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

Chapter 11 : Sword Selection Ceremony (5)

Sword Selection Ceremony (5)

- DOONG! DOONG! DOONG! DOONG!

With the solemn beating of drums, the Sword Selection Ceremony began.

The Sword Selection Ceremony was a ritual in which each participant was bestowed with the sword that matched their talents best.

What kinds of swords would the children here encounter?

- DENG! DENG! DENG!

As the priest rang the large bell, the boys and girls sitting in the front row of the participants' seats began to walk toward the Bladelake.

There were seven of them.

The Sword Selection Ceremony was held in groups of seven per batch.

"We're the last group."

Next to him, Yuria whispered quietly.

"Yes."

Ian was in the last group simply because he had arrived the latest, but for Yuria, being last was about making her the highlight of the ceremony.

Since an early age, Yuria had shown talents beyond her peers, attracting the Elders' and vassals' highest expectations.

They were all convinced that she would draw a legendary sword at the ceremony, so to build anticipation for the event, the protagonist was scheduled last.

'Of course, not even the elders or vassals would've expected Yuria to draw Genesis, the divine sword of the first family head.'

In the 1,500-year history of House Hisperion, the divine sword Genesis had only appeared three times—including Yuria.

The first was the founder, who established all the foundations and systems of House Hisperion before ascending.

The second was the 5th head, a swordsman so outstanding that he was still unfailingly mentioned as the greatest swordmaster of all time, and who surpassed the founder in swordsmanship.

And both of them had lived over a thousand years ago.

'Yuria drew the legendary divine sword that no Hisperion had been able to claim in a thousand years.'

Each time Genesis appeared, house Hisperion entered an unprecedented golden age.

The founder laid the greatest groundwork for the house under the sky, and the 5th head led them to prosperity beyond imagination by defeating the Dragon Lord in war.

The system the founder made was so neat and efficient—as if brought from the distant future—that even 1,500 years later, most of it was still adopted as is. The war trophies seized from the Dragon Lord by the 5th head of house remained crucial assets, widely used by Hisperion's elite swordsmen.

With such a background, Yuria being chosen by Genesis brought turmoil both within and beyond the house.

'The aftermath was tremendous.'

Not only was the succession order of the next head overturned, but the factions centered on direct descendants were greatly shaken, and it had a major impact on Hisperion's international relations.

'But...'

Yuria, who drew Genesis, was unable to lead the house into a golden age.

'Instead, the house fell into ruin...'

It was not a problem of Yuria's talent or qualities.

She surely had the makings to lead the house to a previously unseen height.

But...

'That vessel was crushed before it could even mature.'

At only twenty-five, she became the head, but the grand dukes of the demon realm, who had the might of demigods, were simply too powerful for her to handle. The wounds from the Hisperion civil war were so severe that recovery was nearly impossible, and humanity, lost in its own interests, turned its back on Hisperion.

In the end, all these misfortunes overlapped, and Yuria's brilliant talent was destroyed before it could fully blossom.

— KKUK!

Ian clenched his fist tightly.

'This time, I'll protect her. No matter what.'

So that Yuria's brilliant genius could bloom gloriously.

'That's why the sword I receive at this ceremony is so important.'

It was unlikely Ian would be chosen by Genesis, but if he could at least be bestowed a top-tier legendary sword comparable to it, his future plans would go much smoother.

— TOK TOK.

Lost in thought, Ian felt Yuria gently tap his shoulder.

"What are you thinking so hard about? Focus. It's almost our turn."

At those words, he looked around; most of the participants were already seated, hugging their swords.

There were only twelve children left without swords.

Seven received swords in each round, so after another seven, it would be Ian and Yuria's turn.

'Will Yuria be chosen by Genesis again this time too?'

And what kind of sword would he encounter?

There was no way to know until he saw for himself.

Ian waited silently for his turn.

— CLAP CLAP CLAP CLAP CLAP CLAP!

— DOONG! DOONG! DOONG! DOONG!

Soon, the front group of seven finished receiving their swords, and it was Ian and Yuria's turn.

— DENG! DENG! DENG!

As the solemn bell echoed, Ian and Yuria, with three other boys and girls, walked toward the Bladelake at the center of the hall.

'It's been a long time since I've seen this pond too.'

He hadn't seen it since the lands of Hisperion fell to the demons.

Ian looked at the Bladelake.

Every now and then, from the abyssal depths—deep as a precipice—something flashed like a shooting star: the gleam of a blade.

'One of Hisperion's ancient mysteries.'

The Bladelake was also crafted by the founder—an artifact 1,500 years old.

No one knew what the bottom of that abyss was connected to.

'You couldn't enter it anyway.'

Though it appeared as a calm pond, true to its name, the Bladelake had the properties of a blade. If you dipped your bare hand in, it would come out a bloody, shredded mess.

'Only cold weapons are accepted by the Bladelake.'

Of course, in 1,500 years, people had tried to enter.

Some went in wearing protective gear, others used magic to survey the bottom.

But reportedly, no attempt succeeded in revealing what was truly down there.

'Well, that's not what matters right now.'

What mattered was that Ian was finally able to meet his sword.

'In my previous life, this was a regret and a curiosity—I never thought I'd experience it like this.'

Who could have predicted it?

That he would turn back fifteen years and stand here at the Sword Selection Ceremony.

'What will my destined sword be?'

— DOODOONG! DOODOONG! DOODOONG!

The drumbeat changed rhythm.

It signaled that all preparations for summoning the ancestors' swords were complete.

The boys and girls stood in a circle, as if surrounding the Bladelake.

— CHWARRRR! CHWARRRR!

For a moment, the priests standing behind them shook their bells...

— CHWARRRR...

And soon, the sound faded into silence.

In the stillness, the high priest spoke softly.

"Sword summoners, step forward in order."

At this, the girl on Yuria's left took a step forward.

From here, it was entirely up to the participants.

The girl stretched her right hand over the Bladelake and shouted.

"O great ancestor sword spirit, follow the light and descend upon me!"

There were no fixed words for summoning a sword.

You could call your sword as you wished.

The phrase the girl used was simply a conventional one.

— CHWAAAAAK!

Soon, her destined sword shot out, piercing the surface. The high priest gave a brief explanation.

"Breshar! The sword of a hunter who slaughtered countless vampires. Tracy Skal of House Skal. At her call, Breshar has responded."

Polite applause and excited murmurs rose from the crowd.

— CLAP CLAP CLAP CLAP CLAP!

— RUMBLE! RUMBLE!

"Breshar...? Never heard of it."

"I hear it's the sword that fought against vampire clans a hundred years ago."

"It didn't slay a lord-class vampire, but it killed plenty of them."

"It's not a famous sword, but it's definitely that of a fine swordsman."

"Not bad at all. Though who knows what Lord Skal will think."

— CLAP CLAP CLAP CLAP CLAP!

Watching this, Ian chuckled softly.

'They clap on the outside, but are busy giving their own verdicts.'

The ceremony proceeded smoothly, participant after participant.

"O great ancestor sword spirit, follow the light and descend upon me."

"Revarian! The great and honorable barbarian chieftain's greatsword. Colhen Meriweather of House Meriweather. At his call, Revarian has responded."

— CLAP CLAP CLAP CLAP CLAP!

— RUMBLE! RUMBLE!

"O great ancestor sword spirit, follow the light and descend upon me."

"Jertis! A sword made from the fangs of an abyssal monster. Torebo Swift of House Swift. At his call, Jertis has responded."

— CLAP CLAP CLAP CLAP CLAP!

— RUMBLE! RUMBLE!

The two boys received reactions no different from the girl.

After several rounds of such applause and verdicts, it was soon Ian's turn.

'Hugo Greysel. My father. I bet he's somewhere out there watching.'

Among the packed spectators, somewhere, Ian's father, Hugo Greysel, was probably sitting.

'You never once expected the invisible, ignored fourteen-year-old to make his way here on his own strength. Now just sit tight and watch what kind of sword I pull.'

The Sword Selection Ceremony bestowed greater swords based on the participant's talent.

And at present, Ian's talent was not much inferior to Yuria, the greatest genius of the age.

Gifted with natural swordsmanship, honed skills, the Authority of Projection, and even a body restored from damaged mana circuits and dantian.

'Genesis might be too much, but if it's a treasured sword on the level of the sword of the Swordmaster Patriarch himself, I could easily draw it.'

With that conviction, Ian reached out his right hand.

"Follow the light. To me."

He boldly shortened the usual summoning words.

— SPLASH!

At his call, the Bladelake trembled violently.

— GURGLE! GURGLE!

— BUBBLE BUBBLE!

Suddenly, the water boiled and spouted up to waist height.

— CHWAAAAK!

At last, with a mighty spray, a massive greatsword shot up.

"Huh?"

"What?"

The exclamations came from two people: Ian and the high priest.

The colossal greatsword landed perfectly in Ian's hands.

Ian gripped the hilt with both hands and slowly examined his destined sword from top to bottom.

'This... is my destined sword?'

Teeth missing everywhere, rust eating into every inch—a pitiful sight.

Even the center of the blade was snapped clean in half.

'My god... Fantastic.'

And yet, Ian was completely satisfied with his sword.

'This is the blade used by the Grand Duke of Gluttony...!'

This was a sword Ian could never forget.

A devouring, evolving weapon that grew stronger the more it fed on the flesh and blood of the mighty.

It was Vladiark, the massive sword once used by the Grand Duke of Gluttony.

'Vladiark came out of the Bladelake?'

He'd always assumed, with its very name, that it was a weapon carried from the demon realm.

Though it startled him to see it here, it wasn't actually impossible given the circumstances.

At that time, the Bladelake itself had fallen to the demons.

The demons must have found some way to extract the swords enshrined in the Bladelake.

'So, the sword used by the Grand Duke of Gluttony... was my destined sword?'

Right now, it was a starved, battered shell. But in Ian's previous life, it had appeared completely different.

It wasn't broken, or chipped, or rusty; it gleamed with a vivid luster.

'The Grand Duke of Gluttony turned it into a monstrosity.'

No one knew exactly what or how much he'd fed to Vladiark.

But it was certain that countless powerful beings' flesh and blood were devoured.

'It was wartime, after all.'

Each time he devoured a comrade, after every battle, vladiark's power grew dramatically. It was a nightmare for Ian and humanity at the time.

'Even...'

That greatsword, growing endlessly alongside the Grand Duke of Gluttony's rampage, eventually shattered Genesis, the divine sword.

'Yuria lost her dantian and became crippled in that battle.'

It still gave Ian goosebumps to recall it.

The shock when Yuria's Genesis shattered like glass under the Grand Duke's relentless blows.

The despair when, in the next thrust, Yuria's dantian was pierced through.

So this sword...

'If nurtured, it could become even stronger than Genesis...!'

— WOONG! WOONG!

The sword resonated—so soft only Ian could hear.

The broken greatsword glowed faint red, crying out for blood.

'Of course. I'll let you eat and drink to your heart's content. What better sword could I find for revenge?'

Though this sword played a decisive role in Yuria's and House Hisperion's downfall, he felt no resentment.

It merely served its master's will.

If there was bitterness, it would be toward the Grand Duke of Gluttony alone.

Ian felt nothing but awe and joy at having acquired this sword.

'Grand Duke of Gluttony...'

Just as you did to Yuria—

'I want to drive this blade into your gut without delay.'

Damn, nice way to give his sword a backstory...

I'm guessing those who are ignorant will sneer at him more.

Chapter 12 : Sword Selection Ceremony (6)

Sword Selection Ceremony (6)

"Uh, um... That is..."

The priest stammered his words, then pulled a small booklet from his robes and frantically flipped through it.

The booklet was a dictionary that detailed the list of swords slumbering in Bladelake.

"The, the sword that responded to the call of Ian Greysel of House Greysel... That is..."

But no matter how much he searched, there was no description of the sword Ian had drawn.

After wrestling with the dictionary for a while, the priest finally bowed his head deeply toward Darkan, the Heavenly Sword Lord.

"I-I'm sorry! I do not know the sword that responded to Ian Greysel's call!"

"Hm!"

At those words, a murmur broke out among the assembly.

Everyone was dying to know where that hunk of old scrap metal had come from, and yet the priest said he didn't know!

"Get yourself together! What kind of disgrace is this in front of the Heavenly Sword Lord!"

"A priest who doesn't know the sword? Is that even possible? The man whose whole job is to memorize every sword and the house's history?"

"That fellow isn't one to make such blunders... Maybe he's just getting old. Time is cruel, indeed."

"Silence, all."

When Lord Darkan's voice was tinged with aura, the noisy assembly fell instantly into silence.

"Do not be too harsh on the priest. That sword is one that even I am seeing for the first time."

"E-even the Heavenly Sword Lord has never seen it...?"

Guarding the ancestral swords lying dormant in Bladelake was one of the many duties of the Heavenly Sword Lord.

Thus, before each succession, the Lord also had to memorize, without fail, all swords stored in Bladelake, just like the priest.

The current Lord, Darkan, was no exception—he had gone through that process himself.

So even the Lord, who had memorized every single sword in Bladelake, seeing this sword for the first time meant...

"If even the Heavenly Sword Lord doesn't know it... then it can't be blamed on the priest."

"Right. It's a sword not recorded in history."

"But why did such junk come out of Bladelake in the first place... How bizarre."

"Was it an unofficial addition? You shouldn't toss even a piece of junk like that into Bladelake as a joke..."

"Maybe it belonged to a criminal whose name was stricken from the records..."

"Pfft."

Amidst the whispering crowd, one particularly sharp sneer stood out.

"I'd heard rumors that the eldest son of House Greysel was a dullard, but I never thought I'd witness such a pitiful sword at the Sword Selection Ceremony. It seems even the ancestral sword spirits are saying it's better for a fool like him to lay down his sword early."

The voice, deliberately forceful and meant to be heard, belonged to Katrina Bellator, the head of House Bellator, house Greysel's long-standing rival.

— Swish!

She snapped open a purple velvet fan with a flourish, mocking him.

"A broken, chipped sword... How fitting for your half-witted son. The ancestral spirits must have a wicked sense of humor. Don't you agree, sir Hugo?"

"Ugh... Katrina Bellator..."

— Grit!

Ian's father, Hugo Greysel, ground his teeth as he glared at Katrina.

He wanted desperately to argue back, but in a situation where his own humiliation was laid bare, bickering with that fox would only worsen his disgrace.

Hugo sighed and turned his gaze back to Ian.

'Ian... A half-wit who'll never be able to use aura his entire life...'

The anger he struggled to suppress was directed entirely at his own son.

'I made sure to keep you bound in the manor... And yet, you managed to follow me here and humiliate me like this?'

Hugo's thin mustache quivered.

Ian had long been Hugo's disgrace—

A flaw he wished, more than anything, to hide from the world, forever.

'Why does the heavens seem to take pleasure in mocking me?'

Ever since he was young, Hugo lagged behind in all things and was often scorned by heirs of other houses.

The only reason such a dunce could become the master of Greysel was thanks to his far more capable older brother's death on duty.

Having attained his position not by merit, the contempt and ridicule grew worse, not better, after he became head of house.

'Ian. You are my failure...'

So, at the very least, he wanted to outdo those who mocked him in raising a successful child.

He wanted, at least, for his son to be better than anyone else's, so he could trample the pride of his detractors.

He saw his child as his last chance to satisfy his hunger for recognition.

'I did everything possible for you!'

He married a noblewoman with good genes and a submissive temperament, lavished every sort of tonic and medicine said to be good for unborn children upon his wife.

And the result...

'The mother died, and Ian was born disabled.'

Those chemicals and potions, though medicine in principle, could easily become highly toxic if improperly mixed.

Thinking that more was always better, Hugo carelessly abused these dangerous substances without proper knowledge, so it was hardly surprising that the mother died and Ian was born handicapped.

'Oh, heavens!!!'

And still, Hugo blamed the heavens alone.

That was why he never made any progress in life, even at his age.

'I tried every way to hide you, Ian, and yet you've brought me this disaster!'

Hugo trembled with his fists clenched.

'I should have cut you off long ago. It was complacency that let this happen!'

The only reason he hadn't expelled Ian from the house sooner was his reluctance for his shame to become public.

He did not want to create a scene and draw more attention and mockery upon himself.

But now, since the boy had so openly exposed his half-wit talents, hiding him served no purpose.

'As soon as we return to the manor, I'll strip you of the Greysel name! You'll come to realize how good you had it being cooped up in the manor!'

Hugo Greysel's narrow eyes blazed with fury.

* * *

Ever since the day Sophia was killed by demons, and Yuria was crippled—

'Where did everything go wrong?'

Ian repeated this question to himself like a habit.

'Most of every day was spent regretting and blaming myself.'

But he never found a clear answer.

'Where did it all go wrong?'

Where, really, had his past life gone off the rails?

—Shh.

Ian slowly ran his hand over Vladiark, the sword he had summoned from Bladelake, savoring the touch.

'Maybe it started to go wrong right here.'

If, in my past life, I had safely participated in the Sword Selection Ceremony...

'I might have met you much earlier.'

If that had happened, the Grand Duke of Gluttony would never have obtained Vladiark.

If that had happened...

—Tightly shut.

Ian's eyes briefly squeezed shut as a traumatic memory flooded past.

He relived the moment when the Grand Duke of Gluttony pierced Yuria's dantian with Vladiark and twisted it mercilessly.

'If the Grand Duke of Gluttony hadn't seized Vladiark, Yuria would never have lost Genesis and her dantian...'

Of course, it was all speculation.

Even if past Ian had participated safely in the Sword Selection Ceremony, there was no guarantee he would have encountered Vladiark like now.

The Sword Selection Ceremony paired the participant with the most suitable sword for their talents, and the former Ian and current Ian were fundamentally different in ability.

'I didn't have the Authority of Projection in my past life, nor had I healed my aura disability, nor did I possess skill or knowledge of the future.'

Back then, save for a gift in swordsmanship, I had nothing. Even had I participated, I might never have met Vladiark.

'But still...'

Despite that...

The more he thought about it...

The more furious and ridden with guilt he felt.

'Even if it's just a possibility... the point is, I could have prevented it. Because I let Vladiark slip away, Yuria ended up... like that.'

Ian gripped Vladiark's hilt tightly.

Countless regrets and self-reproaches flashed through Ian's mind.

'If only I hadn't been kidnapped by bandits... If only I had chosen a safer route... If only I had been stronger...'

No—before that, even.

'Hugo Greysel...! If only you hadn't kept me locked up in the manor from the start!'

If only I had taken hold of Vladiark early, I could have averted Yuria's tragedy!

—Grit.

Ian threw a sharp glare towards the spectator seats.

Whether by chance or fate, his gaze landed squarely upon Hugo Greysel, among all those spectators.

The pointed mustache, gaunt face, those sneering eyes—

Hugo, in turn, coldly met Ian's gaze.

'Hugo! As Greysel's head, it was your duty to bring me here safely. Participating in the Sword Selection Ceremony was my rightful claim!'

And Hugo Greysel had betrayed that duty.

Fearing that his son, with a disabled dantian and mana circuit, would draw an embarrassing sword and disgrace him, he trampled Ian's rights for his own convenience.

'If you weren't going to help me, you could at least have stayed out of my way!'

At the time, Hugo Greysel not only locked Ian in his room but took steps so no carriage, warp gate, or servant of the house could possibly help him attend the ritual.

'You stole and trampled on my rights.'

Murderous intent gleamed unmistakably in Ian's eyes.

—Flinch!

Hugo Greysel involuntarily shrank at that look.

He had never seen such an expression from his son.

'Hugo. In this life, you'd best not act as you did before.'

But more than a warning to Hugo, it was Ian quietly vowing to himself.

'If you insist on getting in my way this time...'

Without taking his eyes off Hugo Greysel, Ian hefted Vladiark onto his shoulder.

'I won't hesitate to feed you to Vladiark.'

* * *

About an hour later.

With Yuria's turn as the finale, the Sword Selection Ceremony concluded successfully.

Just as in the previous life, Yuria was chosen by the divine sword Genesis, and everyone present in Bladelake witnessed that shining, historic spectacle.

The advent of Genesis filled the central hall with radiance.

Windshowers burst forth from the divine sword.

Countless blades in attendance rang their names in honor, as if saluting the divine sword.

Before that wondrous and majestic display, some prayed, others lost themselves in awe or tears, still others swiftly calculated politics and whispered schemes.

And thus, with an event destined for legend, the Sword Selection Ceremony ended.

Lord Darkan of the Heavenly Sword lingered with his trusted retainer, Kelbian, savouring the afterglow.

Within minutes, all others had departed. Only Darkan and Kelbian remained in Bladelake.

"Interesting."

Darkan stroked his stubbly chin, a sharp smile on his lips.

"Congratulations, my lord."

Kelbian, his long blue hair falling loose, bowed deeply.

"For the youngest lady to be chosen by the divine sword—truly, a great event after a thousand years!"

"Yes. That in itself is impressive too."

"?"

Kelbian, the trusted retainer, glanced up, sensing discord in the lord's reply.

That, 'too'...?

It was as if the youngest, Yuria, being chosen by the divine sword was only a secondary matter.

'For the youngest to summon Genesis, the Sword of Creation, for the first time in a millennium—an epochal event.'

Yet the lord seemed to keep his focus elsewhere, as if thinking of something much more important.

"Forgive me... but is there someone else in particular on your mind?"

"Right before Yuria... That gray-haired boy."

"Yes. Ian Greysel. The eldest son of House Greysel."

"Right. The little fellow from Greysel. That broken scrap sword he called forth."

Darkan's smile deepened.

"Kelbian. Did you feel nothing from that sword?"

"... Forgive me. To my eyes, it looked like nothing more than a broken, decrepit blade at the end of its life."

It may once have been a great sword, having slept in Bladelake, but as it now appeared, it seemed utterly useless—scrap rather than sword.

A sword in name, but unfit for a swordsman.

As if the ancestral sword spirits had played a cruel jest—perfect for Ian Greysel's nickname, the 'half-wit'.

"I see... Not even you, a master of the highest order, could sense anything?"

Darkan licked his lips.

"The true protagonist of this Sword Selection Ceremony is not my youngest daughter."

"... Do you mean...?"

"Ian Greysel. He is the true main character of this Sword Selection Ceremony."

The moment that gray-haired boy summoned the broken greatsword, Darkan's beloved sword, Dominating Dragon Fang, had wept.

Like a beast howling in terror at the approach of a predator.

"How fascinating."

Dominating Dragon Fang, the cherished sword of the Heavenly Sword Lord, contained the soul of the Dragon Lord.

It was the proudest and most haughty blade in existence, never bowing even to the divine sword Genesis.

Yet those arrogant, ferocious dragon fangs...

"Were frightened by that pile of scrap."

At least, Ian's father-in-law isn't ignorant unlike the others.

Chapter 13 : Notification (1)

Notification (1)

"My Dominating Dragon Fang was scared of that scrap metal."

"Ha, haah!"

Kelbian, the loyal aide, covered his mouth in shock at the Heavenly Sword Lord's words.

The sword of the head of the Heavenly Sword House—Dominating Dragon Fang—was one of the top, ultimate swords on the continent, counted among the greatest. It was a supreme blade with such a high class that it could stand side by side with the Divine Sword Genesis without being outclassed, yet... it was afraid of that chunk of scrap metal?

'Is that even possible...?'

It was hard to believe, but there was no way the head of the Heavenly Sword House could be mistaken.

From the look on his face, it was clearly not a joke.

If so, this was an even more shocking event than the appearance of Genesis, returning after a thousand years.

'Perhaps this is... an ancient relic with a history longer than Bladelake... no, longer than Hisperion's own history, revealing itself again.'

Kelbian, quick to realize the importance of the situation, bowed his head to the Heavenly Sword Lord.

"If you command it, I will retrieve the sword from Ian Greysel and conduct a thorough investigation."

"Hmm..."

Darkan stroked his scratchy white beard, then waved his hand dismissively.

"No. This isn't something we should deal with so recklessly."

Darkan sensed that some fate was entwined with that scrap sword.

He could not know how ancient that sword was or who had placed such a powerful blade at Bladelake, but...

'At the very least, it did not appear merely by coincidence.'

There was a very high possibility that someone's intention was involved.

If it was such a powerful relic that even Dominating Dragon Fang was terrified of it, then whoever left that mysterious artifact must be on par with, if not above, the Heavenly Sword Lord himself at the very least.

'Is it a relic arranged by the first head of the Household...? Hm. But even as the current head, I've never heard of such a thing... However, the odds are high it was prepared by someone on par with the first head. Unless that being bears hostility towards the House, it would be foolish to meddle with their plan carelessly.'

Although Darkan, the Heavenly Sword Lord of Hisperion, was deemed the continent's strongest, he was neither arrogant nor prideful.

His firm caution was the reason he could handle the wild Dominating Dragon Fang and the Black Dragon Armor without issue.

'It's best to approach this cautiously and respectfully.'

But...

'I must uncover the intention behind this.'

As the Heavenly Sword Lord, obligated to protect all that belonged to the family, he had no intention of carelessly investigating a mysterious relic that emerged from the sacred grounds.

And...

'If that scrap sword harbors hostility towards Hisperion...'

A primal gleam flashed in the Heavenly Sword Lord's calm eyes.

'Even if a god is behind it, I will cut them down.'

Having finished his thoughts, the Heavenly Sword Lord rose from his luxurious jade throne.

"I'll handle this matter personally."

"Y-You yourself, my lord...!"

Whether the relic was the arrangement of the first head or the seal of an even more ancient being—

Darkan sensed instinctively that the enormous gears of fate, dormant for so long, had just begun to turn once more.

"I'll be visiting House Greysel soon. Prepare for it."

"Gasp!"

For the Heavenly Sword Lord himself to visit someone personally was a rare event indeed.

He was always the one who summoned others, not the one to go to them.

This was bound to attract much political attention and speculation.

"....."

But Kelbian refrained from unnecessary advice.

He knew there was no way the Heavenly Sword Lord would be unaware of this.

'The Heavenly Sword Lord intends to handle this with utmost respect.'

At the same time, Kelbian could sense his resolve to handle the matter without leaving a single blemish.

"Understood! I will ready everything for departure at any time."

"I leave it to you."

– Step. Step.

Heavenly Sword Lord Darkan left the central hall after entrusting the matter to Kelbian.

Even as he walked the corridors, the image of that mysterious relic and the boy who summoned it lingered in his mind.

'The name of the child who summoned that relic... Ian. Ian Greysel, wasn't it.'

Darkan's lips curled in a glint of interest.

'What kind of talent must the boy possess, to bring forth such a menacing greatsword? I'm looking forward to this.'

Darkan, Lord of Hisperion, the continent's mightiest house of swordsmanship—

At that moment, the presence of Ian was etched deeply into his memory.

* * *

As soon as the Sword Ceremony ended, Ian headed for the banquet hall entrance where he had agreed to meet Sophia.

The Vladiark he received at the ceremony was neatly wrapped in a priest-given cloth and slung across his back.

"Young master! Over here! Here!"

Waving both hands above her head from a distance was a girl in a yellow dress.

Sophia had arrived at the banquet entrance first and was waiting for him.

"Did you wait long?"

"No, I just got here. Oh! What's that on your back? Is it the sword you got from the ceremony?"

"That's right."

"Wow! I want to see it too! Show me, please!"

Sophia bounced on her feet, eyes shining with anticipation at Vladiark strapped across Ian's back.

"It's not very pretty, you know."

"I have to see for myself!"

"Alright, let's head out of here first. I'll show you once we check into an inn, so you can look at it properly there."

"Okay!"

Though there was a banquet scheduled to run late into the evening after the Sword Ceremony, neither Ian nor Sophia had any intention of staying longer in the Sword Palace.

They had already eaten plenty, and the post-ceremony banquet was more of a political gathering anyway.

Even the main spectacle—the warriors—were now leaving in crowds.

There was nothing left to enjoy at the banquet.

"Should we get a place to stay around here, or look for a carriage first?"

"The carriage. We'll return straight to the Greysel estate."

"Ugh! I don't want to go back!"

Ian grinned.

"I feel the same."

But there was a reason he had no choice but to return to the mansion.

'To enter the Sword Dragon Academy, I'll need the notification letter.'

Those who participated in the Sword Ceremony would receive a notification from Hisperion within a few days.

Only with that letter could they enter the Sword Dragon Academy.

'The letter will be sent to the family's main estate, so there's no choice but to return first.'

If the letter landed in Hugo's hands first, he would surely try to dispose of it again.

'I'll make sure to get to it before Hugo can destroy it.'

Were it not for that, Ian would have no reason to return to that wretched mansion.

"Anyway, once I enter the Sword Dragon Academy, I'll hardly ever have to visit the mansion again."

"Young master! You won't forget you promised to take me too, right?!"

"Of course. Even if you protest, you're coming."

"Promise! Because I'll never say I don't want to go, just don't forget!"

With that chatter, they soon reached the main gate where carriages waited.

"Should we get a carriage here?"

"Hmm."

Ian crossed his arms, thinking for a moment before answering.

"Let's shop a bit before we leave."

"Shopping?"

"Yes."

Ian was sure that the moment he returned to the mansion, Hugo would not leave him alone.

He had already spent over 1,000 gold under the family's name in one day and caused ridicule at the Sword Ceremony.

'If I'm going to have a major confrontation anyway, I might as well wring out everything I can beforehand.'

Considering Hugo's temperament, Ian was prepared even for expulsion, so he needed to take everything he could while he still could.

"Might as well buy up all the elixirs we can find here."

The elixirs sold in shops were expensive and mostly mediocre in effect, but they would suffice for Ian's needs.

At least until he entered the Sword Dragon Academy, they would be enough to completely cure his aura disorder and raise his level to top-tier user.

"Sophia. Was there anything you wanted? Today, I'll buy it all for you."

"Y-You're putting this all on the family account again, aren't you?!"

"Of course."

"Is that really going to be okay? The master will surely blow his top..."

"I told you, the clash is inevitable now. I'm better off taking what I can while I can."

"Um... Well, if you say so..."

Sophia, blushing, hesitated on her lips.

"Hmm? You seem to have something in mind?"

"I... I want to pick out my own sword today!"

"Oh. That sounds fun. Sure. Let's stop by the best armory in town."

* * *

Late at night, under a high moon.

Ian and Sophia, having enjoyed shopping in the Hisperion main city, returned to Greysel estate via the warp gate.

"It took a week to get here the first time, but we're back in less than a day."

"Thanks to Hugo."

Inside Greysel territory, they couldn't use the warp gate due to Hugo's interference, but there were no such restrictions in Hisperion lands, allowing them to return in a day.

Naturally, the cost of the warp gate was put on the Greysel family account.

"Haah... What a crazy day! We went to a banquet, participated in the Hisperion Sword Ceremony, and just now in the city..."

Ian chuckled.

"The clerks seemed to take you for a noble lady."

"Pfffft! I know, right? Maybe it was the dress..."

Ian imitated the stoic clerk from earlier.

"Lady Marigold. It is an honor of my house to serve you. This way, please. Step, step."

"Oh, come on! Pfff!"

Sophia playfully bumped his shoulder.

"Ow!"

That did hurt...

"And the sword you bought me... my very first sword... I'll really treasure it."

She rubbed her cheek against the scabbard she was hugging.

"You like it?"

"Of course! This is my number one treasure now!"

"Don't get too attached. Unless it's a masterwork, every sword is a consumable and will need to be discarded someday. Don't give it too much meaning."

"Discard it? How could you say that to my sword!"

"... It's not like it has ears."

"No, I can feel it. It has a soul."

"The price did come close to that of an ego sword."

A whopping 5,000 gold.

It was almost 17 years worth of Sophia's wages.

"Right! Uwaaah! What do I do now! I never imagined a sword could cost so much!"

"That's because of the materials. They used top-grade stuff."

The sword Sophia bought was a masterpiece of modern metallurgy.

The frame included adamantite, said to be indestructible, the hilt was made with a mana-conductive alloy from the mage tower, and the blade itself was of light and sturdy mithril.

"Just use it up and toss it."

Of course, compared to the master blades Ian had used in his previous life, it was just a disposable item not much better than ordinary steel.

"How could I! I'll take really good care of it... thank you...."

"....."

Ian fell silent, caught off guard by Sophia's awkward gratitude.

In his previous life, Sophia was very stingy with words of praise or thanks.

A flood of emotions crossed his mind.

"Ahem! You shouldn't bring it into the mansion. If Hugo sees it, he'll definitely confiscate it."

"Yes. Let's also hide the elixirs you bought!"

"Hm. I'll be using the elixirs soon, so that's fine, but I should bury the rest of my weapons too."

Speed was of the essence—he only needed to retrieve the notification letter quickly from the mansion. Leaving heavy weapons behind was a good idea.

"Let's find a secluded spot."

"Yes... Ugh... If I bury this, my sword might get scratched... sniff..."

"Don't worry. It's made with such good materials, it won't even get scratched."

"Oh! Then I'm relieved!"

"Yeah. Lend me your sword for digging."

"What are you going to use my sword for!"

Ian and Sophia buried their weapons and luggage in a secluded forest area, away from prying eyes.

"You should change your clothes here, too."

If Hugo saw Sophia in such an expensive dress, she'd be in for trouble as well.

"I'll change over there—keep watch for anyone coming!"

"Don't worry. I'll keep lookout with hawk-like eyes."

"Young master, you can't peek!"

"... I won't."

While Sophia struggled to change out of her dress, Ian stood guard, organizing his plans.

'There's really no need to rush straight back to the mansion.'

The only reason to go is to get the Sword Dragon Academy notification letter.

That letter wouldn't arrive today, so there was no need to go back early and suffer seeing Hugo.

'I'll find a quiet place nearby, and fully cure my aura disorder tonight.'

[《Projection progress of Sophia's Dantian and Mana Circuits: 88.7%》]

He'd stocked up on plenty of elixirs in the city, and with plenty of night left, he was sure to finish repairing his dantian and mana circuits tonight.

'I should have plenty of time left.'

He could use the extra hours to raise his aura level with Heavenly Dawn Technique.

'If I train until tomorrow morning, I should at least reach the intermediate user level.'

If he kept consuming elixirs and used the supreme cultivation method Heavenly Dawn Technique for another day, reaching high-rank aura user was within reach.

'For now, that should be enough...'

It would be more than sufficient to handle the useless Hugo.

'Hugo. A man I don't even want to acknowledge as my biological father.'

He remembered getting beaten by him so many times as a child.

That man, who would hit for every little thing, would surely raise his hand again this time, too.

But...

The current Ian was no longer a helpless child.

If Hugo dared to raise his hand against him again this time...

Ian would discipline Hugo with a fist imbued with the enlightenment of a Heavenly Sword Lord.

Chapter 14 : Notification (2)

Notification (2)

The city of Silverfall, where the main estate of the Greysel family was located.

In the dim forest outside its castle walls.

"Ow! Young master Ian! Could you help me untie the string on my back? This thing... I just can't get it loose!"

Sophia was struggling to take off her trailing dress.

"I'm coming."

Ian approached Sophia from behind and took hold of the dress string.

"Can you see well?"

"It's dark, but it's enough."

-swish, swish.

"...? How in the world did you tie this?"

The knot was even tighter than when she was tied up after being kidnapped by bandits.

Upon closer inspection, it was a butterfly knot, intricately made with two strings.

"This will take ages to untie. It'd be better to just cut it."

"W-what!? Then I can't wear it again!"

"It's just the string. Doesn't matter. I'll buy you a new one."

"Ack! No way! That string alone costs more than double my salary! Why buy a new one when it's not just a few pennies! Just..."

"It's fine."

-snip!

"Eek! Eeek! What have you done to my dress!"

"Hurry up and get changed."

"Sniff... My dress..."

A moment later, Sophia finished changing and called Ian.

"Young master, I've finished changing."

A shirt and long pants.

She was now dressed in everyday wear, commonly worn by city dwellers.

"Haaa... The head butler is going to scold me too. Throwing away a maid's uniform, which is the mansion's property, as I please..."

"It was meant to be thrown away from the start. You were captive in a mountain hideout for four days. No way would washing that be enough to fix it."

"I guess that's true... but the head butler didn't see it."

"Then say I threw it away."

"Honestly, I doubt even that excuse would work."

Ian chuckled.

"That's true."

"Ugh... I'm done for..."

While chatting, Ian also finished changing into an ordinary shirt and pants.

"Don't worry about getting scolded. Anyway, as soon as we get the notification from the Sword Dragon Hall, we'll be out again. You probably won't even run into the head butler. Afterward, there's no reason to ever return to the mansion."

"R-right! Ahh, I'm nervous! I'm actually going to get into the Sword Dragon Hall...! Will I be able to adapt?"

"It'll be hectic at first. There'll be a lot of difficult problems. But if we solve them one at a time together, we'll get used to it quickly. I promise."

"Now that you say that, I feel relieved... But really. Young master, have you noticed that you've changed a lot these past few days?"

"..."

"How to say it... You're way more positive than before, much more confident, and seem more mature..."

"..."

"Ahem! Anyway, I'm just going to believe in you and follow! Don't leave me alone, okay?"

"I won't leave you alone. Don't you bail out on me later, saying it's hard."

"Don't worry! That'll never happen! We promised at the banquet, remember? We'll see this through to the end!"

"That's right, we promised. We won't give up halfway no matter what. If you break it, you have to swallow a thousand needles."

"Yes! Then you promise too! If you leave me behind, you have to swallow a hundred billion needles!"

"A-a hundred billion... Got it."

Ian and Sophia hooked their pinkies and promised again.

'Sophia, you've made a promise with me. You can't quit of your own accord anymore.'

Without fail.

So that, no matter what enemy appears before you, you'll be able to protect yourself.

'You're going to go all the way with me.'

A promise to never give up and see it to the end.

She had to become a Grandmaster together with Ian.

* * *

After coming out of the forest, Ian and Sophia found a room at an inn.

The inn was located right next to the city gate.

From the window, they could see the city's main road at a glance, so if the Hisperion mail carriage arrived, they'd be able to spot it immediately.

"So all I have to do is watch here for the mail carriage, right?"

Sophia put a chair by the window and sat down.

"That's right."

As soon as they confirmed the mail carriage, they could dash straight to the mansion and snag the notification letter, minimizing their time at the estate.

With some luck, they wouldn't even have to encounter Hugo or the head butler; they could just nab the notification letter and leave.

'It would have been better if we could intercept the mail carriage and snatch the letter directly.'

But on the street, it was hard to verify identities, and the notification letter was an item that absolutely had to be delivered to the mansion, so dropping by the house was unavoidable.

"I'm counting on you."

If it was quick, the Hisperion mail carriage could arrive as soon as tomorrow.

No matter how delayed, it would come within three days.

Even so, from the second day onward, it was better to check at the mansion just in case.

"Just endure for two days."

"Gosh, this is nothing. Compared to working at the mansion, this is way easier. Don't worry, just leave it to me!"

"I trust you."

"Yes!"

While Sophia kept watch for the mail carriage at the window, Ian immersed himself in cultivating his aura.

'The goal is to advance my aura level to High-rank User within two days!'

So far, he had focused only on recovering the damage to his dantian and mana circuits, so his current level was barely at the novice-rank User stage.

The lowest among all who could wield aura.

Since he'd been unable to store aura in his dantian, his aura reserves had been woefully insufficient.

'But now, I can accumulate aura.'

[《Sophia's Dantian and Mana Circuit》 Projection Progress: 88.7%]

Thanks to diligently projecting and transplanting Sophia's dantian and mana circuit, Ian's impairment was almost completely cured.

The healing would be complete by tonight, and if he used the Heavenly Dawn Technique without stopping for the next two days, he would undoubtedly reach High-rank User level.

'Let's get started.'

To be honest, reaching High-rank User in just two days from novice was normally impossible.

From novice to lower, intermediate, high, and even peak, there were walls of enlightenment to break through at every stage; if he tried to accumulate that much aura at once, his mana circuit could overheat and be damaged, and his dantian, if expanded too quickly, could tear apart.

However, for Ian, who in his previous life had reached Peak Swordmaster, breaking those walls of enlightenment held no difficulty, and even if his dantian and mana circuits were damaged, he could instantly heal them with the Authority of Projection. There would be no problem with overexerting himself.

'I just have to endure the pain.'

And so, for two days, Ian devoured the elixirs he had purchased in bulk at the Hisperion Main Estate in place of meals, running the supreme cultivation method, Heavenly Dawn Technique.

'Grrk!'

Whenever his mana circuit overheated and broke from excessive cultivation, he overlaid Sophia's mana circuit to heal it; whenever the rigid dantian expanded and tore, he repaired the dantian wall with the Authority of Projection.

After two days...

[《Sophia's Dantian and Mana Circuit》 Projection Progress: 100.0%]

The aura impairment Ian harbored was completely healed with the Authority of Projection,

'The sensation of aura flowing through my whole body... I truly missed it.'

His aura level, just as planned, reached High-rank User.

'To reach High-rank Aura User at 14...'

In his previous life, Ian had only become an High-rank Aura User at 20.

Compared to that, he achieved this result six years earlier.

'And it took five years to push from there to Early-Stage Swordmaster level.'

Struggling through walls of enlightenment, that was five years.

Now, having already surpassed all those walls, present-day Ian would never need five years to become a Swordmaster again.

'The only problem is sheer aura quantity. No matter how late, within four years from now. With luck, by eighteen, I'll become a Swordmaster...!'

If things went well, maybe even at 17, or even 16.

'Even Hisperion's fifth head, Ragnar Hisperion, hailed as the mightiest swordsman in history, only became Swordmaster at eighteen.'

Even Yuria, who was called a once-in-a-generation genius, only became Swordmaster at twenty in the previous life.

If Ian became Swordmaster before eighteen, it would be a legendary achievement engraved forever in human history.

'And on top of that, I have the Authority of Projection, and the endlessly growing Gluttonous Greatsword, vladiark...'

In ten years, even facing all seven of those detestable grand dukes of the Demon Realm alone didn't seem completely impossible.

'But I must not get complacent. I can't let my guard down.'

In the previous life, even Yuria, with her godlike strength and power, suffered grave injuries at the hands of the Demon Realm grand dukes and was left crippled.

'If you fall to those fiends, you can't even heal yourself so easily.'

Ian's disability had been a simple deformity, easily cured with the Authority of Projection, but the grievous wounds Yuria suffered at the hands of the Demon Realm grand dukes in her previous life were different.

Wounds left by the grand dukes carried curses and deadly toxins.

Because of those curses and toxins, Yuria couldn't absorb any medicine properly, her aura dispersed at the tiniest provocation, and even the Authority of Projection couldn't heal her dantian.

'Letting your guard down around the Demon Realm grand dukes is pure lunacy.'

Of course, things were far better than in the previous life, and he was confident he'd become much stronger than Yuria had been... but still, complacency was forbidden.

'I have to push all my powers and divine weapon to the utmost limit—not just able to take on the seven grand dukes, but even more at once!'

To rescue Yuria, and to prevent the tragedies of his previous life from happening again.

"Gasp! Young master! Young master!"

As he was running his cultivation, lost in these thoughts, Sophia suddenly called to him in an urgent voice.

"There's a carriage!"

"The mail carriage?"

"Yes! It's got the Hisperion celestial sword insignia in huge letters! It's heading straight for the mansion!"

"Right on time—exactly two days."

It was time to head back to the mansion.

"Good timing."

* * *

The moment they spotted the Hisperion mail carriage, Ian and Sophia left the inn.

Ian told Sophia she could wait at the inn, but Sophia insisted it was better for them to go together rather than being alone, so she followed along meekly.

After quickly hiring a carriage and riding down the main street, they reached the Greysel estate in no time.

"Young master! Hurry! Quickly, quickly!"

"... You seem more impatient than me."

"Let's just swipe the notification and get out fast!"

"Yeah, I have no intention of staying long either. Let's go."

As soon as they got out of the carriage, Ian and Sophia headed for the mansion's mail storage.

If the Sword Dragon Hall notification hadn't yet ended up in Hugo's hands, it should still be there.

"Oh, oh!"

"There they are!"

"Sophia and him...!"

"Those wretches...!"

"They've finally come. Finally."

Dozens of servants passed by as they crossed gardens and hallways.

"Even after going to the sword ritual, this place is as usual."

"Yeah, it is."

On the faces of the servants who looked at Ian, there was open anger and contempt.

"Because of them...! Geez!"

"I heard they embarrassed themselves at the sword ritual too? Pulled out a hunk of scrap metal, huh?"

"Ha! That's what happens when you run off from the mansion for no reason!"

"Just ended up causing trouble for the rest of us..."

"Ugh, only the innocent ones like us have to suffer."

"Can't you just behave quietly for once?"

It seemed that, because Ian had left the mansion, Hugo had vented his anger on the servants.

"Got slapped by Hugo, but they take it out on me instead."

Ian's position among the mansion's servants was not good.

Because Hugo, the master of the house, treated Ian like a parasite and openly ignored him, the servants followed suit by mocking and looking down on Ian.

"Ugh, so annoying! We won't ever have to see any of them again after we get into the Sword Dragon Hall anyway! Let's just beat them all up before we go!"

"No, calm down. Our goal is the notification letter. Let's just grab it and get out of here as quickly as possible."

"Young master, aren't you even angry!?"

"Nope. As long as I have you on my side, that's good enough."

"H-huh! A-ack! Seriously!"

Even as Ian said this, Sophia was still too upset to calm down, stomping in frustration.

"Hmph! Just you watch! I'll get my revenge! I'll succeed as a swordswoman in the Sword Dragon Hall, make you the Greysel family head, and become a knight! Then I'll track each one down and put them in their place until they beg for forgiveness!"

Ian couldn't help but laugh.

"Sophia, even two bodies wouldn't be enough for all that."

"I mean it!"

"Even so, I appreciate the sentiment."

If that's how Sophia felt, then Ian would simply protect such a Sophia.

"But first, we need to get the Sword Dragon Hall notification letter."

Without the notification, they couldn't enter the Sword Dragon Hall, so Sophia's ambitions would all come to nothing.

"Yes! Let's hurry up even more!"

"Right. Let's sprint."

They had to secure the notification before Hugo had a chance to burn it.

Sophia's a loyal one.

Chapter 15 : Notification (3)

Notification (3)

Ian and Sophia dashed across the mansion at full speed.

-tat! tat! tat! tat!

"H-huff! Young master! Faster! H-huff! Hurry!"

"Careful not to trip."

They crossed the garden, raced through the corridors, and headed for the mail storage room.

'If the Sword Dragon Hall admission notice ends up in Hugo's hands first, it'll be a hassle in many ways.'

He also simply didn't want to run into Hugo, but the worst-case scenario was Hugo burning the notice.

Ideally, he wanted to snatch the notice without seeing Hugo at all and slip back out of the mansion.

"H-huff! I'm g-gonna die! I'm out of breath!"

"Wait here. I'll be right back."

"H-huff, yessir!"

While Sophia caught her breath, Ian walked into the mail storage room.

"Huh? Young master... Ian?"

There was only one servant inside.

Luckily, Ian had indeed beaten Hugo there.

"The mail coach from Hisperion should've arrived. Where's the delivery?"

"A-ah... That, um..."

It wasn't even a difficult question, but the servant just fidgeted and couldn't answer.

Looking closer, Ian saw the Sword Dragon Hall notice gripped in the servant's hand.

"So you had it. Give it to me."

"W-wait! No, I can't!"

The servant stepped aside and tucked the notice into his coat.

"The master told me to bring it to him first!"

"If you give that to Father, you know he'll burn it. If that happens, I'll have a really hard time entering the Sword Dragon Hall."

"Umm... Even so, the master's orders are priority..."

Ian spoke with a blank expression.

"If you won't hand it over when I ask nicely, I'll have to take it by force."

Ian's current level was Aura User—Advanced.

To take a letter from a normal person who didn't even know any aura techniques was easier than breathing.

"Just give it over while I'm still talking nicely. I'll handle things with Father, so don't worry about that."

However, he didn't want to hurt a weaker person for no reason.

He was giving the servant a chance.

"Uh?"

But the servant, oblivious to Ian's mercy, just widened his eyes incredulously.

'Did this half-blood brat lose his fear just from spending some time outside the mansion?'

To the servant, Ian was nothing but a fourteen-year-old kid who hadn't even hit his growth spurt, while he himself was a burly young man of twenty-four.

Honestly, a kid who looked like he could be taken down with one hand was threatening him about using force—it was comical from the servant's perspective.

'Really acting out, huh? This is exactly why even the other servants ignore him.'

If you didn't know your place and acted cocky like that, it was no wonder that even the mansion staff looked down on you.

"Excuse me. Why don't you take that up with the master directly? Don't bother me. I'll get in trouble if I'm late. Step aside and don't meddle!"

The servant reached out roughly, intending to shove Ian aside.

-whoosh!

"Huh?"

But his hand just sliced through empty air.

-thwack!

"Gah!"

At the same moment, a counterattack flew in.

"Ah!"

-crash!

The servant lost balance and fell flat on the floor.

Ian roughly snatched the notice from the fallen servant's coat.

"I'll let this slide since you tried to lay hands on me. Just leave."

"Ugh...wh-what...!"

The servant grabbed his aching jaw and blinked in confusion.

Then, seeing the Sword Dragon Hall notice fluttering in Ian's hand, he opened his eyes wide.

"H-how did you—! Give it back!"

The servant scrambled up and glared at Ian.

"I said go."

"N-no way!"

But of course, even the servant had his pride.

"Give it!"

He screamed as he charged at Ian.

"Haa..."

Ian let out a quiet sigh and swung his fist.

-thwack!

"Guh!"

Struck squarely on the jaw, the servant's head snapped ninety degrees, his teeth flying through the air as he collapsed again.

-thud-thud-thud!

-plop!

"Tsk."

He'd probably be lying there for a while, having had his brains rattled.

Ian tucked the notice into his coat and stepped outside.

Now he just had to get out of the mansion and his business here would be done.

"Y-y-young master..."

"Ah. Great."

The moment he stepped outside, he spotted the head butler squared off with Sophia.

He wasn't fond of seeing that man either, if he could help it.

"Tsk tsk. Young master. Were you hiding? Tsk tsk tsk."

The head butler clicked his tongue as soon as he met Ian's eyes.

He looked at him like one would a troublesome brat.

Definitely not the expression of someone serving the heir of a noble house.

"Have you finished causing trouble? The master is very angry. You'd best head straight to his office."

Ian shook his head.

"Tell Father. I have no further—

"And Sophia. Answer me. What is that outfit? Where is your maid uniform?"

The head butler cut off Ian.

His attitude blatantly disrespectful.

"I said, tell Hugo."

Ian stepped forward, shielding Sophia, and repeated himself.

"And if you interrupt me again, I'll have to punish you as the future head of Greysel, so watch yourself."

"What?"

The head butler snorted and stared at Ian.

Then, as if it was just absurd, he broke out into a mocking laugh.

"Future head? Hahaha!"

The four servants standing behind the butler all wore sneers as well.

"Haha, oh my... Young master Ian. No—poor child..."

The butler took off his glasses and wiped them with his cloth.

"To not even know your own place this badly... If you just stayed quiet as usual, at least you'd be cute. A single trip to the main estate event, and now you're just a fool."

After sneering, the butler pushed his glasses back on.

"Ian. Today, the master will excommunicate you. He's already made it clear; you're not even his son anymore. So what could you possibly be relying on, acting so arrogant, tsk tsk..."

The head butler flicked his finger, signaling the burly men forward.

"Boys. Take this brat who doesn't know his place to the master."

"Yes, sir!"

"Aye!"

The four big men behind the butler cracked their fingers and necks as they closed in on Ian.

"Umm..."

Sophia anxiously eyed Ian, slowly inching backward.

"You shouldn't mess with the young master..."

After all, Ian once took down eight bandits bigger than these men single-handedly.

No matter how big these men from the peaceful mansion were, they'd be no match for the young master.

'So this was my standing fifteen years ago...'

Meanwhile, Ian was marveling anew at his own position.

Back then, he'd just spent his days quietly, not clashing with the servants, so he never realized how thoroughly he'd been dismissed.

Once he became a Swordmaster, his treatment inside and outside the family was entirely different, so he had even less reason to notice.

'I always knew I was ignored, but...'

He never imagined they'd look down on him this much.

It was like they viewed him as far beneath them.

'Still, these bastards living off the Greysel household's generosity... Is this really how they treat the eldest son? What a wonderful family.'

Ian clenched his fist tightly.

It seemed he really needed to educate these pests before leaving the mansion.

As the one who would one day be the master of Greysel, the sooner you dealt with such parasites, the better.

"Poor brat. Guess we won't be seeing your face anymore."

One of the burly men reached a giant hand toward Ian.

— 《Power of Projection》 —

[Strength of Orc Lv.15]

————————

Ian grabbed the man's middle finger and twisted it back with a single motion.

-crack!

-snap!

"Aaah?!"

His finger joints burst like shrimp meat, fat and flesh bulging out alongside bone.

"Aagh! Agh!"

White flesh quickly turned red as blood spurted out.

"Wha—what?!"

"Wh-what the—!"

Seeing their comrade fall clutching his finger, the other three men abruptly stopped in their tracks.

Their sneering lips instantly wilted into petrified horror.

"I told you you'd regret it..."

Sophia shook her head in silent prayer.

"I'll give you three seconds."

Ian held up three fingers.

"If you kneel and beg for forgiveness within three seconds, I'll show mercy."

He had no hobby of tormenting the weak.

"H-how..."

"Butler, sir..."

The men dumbly glanced over at the butler for guidance.

"....."

But the butler looked just as shaken.

One of his men was writhing on the floor, cradling a twisted, broken hand.

The butler could do nothing but stand there, jaw agape, at the gruesome sight.

"Three seconds are up."

While he hesitated, the three seconds had passed.

"Fools."

Ian didn't like bullying the weak, but if it was the right thing to do, he didn't hesitate either.

"I hope you learn a lesson from this."

First, one of them.

-crack!

"Urgh!"

A knee kick to the face: broken nose and fractured eye socket.

"Next."

"Aaah!"

The second man tried an instinctive counterattack.

-crunch!

-crack!

"Ggyaaaah!"

A counter-grab: complete shoulder dislocation, pectoral muscle tear.

"N-no!"

The third tried to bolt.

-crack!

"Kk—gaaah!"

A front kick to the back: ruptured disc.

"Uh, ugh..."

Now only the butler remained, his teeth chattering as he crept backward.

"H-how... That half-blood can't even use aura, so h-how..."

"Still running your mouth, I see."

Ian's lips curled in a flat line.

"I'll have to discipline you especially thoroughly."

"W-wait! I was wro—! I was wrong—!"

The butler tried to drop to his knees in a hurry.

"Too late."

But it was already far too late for mercy.

Ian grabbed the butler's head in a rough grip.

"Aaah! My hair!"

"Grip your scalp tightly."

"W-what do you—!?"

-rip rip rip!!

"Aaaaaaaah!!!"

Ian tore a giant tuft of the butler's white hair straight from his head.

A huge bald patch appeared among what once was his proud, luxurious hair.

"If you don't tense your scalp, I'll rip it off your skin."

"W-wait! Young master I—!"

-rip rip rip rip!

"Kkkiiiiyaaagh!!!"

The torture-like lesson didn't stop until the butler was completely bald.

-tap tap.

Ian brushed off the tangled hairs stuck to his hand.

"Uuuhhh..."

The butler crouched, clutching his bald head, shivering in fear.

His scalp was bleeding in several places from being torn open with the hair.

"While your hair grows back, try to develop some respect for me. If I see you like this again next time, I'll just rip your scalp off entirely. Understand?"

"Whimper, uh..."

"If you don't answer, I'll do it now."

"Agh! Y-yes, sir! I-I'll develop respect!"

"Good."

"Whiiimper..."

Ian turned to look at Sophia.

"Uh... oh wow..."

She slowly looked over the wreckage, then quietly gave him a thumbs up.

"Let's go! The knights might show up any second!"

"No. I should see the knights before I go."

"Y-yes!?"

Originally, he planned to just take the notice and leave, but he'd changed his mind.

Now that he'd started their lesson...

Even if it was a hassle, since he'd gotten this far, he might as well finish what he started.

Seeing things through once begun was another of Ian's habits.

"I-is this really okay, young master? The knights are on a totally different level than those guys!"

"I know."

As Sophia said, the knights were on a completely different level.

No matter how big the servants were, if they couldn't use aura, they were just normal people.

Even ten at once would be no match for Ian.

But the knights residing at the mansion were different.

This was the Greysel mansion, one of the greatest houses in Hisperion's territory.

There were knights here who had reached middle-stage Expert—four levels higher than Ian's current level.

'But it doesn't matter.'

Ian had secret techniques he'd forged over countless brushes with death in his previous life.

'Frenzied Insight Style: Reversing Heaven.'

A supreme martial art that read the opponent's aura flow and counterattacked using that power.

It was a technique Ian had developed through pure desperation, always facing those stronger than him in his past life.

'With Reversing Heaven, anyone up to middle-stage Expert is easy to handle.'

Of course, even Frenzied Insight Style was not omnipotent and couldn't surpass an overwhelming difference in rank.

But with Authority of Projection and his other secret techniques, Ian could likely handle middle-stage Expert knights even as an advanced-level user.

'Wonder when they'll arrive.'

Ian simply waited for the knights to show up.

With the head butler having screamed his head off while being scalped, some knights were sure to come and check the commotion.

Since he'd started this lesson, Ian planned to instill some respect for the next head of the family in them too.

"Disgusting little trash..."

A familiar voice rang out at the mansion's entrance soon after.

A voice he hadn't heard in ages, yet felt not the least bit welcome to hear.

Hugo appeared at the entrance, flanked by his knights.

Chapter 16 : Notification (4)

Notification (4)

Hugo stood among the knights, arms crossed, glaring at Ian.

'Hugo Greysel.'

The current head of House Greysel and Ian's biological father.

And, undoubtedly, the most incompetent head in the house's history.

'I didn't get along with that man until the very end in my previous life as well.'

He was trash who persecuted and tormented his disabled son.

I never even considered reconciliation in the first place, but in Ian's previous life, Hugo died before Ian could do anything.

'He met a pathetic end, right up to the very last moment.'

Hugo had died during the civil war in Hisperion in the previous life.

He hadn't died fighting honorably as the head of a martial house.

Hugo, who had sided with Hisperion's eldest son's faction, was executed for leaking internal secrets to the enemy.

'After Hugo's execution, the Greysel family completely fell into ruin.'

Was it because Hugo's absence was unexpectedly big? No. Not at all.

It was because the whole family took on the mess that Hugo had made.

All of Greysel's businesses and assets were confiscated by the eldest son of Hisperion, and the direct lineage and subordinates of the house were utterly purged under all sorts of pretexts.

At that time, Ian survived the purge thanks to Yuria's protection, but if it weren't for her, he too would have died, buried under the mess Hugo had left behind.

'Hugo Greysel. Irredeemable trash.'

Ian gazed at Hugo with sunken eyes.

'You were never fit to sit in the seat of head of Greysel in the first place.'

Originally, Ian had thought he didn't care what happened to House Greysel.

He didn't feel even the slightest sense of responsibility or belonging to his own house.

After all, he had never been recognized as Greysel's legitimate heir, not even once.

He was satisfied with just being Yuria's knight.

But after Yuria became the family head, she ordered Ian to rebuild Greysel and awakened another identity in him, which had been lying dormant.

'Ian. The Greysel family is a great sword and shield that once protected people alongside Hisperion. Your roots must continue in your own land. Only you, as the legitimate heir, can do this, and it is something only you must do.'

The warmth of the hand Yuria held out to him at that time was still vivid.

'Go to the west of Hisperion. Rise your house again there, and protect your people.'

That day, Ian received the command from his lord Yuria to become the father of this land.

'... And return to me again, with them. I'll be waiting.'

And even now, in this very moment after his regression, that command still burned fiercely through Ian's veins.

'I accept your command.'

A command he couldn't fully carry out in his previous life, trampled by the grand dukes of the demon realm.

The restoration and revival of House Greysel.

And, as Hisperion's powerful vassal, ruling Hisperion's west and bringing it under Yuria's control.

Ian vowed that, as the head of Greysel, he would fulfill this command in this life, no matter what.

'Hugo. It would have been better if you were a man with even the slightest chance of redemption.'

He could tell just by looking at those eyes, steeped in vileness.

'What a bastard.'

Even after returning to the past fifteen years—

Hugo.

'I don't think you're someone I could ever change.'

Maybe if Hugo made up his mind to change on his own, things would be different. But there was no way that garbage, full of stubbornness, would ever do that, not even if he died and was reborn.

'Well, it doesn't matter.'

Ian's only concern was to protect the west of Hisperion and bring it under Yuria's control as she commanded.

If Hugo didn't change, Ian would simply take the head's seat from that revolting trash and carry out Yuria's command.

"Hm..."

While Ian was deep in these thoughts, Hugo was scanning the area with narrowed eyes.

Servants lay groaning on the ground.

The butler sobbed, now bald.

Hugo's eyebrows twitched.

'... What on earth happened here?'

As soon as he was informed that Ian had appeared at the mansion, Hugo had sent the butler and those bulky men.

They should have been more than enough to capture a fourteen-year-old boy who couldn't even use aura.

But as a piercing scream rang out, he had rushed down with the knights—only to be met with this absurd scene.

'... Surely, that half-witted cripple couldn't have taken down those big guys alone.'

Hugo's gaze landed on Sophia.

'That wench...? She's just a maid.'

She was a girl who had been working in the mansion for quite some time, so Hugo knew her face.

'No way that girl, who usually just did chores, could have taken down four grown men by herself.'

In that case...

'Is there an accomplice hiding somewhere nearby?'

That was the most plausible hypothesis to explain the current situation.

Hugo looked around with sharp, narrow eyes.

'I can't see anything.'

—Whooong!

He heightened his senses with aura and looked again, but still, he felt no other presence nearby.

'No one hiding in the vicinity...?'

That would mean Ian alone had taken down those four men and left the butler in such a state.

No, surely that couldn't be.

It was impossible.

After all, Ian was born into a martial house, yet he was a cripple who couldn't use aura.

'The supposed accomplice must be someone not to be underestimated.'

If the mysterious accomplice was more skilled than Hugo, it was no wonder their presence had remained hidden.

'Could another family have made contact with Ian?'

If there really was an accomplice near Ian, it must surely be someone sent by a rival house.

A multitude of possible suspects flashed through Hugo's mind.

From Hisperion's direct and collateral branches to the vassals of other great houses.

'What could they hope to gain by helping Ian? Try to form a new faction in Greysel?'

Since Hugo had assumed the position of head, Greysel had been swarming with enemies inside and out.

They had much to plunder, but too little strength to protect it—that was the current state of House Greysel.

An easy prey.

Within Hisperion now, there was no prey as appealing as Greysel.

'Heh heh... But if they plan to use that half-wit as their front man, they've made a grave mistake. I'll have to show them here just how useless that pitiful wretch is.'

If he beat up and excommunicated that cheeky boy here and now, what would any other house do, even if they tried to reach out?

A weakling who had lost his status as a direct heir—such a one would be able to do nothing whatsoever.

"Drag that brat before me."

Hugo signaled to the knights with his finger.

"If he resists, don't hold back—beat him up. Break his arms and legs if you have to."

To him, the boy hadn't been his son since the diagnosis anyway.

Every time he saw that face, all those miserable memories resurfaced, only giving him headaches.

He would sever this tedious tie, right here and now.

—Step! Step! Step!

Three Greysel knights stepped forward under Hugo's command.

Each was a formidable expert, and their presence was impressive.

But most were in casual clothes, not armor.

At the sight, Ian curved his lips into a smirk.

'Knights attending the head of house aren't even wearing armor? He must have chosen only those off duty.'

Lucky, perhaps.

From Ian's standpoint, since he had to fight them now, it was a fortunate thing.

—Tsk.

Ian folded his arms and warned,

"If you don't want to become cripples, come to my side."

"W-what? Pff, phahaha!"

"... What's he babbling about?"

"Let's just get it over with."

But all he got in response were sneering laughs.

They ignored Ian's warning and kept advancing.

"As expected."

He hadn't expected a positive answer in the first place.

He just needed to be rebuffed like this to feel at ease about beating them.

"You heard the head, didn't you? If you resist, I'll break your arm~."

One knight jeered slyly as he reached out to Ian.

Despite his casual demeanor, his aura was definitely drawn up.

Seeing the men lying around so miserably, he must have been wary of possible accomplices or artifacts.

'Doesn't matter. In fact, I prefer it this way.'

Ian's secret art, Frenzied Insight Style Reversing Heaven, shone brightest when the opponent raised their aura.

Ian unhesitatingly threw a punch.

His target: the knight's solar plexus.

"Ugh!"

—Thwack!

With Swordmaster-level aura, he focused it to the limit in his rear leg and fist for an all-out strike.

With the addition of the orc's strength, Ian's fist darted out faster than even he expected.

Even a knight who had reached the level of an expert couldn't react in time.

"Kuhk!"

The leading knight clutched his stomach, staggering backward, the punch landing cleanly on his solar plexus.

But Ian's assault was just beginning.

'I can't hold back against experts.'

Frenzied Insight Style (狂慧流) Reversing Heaven (回天).

When hitting the opponent's solar plexus, he used the rebound from their aura and added his own, plus the orc's strength, making for exceptional rotational force.

With that squared rotational energy, he spun and delivered a back kick.

—Crack!

Reversing Heaven landed square on the knight's chin.

"Kuhk!"

The knight's head snapped as if it would come off, teeth scattering through the air.

—Thud thud thud!

—Plop!

One down.

"Next."

"W-what!"

The knight in the lead collapsed, teeth flying, and those following him instinctively halted their advance.

"Wh-what just happened...?"

"H-Hans? Hey! Get up! Are you joking around?"

The knights called to the fallen man, but the one they called Hans didn't get up.

"L-lord?"

They looked anxiously at Hugo, but he was dumbfounded.

"... W-what... is this...!"

Hugo's eyes were opened wide as they could go.

"A-aura...!?"

Ian used aura...?

The flow he just felt from Ian was unmistakably aura.

Did that half-wit just use aura...?

The boy had been diagnosed countless times by physicians that he could never use aura in his life, so how?

He even took down a knight who'd reached low-rank expert in just two blows.

Just a week ago, he'd been half a man—a fourteen-year-old—and now he could do this?

'No! It can't be! Impossible!'

The presence he felt was definitely aura, but from what he knew, this was impossible.

Even if, somehow, Ian had cured his aura handicap and hidden it for some reason, at his age, even as the most outstanding prodigy, the best he could do would be low-rank User.

Even for a genius who'd go down in history, intermediate-rank User or high-rank User would be the limit.

But a mere fourteen-year-old taking out an low-rank expert knight with just two attacks?

Impossible!

'A-an artifact!? R-right! That's it! That's the only way!'

To make sure, Hugo had to watch Ian's movements more closely.

"What are you all standing around for!"

Hugo shouted at the knights, his anger misplaced.

"Capture him and drag him here, now!"

"Haa..."

"Tsk."

The knights looked at Ian with grim faces.

Having just witnessed their comrade's brutal defeat, now they were afraid the same would happen to them.

"... No choice."

"Guess we'll have to use our swords against a child."

They drew their swords from their belts.

Still, since the head hadn't given an order to kill, they tied the scabbards to the hilts, making them like clubs.

'Drawing swords, huh...'

Even though knights with strong aura were now wielding weapons, Ian only smiled broader.

Frenzied Insight Style Reversing Heaven was, to begin with, a martial art focused on counterattacks.

If they attacked more aggressively, his Reversing Heaven would shine all the brighter.

"Just like real combat!"

"I'll go left!"

—Tatata!

The knights split left and right, swinging their swords at Ian.

One aimed for his collarbone, the other for his knee.

Both intended to break the boy's body completely.

'Frenzied Insight Style Reversing Heaven.'

But no matter how powerful their attacks were, in the face of Ian's martial skills, they just played right into his hands.

—Whoosh!

Their powerful attacks followed the movement of Ian's hands and feet and came right back at themselves.

—Thud!

—Crack!

"Kuhk!"

"Urgh!"

Both knights' eyes rolled up as they staggered.

One had his orbital bone crushed in, half his face sunken; the other's jaw was dislocated, his cheek drooping.

But neither was quite down yet.

He had to follow up immediately.

'Frenzied Insight Style Extreme Point (尖尖).'

A technique where he concentrated aura to its utmost in one point to produce destructive force exceeding his own mastery.

It was another secret technique Ian had developed in his previous life, fighting countless strong foes.

—Crash!

—Crrrack!

"Ugggh!"

"... Urk!"

One knight was struck at the temple with Extreme Point. The other hit on the back of the head with Extreme Point.

With their eyes rolled white, the two trembled spasmodically and never got up again.

"W-what...!"

Hugo stared at the collapsed knights, eyes wide open.

"A-an artifact didn't do that...?"

As much as Hugo was trash, his eyes weren't just for show.

The martial art Ian had just displayed wasn't the product of brute strength alone.

It was undeniably the work of a genius.

There might be artifacts that made you as strong as an ogre, but none that could grant such martial mastery.

"H-how is this even...!"

He knew the boy had some skill with the sword, but by no means should he have been able to perform techniques like these....

It had only been a week.

In that time, Ian had learned aura, and even supreme martial techniques, and now had returned.

Just what happened to that half-wit in a single week?

Hugo's eyes shook with confusion.

—Throb!

'Ugh...!'

Meanwhile, Ian gritted his teeth, enduring the pain flooding his shoulders and wrists.

'As expected, my body can't handle it.'

He had used both Frenzied Insight Style Reversing Heaven and Extreme Point with an untempered body—there was bound to be a price.

Judging by the pain, his shoulder ligaments and wrist cartilage were probably torn.

If left unchecked, they'd swell badly and could cause permanent damage.

But...

'No problem.'

—《Authority of Projection》—

◆Item

[Healing Potion Lv.15]

————————

He had already projected a healing potion in advance while shopping at Hisperion's main building.

'No need to awkwardly open a glass bottle and drink.'

He just needed to manifest the pure potion directly onto the injured spot.

—Ssssss...

—Crack! Crunch!

The veins in Ian's shoulder and wrist writhed intensely.

Just five seconds.

That was all it took for Ian's shoulder and wrist to be completely healed.

"Now, only two left."

Ian snatched a sword from a fallen knight's belt and beckoned to the ones standing beside Hugo.

"If you won't come, I'll go to you."

"U-urgh..."

"This is bad..."

The knights who'd been laughing at Ian just moments before now had no composure left.

And the same was true of Hugo, well aware he was on the verge of taking a beating from the son he had scorned.

"U-urgh...!"

But it was too late to turn back now.

All the incompetent Hugo could do was stand dazed, awaiting his execution.

A good beatup is refreshing...

Chapter 17 : Notification (5)

Notification (5)

Ian swung the sword he had snatched from the waist of a fallen knight left and right several times.

'Not bad.'

It was a heavy sword for a 14-year-old's arm to wield, but as long as he drew up aura, he could swing it effortlessly.

'It's perfect for use as a club.'

Ian tightly secured the strap attached to the scabbard to the bridge of his nose.

If he used the blade, he could subdue Hugo and the remaining knights much more easily, but if he killed them by mistake, it would become a murder case and things would get troublesome.

'I'll just beat them up appropriately and get out.'

As long as he didn't kill them, he didn't care about assault.

Hugo would surely want to prevent rumors from spreading that he was beaten up by his own son, so the other side would certainly try to cover up an assault case on their own.

Ian tapped his palm with the scabbard.

"I'll give you a choice. If you step aside quietly, I'll knock you out without pain. But if you keep coming at me, you'll get seriously hurt somewhere on your body."

Ian pointed at the knights lying collapsed behind him.

"If you don't want to end up like them, just get out of the way."

One with a dislocated jaw, one whose teeth were all smashed, and another whose cheekbone was broken and face crushed.

At the ghastly sight, Hugo and the knights swallowed nervously.

"H-How in the world...!"

Hugo's thin mustache trembled.

"How the hell did you do this!!"

Hugo screamed frantically, but Ian ignored him and continued what he had to say.

"I'll count to three."

"Talk! How could a brat who was half-witted only a week ago possibly...!"

"Three."

"Bl-Black magic!? Right! Did you use some sinister magic!?"

"Two."

"You little trash! You're always set on disgracing me!!"

"One."

"Get him! I said get him! Grab that kid and make him kneel before me!!"

"Your chance is gone."

The countdown ended.

Ian kicked off the ground.

— Bang!

It was a technique where he focused the aura to the extreme at his toes, producing a speed that transcended the limits of human ability.

A leap utilizing the principle of Frenzied Insight Style Extreme Point.

With the added strength of orc power, Ian's body shot forward at an astonishing speed.

"Ugh!"

"Damn it!"

The knights standing beside Hugo hurried to take defensive stances, but it was already too late.

'Just two knights left.'

First, the one on the right.

'Frenzied Insight Style Extreme Point.'

— Crack!

The tip of the scabbard, condensed with extreme aura, burrowed deep into the knight's groin.

"Kuh! Kuhuhk!!"

The knight, who never imagined this spot would be the target, foamed at the mouth and collapsed.

— Aagh!

The rebound from Extreme Point tore his shoulder ligament and hand, but that didn't matter.

— 《Authority of Projection》 —

◆Item

[Healing Potion Lv.15]

————————

He could just project the potion onto the injured area and be instantly healed.

— Sizzle!

'Next, right away.'

Frenzied Insight Style Reversing Heaven!

With the rebound from striking the knight, and by adding the orc's power for rotational force, he delivered a high-speed sweeping blow.

"Aaaargh!"

The knight on the left quickly raised his sword, but it was useless.

— Crack!

Ian's Reversing Heaven pushed straight through the knight's sword and shattered his handsome nose to pieces.

"Kuhh! Kuhuuk!"

The knight, struck directly by Reversing Heaven, lost his front teeth and collapsed backward.

— Aagh!

— Sizzle...

The ruptured trapezius and spine from the recoil of Reversing Heaven were perfectly healed with potion projection within three seconds.

— Clack!

Ian pointed the scabbard at Hugo, now the only one left.

Behind Hugo, there were only feeble servants, so in effect, Hugo was the last opponent.

"H-huagh...!!"

Hugo couldn't even think of fighting back and fell on his butt, paralyzed with fear.

He couldn't even accept the reality unfolding before his eyes, let alone resist.

'T-There were five knights...!'

Five experts who had eaten from the Greysel's table...

All annihilated in an instant by the son he usually treated like trash and ignored.

Even for Hugo, the current head of Greysel, leisurely taking down five expert knights like this was impossible.

'What kind of nightmare is this...? No, yes! That's right! Th-this is a nightmare...!'

Hugo clattered his teeth and pinched his own cheek roughly.

But there was no way he could escape the unambiguous reality.

"U-Uuuugh!"

So this was truly reality?

Impossible!

— Scrape!

Hugo, still on the floor, frantically drew his rapier from his waist.

The gleaming blue blade flashed in the sunlight.

'Ha.'

Ian couldn't help but laugh in disbelief.

Even the trained knights hadn't drawn their real swords until the end.

But the lord of a great house, frightened by a mere 14-year-old, drew his live blade.

It was utterly pathetic to see the tip of his blade tremble endlessly.

"Do you think you'll get away with this!?"

Hugo shouted in a metallic voice.

"You must have used dark magic!? Huh!? Yeah! That's it! You sold your soul to a demon or used dark sorcery! You, you bastard! Otherwise, this isn't possible! No way!"

Hugo struggled to get back on his feet, his legs shaking.

Ian merely watched his disgrace with emotionless eyes.

"Ian! You piece of garbage! You'll regret standing against me like this for the rest of your life! From today, your life will be a living hell! You are disowned! Do you hear? Disowned!"

"……!"

"Get out of my mansion right now! And never bring up the name of Greysel anywhere! Get ou—!"

As Hugo, half out of his mind, raised his blue rapier high,

— Thud!

Someone gripped Hugo's wrist firmly and spoke in a low voice.

"To disown such a talented son... You must be out of your mind."

"... What?! Who are you—! Gasp!"

When Hugo turned his head toward the voice, his face instantly turned pale.

"H-Heavenly Sword Lord...!?"

Eyes blazing with wildness stared icily down at Hugo.

Kelbian, the loyal retainer of the Heavenly Sword Lord, soon appeared as well.

"Sir Hugo. Your words are extremely rude. Please use an honorific and show due courtesy to the Heavenly Sword Lord."

"Gasp!"

In an instant, Hugo felt a crushing pressure clutch his heart.

"S-Sorry! Forgive me...!"

Hugo reflexively knelt and pressed his forehead to the ground.

His face was so pale it could be seen even from behind.

'Wh-Why is the Heavenly Sword Lord here...!?'

From Ian, who had returned as a monster in just a week, to the sudden appearance of the Heavenly Sword Lord at the mansion.

With unbelievable things happening one after another, Hugo felt he might faint and collapse at any moment.

"W-What brings you here without any formalities...?"

Darkan frowned as if looking at an insect.

"Do I have to explain that to you?"

"S-Sorry..."

"Enough. I have no business with you."

Darkan approached Ian.

"I pay my respects to the Heavenly Sword Lord."

Ian had already knelt and paid his respects the moment he saw the Heavenly Sword Lord.

"Rise."

"Yes, sir."

Darkan looked at Ian with eyes completely different from when he saw Hugo.

If he looked at Hugo as if seeing a cockroach, his gaze toward Ian was as if beholding a treasure.

"You performed splendid swordsmanship."

At those words, Ian gulped dryly.

He had seen everything.

"Who taught you such technique?"

'Technique.'

For the Heavenly Sword Lord, the absolute peak of all swordmasters for whom most martial arts didn't even register, to call someone else's technique 'technique' was truly an extraordinary thing.

"I regret to say, I have not had a master yet."

"Huh? No master?"

Darkan brushed his mouth with interest.

'Is he lying to me?'

The skill Ian had shown against the knights was well beyond what a 14-year-old could develop and master on his own.

Such technique would only be able to be properly utilized at the level of a master swordsman, perhaps even among the best as in the case of the five great Lords of Heavenly Sword.

'To master such technique alone...'

It was a ridiculous story.

Darkan's eyes, blazing like flames, fixed on Ian.

"....."

That look was undisguised suspicion.

A bead of cold sweat trickled down Ian's cheek.

Meeting eyes that held both calm and wildness at once, he felt he might buckle at the presence alone.

'I-I'm telling the truth, though...'

Frenzied Insight Style, in his previous life, was a martial art Ian himself devised and developed to survive fights with powerful adversaries.

Of course, it was a technique only completed after reaching the peak master level, so the Heavenly Sword Lord's suspicion was understandable.

Then, soon...

A grin crept onto Darkan's lips.

'He's not lying.'

Once someone has attained the level of the Heavenly Sword Lord, they can judge a person's innocence simply by their energy flow.

Ian's heartbeat.

The flow of energy radiating from Ian was by no means that of someone telling a lie.

"Interesting."

The Heavenly Sword Lord's eyes gleamed as if he had discovered a rare gem.

"T-Thank you, sir."

— Gulp.

Even as he tried to answer calmly, Ian was just as flustered as Hugo.

After all, the Heavenly Sword Lord had never visited the Greysel mansion even once in Ian's previous life.

Yet now, barely a week after his regression, the Lord himself had come directly to the Greysel mansion.

If there was a cause, it must be Ian himself.

It was the result of some sort of butterfly effect from acting differently than in his past life.

But no matter how much he thought about it, he couldn't guess the reason why the Heavenly Sword Lord had come here.

'Why did the Heavenly Sword Lord come here...? And not sending someone, but in person!'

Did I make a mistake during the sword-choosing ceremony?

Or did I miss something from the time I escaped the mountain fortress?

Ian's eyes spun in confusion.

"Well. Don't be so nervous. I didn't come here to interrogate you."

The Heavenly Sword Lord waved a hand as if it was no big deal.

"By the way, I don't see your sword."

At those words, Ian blinked for a moment.

'Sword...? Ah.'

The sword from the sword-choosing ceremony.

He must mean Vladiark.

Ian bowed his head and answered.

"If you mean the greatsword I received at the sword-choosing ceremony, I hid it somewhere else."

"Hid it? Why?"

"... Because I thought my father would take it away if I brought it to the house."

To be exact, it was because it was heavy and hindered movement, so he left it behind—but that was still half true.

He also wanted to keep himself light to avoid facing Hugo, and if he had brought Vladiark, Hugo would no doubt have tried to confiscate it.

Above all, it was much simpler to blame Hugo than making a convoluted explanation.

"You—you—!"

Hugo, standing behind, glared at Ian, his face turning dark red in fury.

"How dare you speak so carelessly in front of—"

"Sir Hugo."

Kelbian stepped in.

"The Heavenly Sword Lord is speaking with Master Ian. Please lower your voice."

"U-Urgh... S-sorry..."

Hugo hung his head, as if fainting again.

"Tsk, tsk."

Even though Kelbian was the Lord's closest confidant, as the head of a noble house, Hugo shouldn't have been that low in rank compared to him.

It was a moment that revealed the essence of Hugo's weakness to the strong and strong toward the weak.

Because he only ever grovelled to those stronger than himself, his former family probably collapsed so quickly in his past life before they could do anything.

As Ian glared at Hugo like filth, the Heavenly Sword Lord also looked down his nose at Hugo, snorting.

"You have much to be sorry for."

He then turned back to Ian with a warm smile.

"It seems your family situation is rather complicated. I have no intention of getting deeply involved. However..."

Darkan put his arm around Ian's shoulder and walked in front of Hugo.

"Hugo. Since you just personally disowned your son, you won't mind if I take him with me, right?"

"Wha, huh?"

Hugo looked up at Darkan dumbly.

"Was that hard to follow? Listen well: Your disowned son. I. Will be taking him with me."

Hugo's eyes shook.

With his intellect, he couldn't comprehend at all what was happening before his eyes.

First Ian returns as a monster after only a week, then the Heavenly Sword Lord suddenly appears and says he'll take his son.

Nothing made sense, everything was incomprehensible.

However, the Heavenly Sword Lord did not care whether Hugo understood or not.

"What say you? Will you come with me?"

"....."

To Ian, the Lord's intentions were just as inscrutable.

To abruptly appear before him, with no prior connection, and say he would take him away.

But regardless of Ian's own will, the answer was already decided.

"I will obey, whatever your wishes may be."

After all, the Heavenly Sword Lord had come personally before him and said so.

It was closer to a notification than an invitation.

"Oh-ho."

Darkan looked pleased, grinning.

For a mere teenager, he showed no panic and immediately accepted, sensing that the matter was already decided regardless of his own wishes.

He was calm and composed to a degree hard to believe for a boy his age.

"You have quite a dignified son. Hugo Greysel. Oh, right. Since you disowned him, he's not your son anymore, is he?"

Was he praising or ridiculing him?

He never had much chance to talk to Darkan in his past life, but the more he listened to the Lord, the more he felt strangely reminded of Yuria from his previous life.

"Then, come to Hisperion as my guest retainer. Ian Greysel."

At those words, the eyes of everyone present widened at once.

To invite Ian as a 'guest retainer' to Hisperion meant much more than just 'taking him along'.

"Come with me. As the guest retainer of the Heavenly Sword Lord, you'll be treated appropriately. My estate will gladly become the cradle for the future you desire."

The Heavenly Sword Lord's guest retainer. A guest retainer of Hisperion!

'M-Me, being invited as a guest retainer of Hisperion...?'

Being a 'guest retainer of Hisperion' didn't simply mean someone who ate meals for free at the house.

It referred to wandering swordsmen who, under the Lord's favor, were protected by Hisperion.

'Among wanderers, only those with world-renowned fame and exploits are invited to Hisperion.'

The legendary adventurer, Kyle Wolfhart, called the Wandering Star, who mastered all sorts of mysterious sword arts.

Silence Doomraven, known as the Sword Fiend, who freely wielded terrifying demon swords and roamed the battlefield in search of live sacrifices.

There were even rumors of dragons...

As one could see, the title 'guest retainer of Hisperion' was not one anyone could receive.

One could only receive Hisperion's recognition—the Lord's patronage—after building great achievements and fame known across the continent and beyond.

Such was the title 'guest retainer of Hisperion'.

'For such an incredible honor to be granted to someone like me, with nothing...?'

Perhaps...

The Heavenly Sword Lord was saying he would take Ian and raise him directly under his care.

As a man worthy of the title 'guest retainer of Hisperion'.

But why...?

Ian furtively glanced at Lord Darkan's face.

'Gasp...!'

Darkan was watching Ian with eyes blazing like wildfire.

'To think such an uncut gem was hidden in Greysel...! That mysterious greatsword didn't appear for no reason.'

The useless-looking, broken lump of scrap greatsword that even his own Dominating Dragon Fang had feared.

'A boy with that much talent called forth a divine sword worthy of his stature.'

The Heavenly Sword Lord stared at Ian as if he would devour him.

'Shall I raise him properly? Undoubtedly, he'll become a great swordsman. Perhaps... Even greater than the 5th Heavenly Sword Lord...! If only I can nurture this boy and make him one of my closest retainers...!'

To have two, not one, thousand-year talents like Yuria in the same generation, within Hisperion's circle...

The moment those two became official swordsmen, Hisperion would surely enter an unprecedented golden age.

At that moment, the attention of the absolute pinnacle of all swordmasters was focused solely on one person—Ian Greysel.

'Ian Greysel. To think I'd meet a talent I absolutely must have by my side like this. Now you can never leave my side. From now on, we'll enjoy getting to know each other, slowly and thoroughly.'

Ian's father-in-law is becoming obsessed?

Chapter 18 : Vladiark (1)

Vladiark (1)

"Then come to Hisperion as my guest retainer, Ian Greysel."

The proposal that the Heavenly Sword Lord, Darkan, gave to Ian.

"Come with me. As the guest of the Heavenly Sword Lord, you'll be treated appropriately. My estate will gladly become the cradle for the future you desire."

There was only one answer that Ian could give to this.

"... It is an immense honor to receive your favor, Heavenly Sword Lord."

It would be foolish to kick away the chance to become a guest retainer of Hisperion, and from the beginning, it wasn't an offer he could refuse anyway.

Wasn't this an offer made personally by the Heavenly Sword Lord—the master among all swordsmen and the great sovereign ruling over the continent's east?

As the child of a direct vassal, Ian had no choice but to follow.

If the lord calls, the vassal's child must simply obey.

'Still, it's by no means a bad opportunity.'

The only thing that made Ian uneasy was that he couldn't guess the intention behind the Heavenly Sword Lord inviting him as a guest retainer.

But becoming a guest retainer of Hisperion was a dream come true for swordsmen all over the world.

'It's more like a miraculous opportunity.'

First of all, if one became a guest retainer of Hisperion, a luxurious mansion would be provided—perfectly solving the housing issue.

On top of that, a monthly stipend for maintaining dignity and living costs would be given, which was a big help financially.

He could even ask an agent of Hisperion to introduce him to master weaponsmiths and elixir makers, and if he passed the review, he could even be given supreme martial arts secret manuals.

Becoming a guest retainer of Hisperion was—truly—no different from being admitted to heaven as a swordsman.

'There's just one thing—a price to pay: missions.'

Receiving kindness means incurring a debt of equal value.

Guest retainers were sometimes assigned difficult missions.

Of course, since the relationship between guest retainers and Hisperion was one based on goodwill, the missions didn't carry legal compulsion.

But if one repeatedly refused missions, not only would they have to leave their guestroom, but everything they had received so far would need to be returned under the label "loan return"—so in practice, it was almost compulsory.

'But even regarding that, I'm relatively free.'

Though Hisperion did assign difficult missions to guest retainers, Ian was only 14 years old.

What mission could they assign to a 14-year-old?

There were plenty of Swordmaster-level guest retainers waiting around—why bother with a child?

Even if, by some chance, they did assign him a mission, it couldn't possibly be that difficult for a 14-year-old.

Considering Ian had been a peak Swordmaster in his previous life, how hard could it even be?

The Heavenly Sword Lord's proposal to become a guest retainer of Hisperion was, from the start, something Ian couldn't refuse, but also had no reason to refuse.

"I will do my utmost to meet your gracious expectations, my lord."

"I like your quick and straightforward answer."

Darkan nodded in satisfaction.

"Well then, Ian. There's something I'd like to ask right away before we go to my residence."

"...?"

What's this?

He hadn't even gotten a bite of bread yet.

Right after becoming a guest retainer, he was getting a request.

"The artifact you summoned in the Sword Selection Ceremony. Show me your sword."

'Ah.'

It was only then that Ian could vaguely grasp the Heavenly Sword Lord's intentions.

'He didn't come to see me—he came to see my sword, Vladiark.'

* * *

"My sword is buried in the forest outside the city."

Ian immediately led the Heavenly Sword Lord to the forest.

Sophia and Kelbian followed behind Ian.

Hugo, on the other hand, simply lay flat on the floor, trembling in fear until everyone had left the mansion.

"This is the greatsword I received during the Sword Selection Ceremony."

Ian took Vladiark, which had been buried, and showed it to the Heavenly Sword Lord.

He didn't know what the lord sensed from this half-shattered, rusty greatsword to make him personally come and see it, but if the lord asked to see, he could only oblige.

Though, honestly, why did he want to see it?

Could it be that he recognized Vladiark's value?

Surely he wouldn't try to take it for himself?

If it was stolen, Ian would definitely take it back.

He'd even take away Dominating Dragon Fang while he was at it.

"Hmm..."

The Heavenly Sword Lord grasped Vladiark and inspected it.

"It's much heavier than it looks."

That was Darkan's first impression upon holding Vladiark.

"This isn't ordinary steel. Hmm. It's not adamantium, nor is it orichalcum. This is..."

Darkan stroked the blade's surface and examined it closely.

'What is this...?'

Even Darkan, who had seen hundreds of thousands of swords and thousands of types of steel in his lifetime, found the material of this blade unfamiliar.

'It's made from a material I don't know.'

The Heavenly Sword Lord pinched the blade of Vladiark delicately between his index finger and thumb.

'It's incredibly hard.'

The dense texture under his fingertips was unmistakable.

It seemed even harder than adamantium—the so-called indestructible steel.

'But it's not hard everywhere.'

Some parts looked like they would crumble like a cookie with the slightest pressure.

'Is it the mark of time? Still, in the past, it must have been a truly magnificent sword.'

The structure of the blade formed a perfect straight line, and the balance of the hilt was excellent.

'But the style is really unique.'

The Heavenly Sword Lord ran his fingers over the uneven surface of Vladiark's blade.

'Why was the blade made so uneven?'

Upon closer look, faint engravings resembling octopus tentacles appeared on the blade.

'Tentacles? No... It could also look like muscle fibers.'

It even looked like the entrails of a living creature.

'Such embossing would be difficult to engrave, and doesn't seem practical... It's hard to understand. Quite strange.'

Even for the Heavenly Sword Lord, well-versed in sword styles, this was something new.

He could confidently say there was no style like this anywhere in history or in the world.

'And it's this big.'

Even with it being snapped in half, it was bigger than an average person's torso.

'Material, style, weight, size, balance—not a single thing about it is ordinary. And most of all...'

The Dominating Dragon Fang at his waist was silently screaming.

As if warning its master, the Heavenly Sword Lord, to get away from that blade as soon as possible.

'It sends chills down my spine.'

On the outside, it looked like mere scrap metal, but the more he looked, the stranger and more mysterious it became.

The artisan who made this sword could be no ordinary smith, either.

At minimum, it must have been the work of someone at the level of legend—perhaps a masterpiece forged by a blacksmith who reached the realm of the gods.

'I should check its aura conductivity and amplification.'

How well did the sword accept aura?

And how much did it magnify the power of aura?

Arguably, these were the most important factors of any sword.

'Let's see...'

The Heavenly Sword Lord took Vladiark in both hands and channeled a stream of aura into it.

In that moment,

— Whuuuuuuuuuuuuush!

"Hm!?"

As soon as the mana circuit in the lord's hand opened, Vladiark began violently sucking in his aura.

'What is this?'

Darkan quickly tried to withdraw his aura by operating his core breathing techniques, but it was useless.

It felt like being trapped in an inescapable swamp or quicksand.

Darkan's aura was being helplessly sucked into Vladiark.

'It's like a starving beast.'

Darkan tried to take his hand off the hilt, but even that was difficult.

It was as if his hand had been bitten by a starving giant monster.

'I'll have to use some force to pull away.'

The Heavenly Sword Lord grinned roughly.

'Interesting.'

If he'd been alone, he would have thrown Vladiark away with full force to free himself, but if he tried that here, the area would be devastated as if struck by a meteorite.

His trusted subordinate Kelbian would be severely injured, Greysel's city would be destroyed, and young Ian and the girl would melt away in an instant as if hurled into the sun.

'I can't do something that insane.'

That left only one option.

'I'll have to sever my mana circuit.'

By practically tearing the mana circuit in his palm, he could separate Vladiark from his hand.

That was the best method available to the Heavenly Sword Lord at the moment.

'First—free my right hand.'

The Heavenly Sword Lord gripped the hilt tightly with his left hand and roughly tore his right hand away from it.

— Zzzt!

'That hurts.'

It felt as though the skin of his palm had been ripped away.

But there was no time to savor the pain.

'Hup!'

With his freed right hand, the Heavenly Sword Lord struck his own left hand at once.

— KLANG!

— THUD!

The black dragon gauntlet encasing his left hand shrieked and shattered, and at the same time, Vladiark, which had been stuck to his hand, fell to the ground.

'That smarts.'

The Heavenly Sword Lord opened and closed his fist and looked down at his left palm.

It was pitch-black with bruises.

"Amazing."

It had been a very long time since he'd suffered an injury since reaching the demigod's realm.

"H-Heavenly Sword Lord?"

Kelbian, who had watched the entire process, called out to his master with cold sweat.

"No need to worry."

The Heavenly Sword Lord waved it off lightly.

"Th-the mana circuit in your hand..."

"Yes. Even I didn't expect this."

For a swordsman holding a sword, the mana circuit in the palm of the hand was extremely important.

It seemed he wouldn't be able to channel aura into a sword for a while.

"I'll have to trouble my youngest daughter, then."

His youngest daughter, Yuria, possessed light aura that could heal mana circuits.

Had she not been around, he would have had to rest for quite a long time, and that would have been a hassle.

"Ian, I apologize for carelessly throwing your sword."

"N-no, not at all."

For the level of injury received, anyone else would have been rattled or angry, but the Heavenly Sword Lord was utterly calm, without the slightest agitation.

"It's certainly no ordinary blade. I nearly got devoured."

The lord picked up Vladiark from the ground again.

"H-Heavenly Sword Lord!?"

"It's fine. As long as I don't channel aura into it, it's safe."

The Heavenly Sword Lord brushed the dirt off Vladiark.

"Hm?"

And then he noticed an unusual point.

"The sword's shape... has changed?"

The blade was about half a span longer than before, the engravings on the surface more distinct.

The edge seemed a bit sharper; there were various other subtle changes throughout.

As if...

"The sword... seems to have grown after consuming my aura."

It was a truly mysterious and bizarre weapon.

There were countless more things to wonder about, but learning this much for now was likely the best he could do.

The Heavenly Sword Lord returned Vladiark to Ian without any lingering attachment.

"Take it. I've seen enough."

"..."

Ian received the sword in silence, bowing his head.

"A sword that devours aura and grows... Truly, something strange has come out of the Bladelake."

"Hm..."

Ian slowly inspected Vladiark, sinking into thought.

A sword that devours its wielder's aura?

The Grand Duke of Gluttony had wielded Vladiark effortlessly, imbuing it with enhance energy.

'So perhaps the Grand Duke of Gluttony could use it because he wielded demonic energy, not aura.'

Ian's expression hardened.

A sword into which one couldn't properly channel aura was, to a swordsman, no different from a useless chunk of brick.

If even the Heavenly Sword Lord couldn't use it properly, it meant that no matter how much Ian grew, he would never be able to wield Vladiark freely like the Grand Duke of Gluttony.

'This could be a disaster.'

He would have to test it at once.

Whether or not he was able to use Vladiark himself.

"Heavenly Sword Lord. May I ask a favor?"

"Hm?"

The Heavenly Sword Lord seemed surprised, perhaps not having expected a request from this side, and gazed at Ian with curious eyes.

"A favor? What is it?"

"I want to try infusing my own aura into this sword. If the same thing happens to me as to you, could you please help me let go of the sword?"

"What?"

The Heavenly Sword Lord immediately shook his head.

"No. Denied. It's far too dangerous. You could be crippled."

To take that risk with such a talented youth was unthinkable.

"Lord, please. I want to know if this sword chooses its master and devoured only your aura, or if it's simply a blade that indiscriminately devours all aura."

"Hm... You think it might be a sword with a will..."

The Heavenly Sword Lord looked tempted.

"There's that possibility, too. But even so—"

He shook his head again.

"Still, just because of the possibility, I cannot allow you—a child—to do something so dangerous."

"Even in the worst case, you have ways to help, don't you, my lord?"

If an arm was cut off, it could be reattached; if the mana circuit was torn, it could be regrown—the Heavenly Sword Lord possessed such power.

"Please, Heavenly Sword Lord."

"Hmm..."

The lord stroked his bristly beard, lost in thought.

If he could avoid it, he didn't want to allow it.

But, as the boy said, to find out if the sword was one that chose its master or was simply a monstrous blade devouring aura indiscriminately, Ian would need to try.

And on that side, he was pleading so earnestly...

"Are you sure? It will be quite painful."

"Not a problem at all."

The immediate, firm reply.

Ian looked at the Heavenly Sword Lord with unwavering determination.

"Huh."

At that, the Heavenly Sword Lord let out a low sound of admiration.

Normally, he would have dismissed it as youthful recklessness.

He would have thought the boy was merely underestimating pain.

But...

'That's not the gaze of someone his age.'

There wasn't the heat of youth in that gaze.

Instead, only a cold, refined resolve could be seen in his eyes.

As if a seasoned knight, hardened by hundreds of battles, was merely wearing the mask of a boy.

Chapter 19 : Vladiark (2)

Vladiark (2)

'What should I do...?'

The Heavenly Sword Lord found himself hesitating in front of the boy's determined resolve.

'Though it is something that boy is requesting, is it truly right to allow such a dangerous act for one not yet even of age?'

Even he, who stood at the pinnacle of all swordsmen, had nearly been devoured the moment he infused that monstrous sword with aura.

He had somehow managed to tear it from his hands, but as a result, both of his mana circuits were completely damaged.

He had only held it for a very brief moment, yet the amount of aura consumed was by no means insignificant.

Of course, in his case, he possessed an ocean-like reserve of aura, so losing that much was no issue at all. But if the boy had lost the same amount, he would've died or been left a cripple.

'But still...'

To determine whether the sword was attempting to devour only him because it chose its master, as the boy claimed, or if it indiscriminately consumed the aura of any wielder, the only way was to let the boy try infusing aura into it himself.

'Above all...'

That unwavering light in the boy's eyes.

Ian seemed to have no intention of backing down in the slightest.

If the Heavenly Sword Lord were to refuse him here, Ian would likely try it himself elsewhere—alone.

'That would be even more dangerous.'

If such a risky experiment was to be done no matter what, it would be better to have it happen in front of him.

Losing that boy to some accident would be a waste—he had so much talent and potential.

'So the answer was set from the beginning.'

The Heavenly Sword Lord made his decision.

"Very well, Ian. I will grant your request."

Since it was a danger that had to be risked anyway, the safest way would be with his supervision.

"I will keep watch to make sure nothing happens to you while you channel aura into that greatsword."

A glow of relief appeared on Ian's face.

"Thank you, Heavenly Sword Lord."

"However..."

There was no need to continue such a dangerous experiment in this forest.

"Depending on what happens, you could be seriously injured. Let's move elsewhere first."

Even if the boy were to lose both arms, it should be somewhere that could perform immediate emergency treatment and reattachment.

"Kelbian, open a portal. We'll go to my underground training grounds."

"As you command."

Kelbian pulled out the necklace hidden at his collar and gestured through the air.

— Bzzzzt!

Sparks erupted along the path of his hand, splitting space open.

— Bzzzzt!

As Kelbian waved his hand through the air a few more times, the rift widened, eventually revealing the Heavenly Sword Lord's underground training arena.

'Huh...'

Ian let out a silent sigh at the sight.

'To think a portal spell could be used with such a small necklace. It's an artifact of unbelievable power.'

Considering the massive size of modern warp gates, it made no sense that such a tiny necklace could open a spatial portal.

It was, simply put, the supreme version of a warp gate.

Unlike warp gates, it required neither enormous amounts of construction materials nor large tracts of land, nor did it necessitate the constant attendance of mages, and even its mana consumption was unmatched.

'I'd love to have one of those myself.'

But even if he acquired such an artifact immediately, he would hardly be able to use it right away.

'Only the ancient relics of the Luminari are capable of such insane feats.'

Only members of the Luminari could wield their ancient relics.

The Luminari—

A minority race marked by the beautiful gems inset in their foreheads.

Kelbian, too, although his hair mostly hid it, was a Luminari with a jewel in his forehead.

'Every Luminari artifact far surpasses modern magic by orders of magnitude.'

The necklace that allowed free spatial travel was impressive, but even more astonishing relics existed.

Magic stones capable of storing as much mana as a dragon heart.

Bracelets with protective barriers strong enough to withstand the aura blades of Sword Masters.

Single-use wands able to annihilate an entire legion with a single squeeze of a trigger.

According to old legends, the Luminari once rode giant, flying golems and waged war against dragons...

'Well, now it's all just ancient legend.'

The glorious rise of the Luminari ended thousands of years ago at least.

Some say they perished in a civil war, others that they migrated to another dimension, and some say they were judged after challenging the gods.

If such an ultra-advanced magical civilization had survived whole until today, wars with the demon grand dukes would have been a much different story.

Of course, since those grand dukes possessed nightmarish armaments themselves, using Luminari artifacts to their fullest might not guarantee 100% victory.

'Still, the course of war itself would have changed drastically.'

Even if victory couldn't be guaranteed, humanity wouldn't have been so ruthlessly trampled as in his previous life.

'In this life, I'll make sure to secure as many Luminari and their artifacts as possible. It'll be an invaluable asset in the war against the demon grand dukes.'

In his past life, he had no leisure to pay attention to the Luminari.

Even upon reaching the rank of Swordmaster, he had struggled desperately just to survive each day.

He couldn't protect the Luminari, let alone Yuria.

In the end, he met a wretched end in humanity's last war.

The Luminari must also have been wiped out by the demons then.

'But this life will be different.'

Having returned fifteen years into the past, he had more than enough time to prepare.

'The Luminari and their relics—I can secure them all ahead of time.'

Furthermore...

'If I use the Authority of Projection to copy the Luminari's forehead gem and transplant it onto myself...?'

Could he also wield Luminari super-magic artifacts?

Moreover, he could replicate the relics themselves with the Authority of Projection.

'If I duplicate the full-body barrier bracelet and wear several at once, or manufacture multiple of those single-use wands capable of blowing away legions and fire them indiscriminately...'

At that level, just wielding the Luminari relics alone would allow him to overwhelm most demon armies.

'Maybe I should try projecting one right now?'

Ian stared at the back of Kelbian's head.

A power that activated by simply resolving to project.

Target: 'The crystal gem embedded in the Luminari's forehead.'

— BZZT!

[Insufficient magical power. Cannot project this object yet.]

'Haaa... As expected.'

Ian let out a silent sigh.

Given that this was the highest-level racial trait, allowing one to use super-advanced magic artifacts, it seemed to require an extraordinary amount of mana to project.

But that was only a matter of time.

'All I have to do is secure enough mana.'

He would try again once he attained the rank of Expert.

It should be possible before he reached Master level.

An image of himself fully equipped with Luminari relics formed inside Ian's mind.

Standing beside him—Sophia, Yuria, and his old comrades, applauding and cheering.

'No need to be impatient. I just need to take it slow.'

His aura cultivation.

Luminari ancient relics.

And every other secret art and mythic weapon in the world.

'One by one. Just acquire them one by one.'

By diligently moving forward, when the day came to confront the demon grand dukes once again—

'I will use every bit of power I've accumulated and tear them all apart, one by one, with my own hands.'

The Grand Duke of Gluttony, who destroyed Yuria's dantian.

The Grand Duke of Lust, who threw Yuria's severed head in front of him.

And the other five detestable demon grand dukes as well.

"The portal is ready."

Kelbian's voice snapped Ian from his thoughts.

"Let's move immediately."

Kelbian and Darkhan crossed the portal first.

Ian and Sophia gathered their belongings and followed them.

The dense forest faded away, and a vast underground training ground unfolded before them.

"W-wow..."

Sophia involuntarily exclaimed in awe at the Heavenly Sword Lord's underground arena.

The ceiling adorned with masterpieces, the massive statues of knights lining the walls.

For the personal training hall of the Heavenly Sword Lord who stood atop all swordsmen, it lacked for nothing in grandeur.

"In this place, whatever happens, I'll be able to take immediate action."

The Heavenly Sword Lord looked gently at Ian.

"Depending on the situation, we may need to amputate your arm. Reattachment surgery is possible, but the pain will be severe. There may be aftereffects. I can tend to any physical aftereffects, but psychological ones may not be easy to overcome."

Frankly, bearing the risk of amputation at such a young age was too much to ask for any boy.

"And still you wish to continue?"

"Yes. My resolve is unchanged."

Ian, who had already tasted death in his previous life, felt no fear of aftereffects or consequences.

"... Admirable determination."

At Ian's unwavering response, the Heavenly Sword Lord's expression also turned solemn.

His hand was already resting atop the Patra, ready to sever Ian's arm if necessary.

"Begin whenever you are ready."

— Clack!

Without hesitation, Ian immediately began channeling aura into Vladiark.

— Wuuuuuum!

— Trrrrr!

As soon as his aura entered, Vladiark emitted a sword cry like a war horse's shrill neigh.

— Wriggle wriggle!

— Kkikikik!

A surprising and bizarre phenomenon unfolded at the same time.

As Ian's aura flowed, the tentacle patterns engraved on the sword's surface began to writhe.

"Gasp!"

"Hoo..."

Quite a grotesque sight.

Kelbian and Sophia grimaced at the scene, while the Heavenly Sword Lord's eyes sparkled with intrigue.

"This time, it isn't devouring aura. The reaction is totally different."

"... It's almost like a living creature."

"It might actually be alive."

It looked almost like twitching internal organs.

Indeed, it moved more like a living being than a sword.

— Kkikikikik!

Yet the sound emanating from the blade was a sure metallic screech.

Iron dust kept falling from the back of Ian's hand as well.

— Krunch!

With a sound like breaking bones, the writhing of the sword ceased.

At the same time, a subtle but undeniable enhanced energy emanated from the blade.

"E-Enhance energy!?"

Kelbian exclaimed in shock.

Enhanced energy was the mark of a Master.

"H-how can this be!? It's impossible!"

No matter how extraordinary the boy, reaching Master rank at his age was utterly impossible.

Ragnar Hisperion, the greatest Heavenly Sword Lord of the age, didn't manifest enhanced energy for the first time until he was eighteen.

Yet this 14-year-old was displaying enhanced energy.

Impossible. Absolutely impossible!

No matter how natural his talent, no matter how supreme his martial knowledge, it made no sense.

Even if the sword amplified aura to a ludicrous degree, it shouldn't be possible.

Enhanced energy could only be manifested not just through sheer volume of aura, but only with a deep enlightenment in its use.

There was no way such a young boy had already surpassed the wall of Master and attained the essence of enhanced energy.

"H-how...?"

Kelbian had no idea how to process the spectacle before his eyes.

"My god."

Even the Heavenly Sword Lord uttered a rare expression of awe.

"... That's my aura."

Vladriark chose his owner...

Huh...

Chapter 20 : Vladiark (3)

Vladiark (3)

A soft glow gently rose above the blade of Vladiark.

"..... That is."

The force was somewhat weak, but it was unmistakably the aura of a Master.

Even more—

"..... That's my aura."

The enhanced energy thinly enveloping that bizarre greatsword was indeed the aura of the Sword Sovereign himself.

There was no way a martial artist of the Sword Sovereign's caliber would mistake his own aura.

The sheer purity. The golden hue. The energy that resembled the sun...

That aura was unmistakably Darkan's own, built up using the Heavenly Dawn Technique.

'Is that the sword's unique ability? To manifest absorbed aura as enhanced energy.'

Otherwise, there was no way to explain the phenomenon before his eyes.

It was impossible that this boy possessed aura from the Heavenly Dawn Technique, a secret technique passed down only to the direct line of Hisperion.

The chances of a mere fourteen-year-old boy having already reached the rank of Master and manifesting enhanced energy on his own were even slimmer.

'It must be the sword's unique ability. A blade that absorbs aura from others and manifests it as enhanced energy...'

The Sword Sovereign Darkan's gaze deepened.

'A truly terrifying divine relic.'

If Darkan's guess was right, the owner of that sword would always have the upper hand in terms of aura, no matter who he faced.

He could drain his opponent's aura until they were depleted, and amplify his own as much as he had consumed from others.

'However...'

Puseok!

The longer the energy was maintained, the more the sword was visibly being worn down.

As the stored aura in the sword was depleted, it gradually reverted to its original scrap-metal state.

'What a peculiar sword.'

When it consumed aura, the sword's form was restored and became sharper as it grew, but as its aura ran out, the edge chipped away, turning it back into mere junk.

'If the aura within it is completely exhausted, would it return to the state I saw at the very beginning?'

Just like when he had first seen it during the sword spirit ceremony, as a hunk of scrap metal?

'Then, what if I poured limitless aura into that ravenous greatsword?'

How far could that sword grow?

As the master of all swords, pure curiosity stirred in Darkan.

'If possible, I'd like to see that sword in a perfectly restored state.'

But for now, whatever he tried, that was an impossible prospect.

He knew firsthand just how insatiable the sword's hunger was.

It wasn't something that could be satisfied in a short time.

Even Darkan, who had ascended to the demigod-rank, felt as if he'd be devoured in a single bite.

'I'll have to be content with the information I've gained for now.'

There was still a mountain of things he wanted to study, but for now, this was the best result he could hope for.

Simply discovering that the strange greatsword was not just a piece of scrap had been a major breakthrough.

'But still.'

It was imperative to clarify the cause of the sword's appearance.

Why had such a divine relic suddenly revealed itself, and why had it chosen that child as its master?

He needed to uncover the reasons and intentions behind that.

If there was any plot or ill will directed at Hisperion lurking behind that greatsword, this Sword Sovereign would have to cut it down himself.

'Still, so far, there's nothing particularly ominous.'

He didn't feel any particular foreboding—yet.

'So why did it suddenly appear if there's no plot or ill intent?'

Just by chance?

No, that couldn't be it.

For an artifact that had lain dormant beneath the Sword Lake for 1,500 years to show itself now, it surely carried some special mission.

'Was it to confront a powerful foe? Or simply because it craved power and wanted to devour great mana?'

He considered many possibilities, but at this point, any thesis would still be just a hypothesis.

To truly understand the intent of the divine sword, he would have to watch how Ian's journey alongside it unfolded.

'Even if that's not its purpose...'

Simply watching the boy's growth and path would be enjoyable in itself.

'Honestly, the greatest outcome of today wasn't the information about the relic—but meeting that boy.'

Discovering such a radiant, unpolished gem was the biggest reward today—or rather, this year, or perhaps in recent memory.

'I want to raise him carefully and keep him by my side.'

If that boy grew up to become his close aide, he would surely be a great strength in protecting this land, this family, and the next head of house.

'His skill—being able to fell five knights single-handed at his age—is already astonishing, but what I like even more is his fearless engagement with that bizarre sword, his composure, and his refusal to get easily agitated.'

Flames of enthusiasm flickered in the Sword Sovereign's eyes as he looked at Ian.

'If circumstances allow, I'd even like to adopt him as my son.'

But if he did, his own children would never let the boy be, so that was not a wise course of action.

'Still, adoption isn't the only path to nurturing someone.'

Now that he'd taken him in as a guest, Ian was already under his care in all but name.

He'd simply have to take his time and raise him with care and attention.

'Life's joys have increased by one.'

Plans for how to nurture Ian unfolded vividly in Darkan's mind.

'What a winsome lad.'

For the first time in ages, he felt as if he'd gained another dependable son.

* * *

The experiment of breathing aura into Vladiark, fortunately, was a complete success, with no accidents.

Just as Ian had expected, Vladiark wasn't simply choosing a master.

It wasn't a crazed sword that indiscriminately devoured aura.

'Thank goodness.'

It was a huge relief for Ian.

If Vladiark had been a demonic sword that consumed even its master's aura, he would've had no choice but to discard it.

'Vladiark is such a powerful ultimate weapon that in my previous life, it even destroyed the divine sword Genesis.'

If he'd had to throw away such a weapon over something so ridiculous, even Ian's heart would have ached terribly.

But today's experiment proved that wouldn't be the case, and an indescribable wave of relief washed over him.

'Still, I never expected it to actually manifest enhanced energy.'

Even Ian had not foreseen this.

No matter that he'd been the peak Swordmaster in his previous life—in his current body, it was simply impossible to manifest enhanced aura at this stage.

And yet, the reason he could was thanks to two factors.

First, the Sword Sovereign Darkan's aura stored within Vladiark.

Second, Vladiark's overwhelming ability to amplify aura.

'Its performance is truly unbelievable.'

Ian could say this with confidence.

'Vladiark is by far the best sword I've ever used.'

Ian had wielded countless legendary swords in his previous life, but Vladiark was on a completely different level from all of them.

'Its aura amplification rate alone is out of this world.'

Even compared to the sword with the highest amplification rate he'd ever used, Vladiark far surpassed it.

Perhaps it was even superior to Darkan's beloved blade, Dominating Dragon Fang.

As far as Ian knew, only the divine sword Genesis rivaled Vladiark's explosive rate of aura amplification.

'And this ability to absorb an opponent's aura...'

The absorbed aura wasn't just stored within Vladiark.

He could take it into his own body, or release it to manifest as physical aura.

He could truly make his opponents' aura entirely his own.

'Its synergy with the Authority of Projection will be perfect. I doubt any other weapon could be this perfectly compatible.'

The Authority of Projection's biggest flaw was that he couldn't use its power if his mana was depleted.

But with Vladiark, that weakness vanished completely.

By slaughtering his enemies with Vladiark, his mana would naturally replenish itself.

'What's more, Vladiark grows stronger and more powerful as it consumes more mana.'

In his past life, the Grand Duke of Gluttony raised Vladiark into a disaster incarnate—a calamity shaped like a sword.

'It was a sword truly worthy of the name 'Gluttony'.'

By simply raising the sword, it could drain the life from thousands of soldiers; the tendrils along its blade writhed like a hydra, tearing knights apart...

'Back then, I just thought it was a gluttonous power, but now I realize it was more than just devouring or vampirism.'

Perhaps it was a process of converting stolen life force from his foes into mana.

'That must be what Vladiark looks like at full growth.'

How much mana it would take to grow it to that stage, Ian still didn't know.

But—

'Just as the Grand Duke of Gluttony did, if I keep cutting down my enemies, I should be able to raise Vladiark to that point soon enough.'

Once Vladiark reached that level, Ian would become a living natural disaster.

He'd be able to endlessly steal mana from his foes and unleash the ultimate spells of great sorcerers and the secret techniques of Grand Masters through the Authority of Projection, without rest.

Until there was not a single enemy left in sight.

Ian's mana would, in effect, become infinite.

* * *

After the experiment with infusing Vladiark with aura was over—

"Kelbian. Please show the children to their new annex. And make sure the head butler knows they are my most important guests."

"Yes! I receive your command!"

With Kelbian's guidance, Ian and Sophia moved to their annex.

"This will be the annex where Ian and Sophia will be staying from now on: Lunabreeze."

The name of the annex was Lunabreeze.

It was the ultra-luxurious mansion where Ian would live out his daily life as a guest of Hisperion.

"Welcome, sirs."

Upon arrival, the mansion's steward came out to greet them.

"I'm Cheryl, and I oversee the management of Lunabreeze."

She was a middle-aged woman who must have been quite beautiful in her youth.

As Cheryl arrived, Kelbian immediately handed over the rest of the process to her and announced his departure.

"Then I'll take my leave now. It was an honor to meet you, sir Ian."

"Thank you for guiding us here."

Kelbian gave another deep bow and briskly took his leave.

As a trusted aide to the Sword Sovereign, he must have been kept very busy.

The fact that Kelbian personally showed them around was, in itself, a huge special privilege.

"If there's anything you find inconvenient or anything you wish to request from the Hisperion family, please let me know."

"I have no needs at the moment."

"Very well. If you need anything, please ring the bell in the mansion, and I'll send someone right away."

"Thank you."

Cheryl finished her introduction and quietly withdrew.

"Phew..... What a crazy day it's been!"

Now that it was just the two of them, Sophia finally relaxed, sighing in relief and clutching at her chest.

"We fought knights this morning, then suddenly met the Heavenly Sword Lord, and now—where are we!? The Hisperion annex? Lunabreeze? Wow! What is this!? Is this huge place really just for the two of us? Really!?"

"Yeah, that's right. Unless we call in any attendants, it'll just be the two of us here most days."

"Oh, wow! Seriously, this is insane!"

Sophia had thought, when they'd been invited to the Hisperion banquet, that nothing more surprising could ever happen in her life.

She never imagined that only a few days later, that belief would be so quickly overturned.

"I really never imagined I'd be living in the annex of the Sword Palace!"

"Same goes for me."

Honestly, Ian was still unsure how to accept all this kindness.

Judging from his manner so far, the Sword Sovereign clearly regarded him favorably...

But why was he going to such lengths for Ian? Not knowing precisely why made him uneasy.

At first, he thought he was after Vladiark.

But even after learning that he couldn't wield the sword, he continued to treat Ian so well...

Was there another purpose?

Or was it just pure goodwill?

Still, it was hard to believe the Sword Sovereign was someone to dispense goodwill so liberally.

Ian's head was spinning.

"Young master! Let's look around, c'mon!"

"You go first and tell me about it. I need to rest a bit... I have a lot on my mind..."

"No way! You have to make memories together for it to count! Come on!"

- Grab!

Sophia seized Ian's hand and pulled.

"Ugh..."

He wanted to resist, but with his aura depleted, it was impossible.

"First, over there! That big warehouse with the sword symbol on it! That has to be the armory! Let's check it out! Hurry!"

"Aaah..."

Three hours passed like that.

Ian was dragged around the mansion by Sophia for nearly three whole hours before he could finally rest.

"I' m exhausted..."

Still, thanks to Sophia, a lot of his worries disappeared.

Or rather, he no longer had the energy to worry about anything.

At least for tonight, he felt he'd be able to sleep better than ever.

"Thank you, Sophia..."

Without her, he probably would've been lost in thought and stayed up all night.

Now, having used up all his strength, one thought alone remained in his head.

"To protect those I cherish...zzZ..."