'

At present, Vladiark had absorbed blood magic power equivalent to a Grandmaster's.

He had absorbed it when he destroyed the magic power storage device at the demonic humans' lair using Vladiark.

Blood magic power was optimized for vampires and couldn't normally be used directly by Ian, but that didn't matter.

Ian had Authority of Projection.

With his authority, he could convert blood magic power into aura and store it in his dantian.

—Rustle, rustle.

Ian walked out to Lunabreeze's sun-drenched front garden.

—Whump!

He sat cross-legged on the grass, still holding Vladiark in hand.

To be honest, training in a wide-open yard like this was not recommended.

Normally, training was to be done in a thoroughly secured environment.

But right now, a Heavenly Sword Knight might return at any moment with another report.

He needed to be in a visible spot so the knight could wake him up even during training.

Although this place was wide open, it was not really dangerous for training.

This was, after all, inside the Heavenly Sword Palace, protected by countless knights.

—Slick.

Thinking thus, Ian closed his eyes.

Holding the heavy black greatsword neatly.

He slowly sought out the blood magic stored inside Vladiark.

Then, by tightening and loosening the blood gates among his mana circuits, he followed the essence of the Sky Thunder, Deep as the Clouds method to open the way for aura to flow in.

It was a task requiring extreme focus, but to others, it would look like nothing more than ordinary meditation.

It was just when Ian had almost finished his preparations to absorb Vladiark's blood magic...

—Swoosh!

—Flash!

"……!?"

Something dug into Ian's hand and violently snatched away Vladiark.

"What!?"

At the same time—

A powerful force shoved Ian's shoulder harshly back.

"Ugh!!"

Ian tumbled backwards.

He tried to get up at once, but—

—Grab!

—Dash!

A stranger's quick hand seized Ian's wrist.

—Press...!

Pressed him flat to the ground as if to pin him.

"W-what...?!"

It happened in an instant.

Ian was overpowered instantly.

Vladiark flew off into the distance, and Ian found himself pinned under the assailant in a mount position, both wrists secured.

"Who...?!"

Ian glared up with wide eyes to see the face of the assailant.

"... What?"

Beneath the clear sky—

Platinum-blonde hair, glittering in the sunlight, brushed Ian's cheek.

And, even against the backlight, red eyes sparkled like flames.

Aris Hisperion.

It was her who had attacked him.

She was looking down at Ian, a smile on her face.

"W-what is...!"

Why was Aris here all of a sudden!?

Hadn't they said the Sword Dragon Hall's ship had just docked?

Shouldn't she be returning with the students right now?

'No, more importantly—!'

That wasn't the issue now.

"... Lady Aris...?"

Ian glared at her, his expression crumpling.

"... What do you think you're doing right now?"

Pinned in a dangerously precarious situation under Aris, there was no room for other thoughts.

"Let go of me."

Ian spoke in a calm voice.

"Isn't this going a bit too far for a prank?"

Attacking in the middle of training.

It was truly an unpleasant act.

If Ian had been in deep training, his disrupted breathing could've severely injured his mana circuits.

"Fufu. Sorry, young master Ian. Did I offend you?"

"Do you even have to ask?"

—Grin.

Aris's smile grew stronger.

Conversely, Ian's expression grew harsher.

"I told you to let go."

Aris shook her head.

"No, young master Ian. I won't let go."

"... Why."

Ian finally realized Aris's breathing was a little rough.

A chill ran down his spine.

"... What are you going to do to me?"

"Who knows?"

—Surr!

At that moment, a cold chill began to emanate from her grip.

"Ugh!"

That icy cold flowed through Ian's wrist and invaded his mana channels.

From wrist to forearm.

From elbow to shoulder.

Riding under his arm to his heart.

"U-ugh! S-stop!"

Aris's chill spread from his heart throughout his entire body.

Ian gritted his teeth and squeezed his eyes shut tightly.

Aris was forcibly invading all his mana channels, and if he lost control, he felt he'd let out a shameful moan against his will.

"You overdid it, young master Ian."

Aris's cold energy pooled at Ian's dantian.

She stroked around his dantian with her own aura as if petting a cat.

"There's almost no aura left. You're completely empty."

"Ha, haa... ha... haa..."

Ian panted rapidly.

"... That should be enough. Ha, ah... Now let me go."

But Aris shook her head mischievously, grinning.

"No, young master Ian. This is your punishment."

—Fwoosh!

Her cold energy pierced even deeper into Ian's body.

"Hi-hik!?"

This time, he couldn't suppress a moan.

Ian's back arched like a bow.

"Hahaha."

Aris pressed down on the shuddering Ian with her whole body, savoring his expression.

"Such a nice face, young master Ian. I've only ever seen your calm face—but look at how broken you can be."

"Ghh...!"

—Gnash!

Ian bit down so hard his teeth ground together.

"Cut it out...!! What do you want from me!?"

"Why, are you mad? I haven't even begun yet."

Aris brought her wickedly smiling face even closer.

Close enough for their breaths to mingle.

"I told you clearly, young master Ian. I told you, didn't I."

That she would be watching him.

"If you disappear like that however you please, what am I supposed to do? You scared me. I thought I'd lost you forever."

"G-ghh...!"

Aris's cold aura still invaded Ian's mana circuits.

"This is punishment for that. And a warning. Even if something like today happens, do not disappear from my sight again..."

A burning obsession like hellfire blazed in Aris's red eyes.

"Understood?"

"... G-ggh..."

"You'll answer, won't you?"

Aris's cold aura licked greedily over Ian's whole body.

It felt as if centipedes were crawling through every vein, sinking in their venomous fangs.

His whole body tingled and turned numb, frost blurring his vision.

He felt as if his body would be permanently damaged if he tried to keep resisting.

But...

"Fuck, hell no...!!"

Ian was not the type to yield to such threats.

Crazy...

Chapter 102 : Obsession (2)

Obsession (2)

"Damn, kaa...!!"

Despite Aris's pressure, Ian did not submit.

– Sssmirk.

"As expected..."

As if amused.

Aris smiled even more mischievously.

"I never thought it would be easy from the start, Young Master Ian."

And it only makes it more satisfying to tame you this way.

– Srrrr!

Once more, Aris's chill pierced into Ian's body.

"Kuh, haah!"

A force much rougher than just before.

All of his mana circuits rampaged out of control, and his vision blurred with sparks.

"Kk, kuuk...!"

Strength automatically entered his limbs, and his internal organs twisted, as if they would immediately be forced out both up and down.

The waves of violation tore through Ian's entire body without restraint.

"Ha, haa...! Ha!"

Thus, one minute passed.

A minute that felt like an entire year.

He barely endured it.

"Amazing."

Aris shone her eyes with a look of pure fascination.

She gently stroked the wrist of Ian, who she was pinning down.

"Most people would've already lost control by now. Even though it's your first time, you lasted all the way here. You're the first, Ian Greysel."

"Ha, haa...!"

Ian forced up the corners of his mouth, which were twitching on their own.

"So you've done this kind of thing often, huh? What a truly disgusting hobby."

"Of course! This sort of thing is all about repetition and practice. I especially did it a lot with my knight commander, Roxy."

Roxy.

Roxy Lockberman.

Captain of Aris's direct Heavenly Beast Knights, and a Grandmaster swordswoman.

"Ah! But it's a secret from Roxy. That I said this. She gets really embarrassed."

"And she still remained loyal to you after going through this crap?"

Even in his previous life, Roxy was the knight who stayed by Aris's side until the very end.

During the Hisperion civil war, even when Aris's downfall and defeat were certain, she stayed steadfastly by her side.

Her personality was a little rough, but as a knight for Aris, she was more than excellent.

"Heh. Roxy hated it at first too. But now, apparently, she views it as a reward."

So there was this kind of background.

Was that loyalty forged through discipline and training?

Well, thinking about Aris's personality, it wasn't all that surprising.

"Poor Lady Roxy."

"Hm. You'll end up liking it too, you know?"

"I can guarantee that'll never happen."

"No, Young Master Ian. Your will doesn't matter for this."

Aris slowly licked her lips.

"No matter how much you don't want it... your body's sensations will steadily, bit by bit, start to change."

She whispered, as if right in his ear.

"Because right now... I'm in the process of remaking your body."

"W-what!"

Ian shuddered all over.

"Y-you're crazy! Stop right now!"

Ian struggled wildly.

But with his aura totally sealed, there was no way he could throw off a Grandmaster.

"Haha!"

Aris laughed cheerfully like a girl.

"Your reactions are fun. Don't you like your body getting changed against your will?"

"Kuh...! Who'd ever like something like this!"

"Heheh. Roxy said something similar at first. She didn't last long, though."

"Ku, kuhh...!"

Ian looked up at Aris with shaking eyes.

Even Grandmaster Roxy Lockberman succumbed to this 'remodeling' technique?

If something like that were done to him, could he even say he'd be the same person as before?

If even Roxy turned into Aris's dog because of this...

'No!'

Ian struggled even harder.

He had a mission as important as his own life.

Yuria, Sophia, Scarlet... people he had to protect.

The Demon Grand Dukes and the greater demons... beings he had to kill.

If he lost himself to Aris's "remodeling" and turned into her tool... her toy...

That was no different than death.

"Get off me, right now!"

– Kwaaak!

Ian shouted furiously, but Aris only gripped his wrist even tighter.

"Ugh...!"

"Calm down, Young Master Ian. There's no need to be so scared. It won't be as bad as you think."

Ian ground his teeth.

"If you really plan to keep this up...! I'm not just going to sit back and take it."

"And what if you don't sit still?"

Right now, Ian had no aura and his body was completely restrained.

But he wasn't entirely without options.

'I'll use innate magic power!'

Innate magic power.

The source magic power that can be called pure life force itself.

If used up, death is unavoidable, and even using only a little shortens one's lifespan. On top of that, recovering it is extremely difficult.

'But it's better than losing my sense of self here...!'

Ian glared at Aris, resolved to burn through half his life if he must.

"....."

Aris sensed, instinctively, what Ian intended to do from his gaze.

"..... You're going to use innate magic power?"

"Think I can't?"

"No. I think you really could, right now."

Aris silently gazed at Ian for a moment.

Ian did not avoid her gaze, either.

"....."

"....."

Their staring contest lasted a short while.

Then Aris spoke in a gentle voice.

"If you're willing to go that far, it can't be helped. I'll back off. I don't want to hurt you over something like this. So calm down, Ian Greysel."

But contrary to her words, she still didn't release his wrist, nor move off of him.

"Then get out of the way, now."

"Relax. The punishment is over now."

Aris playfully tickled Ian's face with her loose hair.

"Instead, I'll give you a reward this time."

"I don't need it, so scram...!"

Just as Ian tried to start struggling again.

– Whish!

Aris's hand moved swiftly.

– Tap!

– Grab!

She switched from pinning down Ian's wrists with both hands to holding them with one.

"Ugh?!"

Then, Aris brought her now-free right hand to her lips.

– Snap!

She bit hard, drawing blood.

"What the...!"

Before Ian could even speak.

– Ssk!

"Mmmp!?"

Aris shoved her finger deep into Ian's mouth.

"Ugh!?"

Aris's blood immediately began to well up in Ian's mouth.

"Kuhk!"

Ian coughed, choking on the blood.

Some splattered onto Aris's face.

But she didn't remove her finger—she pushed it in even deeper.

"Drink, Young Master Ian. My Heavenly Blood."

Heavenly Blood.

The peerless elixir, noble blood containing all the blessings of the Hisperion lineage.

Just a few sips of it could turn a frail person into the strongest man in the city.

"Ugh, ugh!"

– Gulp, gulp!

As Aris pushed her finger even deeper, the Heavenly Blood was forced down Ian's throat despite himself.

"Don't resist. Take it slowly... We have plenty of time."

"Ugh, guh...!"

With not a hint of aura left, Ian's body was flooded with Heavenly Blood, and the intense shock almost made his brain go numb.

It felt just like coming home on a freezing winter night and warming up with a bowl of hot, gentle soup.

'Damn...!'

The mana circuits frozen by Aris's chill were melting smoothly in the warmth of the Heavenly Blood.

'... So that's why she tormented my mana circuit like that!'

To make the reward she gave taste even more stimulating and pleasant.

'So she trained Roxy the same way.'

As the mana circuits that had hardened from Aris's chill melted, his whole body trembled involuntarily.

It felt like his body, from head to toe, was dissolving.

This was Aris's poison at work.

A poison she used to tame Ian, bit by bit, as her own.

'But—'

If it's something like this, I'll drink as much as you want.

Compared to the Heavenly Blood of the Heavenly Sword Lord, it was inferior, but even so, the blood of Hisperion's direct line was still a peerless elixir.

If he drank as much as possible now, he could exponentially strengthen his physical body.

To protect Yuria and his precious comrades, and one day slaughter all the Demon Grand Dukes.

If the poison of a wicked woman could help with that, then Ian would drink it without hesitation.

– Gulp! Gulp!

Ian resolutely began to actively take in more of Aris's Heavenly Blood.

Aris smiled in satisfaction.

"See? Didn't I tell you it wouldn't be bad? You're so honest in your reactions, it's adorable. I think you have talent, Ian. I'm glad you like your reward."

Aris slowly released Ian's wrists.

The moment his two hands were freed, Ian grabbed Aris's wrist.

Then, as if squeezing out the blood, he massaged Aris's hand and wrist.

It must have hurt quite a bit, but Aris didn't care. She simply brushed Ian's hair gently.

"If you hadn't brought back Kargon, I wouldn't have been able to escape blame for this incident."

She would have lost her position as Sword Dragon Hall Head.

And since Kargon's mother, marcellin, wouldn't have left her alone, she might have ended up exiled to the far frontier, like Theo.

"Thanks to you, Ian... I get to keep watching you. This is both praise and a reward for that. Take as much as you want, and drink slowly."

– Snap!

Ian bit Aris's finger even deeper, making the wound more severe.

A sharp pain made Aris frown, but she still did not withdraw her finger.

After all, even if Ian bit with all his might, all he could do was widen the wound a little.

Looking down as Ian, she continued slowly.

"And the top prize for this trial... the Millennium Golden Essence, I'll give it to you too. That's what you wanted from the start, right? Even though the trial ended all muddled because of the demonic humans... no one can complain if I give it to you."

Before the demonic humans had appeared, Ian's score had been overwhelmingly first, and he had even saved Kargon directly from them.

And with Aris, the Pavilion Head herself, commending him, who would dare object?

"....."

Ian mouthed the finger, making eye contact with Aris.

Giving him not only Heavenly Blood, but even the Millennium Golden Essence as well.

It was far more generous than expected.

He almost felt like thanking her.

"By the way, it's starting to hurt quite a bit. Is my blood that tasty?"

"....."

– Gulp, gulp.

Ian remained silent, simply focusing on drinking the Heavenly Blood.

It was a rare opportunity—he had to drink as much as possible.

"If you want, once a year... I could collect the essence from my own blood and give you a Heavenly Blood Pill, too?"

"......?"

Ian looked up at Aris with wide eyes.

She'd give him something so precious? With no conditions? The calculating, cold-hearted Aris?

"Of course, if you swear loyalty to me."

"....."

Ian's gaze turned cold.

So that's how it is.

There's no way Aris would just give away something so great for nothing.

Of course, objectively it wasn't a bad deal.

A normal knight or swordsman would have nodded without hesitation.

From some perspectives, it was extremely generous.

Just by joining Aris's camp, he'd receive a Heavenly Blood Pill—the elixir of heaven—once a year.

But for Ian, it was the worst possible deal.

Because he already had a master: Yuria.

'And I can copy Heavenly Blood as much as I want later with the Authority of Projection.'

Not to mention, Yuria had 'True Heavenly Blood', a tier even higher than Aris's blood.

Later on, he'd be able to copy as much of that as he wanted... Aris's Heavenly Blood was nothing.

When Ian's rejection became clear, Aris clicked her tongue in disappointment.

"I see. You're not going to give in so easily after all."

She licked the corner of her mouth.

"Which only makes you look tastier to me."

Ian was the type whose heart was hard to snare, but once you got him, he'd never betray you.

Aris never expected to win him over in one go, and even his stubbornness pleased her.

Couldn't you sense his conviction?

"For now, I'll let you go, Young Master Ian. Out of consideration for you."

"....."

"But one day, you'll willingly become mine. You'll have no choice, Ian Greysel."

"....."

Ian glared at Aris as he gulped down the Heavenly Blood.

Not in a million years. That will never happen.

Damn, Ian got assaulted...

【(ᗢᵕᗢ)】

Chapter 103 : Home (1)

Home (1)

"I hope you don't forget my warning... Ian Greysel. If you disappear on your own like that again... I don't know what I might do."

Aris left behind her warning and departed.

"....."

Ian lay sprawled on the grass, half-exhausted.

It felt as if a storm had passed.

He rested like that for about five minutes.

"Young maasteer Iaaaan!?"

"... Sophia?"

Sophia had returned.

"Gasp! Young master Ian...!"

"Ian Greysel!!"

Yuria and Charlotte were with Sophia.

They crossed the lawn and hurried to Ian.

"Young master! What on earth happened!? Are you all right!? Are you hurt anywhere!?"

Sophia was the first to rush over.

"I'm fine, Sophia."

Ian sat up with some effort.

"I'm really all right. Not hurt at all."

"Then why were you lying out here like that! I thought you'd collapsed! Are you sure you're okay?"

"I said I'm fine. I was just resting a bit before coming out to greet you."

His fingertips still tingled from what Aris had done earlier, but it wasn't worth making a fuss over.

"How about you? Sophia, are you all right? Not hurt anywhere?"

"Me? I'm perfectly all right! Young master, you watched over me the whole time!"

"And on the way back? Nothing happened while I was gone?"

"No. We just took the boat back. Right after you disappeared, the barrier broke."

"I see."

Ian let out a small sigh of relief.

Sophia seemed to be fine.

"Lady Yuria, and Lady Charlotte, are you both all right as well?"

"Y-Yes, I'm fine!"

"I'm fine too, as you can see... But seriously, what happened?"

Yuria sat down beside Ian.

"Do you know how startled my... all three of us were when you suddenly disappeared?"

"... I'm sorry."

He'd had no choice if he wanted to save Kargon, but from their perspective, it must have been quite shocking.

He'd been carrying them along, then suddenly dashed off alone and vanished.

"I'm not looking for an apology. I was actually going to join the search team for you as soon as we got back. But when I went to the investigation department, they said you'd already returned, so I came here."

"I see. I'll explain everything, step by step. What happened and how it all went down."

Ian began telling the story, starting from the moment he entered the portal.

"You... you threw yourself straight into the portal!? That's so reckless! What if there had been a demonic human stronger than you at the hideout!?"

"I had no other choice if I wanted to save young master Kargon. That was the best option..."

"No, no! You're a cadet too! ... Well, not a typical cadet, but still, that was way too reckless! Even if things worked out in the end... That was something you should have left to the knights! Don't ever do that again!"

"H-Haa! Young master! Really! I—I told you last time! To at least think about those of us who worry about you from behind...! I'm really! Upset, really! For being so reckless again!"

"....."

There was an odd sense of déjà vu in their reactions.

Only their tones were different. Weren't they saying exactly what Aris had said?

Telling him not to disappear on his own.

Yet, it felt different from Aris somehow.

Their nagging didn't feel all that unpleasant.

"Pfft."

Ian found himself letting out a soft laugh.

"Y-You're laughing!? You find this funny right now!?"

"Young master! I'm being serious, you know!?"

"Sorry, Sophia. Lady Yuria, I apologize to you as well."

"....."

Charlotte, awkwardly standing in the back.

"... I—I was worried too, young master Ian."

"...?"

Her expression was surprisingly sincere.

He'd never expected even Charlotte to worry about him.

"... Thank you for your concern, lady Charlotte."

He didn't recall ever seeing her act like this in his previous life.

Maybe after living together for several months, even Charlotte had grown a bit attached to him.

He wasn't sure what she was thinking.

"But I didn't throw myself into danger just on luck."

Ian continued the story.

How he easily took down the two demonic humans who had kidnapped Kargon.

How he gave Kargon emergency treatment after he'd been contaminated by magic power, and found himself outside in the city of Kartai.

How he'd immediately returned through the warp gate.

"I already knew the number and level of the demonic humans, and that the portal linked to somewhere nearby."

He didn't mention saving Scarlet from the hideout or picking up various loot.

That wasn't important for them, and it would only make the explanation more complicated.

"I entered the portal because I was sure it was doable."

"... Still. But still!"

"So you're saying you'd do it again next time!? Right now!?"

"... I mean, it was a rational choice—"

"You didn't hear a single thing I said, did you!?"

"Young master! Do you really want to see me lose my mind!?"

"... Y-Young master Ian..."

"....."

Ian shut his mouth.

"Ah, oh. Look at the time!"

He just tried to change the subject.

No matter how logically he tried to explain, it felt like all he got in return was nagging.

"The sun's already setting. Come to think of it, none of us have eaten since lunch. Let's eat first, shall we?"

"Is eating really important now!?"

"Young master! I'm not finished talking yet, you know!?"

"....."

Failed to change the subject.

"Ian. I know you're special, but that's exactly why you need to be more careful. You're only just starting to draw attention. I have more experience than you with this, so trust me! The place you're most sure you're ahead is often where traps are set. You're smart, so you know this. Do you know how many enemies can appear just because of that one thing—being special? Especially you. Be careful! If you ever make a serious mistake... Wouldn't it be such a waste of your potential!?"

"S-She's right, lady Yuria is right! Young master, you have to be aware of your position! If you keep being reckless like that...! How would you feel if I did the same!? Could you handle it!? That's what I always feel! When you left alone like that last time, I told you how worried I got, but you never! Never! You didn't listen then, did you!? You're not listening now, are you!? You'll do it again, right!? Huh!? HUH!?"

"A-Alright, Sophia... Lady Yuria, too..."

But their nagging continued for a good while.

"P-Please, enough now..."

It felt like his ears would start bleeding.

* * *

Only after enduring quite a bit of nagging did they finally get to have dinner.

Since Yuria was visiting the annex, the four of them dined together in harmony.

Normally, Ophelia—Charlotte's chaperone—would have been there as well, but she was on vacation.

She'd taken time off to match Charlotte's deserted island exam, but with everything that had happened, she'd probably have to briefly return tonight.

Ian took a moment of silence for her, knowing well how it felt to be called back from a hard-earned break.

-clatter! clatter!

-chatter, chatter!

The dining atmosphere was warm and cheerful.

Tonight's dinner was a rather unusual menu item—slime sashimi.

Ian had eaten it several times in his previous life, but for the other three, it was a first.

Its texture was slippery like pudding, with a chewy bite reminiscent of raw meat.

The flavor of slime varies depending on what it's fed as it grows—this one had a pleasantly nutty aroma.

Depending on the sauce, the taste changed entirely.

But since it was so fresh, the nerves were still alive, and picking it up with chopsticks made it squirm vigorously—quite a revolting sight.

Sophia was the first to bravely put a piece in her mouth, then shivered from the wriggling texture, twisting her body all over.

But apparently, she found it better than expected, and her eyes widened.

After that, Sophia picked up the slime sashimi more and more quickly.

However, she never quite got used to the texture, shivering and twisting every time she ate it.

Seeing that, Charlotte and Yuria also mustered their courage and picked up pieces.

And just like Sophia, they both shivered and twisted their bodies as they ate it.

Everyone laughed at the sight.

It was a pleasant mealtime.

After such a harmonious and warm dinner, it was time for Yuria to return to the Heavenly Sword Main Estate.

Ian accompanied her outside to see her off.

-step, step.

-tap, tap.

The road they walked together.

They deliberately took paths where there were no people.

If someone saw the two of them together, it would inevitably lead to bothersome rumors.

Their academy uniforms' hoods were pulled deep over their faces.

"....."

"....."

They didn't particularly speak.

-step... step...

-tap... tap...

Yet their footsteps were incredibly slow.

As if neither of them wished to reach the Heavenly Sword Main Estate.

"....."

Inside Yuria's head, thoughts were racing.

A rare and precious moment alone together.

No one around.

How many months had it been since they'd been alone like this?

Once this was over, it would probably be several months before they could talk again.

If Aris saw her getting close to Ian, who knows what she'd do.

"... Haaa..."

Unconsciously, Yuria let out a sigh.

It had been ages since she'd enjoyed a lively meal at the same table with others like today.

Probably the first time since she'd last eaten with her nanny Dellen, before Dellen had betrayed her.

She'd wanted to stay and linger there, it had been so much fun.

But once she returned to the Heavenly Sword Main Estate, she'd be alone again, day after day.

How long this time? A month? A quarter? Half a year?

"....."

She hated it. This situation.

Honestly, she was lonely. She often talked to herself out of sheer longing for conversation.

It wasn't that the Heavenly Sword Main Estate was empty.

On the contrary, it was full.

Servants to wait on her, knights guarding the estate, all sorts of administrators and retainers.

But most of them weren't well-disposed toward Yuria.

Especially those stationed underground, where Yuria stayed.

They were all people sent by various factions to spy on her.

Guards sent by her sister Aris.

A maid sent by her first aunt Estella.

An administrator sent by her second aunt Marceline...

They were never people she could laugh and talk with like today.

If possible—if only it were possible—she'd like to talk every day about what happened, with friends she could trust like Ian.

If only they could spend time and laugh together every day like today...

'But...'

If she got close to Ian, all sorts of trouble would surely befall him too.

Ian was a child so talented that even her own father, the lord of the Heavenly Sword family, had set his eyes on him.

If Yuria showed herself being close with Ian, Aris, her aunts, and all the other siblings and collateral kin—they'd all do whatever they could to keep them apart.

Ian would get caught up in it and suffer too.

'... So for now.'

For now, just...

Just this much.

Enjoying a brief, happy moment like this...

Being content with walking together for a little while.

-step... step...

Just moving slowly.

Trying to soothe the aching sense of regret.

However—

-step...

The way back was painfully short.

"....."

It was time to part ways.

The quiet rear garden of the massive Heavenly Sword Main Estate.

Once she went inside, there would be plenty of other people, and this was as far as Ian could walk her.

"We're already here."

"... Yeah."

"I'll stay until you go inside."

"....."

So that means...

If I don't go in, he won't leave either.

Yuria stood silently for a moment.

It was too hard to let Ian go like this.

She wanted to talk more, to be with him longer.

What's more, there was something she wanted to ask.

The question she'd left unspoken back on the deserted island.

Do you like me?

"Hey, um..."

-mumble mumble...

But Yuria knew.

Even if they stayed together a little longer, her longing wouldn't be eased.

And even if he confessed that he liked her...

Unless she became strong enough, there was nothing she could do for Ian.

Saying goodbye would only get harder.

So, in the end, she couldn't muster up the courage.

"Thanks for walking me back."

"....."

"Get home safely. I'm going in."

With deep regret behind her, Yuria turned to enter the Heavenly Sword Main Estate.

"Lady Yuria."

Ian called out to her.

Yeah, after the assault, nagging came next...

Also, slime sashimi, Rimuru would be mad...

Chapter 104 : Home (2)

Home (2)

"Thank you for walking me home."

A feeling that she didn't want to be alone again...

"Get home safely. I'm going in as well."

Pushing aside her reluctance to part with Ian like this.

The moment Yuria bit down on her lower lip and turned to head toward the Heavenly Sword main estate—

"Miss Yuria."

—Grab!

Ian caught hold of Yuria.

"Uh, uh!?"

Yuria, surprised at having her wrist suddenly grabbed, was flustered.

"....."

Ian looked like he wanted to say something but hesitated.

Yuria, wide-eyed, waited quietly, gazing up at him.

She wondered what he was trying to say, with his lips trembling like that.

Her heart, secretly, began to race a little.

She could feel the thumping of a pulse, even from her wrist.

She didn't know if it was from her own wrist, or being transmitted from Ian's hand.

"U-uhm..."

Suddenly, if it was because of her own pounding heart, she somehow didn't want him to notice.

It would be embarrassing.

Just as Yuria shyly tried to slip her wrist from his grasp—

"Miss Yuria."

—Grasp.

Ian gripped her wrist even tighter and spoke again.

"Uh, yes!?"

"If it's alright with you, miss... how about living together with us at Lunabreeze starting next year?"

"W-what?"

It was such an unexpected remark.

"W-what!? What do you mean!?"

"No special meaning. It's just as I said."

"You're asking me to live with you!?"

"Yes."

Ian already knew all about how Yuria lived in the basement of the Heavenly Sword main estate.

In his previous life, he visited her daily in that basement to receive treatment for his mana circuits.

'The air there was unpleasant.'

It wasn't just about the musty, damp smell of a basement.

The Heavenly Sword main estate's basement was equipped with cutting-edge magic ventilation, so that was never a problem.

Rather, there were despicable people who made the very air there disagreeable.

The knights, servants, and administrators sent by various factions to monitor Yuria.

Their cold gazes at Yuria, their whispered schemes rumbling in the air, all made the atmosphere as filthy, stagnant, and unpleasant as a rotten swamp.

'You can't call that a home.'

It was nowhere you could feel at peace.

With all sorts of factions mixed together, coming and going as they pleased, constantly watching and checking up on each other—how could that be called a home?

It was closer to an animal cage at a zoo, or a prison for criminals.

Yuria would be watched and checked by countless factions, whether she was training, cultivating, eating, reading a book, or even napping.

'A terribly stifling and uncomfortable place.'

Yuria was always terribly alone there.

Even though she was surrounded by so many people.

Most people only considered Yuria an object to be monitored and checked, and those who approached kindly were simply traitors with an ulterior motive.

Perhaps Yuria couldn't bear the loneliness that had built up in layers there any longer, which was why she had reached out to Ian.

That's the impression Ian got.

The place she lived was unforgiving and cold.

"....."

Ian mustered up his courage.

"I'll be straightforward. I want to live together with you, miss Yuria."

"W-what!?"

"I want to eat together, laugh together, train together, and live joyfully together every day, like today."

"Gasp...!"

"Lunabreeze has many rooms with beautiful views. There are quiet ones, spacious ones. You can choose one to your liking and settle in right away—even if you just bring yourself, you can stay immediately."

"That's... so direct...! You!"

Yuria's face flushed red.

To suddenly ask her to live together.

This was beyond a confession—it was almost like a proposal.

Though, since he hadn't explicitly said he liked her yet,

Ian's true intentions were still a mystery to Yuria.

"Uh, um... hmm."

Yuria lowered her eyes, nibbling nervously at her lower lip, as if lost in thought.

"....."

Ian waited silently, watching her for an answer.

"... Frankly..."

Yuria slowly opened her mouth again.

"Honestly, I want to, too."

Yuria plucked up the courage to speak her heart.

She didn't want to be alone anymore.

The time spent having dinner with Ian today was genuinely delightful.

If possible, she wished she could spend every day that way.

She wanted to run off to Lunabreeze right away and pick out a room of her own.

But—

"But if I did, it would cause all kinds of trouble..."

Countless faces flashed through Yuria's mind.

Her aunts, siblings, distant elders, and vassals who were desperate to monitor and restrain her.

If Yuria moved to Lunabreeze, they would no longer be able to keep an eye on her, nor directly restrain her.

They would find some excuse or another to drag Yuria back to the Heavenly Sword residence.

If things got out of hand, not only would Yuria suffer, but Ian, too, could be harmed.

"And I need to get approval from my father as well."

The Heavenly Sword Lord might be troubled, since keeping Yuria safe would be harder if she left his household.

"There are so many things to worry about."

Especially Aris, her sister, would be the first to make a move.

Aris wasn't only watching Yuria but had also set her sights on Ian.

"... It probably won't work."

Yuria's voice dropped low.

As she slowly tried to free her wrist from his grasp in resignation—

—Slide!

Ian grabbed Yuria's hand firmly.

"Uh, wha!?"

Yuria's eyes widened in surprise.

Ian held her hand even tighter.

"You don't need to worry about any of that. I'll handle everything. I'll take responsibility for it all."

"...?"

—Gulp.

Yuria swallowed hard without realizing it, blinking her large eyes as she stared at Ian.

"Miss Yuria, you can simply make whatever decision you want."

"N-no..."

Yuria's hand fidgeted in Ian's grasp.

"It's not about me... I'm worried about you."

Yuria bit her lips again, lowering her eyes.

If it was up to her, she'd have done whatever she wanted long ago.

"I told you a few months ago... Aris has been targeting you."

Ian nodded.

That was why Yuria had lent him her precious treasures, the Heavenly Bone Wheel and Corgadin.

So he could protect himself.

"If Aris sees that I'm close to you, there's no telling how she'll react. To be honest... Even being here with you like this is extremely risky."

Even though this was a deserted backyard, it was right behind the Heavenly Sword Lord's house.

If anyone saw them, it would quickly reach Aris's ears.

But Ian tightened his hold on her hand even more.

"So, please wait just half a year. Please."

Ian gently placed both his hands over Yuria's.

"For my part, I want to bring you to my annex right away. Maybe even by force if you're unwilling."

Because he couldn't bear the thought of Yuria staying in such a desolate place.

Once she came and lived in Lunabreeze, she'd realize how much more joyful and comfortable it was.

"W-what!"

Yuria's crimson face worked up and her lips parted.

Take her away by force!?

It was a bit high-handed and rude, but somehow, it made her happy to hear it.

It even made her heart flutter; it was a strange feeling.

"But just as you said, there are many obstacles right now. I don't want to recklessly hurry things and ruin it all. So, just half a year... It's not a short time, but please wait half a year."

In half a year, he'd be able to rapidly consume the Millennium Golden Elixirs, reach the very top of Swordmaster, and, with the addition of the Authority of Projection, Frenzied Insight Style, all sorts of Sword Spirit Release techniques, and Vladiark, he could handle someone like Aris with ease.

Ian had dealt with such monsters even in his previous life—and won, and survived, many times over.

"I promise you. In half a year, I'll be able to resolve every concern you have right now."

No matter what threat anyone tried to bring, Ian was confident he could cut them all down.

"Miss Yuria, all you'll have to do... is come to me."

—Gulp...!

Yuria subconsciously swallowed again.

"... W-what exactly are you thinking?"

Yuria asked, her voice betraying a hint of anticipation.

"..."

But it was hard for Ian to answer.

He wanted to explain everything.

That in half a year, he'd become a Swordmaster top ranker, with Vladiark, the Authority of Projection, and other powers, and that no one but the Heavenly Sword Lord himself could stand in his way.

"... Well."

But if he explained everything transparently, the questions would never end.

'Swordmaster top rank in just half a year? How is that possible?'

'Authority of Projection? What's that? How did you get it? Who are you really?'

'Frenzied Insight Style? Where, and from whom, did you learn such swordsmanship? You couldn't have mastered that alone—do you have someone behind you!?'

To fully satisfy her, he'd have to tell her about his past life. Would Yuria believe it?

In the worst case, she might find him suspicious and mistrust him forever.

"....."

Ian's lips moved, searching for an explanation.

"....."

Seeing Ian's troubled look, Yuria spoke up first.

"Ha... It's another secret, isn't it."

Ian lowered his head apologetically and nodded slowly.

"I'm sorry, miss. But when the time comes—"

"It's okay."

Yuria shook her head and smiled.

"I trust you."

Then she gently placed her hand on top of Ian's.

"After all, you saved my life twice. And now, I know for sure you're a kind person."

She'd seen Ian bleed and sweat for those around him, time and time again.

If anyone got hurt, Ian always tended their wounds himself.

A few months ago, and again today—Ian had always been reliable and gentle.

"Ian Greysel. I'll trust in you. Just like you said, I'll wait half a year... so you have to keep your promise, okay?"

At those words, Ian's face lit up.

"Thank you. I promise—you will never be disappointed. I will keep my word."

"Yes! I'll look forward to it, Ian. I trust you."

—Whoosh...

For a moment, a fragrant flower-scented breeze drifted between the two of them.

The scent triggered a memory from a previous life.

'... Hey, Ian, there are so many places I want to go with you.'

'How about you, Ian? Is there a place you want to go with me?'

'I like forests, I like caves, even cold polar regions... anywhere's fine.'

'Once we settle somewhere decent and build a house, then... We'll throw a party every day, like today. Eat delicious food, and I'll keep giving you massages.'

'And if you want more—just say so. I'll do anything for you, Ian.'

.

.

Countless tangled thoughts swirled in Ian's chest.

Those were painful memories.

Yet, in his grip, warmth still remained.

The vivid sensation of Yuria's living, gentle touch.

That brought in waves of relief and gratitude, soothing his aching heart.

'Yuria... Even though it took quite a detour to get here, now, we're finally starting over... The things you dreamed of in your past life—I'll make sure to grant them all. Every single thing you wanted that I couldn't give you back then... all of them...'

'... Ah, let's have a child, too. A child who resembles you and me... I'm sure they'll be incredibly cute.'

"Gasp!"

Ian snapped out of his thoughts.

"U-uhm!"

But his face was already flushing hot, beyond help.

And his two hands were growing warm, too.

"Uhm?"

Though the sun was nearly gone, Yuria noticed Ian's sudden change right away.

"What? What's with you all of a sudden?"

"Uh, what? What do you mean?"

"I mean... your face... your hands just got hot, too."

Yuria blinked.

"... You had a weird thought, didn't you! What were you thinking!?"

"W-what? I don't know what you mean!"

Ian instinctively feigned ignorance.

"Hmmmm..."

Yuria narrowed her eyes and stared hard at Ian.

Ian darted his gaze elsewhere to avoid her look.

Thankfully, Yuria didn't tease him for long.

"Hmph. You're weird sometimes, you know."

Yuria smiled and gently patted Ian's hand.

"Well... I really have to go now. The sun's almost completely set, and if I'm any later, the housekeeper will question where I've been."

"... Alright."

Though regretful, Ian nodded.

And then, slowly...

He released Yuria's hands one by one.

"Then, I'm going."

Yuria waved her hand.

"Yes. Please get home safely."

Ian answered with a slight bow.

"Pfft. What could happen here at this hour? You should get going too."

"I'll watch until you're inside."

"... Geez~ Okay. I'm going first. Bye, Ian!"

Yuria trotted off toward the Heavenly Sword main estate.

Then suddenly, she spun around and glanced back.

"See you tomorrow!"

She waved both hands above her head—hop!—saying goodbye.

Ian also raised both hands above his head and waved.

"..."

And even after that, several more times—

Yuria would walk a bit, then turn around and look back.

She grinned and waved, took a few steps, and looked back again, waving, hopping.

Gradually, she faded into the distance...

Until, at last, she disappeared inside the Heavenly Sword main estate.

Damn, Ian having indicent thoughts...

Hmm, puberty is hitting him, huh...

Chapter 105 : Until We Meet Again (1)

Until We Meet Again (1)

Ian escorted Yuria back and returned to Lunabreeze.

By now, it was completely night.

Sophia and Charlotte were in the underground training hall, taking turns grabbing each other's legs as they did pull-up exercises together.

"Sophia. Lady Charlotte."

"Yes!"

"... Yes?"

"Come this way for a moment."

Ian led the two of them to the secret training chamber.

He was going to show them Scarlet, who was sleeping there.

'At the very least, I'd better introduce her to these two in advance.'

He didn't know when Scarlet might come out.

He had left her a note saying, 'Even if you wake up, don't come outside,' but he couldn't be sure she would follow the instructions on the note.

Therefore, it was safer to introduce them in advance so that at least one side wouldn't be caught off guard if they suddenly ran into each other.

"H-Hyuk!!?"

As soon as Sophia saw Scarlet, she jumped in shock and clasped her hands over her mouth.

"Wh-who is this!? This person's face is so, so pale...!? H-hyuk! Don't tell me she's a corpse!? Y-young master, no way...! Did you again!?"

"... Calm down, Sophia. She's not a corpse. ... And again? What are you talking about?"

"N-no... Hmm...!"

Sophia glanced at Charlotte furtively, then trotted over to Ian and whispered in his ear.

"I thought you'd done it again...! Young master... You always kill anyone who picks a fight with you!"

"... Huh? Wait. What do you mean..."

Was she calling me a beast? Ian was about to retort, but closed his mouth.

Come to think of it, the number of people Ian had killed or smashed in front of Sophia had long since passed into double digits.

Of course, each act of violence had an understandable reason.

Bandits, house servants and knights of the Greysel family, rogue adventurers, Hector's group, demonic humans...

Every single one of them had tried to kill or harm Ian and Sophia.

"Ahem!"

Ian cleared his throat and opened his mouth again.

"Sophia. You know... I only did those things because they were the best option at the time."

"Ah, well! I know that! The ones who did bad things first are the ones at fault, and if you hadn't responded like that, we would've been the ones to die! I just thought... that maybe, someday, I'd end up having to help you hide or dispose of a corpse, and for a moment I thought that day was today!"

"... Uh, what?"

Ian blinked his eyes.

What? Help hide and dispose of a corpse...?

Somehow, Sophia sounded a bit like a villain.

Is this alright?

"Hm..."

... Well, as a swordsman, there are times when that kind of temperament can be useful.

It should be okay... right?

As long as Sophia herself is fine with it, it should be fine.

"Hmm."

Ian continued what he intended to do.

"She's not a corpse. I brought you here to introduce you. Her name is Scarlet Ravierre. She was being held captive in a demonic human hideout, and now she's recovering, so she's asleep."

"Recovering? Is she really okay? Her complexion is extremely pale..."

"That's just her natural skin color. She's a vampire."

"V-vampire!? ... A man-eating bloodsucker?"

"That's right. But there's no need to worry. Scarlet doesn't bite just anyone."

"R-really?"

Sophia nervously swallowed.

"Vampires don't bite people? There are vampires like that!? Are you sure you weren't fooled by her, young master!? You can be so thorough, but sometimes you're just too nice! And she's a woman you're seeing for the first time! Didn't you only meet her for the first time at the hideout!? And I heard vampires are good at bewitchment magic! Are you sure you weren't caught by something like that!?"

"... It's not that. But how do you know so much about vampires?"

"There are books in the library. I read them when I was bored."

"There were books like that?"

Maybe I should take a day to explore the library when I have a chance.

There could even be information related to the Goddess connected with Ian's regression.

"... Y-young master Ian?"

At that moment, Charlotte took a step forward.

"Um... do anyone besides us know that there's a vampire here? Do the Heavenly Sword knights know...?"

"No. I secretly brought her in. Other than the three of us, no one knows."

"Th-then...!"

Charlotte bit her lip before speaking.

"T-then isn't that a bit dangerous...! Just in case, when Cheryl or Ophelia come back, maybe we should... tell them as well...!"

"No. Absolutely not."

Ian refused firmly.

"Only the three of us will know about Scarlet."

He had no choice but to tell these two, but it would be better not to tell anyone else.

After all, Cheryl was usually in the caretaker's room and had no reason to come here, and as long as Charlotte was careful, Ophelia also wouldn't have any reason to enter here.

More importantly, Ian didn't know which faction Cheryl and Ophelia belonged to, so there was nothing to gain from letting the story about secretly bringing in Scarlet leak out.

Ian spoke with a serious expression.

"If this story gets to anyone else, you will be the first person I suspect, lady Charlotte. Do you understand?"

"H-hyuk...!"

Charlotte gasped sharply.

"I-I understand... Y-yes!"

Charlotte's round eyes quivered.

"I'll keep it in mind...!"

* * *

The next day.

A clear morning.

The announcement that Gunryong Hall would be closed spread.

Since such a major incident had occurred with demonic humans mixed in among the instructors, a major investigation had started again, just like during Yuria's kidnapping case.

As before, there would be a massive reshuffling of personnel, and those who had taken bribes from or were even slightly connected to the demonic humans would need incredible luck to survive.

Aris, who was extremely displeased by this incident, would investigate everything thoroughly as if she had obsessive-compulsive disorder.

Scarlet woke up a little less than a week later.

As usual, Ian went to check on Scarlet's condition, but her bed was empty.

Wondering where she had gone, he looked around.

— Swish!

— Shaaak!

Red blood vessels shot out from the ceiling like venomous snakes, instantly suspending Ian in the air.

"... What are you doing?"

Scarlet was suddenly right in front of Ian.

"You are..."

— Charrk!

As soon as Scarlet checked Ian's face, she released the restraints.

"You survived?"

— Swish!

"Ugh!"

Scarlet grabbed Ian's chin and forcibly turned his head.

She was checking his neck.

"No marks...?"

There were no bite marks.

"What are you looking for? The marks from where you bit me?"

"..."

Scarlet quietly took a step back.

"As I thought... I bit you, didn't I?"

"You remember?"

Scarlet frowned and rubbed her forehead.

"I remember you pulling me down from the cross... But after that, it's all blank. When I woke up, I felt full. From the circumstances, I thought I'd completely eaten you. ... I was so starved I couldn't control myself."

Ian smiled faintly.

"I almost died, for sure."

Scarlet narrowed her eyes and stared at Ian.

"What in the world happened? I need an explanation. I have a lot of questions."

"I figured as much."

Ian gestured alternately to the chair and the bed.

"Take a seat, wherever you like. I'll explain it to you calmly."

"..."

— Clatter.

Scarlet sat down in the chair.

Ian sat on the bed.

"Don't worry about biting me. I let you do it on purpose."

"On purpose?"

Ian nodded.

"Your condition was that serious. It was the surest treatment method. Since you're a vampire."

"... But you couldn't have handled the amount of blood I took, someone as small as you."

Even an enormous adult wouldn't have been able to handle it at all.

No matter how noble or good one's blood was, it was nearly impossible for a single human to endure the hunger of an ancient-class vampire alone.

Ian replied calmly.

"I had a way. I don't think it should surprise you that much."

There were all kinds of special abilities in this world.

He imagined someone who had lived so long would have seen plenty of unique abilities.

She probably had encountered humans who survived a vampire's bite before.

"... Is that so. Maybe not."

Scarlet looked at Ian intently.

Her eyes wavered slightly.

There was almost no one who could endure the hunger of an ancient vampire by themselves.

Even trolls, who could regenerate most wounds in the blink of an eye, would shrivel up instantly if bitten by an ancient vampire.

If someone possessed immense holy power like a Saintess or a pontiff of the Holy Kingdom, perhaps they could endure it easily.

They possessed vitality that was nearly immortal.

But because their blood had the attribute of light, like the sun, vampires—whose life originated from darkness—could not drink their blood.

In other words, Ian didn't have the recovery power of holy energy either.

So what kind of ability had allowed an ordinary human to withstand the hunger of an ancient vampire all by himself?

Even more so, a boy who looked so ordinary?

Scarlet, even in her thousands of years of life, had never seen a case like this.

How...?

"..."

A complicated expression spread across Scarlet's face.

"Don't ask too deeply about that. Even if you ask, I can't tell you."

Even though Scarlet had been Ian's close comrade in his previous life, there was no way he could reveal the Authority of Projection or his regression right now.

It wasn't that Ian didn't trust her, but it was an issue that she still didn't trust him yet.

They didn't have that level of trust. If he babbled something carelessly, crucial secret information could leak out.

"... Alright. If you say so."

Fortunately, Scarlet accepted it without fuss.

"I read your letter."

She picked up the note lying on the table and waved it.

On it were written things like where this place was and to please wait here after waking up.

"The blood... You didn't drink it."

Ian gestured to the cup on the table.

He had left it there, thinking she might be hungry when she woke, but she hadn't touched even a drop.

Blood tends to quickly coagulate like jelly, so he had replaced it every day.

"I didn't know whose blood it was."

"It's mine. You can drink it."

"Later. Questions come first."

"Fine. Ask anything. I'll tell you what I can."

"Alright..."

Scarlet leaned back in the chair and crossed her legs.

"I have no idea who you are. It's definitely a face I'm seeing for the first time. But you know my name. And you even rescued me. There are so many things I can't understand that I'm not sure what to ask first."

"Once you sort it out, ask one thing at a time."

"Then let's start simple."

Scarlet crossed her legs the other way and asked.

"How do you know my name?"

"I can't answer that."

If he lied and made something up, she would find out quickly, and it would harm trust. Telling her the story of a previous life was also not possible now.

Scarlet's expression bunched up.

"That's the most important question. You won't tell me?"

"Sorry."

"... You certainly saved my life, but if I can't learn anything about you, I have no choice but to remain on my guard. You know that, right?"

Ian nodded.

"Fine, I'll let it slide. It can't be helped."

"Thank you."

"Next question. Why did you save me?"

This one was easy to answer.

"That's simple. I hate demonic humans. If possible, I want to wipe every last one of them off the face of the earth."

One of Scarlet's eyebrows lifted slightly.

"Even if you hadn't been the one captured there, I would have rescued whoever it was. Anyone who's a prisoner of demonic humans is likely to become my friend."

Scarlet smiled.

"I like that."

The enemy of my enemy is my friend.

It was a moment when Scarlet's heart opened just a little.

Chapter 106 : Until We Meet Again (2)

Until We Meet Again (2)

Scarlet also hated the demonic humans, just like Ian.

Those creatures had stolen from her: her blood relatives, her nest, her strength... everything.

Thanks to Ian, she had regained some of her power, but her nest and blood relatives still remained in their clutches.

Therefore, Scarlet's immediate top priority was just one thing.

To kill those demonic humans, and reclaim her home and family.

"So then..."

Scarlet looked at Ian.

"Our goals are the same, in the end."

The enemy of my enemy is my friend, after all.

— Nod.

Ian nodded his head.

"Alright. Then, the third question."

Scarlet uncrossed her arms and leaned forward.

"How did you get into where I was? ... A little kid like you."

That hideout had eight fairly skilled demonic humans living there.

Among them was even a master-class, and Scarlet had been sealed away under all kinds of concealment talismans.

It wasn't a place some kid like that boy could waltz in and wander around—and even if they somehow entered, finding Scarlet would've been nearly impossible.

"That was... a coincidence."

"A coincidence?"

One of Scarlet's eyebrows arched.

"That's a pretty half-hearted answer, isn't it?"

"Just listen. I'll keep explaining."

Ian began to recount the story, organizing his thoughts as he combed through his memories.

"Someone important to us was kidnapped by the demonic humans. Chasing after them, we ended up at that hideout."

"... And?"

"We killed all the demonic humans. Freed our important person, too. Before leaving the place, while rummaging around the hideout..."

"What? Hold on."

Scarlet furrowed her brow, interrupting.

"What is it?"

"You killed them all? Who did the killing?"

"... Were they not supposed to be killed?"

"No, that's not it."

Each one of those individuals was a late-stage Expert or above.

Compared to top predators like Grandmasters or Ancient Vampires, they were nothing. But on a global scale, those guys were considered quite strong.

And the one acting as their leader had actually reached the master level.

They were hardly the kind of opponents any ragtag bunch could handle.

"Who helped you? I'd like to see the faces of your companions."

"Ah, that's what you meant."

Ian replied awkwardly.

"... I don't know if you'll believe me, but I didn't have any companions. I killed them alone, and while poking around the vault before leaving, I found you..."

"What...?"

Scarlet's eyes narrowed.

"And you expect me to believe that? A kid like you?"

"I'm not lying."

"How many demonic humans were there?"

"Eight."

"Their ranks? The gender ratio?"

"The strongest one was about a early-stage Master. The rest hovered around the peak of late-stage Expert. Two women, six men."

"... Huh."

It was all accurate.

But even so—

That alone wasn't enough to make it believable that this kid wiped out eight demonic humans by himself.

"How old are you, anyway?"

"..."

Ian knew this would make Scarlet even more suspicious, but answered honestly.

"... Fourteen."

What's inside is nearly thirty now.

He couldn't possibly explain about his past life, so he could only say he was fourteen.

"What?"

Scarlet ran a hand down her face, looking dumbfounded as she laughed.

"That's way too young. Really? You're really fourteen?"

"Do I not look it?"

"No, I mean... it's not just your looks..."

The atmosphere, his way of speaking—

He wasn't fidgety, nor did he boast arrogantly after saving her.

She had assumed he couldn't be just a simple kid.

She'd thought his young appearance was just a façade.

But he really was a fourteen-year-old boy?

"What's your skill level? How far have you trained your aura?"

"I can't say. Sorry."

He couldn't divulge his aura rank.

Scarlet still wasn't a confirmed ally.

She could possibly leak Ian's information outside, so he couldn't answer about his trump cards.

"... Well, I figured."

Scarlet bit her lower lip.

"... From the middle on, it's been hard to believe anything you're saying. At this rate, there's no point in asking."

"I won't ask you to believe me. These things are hard to accept, even from my perspective."

However—

"But right now, aren't things about me the least important?"

"... Then? What's important?"

"The fact that you're free now. That's what matters."

"... Hmm."

What mattered was that Scarlet was free from the demonic humans' chains.

And she had regained some of the strength that had been stolen from her.

Now, Scarlet could do as she wished.

She didn't need to care about Ian.

She just had to save her family and reclaim her nest as she wanted.

"That's true."

— Swish.

Scarlet slowly rose from her chair.

"Anyway... I can't believe much of what you've said, but I just wanted to say thank you. It's true you saved me, after all. Thank you."

"Don't mention it. No need to thank me."

"Is there nothing you want from me? You could ask for a reward."

"... A reward?"

Suddenly, Ian recalled the first time he met her.

Wasn't it a similar situation back then?

Scarlet had received help from Ian, and Ian had the right to demand a reward from her.

But both then and now, Ian said the exact same thing.

"I don't need a reward. The blood of the demons is enough for me."

In his past life, those very words had marked the beginning of their connection.

Even in this life, Ian wanted to become her close comrade, just as before.

With that intent in his heart—

Ian spoke the same words again.

"..."

Scarlet gazed quietly at Ian.

"... Hmph. That's pretty cool."

She smiled.

The atmosphere got a little awkward, so Ian quickly changed the subject.

"If you want, you can stay here as long as you like. This place is safe—only I have access. I'll provide you with fresh blood every day. You still need to recover more strength, right?"

"You care this much? I'm touched."

Scarlet turned around and strolled behind the chair.

"But I don't have the time. I'll be leaving right away."

"..."

Ian pressed his lips together bitterly.

He understood why she was in such a rush.

She probably wanted to save her family—who were still suffering under the demonic humans—as soon as possible, even a second sooner.

But he didn't let on that he knew.

If he pretended to know too much, she'd only question how he could possibly know that.

"Will you be alright? Wouldn't it be better to recover a bit more first?"

Scarlet slowly shook her head.

"Don't underestimate a vampire's healing power. I've rested enough. What's left is just rehabilitation."

"If you say so... there's nothing I can do."

Ian hesitated before speaking again.

"If you need help, just send a letter here anytime. Address it to 'Lunabreeze of the Heavenly Sword Palace'."

Scarlet's smile grew warmer.

"A letter, huh. Cute. Still, I've already imposed enough."

"Even so, there might be times you need help—whether it's strength or information, there are many ways I can assist you."

"..."

Scarlet slowly ran her crimson eyes up and down Ian.

"Come to think of it, I haven't asked the most important thing."

Her blood-red gaze fixed gently on Ian.

"You. What's your name?"

Ian returned her gaze and spoke clearly.

"Ian Greysel."

"Ian... Greysel..."

Scarlet slowly repeated the boy's name.

"Greysel?"

Greysel.

She had heard that name here and there, long ago.

Where had she heard it?

Ah...!

One of the highest vassal families of Hisperion.

One of the Seven Pillar Families.

"You... were you a noble of Hisperion? I thought you were an outsider, seeing as this was just the guest annex."

"That's true, but it's a bit complicated. I was expelled from my family. Now I'm just a guest resident."

"... I... see."

Now that she knew the boy's name, his identity became even more confusing.

He was a scion of the Greysel family.

A force wholly unconnected to the Noxcar bloodline, the vampire clan.

So how did this boy know her name?

It continued to bother and frustrate her, but she knew she wouldn't get an answer now, no matter how much she asked.

"Well... I get it for now. I'll remember. Ian Greysel."

A precocious boy.

Were all human children these days this advanced?

No way.

She had lived for thousands of years, and humanity didn't change so easily.

This boy was just special.

"Then, Scarlet. Take this before you leave."

"Hmm?"

Ian got up from the bed and walked to his desk.

He took out a pencil and paper, and quickly drew a simple map.

It was the location of the information guild Nightingale, in the sewers beneath the Hisperion main estate.

"It's an information guild. You'll need information no matter what you're planning, right? And..."

Ian pulled out a pouch, previously placed in his drawer.

"This is some money for your travels. There's plenty in there. You'll need it at the information guild. If they ask how you found them, just say I sent you."

There, the branch staff knew Ian as the Nightingale executive 'Dark Moon.'

If she claimed Ian sent her, they would treat her with great care.

"..."

Scarlet received the map and pouch, her expression growing complex.

"These are actually exactly what I need."

To find her family, she'd first need to locate the demonic humans.

This information guild and the cash would be a huge help.

"... I've never owed so much to someone your age in all my life."

And for her, 'all my life' meant thousands of years.

"Ian Greysel. Shall this big sis give you a kiss?"

Ian responded flatly.

"No, that's alright."

"... What."

Scarlet was caught off-guard.

"That's a pretty firm rejection."

Still, she wasn't hurt.

Maybe he liked another girl. Or maybe he was gay. Or religious.

Usually those who refused had those kinds of reasons.

"At any rate, I really owe you. I'd like to smother you with kisses, but it looks like you'd hate that, so I won't."

"..."

"You saved my life, and you helped me with my own affairs. I'll never forget this favor."

Tucking the map and money into her clothes, Scarlet slowly walked toward the door.

It seemed she really was leaving right away.

As she grabbed the doorknob, she turned and looked at Ian.

"I'm leaving to rescue my family now. They're being held just like I was."

— Nod.

Ian simply nodded without a word.

"They're all powerful vampires."

At least elder-class. At most, Lord-class.

Compared to aura ranks, that was minimum master-rank—maximum grandmaster, peak-stage.

"When I save my blood relatives, I'll tell them about you, Ian."

And, further—

"If you ever need help, just let me know. I'll leave traces at this information guild. If you ask, my family and I will help you together."

"Ooh... That's pretty reassuring."

Her clan, the Noxcar bloodline, was an immense force.

They might be few in number, but when compared to even two or three of Hisperion's Seven Pillar Families combined, they were not outmatched.

Not just master-rank—several grandmaster-rank powerhouses would be standing behind Ian.

'Honestly, just having Scarlet on my side would be incredible support.'

In her previous life, she alone was powerful enough to stand against an army of ten thousand great demons, due to her terrifying blood arts.

She could form chakrams with her own blood, tossing them like boomerangs to completely sweep through the battlefield.

The more blood-red chakrams she hurled, the more enemies they slaughtered, and the larger they grew, eventually becoming so massive that they resembled blood tsunamis.

Against her blood arts, demonic beings fell like wheat at harvest.

Unless one used sunlight-forged steel or blessed silver, which were deadly to vampires, there were few ways to stop her.

'Scarlet alone was like that; if her family joins in, too...'

In his past life, her blood relatives were all deceased by the time he met Scarlet.

So he didn't know the details, but he'd heard from her now and then.

Among her bloodline, there were vampires even stronger than Scarlet.

They were scattered after falling prey to the Cult Leader of Greed, but even that had happened due to trickery, not force.

In terms of raw strength, they were never the type to fall to the likes of demonic humans.

If he could receive their help, it would be a huge boon—not only when opposing the Demonic Human Cult or the great demons but even facing demon grand dukes.

"Scarlet. I'll say it again: if you need help, send a letter anytime. I can back you with the strength of at least five swordmasters."

That strength of five swordmasters was Ian himself.

Scarlet smiled and looked at Ian.

"There might really come a time I need that. I'll remember, Ian. Whether you call for me, or I call for you—let's meet again."

— Whoosh.

With those words, Scarlet vanished like a red wind.

At some point, the door had opened, and her presence swiftly faded into the distance.

Ian sat quietly for a while, wishing her good fortune.

For her sake. For Ian's sake.

And for Yuria, Sophia, and all of humanity.

Her family absolutely had to be rescued, every last one.

Hopefully, she won't get captured again...

Chapter 107 : The Saintess's Proposal (1)

The Saintess's Proposal (1)

The Millennial Gold Essence, the top reward from the deserted island exam, arrived at Lunabreeze.

Millennial Gold Essence.

A national treasure-class metallic elixir containing a magic power quantity equivalent to the entry-stage of a grandmaster.

As soon as Ian got his hands on it, he dashed straight to the cultivation room and began replicating it.

— Swoosh!!

He drew out the magic power stored in Vladiark and accumulated it in his dantian.

— Vwoooom!!

He repeated the projection of the Millennial Gold Essence as many times as permitted by his magic power.

[Millennial Gold Essence Lv.92: Projection progress 100.00%]

[You have perfectly projected Millennial Gold Essence Lv.92!]

[Millennial Gold Essence Lv.92 is now permanently saved in the projection list.]

In less than a day, Ian was able to duplicate one Millennial Gold Essence.

[Millennial Gold Essence Lv.92: You have fully manifested 1 unit.]

The millennia-old treasure immediately became two in an instant.

However—

"Uuhhh..."

His magic power was instantly depleted.

Vladiark was drained as well, and Ian's dantian was at the brink of mana exhaustion.

'I'll have to dedicate the whole day to recovery.'

Fortunately, he still had lots of time.

It would be at least a few more weeks before the Dragon Sword Hall reopened, and aside from cultivating his aura, there wasn't much else to do during that time.

Sophia's training had also recently been overseen by Charlotte and Ophelia, so Ian could focus solely on elevating his stage.

'For now, I'll consume these two right away.'

Currently, Ian's rank was early-stage master.

If he digested these two Millennial Gold Essences with Sky Thunder, deep As The Clouds, he would be able to reach mid-level master.

'But to reach late-stage master...'

The higher one's stage, the explosively greater the amount of magic power needed to break through.

He needed about 13 more Millennial Gold Essences.

An amount of magic power enough to fill the dantian of thirteen entry-stage grandmaster.

It was so much that it almost felt unreasonable.

It was an astronomical amount—almost as if counting the stars in the sky would be easier.

From the master level onward, every breakthrough required a ridiculous amount of magic power.

That's why it often took masters a lifetime to advance, and why there are so few strong people in the world.

'It won't be easy. I will need some time, too.'

But not that much time.

Around six months would be plenty.

If it's right here in Lunabreeze, it's certainly possible.

The cultivation rooms in the Heavenly Sword Palace are among the purest mana spots on the entire continent.

Pure, clear mana flowed through the Heavenly Sword Palace like blood through veins.

On top of the quality, the mana was abundant.

One could liken it to the open ocean.

Ian's cultivation stage had also advanced enough to give him a whale-like capacity, but the oceanic mana of the Heavenly Sword Palace was more than enough to supply his breathing for cultivation.

'And I know excellent cultivation techniques, too.'

The Celestial Cultivation Method, Heavenly Dawn Technique, handed down only to Hisperion direct descendants.

And the very top-tier cultivation method for storing thunder attribute, Sky Thunder, Deep as the Clouds.

Reaching late-stage Swordmaster within six months was well within his means.

'Aris easily handing over the Millennial Gold Essence was crucial. Thanks to her, I now have the elixir, mana spot, enlightenment, and cultivation technique... All conditions have been fulfilled perfectly. Now, it really is only a matter of time.'

To reach late-stage Swordmaster at merely age fourteen.

This growth speed transcended not just history or legend, but even myth.

Had Aris not sent him the supreme elixir of Millennial Gold Essence, such rapid growth would have been utterly impossible.

No matter how good the mana spot or the cultivation technique, without an elixir, it would have taken ten times as long to break through each stage.

Mana spots and cultivation techniques make it easier to fill an empty dantian, and are important for increasing the quality and attribute of aura.

But with a full dantian, accumulating more magic power through cultivation breathing alone becomes difficult.

Not impossible, but the speed slows dramatically.

It's like trying to inhale more air when your lungs are already full.

That's why elixirs are necessary.

To force even more breath into already full lungs.

By driving a massive lump of magic power in at once, one forcibly expands the dantian and mana circuits, causing one's internal aura to surge and allowing for rapid breakthroughs.

Of course, a normal person's body would explode if they tried this, but Ian, who possessed sharp enlightenment and the very best cultivation techniques, could observe and temper the surging aura, strengthening his dantian and mana circuits even further.

Truthfully, all he really needed was those six months.

He was sure he could reach late-stage Swordmaster before the year ended.

* * *

A whole month passed in a flash.

The temporary closure of the Dragon Sword Hall ended.

The next test was set.

A base occupation mock battle taking place at the Three Branch Canyons.

This exam was a team battle, fighting in groups, judging both strategy and combat power.

Their opponent: talented foreigners.

The Selveris Holy Kingdom's apprentice Holy Knights.

Along with them came the recently-baptized youngest Saintess and elite paladin candidates.

They would likely be the toughest hurdle of this exam—at least for the ordinary Dragon Sword Hall students.

To Ian, it was irrelevant.

By the time of the exam, it wouldn't matter if the eldest Saintess came instead of the youngest—he'd be able to handle her easily.

The exam was set for January of next year—planned for winter.

And the coveted top prize...

A personal tutoring session from Aris Hisperion.

"...?"

Ian seriously considered skipping this exam.

'This... isn't a reward, it's a punishment.'

Of course, for those who didn't know Aris's true nature, there would be nothing lacking in this top reward.

It was a chance to receive personalized training from a grandmaster expert, after all.

On that merit alone, it could be considered extravagant.

If it were auctioned, it would likely exchange hands for a truly astronomical sum—and make history.

But for Ian, who knew Aris's wicked and cunning true nature, it felt more like...

A punishment, as if he had to share a table with a giant venomous spider.

'Maybe I should just coast through this exam and cultivate in Lunabreeze instead...'

He thought about it for a moment, but then quickly changed his mind.

'No. By then, I won't have any reason to fear being alone with Aris.'

By the time the exam was over, Ian's level would be late-stage master.

Although a rank below Aris, with the Authority of Projection and abilities like Vladiark, he'd definitely stand a chance against her one-on-one.

'And by that point, I'll need some guidance as well.'

Late-stage master was the highest level Ian had reached in his previous life.

To push beyond that, he would need more research and enlightenment.

That's why this was an important opportunity for him, too.

A chance to learn the path to grandmaster for next to nothing—from Aris.

'In the end, I have no choice but to do my best on this exam, too.'

Ian decided to take the top spot this time as well.

And he'd ask Aris—

How to break through from late-stage master to grandmaster.

— Murmur, murmur.

Time passed a bit more.

The Selveris Holy Kingdom's apprentice Holy Knights arrived at the Dragon Sword Hall.

For the duration of the exam, they would be training together with the Hisperion students at the Dragon Sword Hall in a group residence.

The Dragon Sword Hall often held joint training sessions each semester with swordsmen from other countries in this manner.

This time, the guests were from the Holy Kingdom, but next time it might be the Empire, or a Royal Federation.

Thus, talented individuals from all over the world gathered at the Dragon Sword Hall.

"We sincerely welcome you to the Dragon Sword Hall."

— Clap-clap-clap-clap!

A simple welcome ceremony was followed by a banquet.

Since all students were required to attend, Ian had no choice but to take a seat.

It was meant for students of both nations to get to know each other and build friendships.

At first, he stuck with Sophia and Charlotte, but he couldn't stay with them for long.

If students only hung out with their close friends, the instructors would come and split them up.

It was meant to encourage them to greet new classmates.

"..."

— Kya! Kyahaha!

Sophia had already befriended the girls from the Holy Kingdom and was excitedly chatting away with them.

Indeed, her social skills were impressive.

"..."

— Murmur! Murmur!

Charlotte was greeting high-ranking priests from the Holy Kingdom.

Being a direct descendant of Hisperion, political encounters and exchanges were unavoidable for her even in these settings.

'I wonder what Yuria's up to.'

Yuria was also a direct descendant.

Maybe she was being harassed by the political types from the Holy Kingdom as well.

Yuria didn't really like that kind of thing.

If he found her, he'd have to rescue her.

As he thought so and started searching for Yuria...

"Young master Ian. This is our first meeting, isn't it?"

"...?"

A seductive, melodious voice called out to Ian.

A voice he had never heard before.

He turned his head toward it.

"Ah."

The second wife of the Heavenly Sword family patriarch.

Marceline was standing there.

Ian immediately showed his respect.

"I greet Lady Marceline."

Marceline smiled in satisfaction.

"It's an honor. I thought there was a chance you wouldn't recognize my face."

"How could I fail to recognize the lady of the house when I am indebted to the Heavenly Sword Palace? That would be inconceivable."

"Fufu. Is that so?"

Marceline folded her jewel-encrusted fan and placed both hands below her navel.

"I wanted to thank you. You saved my son, and I'm sorry to be so late in expressing my gratitude, young master Ian."

"Not at all. I'm sure you're extremely busy. I only did what anyone would have done."

Ian's reply was simply polite convention.

"Fufu, how mature. You're someone my husband likes. And I'm entrusting my daughter to you as well—Charlotte Hisperion. She hasn't caused any trouble, has she?"

"..."

In the past, he would have immediately wished she'd take her back, but now that Charlotte and Sophia had become so close, he honestly felt she was part of his family, too.

"Thanks to Lady Charlotte, the annex has become lively. Though our first meeting was... less than ideal, we get along well now."

In truth, Ian and Charlotte were still a bit awkward, but he said it out of courtesy.

"Fufufu. I know my daughter's personality—she isn't so easily tamed. I'm sure you've been through a lot."

"...?"

Not particularly, though.

"It can't be too interesting to converse with an older woman like me for long."

"Not at all. I am honored that you would speak to me."

"Fufu, what a sweet boy. Still, I'll be brief and let you get back. Young master Ian."

Marceline opened her jewel-encrusted fan and spoke.

"I owe you a great debt, little one. Both my son and daughter have benefited from you. As a mother, I feel immense gratitude and indebtedness."

"I am deeply honored by your regard."

"No need to be so stiff, Ian."

Lady Marceline gently placed a hand on Ian's shoulder.

He looked up at Marceline.

"You may think of me as a mother if you wish. Treat Kargon like a brother, and grow as close with Charlotte as you like."

"..."

There was meaning behind her words.

"If you ever need help, come to this mother anytime. For you, young master, even your mischief is welcome."

Gyat damn.

Chapter 108 : The Saintess's Proposal (2)

The Saintess's Proposal (2)

Ian didn't know much about Lady Marceline.

He had never had any connection with her in his previous life.

Marceline disappeared even before the Hisperion civil war began.

This was after Kargon had been killed by demonic humans in his past life.

Marceline set out herself for Kargon's revenge.

She led her direct knights and roamed the continent, devoting herself solely to eradicating the demonic humans.

Not long after, she vanished.

She disappeared without a trace, along with her elite knights who followed her.

This happened in less than a year after Kargon's death.

Ian didn't know whether her body had ever been found or what happened to her after that.

At that time, Ian hadn't even met Yuria yet.

Still, it was something he could guess. She was probably captured by the Demon Cult and sacrificed as an offering.

As nourishment of magic power to summon great demon nobles and grand dukes of the Demon Realm to this land.

'Lady Marceline was also a swordswoman at the Grandmaster rank. To the demon cultists, she must have looked like a bountiful and luscious lump of magic power.'

Her anger at losing her son must have made her reckless to the point of foolishness and driven her into certain death.

She must have quickly been caught in the demon cult's wicked trap—not surprisingly.

'But this time, that won't happen.'

In his previous life, Kargon's death turned her into an avenger, but in this life, Kargon wouldn't die.

Kargon was the brother Yuria had missed in her past life and the beloved child of the Heavenly Sword Lord.

That's why Ian had no choice but to watch over Kargon with special care.

'So, like it or not, in this life, I'll be seeing Lady Marceline quite often.....'

Lady Marceline smiled benevolently and spoke.

"If you ever need help, please come find this mother anytime. If it's you, young master, even your mischief is welcomed."

"..... Thank you for the honor, my lady."

He was meeting her for the first time, but his first impression was not bad.

She simply appeared to be a mother who loved and cherished her child.

Ian had no biological mother, so her words—telling him to think of her as one—gave him a strange feeling.

Of course, he couldn't tell how much of that was genuine.

"Well, then... This mother must not take up too much of your time. I'll take my leave now. I hope you have a wonderful time, Ian. Make lots of new friends too."

"Thank you, my lady."

"Fufu, see you next time."

Marceline walked away with elegant steps.

Ian quietly watched her back.

'I wonder what kind of person she really is. I still know nothing about her.'

But she was a Grandmaster-rank powerhouse.

If he could get close and make her an ally under these circumstances, she would indeed be reassuring.

When the Hisperion civil war broke out in the future, she would be a great supporter, and even in battles against the grand dukes of the Demon Realm, she would be a valuable force.

If possible, he wanted to continue getting along with her and make her an ally.

Would getting close to Kargon make Marceline an ally too?

—Swoosh.

"Did my mother bother you?"

'Speak of the devil and he shall appear.'

Ian had just been thinking of Kargon, when he appeared.

—Bow.

"I greet Young Lord Kargon."

When Ian bowed immediately with the etiquette of the Heavenly Sword Palace, Kargon's eyebrows furrowed with slight disappointment.

"..... You're still too stiff, you know. You've even saved my life. You should feel free to treat me much more comfortably."

"I'm glad you've recovered safely."

"That's thanks to you. I've heard the whole story. Some things I even remember."

"..... You remember?"

"I lost consciousness when I was kidnapped, but there are things I vaguely remember. Someone washed the demonic energy from my body and carried me on his back. Only after waking up and hearing from the others did I realize that it was you."

Kargon lowered his head, showing Ian his crown.

"Truly, thank you, Ian Greysel. I owe you my life."

"Y-young lord.....!"

Ian promptly grabbed Kargon's shoulder and raised him up gently.

It was generally improper to touch one of direct bloodline recklessly, but it would have been even ruder to just blankly stare at the direct heir's bowed head in such a circumstance.

—Clap!

Kargon grasped Ian's shoulders in return.

"I was truly amazed when I heard it was you who saved me. Purifying my body of demonic energy by yourself there couldn't have been an easy task."

"..... It was nothing special."

Kargon's expression became serious.

"Nothing special, you say. That's something that could have endangered you through contamination, and it was even enemy territory. Plus, it's extremely difficult to do technically. But despite all that, you prioritized my treatment first. You didn't abandon me or run away. Thanks to your swift care, I was able to recover without any aftereffects."

"......."

Ian felt a bit embarrassed.

He never quite got used to receiving compliments and gratitude.

"And you also got me safely to the Heavenly Sword Palace. If you hadn't been there, I surely would have died. ..... Frankly, I collapsed without being able to resist them at all."

It was understandable.

Kargon was a late-stage user, and those guys were two expert-rank elites.

Besides, they even possessed a demon artifact, so there was no way Kargon could have handled it.

It wasn't that Kargon was incompetent. He was still just a young cadet.

"You have nothing to be ashamed of. They were simply being cowardly."

"But you, on the other hand, didn't even fall against them, and you weren't hurt. You escaped perfectly, too."

"......."

Comparing himself—a peculiar case—was a bit.....

"So I've done a lot of soul-searching. I wasn't keeping my mind sharp. Maybe I hadn't worked hard enough. Or maybe both my spirit and my effort were lacking."

"......."

"So I feel the need to push myself more. I won't stop until I can stand where you stand."

"......."

Ian felt quite conflicted inside.

If Kargon compared himself to Ian, he would just make things harder for himself.

If Kargon pushed himself too hard to catch up, he might fall into inner demons instead.

Between Ian and Kargon, there was the regression, the Authority, the relic, and other insurmountable gaps—a few, at least.

He wondered how he should talk him down, how to dissuade him.

As Ian was worrying about that, Kargon spoke again.

"Ah. This wasn't what I meant to say in the first place. I talked so much about myself. You must have been bored."

"Not at all."

Kargon looked deeply into Ian's eyes.

"I want to make a vow to you. That's the real reason I'm here."

"..... A vow?"

"You saved my life, so now a part of it belongs to you. Someday, I will stake my life for you."

"Uh, um."

No, that's not necessary.

In fact, that sounded more dangerous, as if he might do something reckless.

"Your words alone are more than enough. Please, think of your own well-being first, young lord....."

"No. I've already decided. I'm making my vow to you right now. When the time comes to risk my life for you, I won't hesitate."

"Uh, uhh....."

"And if you ever need my help or support, just say the word. Ian, you're now like a brother to me."

"......."

Saving someone's life was no small thing, but he hadn't expected this much gratitude.

"I am overwhelmed by your gracious words. But please, young lord, I hope you'll value your own life first. That's all I ask."

Ian could manage well enough on his own without anyone risking their lives for him.

"Heheh."

Kargon chuckled softly.

"You always put me first. Just having you stay with our family is a huge stroke of luck. But my words are sincere. Remember that. Call on me whenever you need to."

"..... If you insist so much, I'll remember."

He wanted to persuade him more firmly, but it only seemed like Kargon would get more stubborn.

For now, it was best to agree and simply avoid leading Kargon into danger from Ian's side.

"Well, I should get going too. The instructors are starting to give us looks."

At that, Ian glanced around. Some of the instructors were glancing their way.

Their faces weren't stern, but they gestured and smiled toward the apprentice holy knights.

It was their way of telling the dragon sword academy cadets not to stick only to themselves but to go and meet new friends.

"Young Lord Kargon."

Just then, a middle-aged priest came to greet Kargon.

"It's been a while. Do you remember me?"

"Ah! You're..."

It seemed they knew each other, as Kargon greeted him warmly.

"Well then, Ian, I'll excuse myself first. See you later. Have a good time."

"Yes, young lord. I hope you enjoy yourself as well."

—Bow.

The middle-aged priest also politely bowed to Ian.

Kargon and the priest walked away together.

"....."

Ian was soon left alone, feeling awkward.

The instructors had told him to make new friends, but Ian was not an outgoing person.

If anything, he was almost a total introvert.

If it wasn't a familiar face or official conversation, he had no idea what to say.

Go up to strangers first?

He'd rather be tossed in the middle of the jungle.

'Guess I'll just fill my stomach quietly.....'

So Ian, studiously ignoring the instructors' looks, awkwardly sipped his drink alone.

"Young master Ian?"

A bright, youthful voice called out to him.

"......?"

Turning around, there was a small girl.

She was about a head shorter than Ian.

Eleven? Maybe twelve years old?

"..... A child?"

Why was there a child here?

"What!"

The girl bristled.

"A-a child?! I'm a year older than you, you know!?"

"……?"

Older? Really?

As Ian just blinked, the girl cleared her throat.

"Let me introduce myself. The name of this delicate servant is Seraphina the Third. I am the Saintess of Selveris Holy Kingdom and the one who spreads the doctrine of the Holy Radiance."

"Ah. The Saintess."

Only then did Ian realize she was the Saintess.

No wonder.

He'd been told the Saintess would be here, but hadn't seen her—because she was too small to notice.

"It's nice to finally meet you, young master Ian."

Seraphina placed her hand to her chest and bowed in the Holy Kingdom's manner.

"Pleased to meet you, Saintess Seraphina. It's an honor."

Ian also placed his hand over his heart and bowed his head, following Hisperion etiquette.

If she was the Saintess of the Holy Kingdom, her rank was more or less equal to a direct line of Hisperion.

She must be very busy meeting various political figures right now.

So why had she personally sought him out, who was just standing off in a corner?

"You're wondering why I've come to meet you like this, judging by your expression."

"……."

She'd read him.

She seemed quick-witted.

"I'll just tell you the reason for this humble servant's visit right away. That's the main point."

—Step!

Seraphina took a large step closer to Ian.

"....."

It was too close for comfort, so Ian took a small step back.

—Step!

Seraphina stepped forward even more.

"......?"

The distance between them closed to about half a handspan.

So close their breathing could almost touch.

—Grab!

Suddenly, seraphina grasped Ian's hand with both of hers.

"......!"

Ian stiffened in surprise.

Normally, he would have immediately pulled his hand away, but now he could only stand still.

If he pulled away at such a close distance, he might end up hurting the Saintess.

"..... What are you doing?"

"I will now tell you why I personally sought you out, young master Ian.....!"

Seraphina's fine sandy hair fluttered in the breeze.

Her eyes, which had been hidden by her bangs, now shone in a clear purgatory hue.

"It is to declare that I will take Young master Ian to our Selveris Holy Kingdom!"

"Wha—!?"

What was this all of a sudden?

Take him with her?

Says who?

Who said he would go?

'But before that.....'

The Saintess's voice had been quite loud just now.

It had drawn a lot of the surrounding attention.

"....."

He felt all eyes piercing him.

"First, could you please let go of my hand.....?"

Ian tried to pull his hand free.

"No!"

But Seraphina wouldn't let go so easily.

"....."

"I would like to propose a bet to you, young master Ian!"

Another weird one appeared...

Does Ian have the same constitution as Bang Sung-yun?

Chapter 109 : The Saintess's Proposal (3)

The Saintess's Proposal (3)

The Saintess Seraphina boldly shouted.

"I propose a bet to Young Master Ian!"

"...?"

A bet?

What kind of bet?

No—wait, before that.

Does a pure and upright Saintess even do things like betting?

Is that allowed?

"Heeheehee...!"

Seraphina laughed slyly.

With a wicked shadow cast over her face as she smiled, she didn't look like a Saintess at all.

"We'll have a contest! In the final test of this training camp! Betting on Young Master Ian's allegiance and our Holy Kingdom's holy relic!"

"... What!"

A holy relic?

Ian was taken aback.

"You want to bet with me and a holy relic?"

"Yes!"

"No, how could you...?"

The holy relic was a national treasure of the Holy Kingdom.

If there were renowned swords among the blades of Hisperion, Selveris the Holy Kingdom had the holy relics of the Radiant Church.

Each one carried historical value, and among them there were even artifacts with an absolute status, not at all inferior to the Divine Sword Genesis.

They were virtually the core of the Holy Kingdom's power, and the foundation of the Radiant Church's prestige.

To so casually place something that precious as a bet?

Isn't that blasphemy?

Is it really okay for a Saintess to do that?

Is this kid acting with the Lord's permission?

No, even before the Lord, the Holy King would never approve of such a thing.

A national treasure as a bet?

"... That's quite a startling proposal. Putting myself aside—would the Holy King even allow you to bet the relic?"

"Yes, of course! This is a divine command directly from the Holy King!"

"... Excuse me?"

Directly from the Holy King?

The Holy King is the ruler of Selveris the Holy Kingdom, and leader of the sacred Radiant Church.

Naturally, Ian had no connection with him—he hadn't even seen his face in his previous life.

"How would the Holy King know of me to ask you to bring me?"

"That—I don't know either!"

... She doesn't know?

Ian felt the back of his head start to prickle.

"But the Holy King receives revelations of holy radiance directly! Perhaps that revelation told the Holy King to bring Young Master Ian!"

"A revelation, huh..."

Ian's mind grew even more tangled.

Why would such a revelation say to bring me?

Then, a thought flashed through Ian's mind.

"Ah."

If that revelation was like a message from the Radiant Church's god...

Is it perhaps related to the Goddess?

To the being who sent him back 15 years into the past?

'Hmm...'

If there's any link between Ian and the Radiant Church right now, it's clearly only that.

A contact point with a divine being.

But...

'There's some plausibility, but I'm not sure.'

The being revered by the Radiant Church in the Holy Kingdom wasn't really a Goddess but "light" itself.

They worshipped everything that gave light: the sun, stars, moon, flame, fireflies, anything that shone.

None of that was particularly close to a Goddess.

Light has neither a human form nor gender.

'Well, there's no use speculating now.'

With so little information, there's no point in theorizing—a solution won't come.

Ian stopped thinking about it.

Right now, what mattered was something else.

"Saintess. Could you please at least let go of my hand first...?"

"No! Until Young Master accepts my bet, I absolutely won't let go!"

"Ah..."

Because of the Saintess's loud voice, more and more people were staring.

"Besides, this is the first mission I've been entrusted with! I must succeed!"

"Even if you say that..."

Ian kept trying to pull his hand free.

But Seraphina showed no intention of letting go.

"Haa..."

Ian sighed softly.

"This isn't something I can decide alone. The condition you're requesting is my naturalization, isn't it?"

The Holy Kingdom wanted to bring Ian into their fold.

'I doubt I'd lose no matter the bet, but...'

If the condition was for Ian to join another nation, just agreeing to the bet in itself was a problem.

Ian was, after all, the first son of the Greysel family, a vassal household of Hisperion.

"I'm not sure? In the end, isn't Young Master's will what's most important?"

"I am the eldest son of Greysel, one of the Seven Clans of Heavenly Peak. Loyalty and vows to Hisperion are etched into my blood. I can't just recklessly stake my national allegiance on a bet—"

"I heard you were excommunicated, though?"

"...?"

Well. That's true.

That's... really blunt.

"You're staying here as a guest, aren't you?"

"..."

She wasn't wrong.

Hugo, the lord of the Greysel family, had excommunicated Ian to his face, so Ian could no longer truly be called part of Greysel.

He wasn't even supposed to use the Greysel name anymore, but Ian simply ignored the excommunication and kept using it, since he didn't acknowledge Hugo as his lord.

And, an official guest of Hisperion did not swear loyalty to the nation—in essence, he was merely an invited guest.

So, should Ian ever decide to leave Hisperion, nothing was stopping him.

"The Saintess is correct."

In the end, it came down to Ian's choice.

But of course, he wasn't planning on leaving.

If Ian left, the Heavenly Sword Family Lord would be greatly disappointed, who knows how Aris would react, and he'd only just started to grow closer to Yuria—it would hurt her feelings a lot.

Perhaps even Vladiark might be retrieved.

The legendary swords of the Bladelake could only be possessed if recognized by Hisperion.

And, more than anything,

There was no reason for Ian to go to the Holy Kingdom, Selveris.

What benefit would that bring him?

They'd give him a holy relic, but he'd have to win the bet to get it.

There was simply no reason to accept such a suspicious proposal.

"I will give you the Holy Sword!"

That's what Seraphina said—before Ian could finish his thought.

"What!?"

The Holy Sword.

A divine weapon, more effective than anything else at obliterating dark entities like the demons.

"The Holy Sword of the Sun!"

"Huh!?"

Among them, one of the three most exalted holy swords.

"Heliodin!"

"M-Mad!"

Ian, without even realizing, blurted out a curse of amazement.

The Holy Sword Heliodin was a superlative great sword, not inferior even to the Divine Sword Genesis or the Monstrous Sword Vladiark.

It was essentially a massive, holy power condensed into the shape of a giant sword.

When properly wielded, it could melt even mighty Great Demons like the spring snow.

During the previous life's War of Man and Demons, it had already been lost—no one could wield it.

If it had remained in humanity's hands, the outcome of the war could have been completely different.

"If you accept our bet...! Regardless of the outcome, we will hand you Heliodin! Whether you lose or win, you can get Heliodin!"

"Huhhh...!"

Ian's mouth fell open.

If Heliodin was in his hands, the wars against the demon grand dukes would be so much easier.

The Divine Sword Genesis boasted overwhelming firepower, Vladiark devoured the enemy's magic power with monstrous might, but Heliodin had divine power that automatically recharged holy strength.

The faith of the Radiant Church's believers would gather as holy power in the sword.

The more believers, the more fervent their prayers and devotion, the faster the holy sword's power would be replenished.

Moreover, as Heliodin was literally a mass of holy power, it would grant physical vitality, increased recovery, enhanced energy, sharpened senses—a whole array of powerful blessings.

Even better, these beneficial effects would extend to Ian's companions around him.

Such was the power of holy strength.

In addition, to evil demons, it would inflict debilitating effects: sapping stamina, slowing recovery, interfering with spells, lowering cognitive abilities, and other strong restrictions.

Honestly, it was a very tempting treasure.

Every night, Ian secretly racked his brain over how to handle the demon grand dukes.

If he could just get his hands on Heliodin, he'd be able to shed much of that anxiety.

Gulp!

He unconsciously swallowed his saliva at the thought.

"Hehehe!"

Reacting to Ian's response, Seraphina grinned slyly.

"Well? What do you think of this humble servant's proposal?"

"Hmm."

This was certainly a bet worth risking.

Win or lose, Heliodin was guaranteed.

And in any kind of contest, it was unlikely Ian would lose to the Saintess.

No matter how outstanding Selveris the Holy Kingdom's intelligence network was, it would be difficult for them to grasp Ian's true capabilities.

At best, they'd estimate him as an Expert rank.

So—

"I'll hear more details."

"Hehehe! I knew it!"

Seraphina waved his hand excitedly, chattering with delight.

"You know this training camp exam? The last test at the beginning of next year. If we win in the mock battle, Young Master Ian has to naturalize in our Holy Kingdom and become a holy knight!"

Holy knight.

The highest-ranking holy knights of Selveris, usually protecting the Saintess or the Holy King, or punishing evil heretics—the top fighting force of the nation.

"If we win, since I brought you, you must become my holy knight!"

"Hm. Then if our Sword Dragon Hall wins, what happens?"

"In that case... This humble servant will be very sad, but as promised, we'll give you our national treasure, the Holy Sword Heliodin, right then."

"Oh..."

Not even a delay—given to him on the spot.

That's refreshingly straightforward.

"Under those conditions..."

It's almost too good.

Just as Ian nodded, about to accept the bet.

"Wait! Who said you could decide that by yourself!?"

"Hmm?"

Suddenly, Charlotte appeared and cut in.

Her face was flushed with anger, her brows fierce.

"Let go of that hand right now! Can't you see Ian is uncomfortable?"

"No! Not until Young Master accepts my proposal! For a thousand—ten thousand years!"

"What! What nonsense!? And saying you'll just take Ian away!?"

Charlotte stomped up to Seraphina.

"First, let go of that hand!"

"Kya, kya!?"

Just as Charlotte tried to forcibly peel the Saintess's grip away...

"Refrain from being disrespectful to Saintess Seraphina."

A slender young female knight, who looked about seventeen, blocked Charlotte's way.

Glancing at her chest badge, she was a holy knight cadet.

"Wha-what...!"

Charlotte's face turned scarlet.

"How could you behave so rudely after we invited you here as guests...!"

Charlotte was about to push past the knight by force.

— Swish!-

A massive shadow loomed over them.

"H-huh?!"

The young knight looked up and suddenly turned pale.

Charlotte turned as well—to see Barbarian Kuga standing there, his bulging muscles rippling.

Kuga seemed to have grown another handspan taller in just a few weeks.

He was closing in on three meters now.

"You say you'll take away our War Chief? That's nonsense."

"...?"

War Chief? When did I become your War Chief?

"Ian cannot be taken. Kuga will stop you."

— Tremble, tremble...

— Shiver, shiver...

The aura Kuga gave off was so overwhelming that the Saintess and the knight clung to each other, trembling like frightened chicks.

"What is this, a beast?"

A blond youth, looking like a handsome playboy, stepped between them and Kuga.

"My ladies are frightened. Cease your approach, giant."

"What?"

He was handsome, but with an over-sweet, oily expression. Glancing at his badge, he too was a holy knight candidate.

"It's becoming noisy."

At that moment, Kargon appeared behind Kuga.

"And I think I just heard something ridiculous,"

Kargon said, his eyes—rare for him—carrying genuine hostility.

"You're going to take Ian away? My friend who is as good as a brother? On whose authority? You're betting my friend himself as if he were some object? Does the Holy Kingdom have no manners?"

He looked truly angered.

It was the first time Ian had seen Kargon so incensed.

"This is truly offensive. Saintess Seraphina. Makes me want to end this banquet right now."

"... Ugh!"

The Saintess broke out in a cold sweat.

But her spirit didn't falter.

"I—I just wanted to give Young Master Ian more choices, that's all!"

"I don't know what trick you're up to, but enough. If you're trying to use Ian, I won't forgive it."

"Well? The choice is Young Master Ian's. Isn't it? Young Master?"

"...."

At her question, everyone's eyes naturally turned to Ian.

At that moment—

— Smack!-

"Ah, ouch!"

A white flash came down on Seraphina's hand.

Clutching her stinging hand, Seraphina took several steps back.

Turning with teary eyes, she saw Yuria standing there.

"Don't touch Ian."

Yuria's eyes were colder than ever.

Yes! Yuria, save Ian!

Chapter 110 : The Saintess's Proposal (4)

The Saintess's Proposal (4)

Seraphina, who had been struck on the wrist by Yuria, lost her grip on Ian's hand.

Startled, she looked up to see Yuria glaring coldly at her.

It felt a little scary.

"Hee, h-hiing...!"

Seraphina rubbed her tingling wrist, her face on the verge of tears.

"W-what is this!"

"Saintess! Are you alright!?"

The Holy knight candidates bristled at the scene.

"You, you...!"

"How dare you do that to the Saintess!"

They seemed ready to run in, fists raised, unless an apology was forthcoming.

"What? And what are you going to do about it?"

But Yuria didn't even flinch.

Yuria was just as—no, even angrier than they were.

How dare she... what should I call it... anyway, trying to take Ian away like that.

"Coming at me? Then come on in. I'll finish this in one go."

"You think we won't!? I'll break your wrist!"

The ballroom was on the verge of turning into a battlefield in an instant.

A volatile moment.

At that moment—

"Everyone, that's enough."

A weighty voice cut through the tense air.

— Thud. Thud. Thud. Thud.-

Turning toward the voice, a man clad in heavy armor strode forward confidently.

He looked about 190cm tall, with a boyish face looking around eighteen or nineteen.

A gentle visage remarkably similar to the Saintess, but with slightly sharper features.

Fine, sand-colored hair and purgatory-colored eyes.

"Nice to meet you all. Young master of Hisperion, miss, and brothers. My name is Garenus McKellan."

Seraphina's biological older brother.

And—

"I'm here as the representative of the holy knight apprentices as well as the Holy knight candidates. I look forward to working with you."

With dignified movements, Garenus gave a knightly salute.

"Hmph!"

"Tch...."

But Kuga and the direct line showed only coldness.

It wasn't the right atmosphere for friendly introductions.

"Hmm."

Garenus didn't seem to care.

After all, he hadn't come to exchange pleasantries, either.

"It seems you're all displeased with us, but I won't apologize. What the Saintess says is the will of all of us."

Garenus continued calmly.

"We came here in accordance with His Holiness the Pope's holy command to bring young master Ian to the Holy Kingdom. Therefore, by legitimate means and with righteous methods, we fully intend to bring young master Ian to the Holy Kingdom."

"Ha!"

Yuria sneered incredulously.

"Legitimate means? Righteous methods? Is grabbing a boy's hand and whining your idea of fair and just?"

"Consider that the Saintess's charm. Isn't it cute?"

"What...?"

Garenus wiped under his nose with a satisfied look.

Now it was clear he was a hopeless little-sister fanatic.

"The legitimate method I refer to is a contest—a fair duel where both sides agree to terms, and both winner and loser take responsibility and accept the result with honor."

Garenus spoke solemnly.

"Of course, the choice belongs to young master Ian. If Ian refuses, there is nothing we can do. Forcing a duel on someone unwilling would be nothing but unjust violence. If he immediately declines, we'll withdraw without further protest. But."

A fire sparked in Garenus's eyes.

"If the young master does not refuse, none of you have the right to interfere with this contest. Only honorably—with dignity. If you wish, you may join the contest as well."

"Uh, ugh...!"

"Tch...!"

Everyone looked angry, but since he was only stating the proper rationale, none could rebut.

In the end, as Garenus said, the choice belonged to Ian.

Now was the time for Ian to speak up.

"Then, I suppose I should state my opinion."

At those words, every gaze turned to Ian.

"So, to get to the conclusion first..."

Ian looked over both the Saintess and the Holy knight candidates as he spoke.

"I have no intention of going to the Holy Kingdom."

Mixed emotions flickered among both the Saintess's group and the Sword Dragon Hall group.

"Ah!"

"Knew it!"

"But the wager is very tempting. So tempting I can't refuse."

"Hmm!"

"Gasp!"

A glimmer of hope appeared on the Saintess's side, while a hint of tension crossed the Sword Dragon Hall.

"As expected! On the path of Radiance, there is always hope!"

"Ian! So what are you going to do!? Will you accept the bet?"

"....."

Ian turned to the Sword Dragon Hall group.

"I need your help. I want to accept this contest. And I will definitely win."

"Ah!"

"Hmm!"

The Sword Dragon Hall group each reacted differently to Ian's words.

Some were worried, others' competitive spirit flared.

But none were angry or objected.

The choice was Ian's, and he'd said he didn't want to leave.

"Haa..."

Yuria just parted her lips, letting out a sigh.

Those who were worried finally nodded as well.

"If that's what you want, so be it. Fine. Ian. This time, I'll protect you."

"... Do you know how much I've struggled so far... I absolutely won't let the young master go to the Holy Kingdom!"

Those with burning fighting spirit grinned and patted Ian's shoulder.

"I was secretly hoping you'd accept. I want to show them what we're made of. I'll do my best."

"If the war chief says to fight, a warrior simply obeys. Hmph!"

Ian smiled, pleased.

When he glanced back at the Saintess and the Holy knight candidates, their eyes were also glowing.

"I thought you would agree, young master. This too is the path of Radiance—Radiance's guidance."

"Young master Ian! You absolutely won't regret this! No matter what happens! Let's both do our best!"

"I look forward to a fair contest, Ian."

"A fine junior will be joining! Not that we'd ever lose!"

— Pang!-

Yuria slapped her fist into her palm.

"You? You said you'd wager your holy artifact, right? Let's go. Let's see who wins. Though betting you for Ian is nowhere near enough, since Ian wants it, I'll grant you the honor of facing us."

"Fuhihi...!"

Saintess Seraphina covered her mouth and laughed slyly.

"Now that young master Ian has accepted, the game is as good as over! Oh! No taking back now! No way! Absolutely forbidden! The Lord of Light doesn't forgive such things!"

"Ian doesn't say anything twice. You guys better not back out later. Get your holy artifact nicely wrapped up and ready to send over at once."

"Hmph! You better prepare plenty of tissues! You'll need them to mop your tears at Ian's farewell! Hooha!"

— Bzzzzzt!!-

A fierce staring contest erupted between Sword Dragon Hall and the Saintess's group.

"I specialize in hunting the big ones!"

"This warrior will pluck all that yellow weed from your head!"

"Let me show you the Holy Kingdom's skill."

"Hmph! I can already guess who'll win!"

Both sides flung fighting words, their competitive flames burning.

Ian, standing between them, quietly smacked his lips.

'This is quite the windfall.'

A chance to win the Holy Sword Heliodin itself.

'It's basically getting it for free.'

By the time the final test of this training camp arrives, he'd be a late-stage Swordmaster.

There's no way he could lose in a match against these kids, even if he tried.

'I already feel Heliodin in my hands.'

Despite that, Ian forced himself to calm his excitement.

'Still, I mustn't relax.'

No matter how overwhelming the situation looked—

Ian's way was always to tap even an adamantium bridge before crossing.

Missing out on this opportunity due to a moment's carelessness would mean suffering excruciating regret.

'I can never go to the Holy Kingdom, and I can't let Heliodin slip away, either.'

The victory was practically certain, but he'd never be careless until the end.

He would push his overwhelming odds even higher, until his victory was absolute.

'I'd better make sure I'm perfectly prepared.'

In that moment, a quiet fire also began blazing in Ian's eyes.

* * *

"Since young master Ian has accepted our contest, this servant will take her leave, satisfied. After all, I must prepare to win this bet."

"Spend a hundred years preparing. You'll never beat us."

"Fuhihit! We'll see when the time comes! Bye for now!"

"Those little..."

The Saintess's group and her attendants retreated, their battle of nerves with Sword Dragon Hall continuing until the end.

"Ian! You're confident, right!? We can definitely win, can't we!?"

"We just need to prepare properly. As long as we don't get careless, our side should win. Looking at the lineups, that's clear."

"Whew... Alright! I trust you! Let's show them!"

"I'll definitely protect you."

"Ian, y-young master! I-I'll do my best too...!"

"This warrior is heading off to sweat."

And so the group camp training began the next day.

Mornings were filled with strategy and theory lessons—

such as using terrain, signal systems, developing role assignments, and so on.

Afternoons were for physical training and practical classes—

team battles, cliff climbing, swordsmanship practice, and more.

After Sword Dragon Hall's daily schedule ended, Ian would return to Lunabreeze and focus on using the Authority of Projection to replicate the Millennium Gold Essence.

Several weeks—then over a month—passed quickly like that.

'These kids... they're actually pretty skilled.'

Sparring and physical training with the others let Ian measure the Holy Kingdom's level.

There were three Holy knight candidates in total.

Two had skills about on par with Kargon and Charlotte.

But the Holy knight candidate leader, Garenus, seemed even stronger than Yuria.

He had talent equal to a Hisperion direct line, was only 18, and had already reached Mid-stage Expert.

Most likely, he'd hit Late-stage Expert by next year.

Moreover, not only did he have aura, he possessed sacred power as well. If he received the blessings of his sister Seraphina, his pure fighting strength would reach Late-stage Expert and beyond.

'No wonder the Saintess was confident enough to challenge us.'

Her faith in her older brother was obvious.

'And the Saintess herself isn't a pushover, either.'

The Saintess's physical strength was on par even with Barbarian Kuga.

Seeing that little girl lift up boulders the size of wild boars during mountain training was more than a bit shocking.

That formidable strength was just one of the many blessings she carried from her immense sacred power.

'For Yuria to break free by smacking the Saintess's hand away...'

Just how hard had Yuria hit her hand back then?

'Now that I think about it, even my own hand tingled a bit.'

Thank goodness Ian had taken Tianxuedan and his body had toughened up.

If a normal person had been caught up, at least one—either the hand or wrist—would surely have been shattered.

Of course, Yuria had likely done the math before hitting so hard.

'Still—'

Though Seraphina the Saintess possessed monstrous strength, her pure fighting skill wasn't that impressive.

She'd focused more on healing, blessing, and miraculous holy arts rather than combat techniques.

Of course, even that was troublesome in its own way.

'Still, we can definitely win. Our side.'

Ian's plan to reach late-stage Swordmaster by year's end was proceeding smoothly.

He had reached Swordmaster Median already, and was now steadily channeling aura into the Authority of Projection to replicate the Millennium Gold Essence.

Each time a Millennium Gold Essence was produced, he'd immediately take it to increase his dantian's maximum aura, and planned to repeat this process thirteen times.

'Then when the final test comes...'

He'd be able to reach late-stage Swordmaster with ease.

'By that point...'

Even if every Holy knight candidate and holy knight apprentice from the Holy Kingdom attacked Ian at once, he'd be able to defeat them easily.

'The Holy Sword Heliodin. I'll be seeing you soon.'

It was the height of midsummer.

New weapon, incoming...

Does it also have sword spirit release?