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

Chapter 21 : Guest (1)

Guest (1)

The fifth child of the Heavenly Sword Lord Family, and Yuria Hisperion's older sister.

Charlotte Hisperion's bedroom.

"Dad? He took that half-wit from Greysel in as our family's guest?"

Charlotte had just heard the rumor that was beginning to spread throughout Hisperion.

"Why would Dad do that? Are you sure?"

"Yes. I just sent someone to check directly. Gray hair, black eyes. Fourteen-year-old boy. Eldest son of Greysel, a vassal family. We confirmed for sure that Young Lord Ian is staying in the guest annex."

"Hmph. So it's true."

Sitting in front of her vanity, Charlotte turned the ring on her finger and continued.

"Do you have any idea? Why Dad did this?"

The butler bowed his head.

"... I am sorry. I find it difficult to fathom the Thousand Swords Lord's grand intentions."

"Well, I suppose so."

Charlotte didn't blame the butler.

She herself had absolutely no idea what her father was thinking.

'If he's the eldest son of the Greysel family... Ian Greysel. The half-wit supposedly born with a disability in aura. He's the dullest of the dull.'

On the other hand, what does it mean to be a guest of Hisperion?

It's an honor bestowed only upon the world's most talented unaffiliated swordsmen—nothing less than dazzling prestige.

Ian, the talentless dullard, and the guest position in Hisperion are essentially polar opposites.

Then why would her Father place a half-wit like Ian in such an undeserved position?

"Dad's whims are impossible to understand~"

The butler cautiously spoke up.

"There are a few points to consider."

"Go ahead."

"If there was a moment when the Lord became interested in Young Lord Ian, it was likely the Sword Selection Ceremony. Until then, they had no points of contact at all."

"You think so too, huh?"

Charlotte had been thinking the same thing.

Public knowledge held that the only connection between the Lord and Ian was the Sword Selection Ceremony.

Their conversation at the Greysel estate, and the experiment exchanging Vladiark in the Lord's underground training hall, were not known publicly.

Some of that was to hide the embarrassment of Hugo getting beaten by Ian, and the Lord himself had no reason to make his movements public.

"Dad must have found something in that half-wit."

Charlotte fiddled with the ring on her finger.

"And if we're talking about anything remarkable at the Sword Selection Ceremony, there's only one thing."

The hunk of rusty steel that Ian called forth.

What else could there be?

"That scrap heap. To my eyes, it was nothing but rusty, broken junk. Did Dad see something else?"

As host, Charlotte had also attended the Sword Selection Ceremony.

When Ian pulled the broken sword from the Bladelake—

People just busied themselves laughing at a half-wit summoning a half-wit's sword.

"But Dad always sees what others don't."

Perhaps that discerning eye was one of the many reasons the Heavenly Sword Lord family could reign at the top.

"It's someone Dad's interested in. I'd like to see him for myself."

"Shall I summon him here?"

"Yes. Bring him over."

The butler took out a memo pad from his pocket.

"What time shall I set the appointment for?"

"Hm? Time?"

A mocking smile flickered at the corners of Charlotte's lips.

"Why bother setting a time for summoning a half-wit? Just bring him and let him wait. I'll see him when I feel like it."

"Uh..."

The butler let out a subdued sigh.

'If that's the case, young Lord Ian will have to wait in the parlor indefinitely for Miss Charlotte.'

He didn't think it was a very good idea, but the butler wasn't in a position to object.

"... As you command."

* * *

The extravagant mansion Ian stayed in, thanks to the Lord's favor.

A new morning at Lunabreeze.

"It's morning. Get up, Sophia."

Ian shook Sophia, who was lying beside him.

"Huwaaaah..."

Sophia buried her face in the soft pillow, letting out a melting sound.

"I can't get up... Sealed..."

"If you sleep late now, you won't be able to sleep at night."

"Five more minutes... No, ten more minutes..."

"..."

Since this was their last holiday before entering the Sword Dragon Hall, perhaps he should let her sleep.

"Alright, fine. I'll wake you up again after I wash up. Just sleep more."

"So soft... zZz..."

Ian gazed at Sophia, who fell asleep again within a second, smiling unwittingly.

'Thanks to the Lord... I get to enjoy such luxury. I'm truly grateful.'

Seeing Sophia so happy made his heart naturally warm.

'But I still can't figure him out. Why is he treating me so well?'

Last night, through the manager Cheryl, the Lord had even sent him a top-grade elixir.

It was packed with extremely pure mana.

If Ian completely absorbed it before entering the Sword Dragon Hall, breaking through the wall to Expert rank at his age would not be impossible.

'Expert by fourteen, huh.'

Achieving Expert at fourteen was, historically, an incredible accomplishment, only ever matched by 'Ragnar, the greatest swordsman in history,' or 'Yuria, called the talent of the heavens.'

'And the mansion itself...'

Ian headed to the bathroom.

The toilet, sink, bathtub, mirror—everything was top-class, cutting-edge.

'The bed, the food, everything... It's just unreasonable how good all this is.'

The ultra-luxury hotel suite at the Hisperion main building, which used to cost hundreds of gold for a night, now felt like a hut in comparison.

'This massive mansion is filled only with the best.'

And it wasn't just large.

Everything a swordsman could need—their own arsenal, workshop, secret cultivation room, and training hall—was basic.

There were also gardens and greenhouses for alchemy herbs, and an artifact studio for magic imbuement.

There was a library, garden, swimming pool...

There wasn't a single impractical space in the house.

'I've never had a life this good, even in my previous one.'

He never enjoyed such comfort—not when he became Yuria's knight, not even after Yuria became the family head.

Partly because Yuria's precarious standing, due to her siblings' schemes, had made things difficult, and after becoming head, the civil war's cost forced her to sell the family's treasures.

'Whatever the Lord is thinking, at least for what I received, I should repay him properly.'

Enjoying this luxury, receiving the elixir for his growth, and help in researching Vladiark.

Ian never forgot to repay kindness, just as he never forgot to take revenge.

'Yuria... If only you were with us now.'

Yuria must be living underground in the Lord's Palace right now.

She was born with 'Heavenly Energy', a light aura that only the main line of Hisperion ever inherited, and as a 'Heaven-blessed swordswoman', she'd faced countless

assassination attempts from within and outside the family since she was a child. The Lord's measure was to protect her.

He understood the Lord's intentions, but living underground could never be pleasant.

He often remembered how much Yuria had suffered in those days.

"... Ugh!"

Suddenly, a scene from the past flashed before Ian's eyes.

His previous life.

The sight of Yuria desperately trying to stop him leaving for humanity's last battlefield.

Ian's mind was tormented by the vivid memory of her flailing, missing limbs and screaming.

'Come to think of it, I wasn't any different.'

He'd locked Yuria in the fortress basement under the pretense of protecting her.

He'd known she hated the underground life...

And, in the end, he'd left her there alone.

There, Yuria was mercilessly killed by the Grand Duke of Lust, Lilith, while calling out his name.

"Huuuuh..."

Ian forced down his rising panic with controlled, shaky breaths.

'I won't let the same thing happen in this life.'

Steeling himself, he reached for the Lord's elixir—

— Knock knock.

Someone knocked on the bathroom door.

"Sophia?"

"Excuse me. This is Cheryl, the mansion manager."

"Manager?"

What could this be, so early in the morning?

Ian hurriedly put on his shirt and opened the bathroom door.

"What is it?"

"You have a visitor, young Lord Ian. Lady Charlotte Hisperion, the Lord's third daughter, has sent her carriage. She wishes to see you urgently."

"Ah..."

Charlotte Hisperion.

Third daughter and fifth child of Lord Darkan.

Also known by the nicknames Charlot or Lottie.

Just hearing her name made Ian's temples throb.

'One of the worst enemies from my previous life.'

During the Hisperion civil war—

Charlotte temporarily allied with Yuria to form a joint front.

The adversaries were Hisperion's second son and eldest daughter.

Their side was at a disadvantage, but it wasn't impossible if they fought to the end.

But Charlotte betrayed Yuria before the battle even started.

She'd caved to the second son's threats and the eldest daughter's persuasion.

As a result—

That betrayal shattered their already slim chances, and Yuria was gravely injured.

'I heard Charlotte also died betrayed by her siblings.'

Was it the eldest son? The third daughter? Maybe the second son? Or the fourth?

'With all those damned bastards, it wouldn't be strange for any of them to have done it.'

Not that it really mattered.

"Please tell her I refuse."

"... Pardon?"

"Tell Lady Charlotte I have no business with her."

He didn't know why the traitor wanted to see him, and didn't care.

He had no intention of getting along with such a traitor in this life.

Still, because they'd been allies, if she stayed quiet, he'd leave her be. But if she bothered him or Yuria, he wouldn't tolerate it.

"Y-young lord? Lady Charlotte is the Lord's third daughter—if you refuse the summons..."

"Cheryl."

Ian cut her off.

"I'll handle it, so just relay the message. I have no business with Charlotte."

"O-oh..."

Cheryl hesitated in embarrassment, but seeing Ian's unwavering gaze, she finally bowed her head.

"U-understood..."

* * *

Charlotte Hisperion's bedroom.

"... What? He refused my summons?"

Charlotte snorted in disbelief.

"Hah? That half-wit. Refused. My. Summons? Is this for real? Did you convey it properly?"

"Yes. I relayed the message through Lunabreeze's manager and his refusal was delivered firmly and clearly."

"Ha. So I was turned away at the door? Unbelievable... Even being dumbstruck has its limits."

"My apologies."

It was a situation Charlotte had never expected.

Among everyone her age—from direct line to vassals—no one had ever defied her.

On the contrary, everyone busied themselves flattering her.

But Ian? What the hell was with that guy?

A talentless half-wit who couldn't even use aura—where did that confidence come from?

Getting a bit of attention from Dad makes him cocky?

"Will you visit in person?"

"What? Are you crazy?"

Charlotte glared at the butler.

"Uh..."

"He should come! Why should I go to him? Am I below him?"

"M-my apologies."

"Watch your mouth next time!"

Charlotte crossed her arms and bit her lip.

Why should she visit him?

He wouldn't even come when summoned.

Her pride wouldn't allow it.

"Whew... This is so infuriating. How dare he? What does he think he's got to ignore me? Why did Dad even take him as a guest?"

Charlotte was clearly displeased with everything.

"Anyway! Like it or not, we'll have to live under the same roof for a while. This is just an embarrassment to my status, don't you think?"

"Y-yes... uhm..."

"I need to make it clear who's on top. Don't you agree?"

"O-of course, you are right."

He said so, but the butler felt deeply uneasy.

Charlotte always made troublesome demands when she had that look on her face.

"Then I should mobilize the errand boy!"

Errand boy—

A code name for the assassin who lived in the Heavenly Gold Palace, Charlotte's residence.

"Gasp! M-milady!? The errand boy... Isn't that a bit hasty...?"

"Hah? What are you thinking? Did you think I'd do something to Dad's guest? I'm just going to give him a little scare."

"A-a scare..."

"That sword. That broken scrap heap."

After being turned away like this, she couldn't let it slide.

She'd only be satisfied when she dragged him before herself and forced him to kneel, whatever it took.

"Steal his sword."

To enter the Sword Dragon Hall, one must carry the sword received at the Sword Selection Ceremony.

If that sword is lost before entry, the qualification to enter is also lost.

One of the roads to becoming an official Hisperion swordsman would be closed forever.

"Steal the sword and discreetly reveal it's with us. He'll want to get into the Sword Dragon Hall, so he'll have no choice but to come. Like it or not."

"F-foresight indeed..."

"See?"

Charlotte tapped her red lips, then continued.

"Send Alex as the errand boy."

"A-Alex...!"

Alex.

Usually disguised as a servant in Heavenly Gold Palace, but actually a top-tier expert, an elite assassin.

He was Charlotte's most valuable asset and all-purpose problem solver.

"His specialty—the ability to make aura hooks—would be perfect for this."

Alex could form aura hooks to pull items from afar, like telekinesis.

'Top-level assassin being used for this childish squabble...'

The butler thought to himself, but voicing it was not his role.

"... I'll ready him for the task."

"Good. Handle the details. Just bring me results."

"Yes, ma'am."

As the butler bowed and withdrew, Charlotte hummed happily.

"Hm hm~"

Now, she just had to wait. Soon, she'd make that arrogant brat pay for ignoring her.

And the next day—

Alex, Charlotte's elite asset, was found dead.

Play stupid games, win stupid prizes.

Chapter 22 : Guest (2)

Guest (2)

The guesthouse for Hisperion's honored guests boasted security so high it was among the best on the continent.

Since it was situated within the Heavenly Sword Palace, where the head of the Heavenly Sword Family resided, it was personally guarded by the most elite force in Hisperion—the Heavenly Sword Knights.

No matter how skilled an assassin or thief, the walls guarded by the Heavenly Sword Knights were not something one could simply take lightly.

However, that only applied to intruders from outside the walls.

If the intruder targeting the guesthouse was already inside the palace walls, the situation changed.

Since the Knights focused their vigilance on the boundaries of the palace, the internal facilities were comparatively less secured, and of all the internal buildings, the guesthouse's security was a low priority.

No matter how important a guest the Heavenly Sword Family's honored guest might be, they would never take precedence over direct family members living near the family head.

That was one reason, but the biggest was that each and every guest was, from the outset, a terrifying monster who barely needed protection.

Except for Ian, all of Hisperion's guests were at least master-level experts.

Among them were even some at the same level as the Captain of the Heavenly Sword Knights—a Grandmaster. Who would protect whom?

The Hisperion guesthouse was truly the territory of the world's top apex predators.

For intruders, it was a deadly demon realm.

To break in with malice was essentially throwing oneself into a dragon's maw.

Was there really any assassin or thief foolish enough to do such a thing?

And yet—

Tonight, there was one such fool.

Alex.

An assassin for hire by Charlotte, and an expert of the highest class.

'Charlotte... That arrogant, overconfident brat... Always making me do the shittiest work...!'

Alex gritted his teeth as he darted-nimbly across the rooftops like the wind.

Tonight's mission was to infiltrate Ian's guesthouse and steal the rusty greatsword Ian had summoned during the Spirit Sword Ritual.

'Last time it was stealing the Supreme Mana Stone from the Magic Tower Auction...'

During that mission, Alex had nearly lost his life to the Magic Tower's security mechanisms three times.

'And now what? Robbing the guesthouse? Shit, why doesn't she just tell me to stick my head into a dragon's jaws? Playing along with that brat's nonsense has its limits.'

If he kept going along with Charlotte's whims, Alex felt he might die before reaching old age.

Not that many assassins died of old age anyway.

'How many times has that brat almost gotten me killed?'

It had only been six months since Alex joined Charlotte.

In that time, he'd lost count of how many times he'd brushed death.

'Damn... Contract or not... Should I just steal whatever's worth money and disappear?'

Or maybe—

'Kidnap that snotty brat Charlotte and sell her?'

If he handed her to a power hostile to Hisperion, she might fetch a good ransom.

'I'm seriously tempted. At this rate, stabbing her in the back and running off seems much safer. And I'd get my money faster.'

After all, the only reason he entered Charlotte's employ was for the money.

The money he needed for the business of his dreams.

'Steal Charlotte's jewels... Add her ransom on top, and I'll have more than enough to start that business.'

Drugs, organ trafficking, assassination, slavery, prostitution—

Vile enterprises where one could rake in cash by leeching off society and the innocent.

He could do them all.

Decision made.

'Good. If I just stay put, she'll keep sending me on these shitty assignments, so there's nothing to hesitate about. This'll be the last one. Time to start planning to stab her in the back properly.'

He would steal Charlotte's wealth and sell her off after kidnapping her.

'Once I've kidnapped her, I'll have my fun before making the sale.'

When that time came, he'd vent all he'd accumulated on her maddening face and body.

A silent sneer.

Alex's eyes and lips gleamed with malice.

'Still, I'm lucky tonight.'

From the high rooftop, Alex looked down at Lunabreeze, the guesthouse where Ian resided.

Next to Lunabreeze, the other guesthouses for Hisperion's guests were lined up in a row.

The guesthouses were clustered tightly together in one sector of the palace.

'Good thing all those monster-like guests are away right now. Otherwise, even an expert assassin like me couldn't dream of sneaking in here.'

Alex thought he had been lucky, but in reality, it was normal for Hisperion's guests to rarely stay in their assigned guesthouses.

Their nature was, after all, unaffiliated wanderers.

Rather than staying put, their way was to roam restlessly in pursuit of their own goals.

To the guests, the guesthouse was nothing more than an 'inn for a brief stay.'

It was natural for those places to be empty more often than not.

'The only thing to watch out for... are those two on patrol.'

Alex narrowed his eyes at the two Heavenly Sword Knights wandering the guest sector.

Judging by their energy, both were advanced-stage Expert.

'Nothing I can't handle.'

If Alex fully concealed his presence, even master-level experts could not easily detect him.

Hiding from expert-level knights was as easy as breathing.

'I'll finish the job before sunrise.'

— Swish!

Alex flung himself from the high rooftop.

Landing silently, he slipped like a shadow straight to Ian's guesthouse.

'Where's that rusty greatsword?'

The first place to check, naturally, was the armory.

'Found it.'

Should he be saying 'of course' or 'how careless'?

Through the armory window, Alex could see Ian's rusty greatsword plainly displayed on a stand.

'Can't go inside, though.'

As expected, the armory provided by Hisperion itself was enveloped in every lock and security ward imaginable.

Locks could be picked, but the moment he entered through the window, the security barriers would instantly subdue him.

'I prepared a special trick for times like this.'

A unique secret technique developed by Alex himself.

He wove his colorless assassin's aura into a hook to pull his target.

Dark Hook Throw (黶葛投).

'I'll thread through the narrow gap in the security, and drag that sword out.'

Alex raised his right hand, aiming at the rusty sword.

A colorless, tranquil shimmer gathered above his palm.

He whipped it forward as if throwing.

— Swish!

Alex's Yumgaltu extended silently, hooking onto Ian's Vladiark precisely.

'Got it!'

A sure sensation transmitted to his fingertips.

Yumgaltu had bitten down on the target.

'Now all I have to do is pull—!'

Just as Alex tried to haul the colorless hook in using his aura—

— Bzzzzt!

'Ugh—!?'

Suddenly, a pain like his entire mana circuit was being torn out swept his body.

"Ku... kuh-!"

So intense that even an expert assassin like Alex gasped as if at death's door.

But that was only the beginning.

'Wh-what...!?'

Alex's eyes widened.

— Crack! Crunch!

'My aura...! It's being devoured!?'

He could hardly believe it, but it was clear.

Like a vampire sucking blood, like a ghoul ripping out innards—

That rusty greatsword was greedily swallowing up his aura.

'Need to cut it off—!!'

He tried to sever the aura hook in a panic.

'N-no!'

Alex's aura slipped from his control, continuing to be helplessly swallowed by the rusty greatsword.

'N-no...!'

Every moment, his aura was being gulped down in clumps.

'If this continues...! I'll die!'

Alex realized his life was hanging by a thread.

'If I want to survive...! There's only one option...!'

At this rate, even his foundational innate vital energy might be devoured.

He had to decide quickly.

'No time!'

He had no choice but to sever his mana circuits!

The right decision.

However—

— Krunch!

'Aaaaagh!!'

It was already too late.

Vladiark's hunger had already reached his heart.

Unless he ripped out his own heart entirely, Vladiark's feast would not stop.

"Gaaaaaah!!!"

In the end, Alex let loose a scream he had been desperately holding in.

* * *

Late at night, the moon hung high overhead.

—Gaaaaaah!!!

"...?"

Ian woke from sleep to a scream coming from the first floor.

The first thing he checked upon opening his eyes was Sophia's safety.

"zzZ..."

Fortunately, she was sleeping soundly right beside him, oblivious to the world.

'Sophia's fine. But what's with that scream?'

An unlucky servant triggering a magic barrier?

Or an intruder?

Whatever it was, he had to check himself.

— Swish!

Ian grabbed the dagger by his bedside and climbed through the window onto the eaves.

Then, quietly—

Suppressing his presence, he moved toward the source of the scream.

'Hmm.'

Looking down from the eaves, he saw a corpse lying in front of the first-floor armory.

'Any other presences?'

He widened his senses, but caught nothing else.

'Nothing else. But maybe there's something I can't detect. I'd better stay alert.'

—Clank! Clank! Clank! Clank!

At that moment, a group of knights in splendid armor came running from afar.

They were Heavenly Sword Knights patrolling the area.

They must have heard the scream too.

"Contact the team leader with the communication stone! Hurry! This is where the Heavenly Sword Family's guest is staying!"

"This is Owl! Owl! Full Moon, please respond!"

—This is Full Moon.

"Incident in the Crescent Sector. Requesting urgent support!"

—Roger. Support is on the way.

From the third-floor eaves, Ian watched the knights enter the garden, suppressing his presence.

'Ugh... This is going to get noisy.'

Ian could see the knights crossing the main gate into the courtyard.

It couldn't be helped, since the scream came from this direction.

'No reason for me to go down there.'

But what concerned him was that the corpse was found near the armory.

'I'd better check inside the armory.'

There could be another intruder, or something might have been stolen.

Ian returned to his bedroom, tucked the blanket back over Sophia, then headed down to the armory.

Vladiark, Sophia's 5,000 gold greatsword, and other various swords were all displayed in the armory.

'Hmm.'

Ian immediately discerned the signs of the intruder.

'Was he devoured by Vladiark?'

In the darkness, Vladiark emitted a faint red glow, pulsing as though alive.

The blade was sharper and longer than when Ian saw it before bed.

'I see why the corpse was near the window. He tried to snatch Vladiark from there. Probably used aura to move it and got devoured right then and there.'

—Clank!

Ian carefully picked up Vladiark.

"Hmm...!?"

Before he knew it, he let out a soft exclamation.

'The amount of absorbed aura...!'

An entire advanced-stage expert's worth!

'So the guy outside was an advanced-stage expert?'

He hadn't found any other corpses devoured by Vladiark, so that must be it.

'I'll need to investigate the intruder further, but...'

The massive amount of aura stored in Vladiark was an unexpected windfall.

'If I use the top-tier elixir given by Heavenly Sword Family Head, and absorb all the aura stored in Vladiark...!'

With about two weeks left until the Sword Dragon Hall entrance trial.

In that time, reaching earlyt-stage expert was entirely possible.

'Basically, entrance exam valedictorian is in the bag.'

Sword Dragon Hall had a system where, depending on trainee performance, top rewards ranged from legendary elixirs to martial arts tomes and rare artifacts.

'If I reach earlyt-stage expert before entering, the best rewards will basically already be mine. I'll have them all to myself.'

Chapter 23 : Guest (3)

Guest (3)

Dawn.

The Heavenly Sword Family's Lord's Palace where Darkan resided.

"What...!? An intruder entered Ian's annex?"

As soon as Heavenly Sword Lord, Darkan, received the report of the nighttime incident, he immediately rushed to the Lunabreeze estate.

Garden of the Lunabreeze estate.

At the scene, the family's knights and magicians had gathered and were in the midst of their investigation.

"H–huff! W–we greet the Heavenly Sword Lord!"

"We greet the Heavenly Sword Lord!"

The knights and magicians hastily paid their respects, kneeling as soon as they saw Darkan.

"Ian! Where is my Ian?!"

Darkan immediately looked for Ian first.

That gray-haired boy was a rough gem so pure and supreme that the Heavenly Sword Lord would count him among the best three talents he had ever met.

A seed of possibility, possessing limitless talent equal to his youngest daughter, Yuria.

A talent he never wanted to lose or have stolen by anyone.

For the always talent-hungry Heavenly Sword Lord, Ian was the happiest blessing from the heavens in recent years.

That being the case.

Who dared, so fearlessly, to tread with muddy feet into the annex of the gem cherished by the Heavenly Sword Lord?

If, by any chance, even a small injury had befallen Ian, the Lord was sure he would have let loose the wild instincts of Dominating Dragon Fang.

As soon as the culprit was found, he would skin them alive and boil them from their toes in wyvern digestive fluids.

A wild fire blazed in Darkan's eyes.

— Shiver, shiver, shiver, shiver...

All around, the knights and magicians involuntarily trembled at the fierce energy emanating from him.

"... We greet the Heavenly Sword Lord."

Ian came out of the Lunabreeze estate and paid his respects to Darkan.

"Ian!"

As soon as Darkan saw Ian, he rushed to him at once.

"I heard the story! There was an intruder in the estate? Let me see! Are you hurt anywhere?"

Darkan lifted Ian's arms, turned his body, and thoroughly checked him from head to toe.

"... No, I'm not. Not even a scratch."

Only then did Darkan let out a deep sigh of relief.

"Whew... What a relief."

Without delay, he walked over to the corpse lying in front of the armory.

"Who would dare...!"

The body, as shriveled as a mummy.

Darkan grabbed the mummy's hair and inspected the facial features closely.

"Haa... Charlotte."

He immediately grasped who was involved.

"Everyone, withdraw. The investigation is over."

Darkan ordered the surrounding knights and magicians to step back.

Though confused, they could not defy the Lord's command.

"By your command."

"We shall withdraw."

They bowed and retreated from the Lunabreeze garden.

"Is it someone you know?"

Ian approached the Lord and asked.

"There is no one in this Heavenly Sword Palace whom I do not know."

Darkan's expression looked rather bitter.

The corpse's name was Alex.

A hired assassin that Charlotte had contracted six months ago.

"It's still early to say conclusively, but it seems my daughter is involved in this incident. Have you ever met my daughter, Charlotte?"

"Ah..."

So it was Charlotte after all.

Ian thought "of course" inwardly but kept his expression neutral.

"I haven't met her. But I did decline a summons from her once."

"... And then the same night, this guy showed up?"

"... Yes."

"I see. Cause of death... Looks like he tried to steal your greatsword and was killed in the attempt."

A vein twitched on Darkan's temple.

"Ian. I will take full responsibility for this matter and resolve it thoroughly. I will make sure nothing like this happens again."

Ian bowed his head in respect.

"... It is an honor beyond my station."

Was he not going to ask why I refused Charlotte's summons?

The Heavenly Sword Lord only talked about resolving the incident and did not ask about any other topics.

"Don't worry about this. Was there anything else that made living here inconvenient?"

For Darkan, Ian was a talent he wanted to keep at his side no matter what.

It would be troublesome if today's incident made him want to leave the annex.

"No, not at all. Everything you have provided surprises me daily."

"That is good to hear. Still, after this incident, if you feel uneasy staying here, you are welcome to move into the Lord's Palace."

"...!"

W–what?

Not the annex, but the Lord's Palace?

Allowing a guest into the Lord's Palace was unheard of, whether in his previous or current life.

It wouldn't just make him a guest of Hisperion but practically an adopted son.

The Lord's Palace certainly had facilities far superior to the annex.

But Ian couldn't readily nod his agreement.

'If I move there, I won't be able to handle the political scrutiny.'

The Lord's Palace was a place where countless power holders, from Hisperion's dignitaries to overseas VIPs, came and went without rest.

If Ian went to live there, he was bound to draw all the more attention from these power holders.

Ian, who already had many secrets to keep, like his regression and Authority of Projection, found such intense attention only troublesome.

"I–It's too much for me. Just being able to stay here is already more than enough."

"Is that so. My offer stands at any time, so let me know if you change your mind. I'll make preparations in advance—just come along with Sophia if you wish."

"Th–thank you, as always."

"I'll also greatly increase the guards here. You'll never have to worry about something so unfortunate again."

"..."

Such sincere hospitality that Ian found himself at a loss for words.

'I think this is the first time ever—counting even my previous life—that I've been treated with such regard.'

Yuria in his previous life had treated Ian with sincerity as well, but that had been more of a feeling of shared hardship—not this one-sidedly generous relationship.

He couldn't figure it out.

Why was the Heavenly Sword Lord treating him so well?

'I hardly had any connection with the Lord in my previous life. But now...'

What in the world had changed the situation so much?

If he had to name the greatest difference between his present and past lives...

'I obtained Vladiark during the Sword Selection Ceremony. And I revealed some of my abilities in the fight with Hugo...'

But it couldn't be just his skills that drew him in.

For someone like the Lord, who commanded monsters capable of splitting cities and shattering buildings with a single sword, beating five knights at his age was remarkable but not unheard of.

'Or perhaps he's seen my potential?'

Just as Yuria had seen Ian's potential in his previous life and took him in.

Did the Heavenly Sword Lord also see some kind of possibility in him?

'Thinking about it alone won't give me the answer.'

To know the answer, he would have to ask directly.

"M–Heavenly Sword Lord!"

"Hm?"

Darkan, who was about to leave the Lunabreeze estate, turned as Ian called out to him.

"I have something I'd like to ask."

"As much as you wish."

Darkan nodded readily.

"Why are you treating me so well?"

"Hmm? Haha. You speak in such a candid way."

A warm smile spread across Darkan's lips.

"Why am I treating you this way...?"

Rather than incur suspicion by hiding his feelings, it was better to be honest.

Darkan stepped forward, knelt on one knee before Ian, and met his gaze.

"I'll be frank. I have very high expectations for your potential."

As expected.

Just like Yuria in his previous life, the Lord had brought him in upon perceiving his potential.

But what exactly was that potential?

"May I ask what kind of potential you see?"

"I saw you defeat five knights. Such accomplishment at your age is admirable. If you continue to grow, you could become a leading swordsman in Hisperion. But that isn't the only thing I see."

There were many strong people.

But there were very few strong people with a heart like Ian's.

Humans, as they grow stronger, tend to develop a stronger sense of individuality.

Most powerhouses burn their lives pursuing their ideals and causes.

For those causes and ideals, they would even sacrifice their loved ones.

But Ian was different.

"For you, the most important thing must be the people precious to you."

He could tell from Ian's aura.

At the Lord's level, one could tell roughly why a swordsman took up the sword just by sensing his aura.

One focused on revenge or malice bore an aura like the maw of a vicious wolf.

On the other hand, one who wielded the sword out of justice and protection bore an aura like a solid shield.

And Ian's aura...

'It's like... the mother facing a beast with her young protected behind her.'

It was truly a rare aura.

'The one he wants to protect... Is it that girl?'

The girl who was now fidgeting anxiously beside Ian.

Sophia Marygold.

'That girl's aura is also wonderful. She truly follows Ian with all her heart.'

Sophia's aura was like a sunflower in full bloom.

Both of their auras were those that could only be possessed by people who knew true loyalty for those precious to them.

'Outstanding skill...'

For someone that skilled, there was not an ounce of arrogance.

'And outstanding character.'

He was the kind of talent that made you want to keep him close just by watching.

"Ian, may I ask you a question as well? Why did you take up the sword? Do you pursue any great cause or dream?"

"..."

Ian was silent for a moment.

A cause or a dream.

Of course, he couldn't say he had none.

He did have a grand goal.

First, to become stronger than anyone else.

And then, to personally slay the seven grand dukes of the Demon Realm.

But if asked what all that was for...

He only had one answer.

"To protect the people precious to me."

Yuria, Sophia... and his companions from his past life.

As the Lord had said, Ian's guiding principle was 'to protect those he cherished'.

Darkan smiled as if he had expected this.

"Right? That's what I felt from you. I have a good sense for these things."

He presumed that the reason Ian had fought those larger knights at the Greysel estate was to protect Sophia.

"That's why I want to be included among your precious people."

"... Yes?"

"I want to become someone precious to you as well."

...?

... What?

Why?

Ian blinked in surprise, looking up at the Heavenly Sword Lord.

Darkan looked down at him, sporting a mischievous smile.

A smile resembling Yuria's.

To think a white-bearded, silver-haired uncle could make that kind of face.

"To be blunt. I want to raise you well and keep you by my side. If someone like you, who prioritizes your precious people above all, were by my side, you'd make a fine vassal. Am I wrong?"

"..."

Vassal.

To be a vassal...

Could I be one?

In his previous life, Ian was famous as Yuria's loyal retainer.

Just as much as his title 'Swordmaster', his nickname "Yuria's Faithful Dog" was widely known.

'But...'

Ian could not consider himself a true vassal.

He had failed to protect Yuria in the end.

What kind of knight who failed to protect his master could call himself loyal?

'Urgh...'

Thinking of the past, the tragedies of his previous life flashed by like a panorama.

With a painful expression, Ian spoke.

"I cannot be confident. There's so much I'm lacking."

Ian thought that the Lord would be disappointed in his answer.

"... Ho."

But the reaction was the opposite.

The Heavenly Sword Lord looked at Ian with surprise.

'At that age, he could easily claim confidence out of youthful pride... Yet, he's cautious. I'm pleased that he doesn't speak of loyalty lightly.'

And that expression.

'Self-reproach and anger. He is sincerely angry at his own shortcomings.'

The Lord knew that expression well.

Among his own knights, those who had been through all sorts of hardship and learned unwavering loyalty.

The boy's expression was exactly the one they wore when wallowing in regret.

'To think a boy of just fourteen could answer with that expression, just like those men. Ian, with such talent at your age, rather than arrogance, you genuinely feel your own shortcomings... What is it you are regretting?'

What on earth could he have experienced at such a young age?

He seemed as if he had lost someone precious due to his own mistake and fallen into despair.

'It seems he knows the pain of loss.'

But.

'Ironically, loss—the experience of failing to protect someone precious—is an essential experience to become a true knight.'

This was one of the many truths the Heavenly Sword Lord held.

Only a knight who has experienced heartbreaking loss can truly understand the meaning of loyalty and protection.

'Astounding.'

The Lord was genuinely impressed.

Not only swordsmanship talent and a pleasing temperament, but also having experienced the "loss" needed to become a true knight, all at such a young age.

'Amazing...! Perhaps this child really is a gift from the founder's spirit bestowed on the family...!'

A genius, beyond doubt.

A genius of swordsmanship.

And—

A genius of loyalty!

'He may be a talent beyond my wildest imagination...!'

The heart of the Heavenly Sword Lord, calm as a dormant volcano, now began to pound with excitement.

"If you lack something, I can provide it."

Darkan placed his hand on Ian's shoulder.

"I ask only one thing of you: Just grow well by my guidance and stand by my side. That is all I want. Ever since I first saw you, I thought of nothing else."

"... Then the reason you treat me so well is..."

"Because I want you. So I act accordingly."

Ian quietly met Darkan's gaze.

Eyes as red as Yuria's.

Red as freshly spilled blood, clear as sacred flame.

'This man... seems genuine.'

All the Lord wanted from Ian was this one thing.

Simply to stand by his side.

That seemed to be everything.

'The only condition is loyalty.'

If that was all the Lord truly wanted...

If he sought only that...

Ian answered resolutely.

"I must refuse. I cannot accept your favor."

He could not accept the Lord's favor.

He had always had only one lord, in the past and now—

It was Yuria Hisperion alone.

Ian let out a silent sigh.

'... Haa. I guess I'll be expelled now.'

He could have carelessly said yes and reaped the rewards.

But since the Lord had confessed his true feelings, it was only proper for Ian to face him with sincerity as well.

For Ian, loyalty and sincerity were never things to be taken lightly.

But there was no reply.

"..."

Was he angry?

Ian cautiously lifted his head and glanced.

The Heavenly Sword Lord was smiling wickedly, his wildness gleaming.

"You're misunderstanding something, Ian. You have no choice."

— Grabs!

The Heavenly Sword Lord seized Ian's cheeks and met his eyes.

"I've already chosen you and decided to make you mine."

"W–Wuh-wuh-wuh!?"

"I knew from the start this wouldn't be easy. Of course, it wouldn't be. People like you never lightly swear loyalty. I know it well—oh, yes, very well."

Having received oaths of loyalty from countless swordsmen, the Lord was an expert in this field.

"You understand the meaning and weight of loyalty, right? At your age, that impresses me even more. It makes me want you even more. Ian. The more I see you, the more you amaze me."

You were born with unlimited talent both as a swordsman and as a loyalist.

Such a talent could never be let go...!

Even if I have to make you my son-in-law and force responsibility on you—

I must keep you by my side!

Father-in-law is forcing himself on Ian...

【(⊙ _ ⊙)】

Chapter 24 : Guest (4)

Guest (4)

The Heavenly Sword Lord spoke while gripping Ian's cheek.

"I'm not telling you to swear loyalty right here and now, Ian. I am a very patient person. I can wait as long as it takes until you open your heart."

"Mm! Ubu-bub!"

"But you cannot escape from me."

"Ubu!?"

"If you run away, I'll catch you and bring you back. If you hide, I'll find you and bring you back. You have no choice but to quietly accept my goodwill, Ian. In this matter, you have no say."

A gigantic obsession burned like a wildfire within his crimson eyes.

"Bup...!"

Facing those eyes, Ian felt goosebumps rise all over his body.

To receive the obsession of an absolute being who had reached the demi-god realm all at once—it felt as though the entire sky was gazing down at him.

A cosmic terror he'd never felt, not even when fighting the Grand Dukes of the Demon Realm.

No matter how strong of a swordmaster Ian had been in his previous life, the obsession of the Heavenly Sword Lord—a man whose realm far surpassed those Grand Dukes—was something he couldn't completely withstand.

—drdrdrdr....

"I enjoyed this honest conversation, Ian Greysel."

Darkan let go of Ian and stood up.

The obsession that had distorted his face was now gone, replaced with his usual warm smile.

"As I mentioned earlier, I'll handle this intruder matter neatly. I'll send someone to inform you of the results, so rest easy during your stay."

And then—

"One day, stand by my side, Ian. It won't be bad, I promise."

With those words, Darkan left the Lunabreeze Manor together with Kelbian.

—thud!

At the same time, Ian collapsed to his knees as if his soul had left his body.

"Wh-what just...?"

"I-Young master Ian! A-are you alright!?"

"My legs... won't move..."

Ian stared blankly at the Lunabreeze Manor.

Truly, there was no such thing as a free lunch.

That luxurious mansion was both his cradle and his gilded cage.

He never imagined the Heavenly Sword Lord would be obsessed with him to such an extent.

"To stand by his side..."

For Ian, who already had his own master, Yuria, this was a troublesome offer.

'... Still, it's not like the situation itself is bad.'

Though Darkan's obsession and demands would have to be addressed eventually, for now, the kindness he showered on Ian was tremendously helpful.

Regular stipends, elixirs sent by the Lord, the protection of Heavenly Sword knights...

Compared to his previous life, where he had to scrape by training tirelessly with Yuria on bare ground, this was a miraculous environment for growing strong in both safety and speed.

'It's basically being raised like livestock.'

Darkan intended to feed Ian well, train him thoroughly, and make him into a loyal hound.

For some, such a thing would feel suffocating and hurt their pride.

But Ian was a man who could handle being raised like livestock if it served his purpose.

'If I'm being raised forcibly, then so be it. I'll gladly accept it.'

Truthfully, Ian wasn't in a situation where he could choose recklessly.

His enemies were the Grand Dukes of the Demon Realm themselves—true calamities.

The established wisdom was that it took three Grandmasters just to bring down one Grand Duke.

And Ian's mission was to defeat no fewer than seven of those monsters.

To protect Yuria from such terrifying foes, pride didn't matter.

In fact, even devouring whatever he could get his hands on might not be enough to grow.

'But... swearing loyalty is impossible. I have only one master: Yuria.'

That was the one thing he would never compromise on.

He was greatly indebted to the Heavenly Sword Lord, but that didn't mean he could turn his back on the master he had already chosen.

He had received grace from Darkan, but he owed his salvation to Yuria.

From the moment he was taken in by Yuria in his previous life, Ian's life belonged solely to her.

She had saved him in his past life—so this time, it was his turn to save her.

'Still, when you've received kindness, it must be repaid. To truly return that favor, I need to become stronger. I can't be of help to the Heavenly Sword Lord with paltry strength.'

To repay the Lord's kindness, and to one day break free of him, power was necessary.

There was much to protect and much to repay.

The reasons to become strong only kept increasing.

* * *

Late morning, just before lunch.

The Heavenly Gold Pavilion, where Charlotte resided.

"H-he's dead!? Alex!?"

Upon hearing the butler's report, Charlotte jumped up from her seat.

"Yes. Early this morning, he was found dead, as shriveled as a mummy. The location was in front of Lunabreeze Manor's armory. The exact cause of death is unknown... It appears the security magic device was triggered excessively."

"T-that's..."

"And... the Heavenly Sword Lord personally visited the scene and confirmed the body."

"D-dad himself!? He visited the scene!?"

Charlotte's face fell slack in astonishment.

"Why would dad...?! Why would he get involved in something as minor as one guest!? There are so many people he could have sent instead!"

"I do not know, young lady. It is beyond me to grasp the Lord's profound intentions."

Charlotte's eyes trembled violently.

"N-no... Surely I haven't crossed the wrong person? T-there's no way I did something to make dad hate me...!?"

"..."

"S-say something!"

"... I'm very sorry, young lady. I cannot assure you of that."

The attendant butler handed her a scroll.

The scroll was stamped with the large seal of the Heavenly Sword Lord.

"The Lord has summoned you, miss Charlotte. You are to present yourself in the audience chamber this afternoon."

"D-dad, summoning me...?! N-no...! It's been ages since we met alone... Why must it be over something like this!?"

But inside Hisperion Palace, the Lord's orders were absolute.

Charlotte sulked for a long while, but in the end, she had no choice but to go.

Time passed, and afternoon arrived.

Charlotte, not even having had lunch, visited the audience chamber, feeling as if she had indigestion.

—murmurmurmur.

"Ah..."

She had thought it would just be her and her father alone.

But to her surprise, the audience chamber was filled with knights and civil officials.

"F-father..."

Charlotte bowed herself flat before the Heavenly Sword Lord.

"Charlotte Hisperion."

With the radiant sun behind him, the Lord looked down at Charlotte.

His face was hidden by the backlight, but his red irises burned as if they were embers.

"You meddled with my guest."

"A-ah..."

Charlotte's entire body shook.

The terror of facing the wrath of an absolute being head-on.

The anxiety of being hated by the father she so admired rocked her like a storm.

"Speak. Why did you do it?"

"I-I... Th-that..."

Her thoughts whirled with words, yet none seemed to be the right answer.

What justification could there be for tampering with the Lord's guest?

From the moment she'd been caught, there was no escape route.

That was why she had taken the trouble of hiring an Expert-level assassin.

She never thought they'd fall prey to something as trivial as a security magic device...

"I'll take your silence as your answer."

The Lord spoke coldly as Charlotte could only tremble and say nothing.

"You are a disgrace."

"U-ugh..."

Any chance to make excuses was gone.

All that remained was judgment and punishment.

"I ask you. Why did you send an assassin after Ian Greysel?"

"I-I never meant to harm him! I-I just..."

"Just?"

"I just wanted to steal Ian's greatsword..."

Even as she spoke, Charlotte was too ashamed to finish her sentence.

How could a daughter openly admit to her father that she tried to steal his guest's belongings?

"Shameful, Charlotte."

The Lord looked down at her with eyes gone cold.

"Ian is an important guest of mine. I promised him safety and peace, and invited him to the Heavenly Sword Palace. Yet you, as a direct heir, tried to steal from my guest. You've betrayed me and stained our house's honor."

"U-ugh!"

"No house of any standing would stoop to pilfering a guest's belongings. Charlotte. I am ashamed of you to the core."

"Uu, huuuk!"

Each time the Lord enumerated her sins, Charlotte felt the gaze of everyone present battering her from all sides.

The weight of guilt and shame was almost suffocating.

"But this is not your fault alone. As your father, I too feel responsible."

"D-dad...!"

"This is not a private matter. Address me as lord."

"U-ugh!"

"You're 15 now. Too old for childishness. I should have taught you responsibility as a direct heir much sooner. I was too late."

With blazing red eyes, the Lord commanded.

"Charlotte. The protection of the family has made you arrogant and petty. To teach you responsibility and independence as a direct heir, I will confiscate all your assets."

"Wh-what?!"

Charlotte's eyes went round as saucers.

"From now on, you will reside in the Dormitory of the Dragon Sword Hall, together with the other trainees. Until your disciplinary period ends, you will be charged a monthly fine of 15 gold. You must earn this money yourself without aid from the family, and to prevent any tricks, I will assign a Heavenly Sword knight as your supervisor."

"Wh-what! Th-that's absurd...!"

That was as good as being thrown out of her own home.

Having only ever worn and eaten the finest, how could she possibly adapt to a sweaty dormitory life?

Let alone a fine of 15 gold per month?

A new maid earned 5 gold per week—a sum equivalent to three weeks' wage for a laborer.

It wasn't much in itself, but earning it on her own was a different matter.

How was she supposed to do that?

Her whole life, she had only ever touched swords and jewels!

"Leave. As of this moment, all your property has been confiscated. Return to the dormitory at the Dragon Sword Hall."

"D-Da... N-no, Lord!"

"Is the punishment too light? Very well. From now on, even your daily essentials at the Dragon Sword Hall will be billed as debt."

"Ah, no...!"

"Everything you eat, wear, even the swords you wield—from now on, the family provides nothing without payment. Until you repay every last coin, you may not return to the Heavenly Gold Pavilion. Now go."

"Uu, huuuuk..."

Still trembling and on her knees, Charlotte finally retreated from the audience chamber in tears.

Her father seemed so heartless, but whining would only make things worse.

"Miss Charlotte. Welcome."

Outside the audience chamber, the butler had vanished, replaced by a slender female knight.

"I am Ophelia, a senior knight of the Heavenly Sword Order. I'll be serving as your supervisor."

"S-supervisor... Uu, huuuuk..."

How had things turned out like this?

Lamenting her predicament, Charlotte started to cry.

Immediately, Ophelia began to take out a photo-magic device and started snapping pictures of her.

—snap! snap!

"Hic!? Uu! W-what are you doing!?"

"It's an order to record any unusual circumstances with photos and report them regularly. I look forward to working with you."

—snap! snap!

"Wah, waaaaah!!!"

On top of it all, she didn't like her female supervisor.

Charlotte burst into sobs.

'This is all because of Ian! That dullard!!'

What did that dullard do to so catch her father's attention, that he would go so far for him?

'Ugh... just wait and see!'

Still reeling, Charlotte burned with competitive spirit against Ian.

'I'm going to prove it to Dad! That I'm more useful than that dullard Ian!'

She still had no idea what her father saw in Ian.

But whatever it was, if she could prove she was the better choice, surely her father's attention would turn back to her.

'Just wait and see!'

If she just proved herself better than Ian, surely this ridiculous punishment would be lifted.

He wouldn't let a gemstone as radiant as her rot in some poor environment.

'I'll go all out at the Dragon Sword Hall! Ian Greysel! I'll show you up with sheer swordsmanship first!'

Currently, fifteen-year-old Charlotte was a peak-stage aura user.

Among her peers, she had no rival, and even among the Hisperion direct line, her achievement was exceptional.

Meanwhile, Ian was fourteen.

A year younger, and unable to use aura—a dullard.

No way someone like him could be a match for Charlotte.

'I'll sabotage Ian Greysel at every single test! Make sure he can't accomplish anything!'

If Ian failed to stand out at the Dragon Sword Hall, her father was sure to be disappointed in him.

Then her own punishment would naturally end.

There'd be no reason to continue punishing his daughter over that dullard.

'Unless he miraculously becomes an Expert overnight, he'll never escape my clutches!'

The only people in history to reach Expert at fourteen were the fifth Heavenly Sword Lord, Ragnar—considered the greatest swordmaster of all time—and their youngest sibling, the genius Yuria.

In other words, Ian escaping her plan was unthinkable.

'Just wait! I'll crush you and prove to Dad I'm more valuable!'

Charlotte wiped away her tears and got to her feet.

'I'll definitely win Dad's approval! I'll be as spoiled as I want!'

Clenching her fists, Charlotte vowed she could do it.

When she imagined the Heavenly Sword Lord patting her head someday, a small smile even crept onto her lips.

Meanwhile, at that same moment—

Lunabreeze Manor.

In a secret underground training chamber.

Ian grinned while gripping Vladiark.

"I can't believe how reassuring this stored aura feels."

The amount of aura a peak-stage Expert had was throbbing within Vladiark.

Two weeks remained until the Dragon Sword Hall.

If he spent those two weeks consuming the elixirs sent by the Lord and absorbing the aura stored inside Vladiark...

"I'm guaranteed to reach the Expert level before entering."

Charlotte's scheme was already collapsed—before it even began.

This Charlotte bitch is retarded.

【(ʘ言⊙╋)】

Chapter 25 : Preparation (1)

Preparation (1)

The incident of a thief breaking into Ian's mansion was completely resolved in just one day under the supervision of Darcan, the Heavenly Sword Lord.

Charlotte, the mastermind behind this event, was severely condemned before the senior figures of Hisperion and was almost kicked out of her family as a heavy punishment.

Of course, it was not a permanent exile—only a temporary disciplinary action—but still.

'I never thought they'd punish her this harshly.'

Ian, who had heard all the details from Kelbian, was also taken aback by how heavy the punishment was.

'Not only was all her property confiscated, but she also has to pay a monthly fine of 15 gold, and even for everything she eats and wears at the Sword Dragon Hall, she has to pay.'

Charlotte had become penniless and in debt in an instant.

For a while, she would be living a life even more destitute than most commoners.

'The Heavenly Sword Lord is really ruthless, even to his own children.'

Is he the type to discipline his children with an iron hand?

On the other hand, perhaps he wanted to show his favor toward Ian, and that's why he imposed such an excessive punishment.

'Well... At least thanks to it, I've achieved complete peace.'

The Heavenly Sword Lord strongly condemned Charlotte in front of all the senior figures of Hisperion.

It was both a judgment on the culprit and a warning to everyone.

A warning that no one—not even his own children—should ever lay a hand on his guest.

He made it clear that if anyone, not even his own child, touched Ian, his guest, he would never forgive them.

At that tribunal, the Heavenly Sword Lord publicly revealed just how special Ian was to him.

'Thanks to him, at least until I enter the Sword Dragon Hall, I'll enjoy real peace.'

There were now about two weeks left until admission to the Sword Dragon Hall.

'I need to make the most of this two-week period of peace.'

After those two weeks, he would face various tests and fierce competition at the Sword Dragon Hall, so there was much to prepare in advance.

First was aura training.

Within two weeks, he intended to raise his aura level to at least early-stage Expert.

If he absorbed the elixirs sent by the Heavenly Sword Lord and the aura stored in Vladiark, that should be more than achievable.

He might even be able to reach farther than that.

Second, basic physical conditioning.

Regardless of aura, building a sturdy body was equally important.

The body was the vessel that held the aura.

If the body was strong, the aura could be displayed in full.

He was planning to undergo intense physical training in the mornings with Sophia.

And third, Sophia's physical strength, swordsmanship, and aura.

Sophia was already in pretty good shape.

After all, she'd built up basic stamina and strength from working at the mansion.

Doing the laundry with thick blankets and wringing them out, moving dozens of heavy boxes of food supplies, quickly cleaning the expansive mansion floors in a limited time, etc.

For all that hard labor, Sophia's strength and muscles were hardly lacking.

But when it came to aura or swordsmanship, she was a total novice.

All she had seen of swordplay was from a distance when Ian practiced alone, and she'd rarely had the chance to even witness the use of aura.

And her physical ability, though good for an ordinary person—especially a sixteen-year-old—was still lacking in terms of agility, reflexes, and flexibility by the standards of swordsmen.

'Physical conditioning, aura, swordsmanship. It'll be pretty tight to address all that in just two weeks.'

Honestly, two weeks was a very short time to resolve everything.

'Still, if we work hard, we'll manage somehow.'

It wasn't baseless optimism.

Ian had reached the very top of swordsmanship, attaining the level of peak-stage Swordmaster in his previous life.

He knew exactly what training Sophia needed most, what cultivation techniques would be most efficient, and which sword techniques would be most effective.

All sorts of know-how were crammed in Ian's mind.

Additionally, Ian was quite talented at teaching, with plenty of experience instructing others in his previous life.

He could justifiably be called one of the continent's top trainers.

With that kind of ability, if he focused solely on teaching one person for two weeks, meaningful results were inevitable.

'The problem is after two weeks. When I enter the Sword Dragon Hall.'

He could manage until admission.

But after that, who knew what might happen?

'It's basically the calm before the storm.'

These two weeks of peace were no different than the silence before the storm.

Right now, thanks to the Heavenly Sword Lord's protection, everyone was leaving Ian alone. But two weeks later, he'd have to be on guard.

With the lord publicly showing how special Ian was, all of Hisperion's senior figures now had their eyes on him.

Some would try to figure out why the lord was giving Ian special treatment; some would be jealous of the lord's favor; some would try to keep Ian in check, test him, or just hang around hoping for scraps.

'This could well be the last peaceful break I get.'

The more attention he got, the more enemies would appear.

He needed to build up as much strength as possible during these two weeks.

So that whoever picked a fight with him, he could crush them easily.

'No point in delaying. Let's start right away.'

It was just after lunch in the afternoon.

Ian called over Sophia, who had been sunbathing, explained their two-week plan, and got straight down to training.

"It's finally starting for real! I'll keep up even if I pass out! Go ahead and make it tough!"

"Excellent. That's a good attitude."

And so, a day. Two days. Three, four, five...

Mornings: running.

"Haa, huh! I—I think I'm going to throw up...!"

"Don't stop! Keep running! This is your breakthrough moment!"

"H-how come you... huh, huh...! don't get tired at all...! U-uweegh!!"

"Run even while puking!!"

"Uu, ugh...! uweegh!"

Afternoons: sword practice.

— Smack! Smack! Smack!

"Keep your wrist flexible! Move your feet faster! That's it, good job!"

"Huff! I think I've got some talent, don't you think?"

— Smack!

"Ow!"

"Don't let your guard down! Keep your field of vision wide and keep moving!"

"U-uuh...! Yessir!"

Nights: aura cultivation.

"I'm channeling aura into your circuits right now. Can you feel it?"

"Y-yeah. It's warm and, kinda ticklish..."

"Focus more. Memorize this route. This will be your solo cultivation path from now on."

"Wh—huh!? M-my lower stomach is way too ticklish...!"

"Of course. I'm tickling it on purpose."

"Agh! Seriously!"

Before bed: stretching.

"Outer and inner thighs—make sure you stretch this part every day. I'll massage it for you. It's going to hurt. Be prepared."

"Eh~ How bad could a massage—Kyaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!!!"

At dawn, he split his sleep to work on aura level growth.

"zzZ... zzZ..."

Sophia collapsed into unconscious sleep each night, exhausted by the hard training.

That was when Ian's personal training began.

'The elixirs the Heavenly Sword Lord gave me are all absorbed as of today.'

Thanks to that, in just one week, Ian's aura stage leaped from Late-Stage User to the entry-stage Expert.

'If I'd used ordinary training methods, I could never have made so much progress.'

If he'd used the cheap common cultivation techniques, it would've taken over half a year to absorb all the elixirs, and the energy absorption rate would've been terrible.

'Thanks to the Heavenly Dawn Technique I learned from Yuria...'

The Heavenly Dawn Technique, a supreme cultivation method passed down only to Hisperion direct descendants.

Thanks to the Heavenly Dawn Technique, Ian had absorbed all the lord's elixir in just a week, with almost 100% absorption efficiency.

'Reaching Expert stage at age 14. An incredible feat, though I don't really feel it.'

The only other people in history to reach the Expert stage at age 14 were the 5th Heavenly Sword Lord, Ragnar, and the supremely talented Yuria.

It had only ever happened twice in history.

Though Ian had accomplished a historic feat, it didn't strike him as that impressive.

'Probably because something even greater is within reach.'

Ragnar Hisperion, known as the greatest swordsman of all time, was said to have reached the entry level of Swordmaster at age 18.

'I can reach Swordmaster even faster than that.'

If this growth speed continued, Ian would reach it by 17 at the latest.

'Plus, I even have the greatsword Vladiark, which lets me absorb others' aura...'

If he used this sword to rapidly accumulate a huge amount of aura, he might hit Swordmaster before turning 16.

'Let's try right away.'

Ian sat cross-legged, grabbed Vladiark with both hands, and focused on the aura stored within.

— Thump! Thump! Thump!

Vladiark glowed gently red, pulsing like a living heart—as if to welcome its master.

'Stored aura: the equivalent of a single Advanced-Stage Expert level swordsman.'

But even if he absorbed all this aura, he wouldn't inherit the full power of an Advanced-Stage Expert's level as it was.

That was because breaking through the blocked meridians inside the body was just as important as the amount of aura and one's realizations.

And breaking through those blocked meridians consumed a considerable amount of aura.

'The blockages in the meridians are clogged with impurities.'

The aura used to break through the impurities would be mixed with filth, become impure, and unusable.

'There's a way to project already-cleared meridians using the Authority of Projection, but...'

It also consumed a massive amount of aura.

In the end, whether he broke through directly or projected via the Authority of Projection, the aura consumed would be similar.

Aura consumption was unavoidable for unblocking meridians.

'For now, should I change locations?'

Ian picked up Vladiark and moved into the bathroom next door.

Because clearing the impurities from the meridians produced a foul smell.

He didn't want to disturb Sophia's deep sleep with rotten stench.

'Alright. Ready.'

Ian stripped down and sat cross-legged in the bathtub.

As he gripped Vladiark and slowly pulled the stored aura into his body—

— Dding!

[The Authority of Projection is reading the data stored in 'Vladiark' of the Old ■? ■.]

A blue window appeared before his eyes.

[There are 2 skills you have not yet confirmed.

Would you like to check them now?

[Y/N]

"...?"

What's this?

The Authority of Projection reading data stored in Vladiark?

And what the heck is "the Old ■?'s ■"?

Let's check it for now.

[You have accepted.]

As soon as he intended to check, the blue window refreshed and new words appeared.

— Dding!

————————

◆ Skills absorbed into Vladiark:

- [Dark Hook Throw (黧葛投) Lv.63]

- [Shadowless Skybreaker (無影飛破) Lv.58]

————————

'Huh?'

Ian's eyes widened.

Just seeing the words on the blue window, he instantly understood what they were.

Dark Hook Throw.

A technique that materializes aura like a hook to capture a target.

Shadowless Skybreaker.

A martial art that combines stealthy footwork and assassin techniques for surprise attacks.

'This is...!'

It was the martial arts of an assassin.

The sort of techniques used by assassins who had been devoured by Vladiark.

Why would such techniques be in Vladiark...?

'...!'

Suddenly, one hypothesis flashed through his mind.

'Did Vladiark absorb not just aura, but even the skills of assassins!?'

Was it possible for Vladiark to absorb not just magic power but even techniques!?

'But...'

In his previous life, he'd never seen the Grand Duke of Gluttony, the previous owner of Vladiark, replicate the techniques of those he'd slain.

'Wait! Could it be...!'

Is it only possible to extract techniques absorbed by Vladiark using the Authority of Projection?

'If that's the case...!'

If Ian's hypothesis was true—

Vladiark was a weapon completely optimized for the Authority of Projection...

In essence, the perfect set when paired with the Authority of Projection.

The ranking for me is a bit confusing...

Author-nim uses entry,early,advanced, late, and peak when describing the stages of the ranks of the characters.

And at the moment the ranks are Aura User, expert, master, grandmaster, and Demigod...

I'm not sure if there will be ranks in between, but those are the currently known ranks...

If you find any mistakes, please let me know by commenting or pinging me in the discord server...

Thank you for reading!!!

Chapter 26 : Preparation (2)

Preparation (2)

Authority of Projection.

So long as there is enough magic power, it is a divine authority capable of conjuring all manner of natural disasters and miracles at will.

Vladiark.

A devouring, growing weapon that absorbs magic power from enemies and supplies its wielder with virtually limitless power.

Vladiark compensates for the only weakness of the Authority of Projection—"magic power depletion"—while the Authority of Projection allows one to do everything Vladiark cannot.

These two already had the best possible synergy.

———————

◆Skills absorbed by Vladiark

-[Dark Hook Throw(鬟葛投) Lv.63]

-[Shadowless Skybreaker(無影飛破) Lv.58]

———————

'I never imagined it had a function like this, too.'

This ability not only absorbs an opponent's magic power, but also their skills, storing them away.

[※Notice: 'Authority of Projection' has been detected in the user.]

[※Notice: Absorbed skills can be copied via the 'Authority of Projection'.]

[※Notice: You can currently project a total of '2' skills.]

Moreover, only a user who possesses the Authority of Projection can extract technology absorbed by Vladiark.

That said, considering that the Heavenly Sword Family Lord's skill, whose aura was once devoured by Vladiark, was not absorbed—perhaps absorption only occurs if the opponent's innate energy is also swallowed.

'So even the Grand Duke of Gluttony wasn't able to utilize all of Vladiark's functions.'

Even the Grand Duke of Gluttony, who was Vladiark's master in my previous life, probably never used this ability.

Ian was sure of it.

He had never seen that guy steal and use someone else's technique as-is.

'It was impossible to use because he didn't have the Authority of Projection.'

A function of Vladiark that could only be used when combined with the Authority of Projection.

'At this point, even a fool would realize.'

There is some definite and intrinsic connection between the Authority of Projection and Vladiark.

'Could Vladiark also be related to the 'Goddess'?'

When Ian was captured at the mountain stronghold...

During the tutorial for the Authority of Projection, while preparing to escape, he saw the following phrase:

[※Tutorial:《Authority of Projection》...(omitted)...is a treasured artifact prepared by the Goddess to protect this world.]

The phrase that appeared before my eyes referred to the Authority of Projection as "the Goddess's arrangement".

'The Authority of Projection is the Goddess's arrangement.'

Then, is Vladiark also the Goddess's arrangement?

'The Goddess, huh...'

The indifferent voice Ian heard before his return, as he faced death.

[Goddess... Guardian of the world... Selection...]

[Goddess's arrangement... Authority of Projection... Forced succession...]

[Reconstruction of the world line... In progress...]

That, too, mentioned the 'Goddess'.

'If regression, the Authority of Projection...and even Vladiark are all related to the Goddess...'

It was certain.

The entity called the Goddess was focusing her intentions on pouring power into me.

'In that case, the Goddess's intention is...'

[Guardian of the world... Selection...]

[《Authority of Projection》...is a treasured artifact prepared by the Goddess to defend this world.]

To protect the world.

The Goddess wants to defend the world through Ian.

From what?

'Isn't it obvious.'

The Demon Grand Dukes of the Demon Realm and those demon bastards.

The only ones destructive enough to shatter the world are that trash.

'So there was a reason people prayed so earnestly to the heavens.'

In his previous life, Ian didn't believe in the existence of a god.

No, more precisely, he just never paid attention.

But having now received such direct support from a deity, he had to admit the existence of a god must have been real after all.

However...

Why did the Goddess choose him?

He'd spent his whole life far from religion.

If She were to choose someone, wouldn't it be better to pick a devoted follower instead?

If so, they might have understood Her will more quickly and obeyed it faithfully.

'And in terms of ability as well.'

There must be plenty of people more capable and stronger than him.

Take Darkan, the Heavenly Sword Family Lord, or even Yuria Hisperion—both possessed much greater power and talent than him.

If the Goddess wanted to protect the world, wouldn't it be better to entrust it to such prodigies?

'If the Goddess had chosen Yuria, the whole course of my previous life would have been completely different.'

If Yuria had summoned Vladiark instead of the Holy Sword Genesis in the Sword Selection Ceremony, she wouldn't have suffered so one-sidedly at the hands of the Demon Grand Dukes.

'Genesis is certainly a powerful sword, but its synergy with the Authority of Projection is the worst.'

The Holy Sword Genesis is the ultimate weapon with the greatest destructive power in the world.

It is said that the Creator God used it to split heaven and earth at the world's genesis.

However, that kind of power came with an enormous consumption of aura every time it was used.

No matter how talented Yuria was, even if she had the same amount of aura as Ian, managing the aura drain from using both Genesis and the Authority of Projection at once was always a struggle.

'In the end, she was defeated through attrition.'

Yuria's weakness was that she had no means whatsoever to recover aura.

This flaw was brutally exposed in wars of attrition.

With her magic power depleted, Yuria's dantian was finally pierced through by the Grand Duke of Gluttony's hand...

'... Haa.'

Ian shook his head violently to shake off those distracting thoughts.

'These thoughts are no help right now.'

Why the Goddess chose him.

What he was doing in his previous life.

Why Yuria had to meet such an end.

Such thoughts were of no use to Ian at this moment.

'What matters now is not to repeat the same tragedy.'

If he wanted to avoid repeating the same tragedy, Ian can't let himself get lost in such distractions.

'At least the situation is far better than in my previous life.'

Whereas Yuria constantly struggled with magic power depletion in the past, now Ian have Vladiark, allowing him to absorb enemy magic power and be free of that issue.

And with the "skill absorption" ability of Vladiark—which only someone with the Authority of Projection can use—Ian can take full advantage of it, using Vladiark more effectively than the Grand Duke of Gluttony ever did.

'The main weakness of the Authority of Projection is gone, and with Vladiark, I can even steal the authorities of the Demon Grand Dukes.'

The situation was full of hope.

'Yes. Now's the time to look at the possibilities of the future, not the trash of the past.'

For now, Ian should focus on using Vladiark to strengthen his martial power.

'First, let's check out the absorbed skills.'

———————

◆Skills absorbed by Vladiark

-[Dark Hook Throw(黧葛投) Lv.63]

-[Shadowless Skybreaker(無影飛破) Lv.58]

———————

Dark Hook Throw is an art that creates hooks out of aura to snatch the target.

Shadowless Skybreaker is a martial technique combining stealthy footwork and assassination skills, allowing the user to hide their presence.

'Both are useful techniques.'

Depending on how Dark Hook Throw is used, it could become a trump card in combat, and in cliff-like terrain it could even be used as a rope for climbing.

Considering Shadowless Skybreaker is a specialty of professional assassins, mastering it could greatly enhance Ian's infiltration and stealth skills.

'But the magic power required to extract these is outrageous.'

The magic power required for projection rose in proportion to the level of the target.

Dark Hook Throw is level 63. Shadowless Skybreaker is level 58.

'The highest level I've projected so far was 27.'

— 《Authority of Projection》 —

◆Trait

[Sophia's dantian & mana circuit Lv.27]

————————

It took a full three days to project Sophia's dantian and mana circuit at level 27.

Of course, Ian was only at the very start of the User stage then, while now he had reached entry-stage Expert, so things are different.

At his current level, projecting Sophia's dantian or her mana circuit would take about half a day.

'But level 58 and 63 are just too high for me right now.'

A two-fold level difference didn't mean the magic power required was simply doubled.

The higher the level, the more exponentially the required magic power increased.

'I can feel it vividly. The sheer weight of magic power needed.'

To project Dark Hook Throw, he'd need the total aura of one peak-stage Expert, and for Shadowless Skybreaker, the aura equivalent to a late-stage Expert.

'Damn expensive.'

Currently, the aura gathered in Ian's dantian was at the level of an entry-stage Expert.

Vladiark had the aura storage just above the level of a peak-stage Expert.

Even combined, it was impossible to immediately learn both techniques.

'Right now, raising my aura level is far more effective than projecting new techniques.'

Both Dark Hook Throw and Shadowless Skybreaker are useful, but not what Ian need immediately.

It's not as if he have an infiltration mission right now.

And in the long term, raising his aura rank was much more profitable.

The higher Ian's aura rank, the easier it will be to supply the mana needed for projection, and if he can defeat more powerful enemies, he'll be able to absorb even more skills.

'For now, focus on raising my rank to the maximum.'

One week later.

Ian reached the middle-ealy-stage of Expert rank.

Previously, the mountain bandit boss he defeated with his fists was at the intermediate User level.

Now, Ian could take on thirty like him at once.

The average level of the new recruits at Sword Dragon Hall was only at the entry to early-stage Users.

With the addition of his Frenzied Insight Style, even if all the new recruits rushed at him together, it would be impossible to capture Ian.

In effect, the position of top student at Sword Dragon Hall was already practically reserved for Ian.

'Sword Dragon Hall offers rewards according to achievement and performance.'

The best reward, reserved for the top student, would also go to him alone.

* * *

Two weeks of training passed in the blink of an eye.

"Young master! Look! I've got calluses on my hands already!"

"Weren't those calluses always there?"

"What?! No, they weren't! These are new! I really worked hard, okay? This is proof!"

"Really? Let's see. Oh, you're right. They're the kind of calluses you get from gripping a sword. You really did work hard, Sophia."

"Hehehe... Compliment me more, please!"

"Just keep doing what you're doing. You're awesome."

"Hehehe...!"

"...?"

During these two weeks, Sophia made remarkable progress as well.

She quickly adapted to physical training, as her basic physical strength was already good, and she had more talent for swordsmanship than expected, at least enough to lay down a solid foundation.

She even managed to reach the entry-stage User-rank.

Turning an ordinary person into at least a fledgling swordsman in just two weeks was an incredible achievement.

'But there's still a lot that's shaky—if I don't supervise her closely, it'll fall apart quickly.'

Since the foundation was built hurriedly, there were many rough patches.

Her aura rank was still only at the very beginning of the entry-stage.

She could sense and move aura, but even reinforcing a single finger was difficult for her.

'Still, at this level, she shouldn't be totally outclassed by the new recruits. She should be somewhere in the lower-middle tier, at least.'

Sword Dragon Hall is the world's most elite swordsman training institution, gathering geniuses from around the globe, but in reality, only a fraction of the new recruits are true prodigies.

Most of them are just ordinary teenagers.

Of course, they're better with the sword and manage aura better than Sophia at the moment, but Sophia has much greater strength and stamina than her peers.

If she relied on physicality, she could reach the lower-middle rank without much trouble.

'There's nothing to worry about with Sophia.'

She'll continue to receive intensive tutoring from Ian, so soon enough, she'll be aiming for even the upper-middle ranks.

'The problem is Yuria.'

In his previous life, Ian heard so many stories from Yuria.

Among them, of course, were tales from her Sword Dragon Hall days.

'Yuria said she came close to death countless times before graduation.'

There was the time during the monster battle practical exam when an assassination was attempted with a bomb hidden inside a monster;

On a mission, she was ambushed by dark forces when her siblings leaked confidential information;

There were other things too—like how she could no longer eat her favorite foods after the poisoning attempt, or how she found it hard to trust people after discovering that a trusted companion had been a traitor...

'I remember every story Yuria told me... every single world.'

She would show her scars from her close brushes with death, grinning mischievously, but for Ian, those weren't good memories.

They were all tales that made Ian's heart sink.

'In my past life, Yuria barely managed to survive graduation by her own strength, but there's no guarantee she'll make it unscathed this time as well.'

As long as there was even a 0.01% chance that Yuria could die, I could never relax or let my guard down.

'I absolutely can't leave her alone—this time, I must be by her side.'

In his past life, Ian always felt regret.

If only he could have spent those days at Sword Dragon Hall with her, not only could he have protected her, but they could have shared so many more memories together.

'But there's no need to regret anymore.'

Now Ian was in the same class as Yuria, entering Sword Dragon Hall together.

'I can settle all the regrets I had in my previous life.'

Ian took a great step toward the Sword Dragon Hall.

'In this life, we'll graduate together with not a single scar—just a heap of memories, Yuria.'

Chapter 27 : Entrance Exam (1)

Entrance Exam (1)

Ian had many reasons for entering the Sword Dragon Hall.

First, and most obvious, was to protect Yuria.

To reliably guard Yuria from the assassination attempts and numerous terrorist attacks that were sure to come, Ian also needed to enter the Sword Dragon Hall alongside her.

And if possible, he wanted to create as many memories as he could by her side during her childhood.

In her previous life, Yuria had apparently been too busy just trying to survive at this age and hadn't been able to make any memories at all.

Whenever she spoke about her childhood, it was always stories about living underground or nearly dying.

Watching her speak of such things as if they were fond memories, to be honest, made his heart ache.

'If I'm going to protect Yuria and also give her good memories, I'll have to move as if I had two bodies. It won't be easy, but I must do it.'

His second goal was the rewards offered by the Sword Dragon Hall.

In particular, his aim was the top ranker's reward.

'The top reward is known for being a treasure even Swordmasters would covet.'

There were incredibly expensive elixirs that even the king of a nation would struggle to obtain.

Or ultra-high-grade magical artifacts whose workings even current tower lords could not clearly analyze.

Rare materials that even world-renowned master blacksmiths might have only touched a handful of times.

Secret martial arts manuals that even the houseguests of Hisperion would drool over.

Other prizes included famed swords, legendary armor, jewels housing high-ranked spirits, treasure maps promising instant riches, entry permits for the family's mana spots, and so on...

'Whatever I receive, it'll be a tremendous help for my growth.'

Since Ian possessed the Authority of Projection, if he copied those rare rewards, he could use them a hundred times more effectively than anyone else.

Even with just one top reward, he would achieve incredible growth.

If he were to monopolize all the top rewards, just how strong would he be by the time he graduated from the Sword Dragon Hall...?

'Perhaps I could even make it into the world's top 100 immediately after graduation.'

If an ordinary person had spoken those words, it would have been mere delusion.

However, to Ian, it didn't seem that impossible.

'No matter where you look in the world, there isn't a place as safe or as conducive to rapid growth as the Sword Dragon Hall.'

And lastly, the third reason was gaining ownership of Vladiark.

'The sword gained in the Sword Selection Ceremony is only officially recognized as mine after graduation from the Hall.'

For now, it was only temporary ownership.

Only by graduating from the Hall and becoming an official swordsman of Hisperion could he fully own the sword obtained in the Sword Selection Ceremony.

If he failed to officially become a swordsman by any means, he would have to return the sword to Hisperion without question.

Of course, since he was now on friendly terms with the Heavenly Sword Lord, even if he didn't graduate, it didn't seem likely that Vladiark would be taken away from him. But the law of Hisperion was clear.

Legendary swords from the Sword Selection Ceremony were solely for the official swordsmen of Hisperion.

There was no reason to freely distribute such legendary swords from the Bladelake to swordsmen not belonging to Hisperion.

'Let's organize my goals. So I don't lose my way halfway.'

First, protect Yuria in the Sword Dragon Hall.

Second, monopolize the top rewards and grow rapidly.

Third, graduate and legally secure ownership of Vladiark.

And, a fourth goal that just now came to mind—

Grow stronger together with Sophia.

'In that case, what I need to do right now is—'

As soon as he entered the Hall, he would have to take the entrance examination.

He had to pass it as the top candidate and claim the top reward.

'I wonder what the reward will be.'

In his previous life, according to what he'd heard from Yuria, the reward was a fire-attribute elixir imbued with flames.

'A fire-attribute elixir isn't bad. After all, nothing beats the fire attribute for burning away the impurities plugging up the bloodline.'

Breaking through the stagnant ki blocking the bloodline would greatly aid his progression in aura mastery.

Would a fire-attribute elixir be the reward again, just as in his previous life?

He'd have to check for himself to know the answer.

But more than anything, what he looked forward to was daily life together with Yuria.

Living and training with Yuria in the Hall, building childhood memories together.

'In my previous life, this was something I could only ever imagine... I can't believe it's actually become reality like this.'

With a spring in his step, as if he had wings, Ian strode briskly toward the Sword Dragon Hall.

* * *

The rooftop of the Sword Dragon Hall dormitory.

"There, I see them!"

Charlotte leaned over the railing, pointing her finger into the distance.

Visible at the tip of her finger were the new trainees, working hard to climb the Hall's tall stairs.

Among them, a gray-haired boy—Ian Greysel—could be seen.

"That gray-haired boy! He's Ian Greysel."

"Yes, I see him well. He looks like a gigolo."

Standing next to Charlotte was the mage in charge of this entrance examination.

He was a veteran in the Heavenly Tower under Hisperion, though he was merely at the 4th-circle and in his mid-to-late forties.

"The hair color is enough to tell at a glance that he's a Greysel kid."

"Right. Keep your eyes on him—he's the target for this exam."

Target.

Charlotte referred to Ian as the target.

"Yes, of course. As you said, miss, I just need to knock that kid out during the entrance exam, right?"

Charlotte was conspiring to use the examination mage to make Ian Greysel fail the exam.

"That's right. Make sure he fails in a way that makes him look as useless as possible."

If Ian put on a pitiful display during this exam, even her father, the Heavenly Sword Lord, would probably lose interest in him a bit.

If it happened a few more times, he would become completely indifferent.

Then the punishment Charlotte received because of him would disappear.

He wouldn't let his daughter rot in such a dismal place because of some nobody.

"But don't make it too obvious. Understand?"

Her father still had keen interest and favor toward Ian.

If this plot were exposed, she'd face a level of punishment that would be irreversible.

She might even have her tongue paralyzed for a while, unable to speak.

"Ugh..."

Unable to help herself, Charlotte shivered at the foreboding thought.

"No matter how many times I say it, it's not enough. Making Ian fail is important, but making sure our plan isn't found out is just as important. Got it?"

"No problem. I'll take care of it for sure."

The mage, Alberto, who was colluding in Charlotte's plot, was confident.

He'd designed this entrance exam himself, and the administration was entirely his responsibility.

If he subtly tweaked the challenges, what could be so hard about making a mere boy fail?

"Good."

Charlotte smiled in satisfaction at Alberto's display of confidence.

It was a smile full of the pride and hubris of a fifteen-year-old.

"If this all goes well, I'll secure you a better position at the Heavenly Tower."

Though Charlotte had her assets confiscated as punishment, she hadn't yet lost all her allies.

No matter how penniless she seemed, a direct descendant of Hisperion was still a direct descendant.

Charlotte was among the more talented of the direct line, and also generous with rewards, so she naturally attracted followers.

If she remained penniless, even those supporters would disappear eventually, but for now, she still held considerable power.

And among those supporters was the vice-tower lord's faction in the Heavenly Tower.

Charlotte's massive donations of gems and magic stones had earned her the vice-tower lord's support.

The vice-tower lord was a high-ranking mage at the 6th-circle and held an important post, so it was plenty to promise Alberto advancement.

"Do a good job."

"It's an honor to serve you, miss Charlotte."

Alberto bowed his head and smiled obsequiously.

For Alberto, who was already worried about being forced to retire because of his age, Charlotte's offer was almost too good to be true.

"But."

Charlotte's voice suddenly turned as cold as a winter wind.

"If you fail, you know what happens, right?"

"...?"

For a moment, the air was thick with chill, and Alberto glanced nervously at Charlotte.

"... Gasp!"

Charlotte gazed down at Alberto, her eyes gleaming with murderous intent.

— Gulp!

He swallowed involuntarily.

"O-of course."

All opportunities come with risks.

If Alberto failed this time, not only would he lose all status in the Tower, he'd probably be forced to retire this very year.

"I-I will handle it without fail."

"Good. Seems you understand well."

Charlotte wore her arrogant smile again.

The oppressive air quickly returned to normal.

Only then could Alberto breathe a sigh of relief.

"Well then, best of luck. I'm counting on you."

"I-I'll make sure to live up to your trust."

Charlotte just waved her hand in response before disappearing down the rooftop stairs.

"Phew..."

Once Charlotte had left, Alberto let out a sigh of relief.

"Even young, a Hisperion is still a Hisperion."

He could hold his own in a contest of will with advanced-stage Expert knights.

Yet the sheer, razor-sharp presence of a fifteen-year-old girl, only at the upper ranks of User, was hard to believe.

'If I really mess up, my career as a mage could be finished...'

Alberto already lacked connections within the Tower.

If this incident earned him Charlotte's hatred, his potential allies would shrink further.

No one wanted to be collateral damage by getting close to someone disliked by the direct line of Hisperion.

"But... Well, there's no way I can fail."

This entrance exam's concept was a magical obstacle marathon.

It was a test where the trainee who withstood the magical obstacles for the longest would take the top spot.

The entrance exam was, in essence, a placement test to gauge the capabilities of new trainees.

Alberto had designed and would personally administer the test.

To subtly tweak the obstacles and make Ian fail was not difficult at all.

'I'll just guide the obstacles toward that brat.'

If he could take out the new trainees around Ian along with him, it would look quite natural.

"Hehehe..."

Alberto grinned evilly as he peered over the edge of the rooftop.

Ian was standing at the center of the training ground with the other new trainees.

A youthful boy of only fourteen.

He'd reportedly been getting a lot of attention from the Heavenly Sword Lord lately.

Enough even to be brought in as a houseguest of Hisperion.

It was even said that Charlotte had all her assets confiscated and received severe punishment for provoking that boy.

The reason for such deep favor had yet to be revealed, but honestly, what could it possibly be?

No matter how much natural talent, he was ultimately just a fourteen-year-old boy.

Even if he'd gathered the lord's attention with some outlandish genius, he'd at most be an late-stage User.

'There's no way a fourteen-year-old brat could overcome my magic.'

If the boy were at least early-stage Expert, it might have been tough to make it look natural.

But is that possible in reality?

In all human history, only two had reached Expert rank at that age:

'The fifth Heavenly Sword Lord, Ragnar Hisperion,' and 'the one known as Talent Blessed by Heaven, Yuria Hisperion.'

'Since he has the lord's full attention, he must have some talent, but...'

At most, late-stage User.

That's exceptional at his age, but it's meaningless among true veterans.

Late-Stage User, nothing more. Alberto could subtly eliminate him through manipulation.

"Kekekek..."

Alberto gave a sinister grin, eyes fixed on Ian.

"Ian. Guess your luck is about to feed my fortune today. Now quietly become my stepping stone to success."

I, Alberto, would make that boy fail and rise higher in the Heavenly Tower.

Yeah, I hate Charlotte. She's irredeemable...

Chapter 28 : Entrance Exam (2)

Entrance Exam (2)

The grand front gate of the Sword Dragon Hall.

The new cadets underwent entrance checks and received numbered tickets from the instructors.

The numbered tickets served as seat assignments, handed out in the order of entry.

"Let's go too."

"Yup!"

Ian and Sophia also received their numbered tickets from the instructor.

They were 97 and 98, respectively.

"Uh, huh? Aren't we supposed to be inspected separately?"

Other new cadets had their swords and notification letters from the ceremony thoroughly examined, and those entering through recommendations underwent even stricter inspections. But Ian and Sophia were simply allowed in after confirming their names and faces.

"Is it really okay for us to just go in like this?"

"Yeah, we can just go in. All the necessary procedures were finished two weeks ago."

There had been no problem preparing the notification letter and Vladiark required for entrance, and Sophia's process was handled neatly through Cheryl, the manager of the annex.

From what Ian had heard, the Heavenly Sword Lord himself had directly approved Sophia's admittance.

It was only natural they'd get a free pass.

"Wow, waaah... Now it really feels real. Never thought I'd actually get to learn swordsmanship... and at the Sword Dragon Hall, the world's greatest institution for training swordsmen...!! Woohoo!"

Sophia trembled with excitement as she gazed around the vast training grounds of the Sword Dragon Hall.

"Young master Ian! I'll work really hard! I'll become such a strong swordsman you'll be shocked!"

"That's the right attitude. Never forget that original determination."

"Yup! I'm always sincere!"

"Good, good. Let's find our seats first."

"Yup!"

Looking around the training ground, they saw stone slabs lined up neatly, each with numbers inscribed.

The slab with the same number as their ticket was their spot.

Ian and Sophia each sat down on the slabs marked 97 and 98.

'Yuria...'

As soon as he sat down, Ian looked around for Yuria.

The biggest reason he entered Sword Dragon Hall was to protect Yuria by her side.

'She's not here yet.'

No matter how he looked around in any direction, Yuria was nowhere to be seen.

"What are you looking for?"

Seeing Ian constantly turning his head, Sophia asked.

"Oh, nothing. Just looking around."

"Aha!"

At Ian's reply, Sophia also turned her head, scanning the training grounds.

"It's much bigger than I expected! I think the Greysel mansion could fit right in here!"

"Yeah, really."

Just as Sophia said, the training grounds of Sword Dragon Hall were almost as vast as some city plazas.

"It feels less like a swordsmanship school... more like a fortress."

"Could almost be a giant stadium."

"Exactly!"

The structure of Sword Dragon Hall was reminiscent of a massive rectangular stadium.

On both sides, grandstands housed multitudes, and both in front and back, imposing dormitories and classrooms wrapped around the grounds like a fortress wall.

"Young master, you said the entrance exam is right after the entrance ceremony, correct?"

"Yeah."

Ian remembered from his previous life that the main event of the Sword Dragon Hall entrance function was, in fact, the entrance exam.

The entrance speech would be very short and quickly move on.

'The format of the exam is...'

He remembered this as well, from what Yuria told him in his previous life.

'The magical obstacle marathon.'

Ian remembered everything Yuria had ever told him.

'In my past life, Yuria took first place in the entrance exam.'

It was only natural.

Yuria, now 14, had reached the threshold of an Expert.

Except for Ian, who was currently a low-intermediate-stage Expert, Yuria held the highest rank among all 14-year-olds in the world.

Probably, the only 14-year-old in the world who could beat Yuria one-on-one was Ian himself.

'But she didn't take first place so easily.'

There were some obstacles and several rivals.

'First, the interference from the test's supervising mage.'

According to Yuria, the supervising mage had cleverly concentrated the obstacles on her.

He later learned that the mage belonged to Charlotte's faction.

Charlotte used her faction's mage to keep Yuria, who was monopolizing the Heavenly Sword Lord's attention, from shining.

She wanted the Heavenly Sword Lord to be disappointed in Yuria.

'Now that I have ties to Charlotte too, I need to be wary.'

Charlotte had tried to steal Ian's Vladiark and got caught, receiving heavy punishment and ending up broke.

But she hadn't lost all her supporters yet, so she was likely to seek revenge in some way.

There was a good chance she'd use a mage to get revenge during this exam, so Ian had to stay vigilant.

'Actually, this could be better. If the magical obstacles focus on me, it simply means more mana to feed Vladiark.'

Whether it was fireballs or water cannons, if it was made of mana, Vladiark could devour it.

Try interfering, if you dare.

Vladiark would eat them all.

'And the second factor that troubled Yuria in my past life... that guy.'

The man with blazing red hair standing confidently in the very front row.

'Kargon Hisperion.'

The Heavenly Sword Lord's sixth child and third son.

Fourteen years old, same as Yuria, but born a few months earlier, so formally her older brother.

Born of the Heavenly Sword Lord's second wife, Yuria's half-brother.

'That guy and his subordinates focused all their attacks on Yuria, didn't they.'

Currently Kargon's rank was probably late-stage User.

Considering that the average new cadet's standard was entry-stage to early-stage User, Kargon was far above his peers.

If not for Yuria, Kargon would have been first place in the previous life's entrance exam.

And Kargon knew it.

If he could only get rid of Yuria, the top spot would be his.

So he formed a group.

He knew there was no beating Yuria one-on-one.

He aimed to crush her with sheer numbers.

But.

Each time, he was crushed by Yuria's overwhelming talent.

He had never taken first place in an exam even once, as far as Ian had heard.

'There's little need to worry about him. Yuria can handle him alone.'

But there were two more people to keep an eye on.

'First, that one—Hector Goldhound.'

Rich golden hair and bronzed skin. A larger build than most.

He was the second son of the strongest great family among Hisperion's vassals.

Hector, along with his gang, was sitting together in the shade.

'He's another gang leader, like Kargon.'

His aura rank was the same.

Late-stage User.

But the difference was their temperament.

'Kargon, for all his competitiveness, isn't a brute.'

But this guy—no question—was a brute.

Not only did he constantly bully those around him, but he would stop at nothing to win.

'During the entrance exam, he attacked Kargon, not Yuria.'

Likely, the reason was...

He wanted to make Kargon submit and steal his lackeys.

Probably, his final target was also Yuria.

But for now, knowing he couldn't beat Yuria, he tried to crush Kargon first and build up his own force.

'At least for this exam, I won't need to worry too much about him.'

He would only be after Kargon during this test.

But the last guy was worth caring about.

'Barbarian Kuga.'

Said to have been brought from a slave arena by Aris Hisperion, the Heavenly Sword Lord's third child and first daughter.

There was no need to look around for Kuga.

He stood out so much he was instantly recognizable.

'That guy's supposed to be 14?'

Among new cadets averaging 160 cm, his overwhelming size was obvious.

'He must be well over 2 meters tall...'

Even in his previous life, Ian had been nearly 2 meters tall.

But this guy looked way bigger.

And those muscles.

Even most orcs would look delicate beside that muscular frame.

'He's apparently a intermediate-stage User.'

Above the average of the new cadets, but lower than Yuria, Kargon, or Hector.

But that wasn't his main weapon.

'That overwhelming brute strength overflowing from his barbarian physique.'

Barbarians are classified as demi-humans, like elves or luminaries.

They possess such immense strength that they can hardly be considered human.

Kuga was a physical genius with unprecedented power, even among barbarians.

'According to Yuria, he was more dangerous than Kargon or the mages' interference.'

Brute force that even the entry-stage Expert Yuria struggled against.

That guy would likely survive until the final stages of the exam.

He'd be running into them for sure.

Ian would have to be extra careful with him.

'And finally...'

The existence Ian needed to be most careful with if he wanted to take first place in the entrance exam.

'Yuria Hisperion.'

The top scorer of Ian's previous life and the strongest among the new cadets.

And the one he loved most dearly.

'No matter how much I care for you, I can't yield first place in the entrance exam.'

In this life, Ian needed to become stronger than anyone.

To protect Yuria from the Grand Dukes of the Demon Realm, he'd have to claim every single reward given for being top of the Sword Dragon Hall.

* * *

A little while later.

The new cadets filled their seats without a single absence, and the stands on both sides of the training grounds were packed with nobles and swordsmen come to watch the entrance exam.

Soon, with the Heavenly Sword Lord's grand entrance, the entrance ceremony began.

The entrance ceremony ended in a flash.

A short welcoming speech and a simple oath.

"As a cadet of Hisperion, I swear to devote myself with all my heart to the laws and people of this land."

With that, the entrance ceremony was over.

The Heavenly Sword Lord, Darkan, stepped down from the platform and took the highest seat in the stands, while the MC took the podium and began the proceedings.

"Now, let me explain the format of the Sword Dragon Hall's entrance exam."

—Flash!

With a flash of light, a translucent screen appeared in the sky.

It was a projection magic spell to explain the entrance exam.

"This year's entrance exam is simple."

—Tsk!

As the MC pressed the button in his hand, a line drawn around the edge of the training ground began to glow blue.

"This line you see is the 'dead line'. All new cadets must avoid crossing the dead line and endure inside the area for as long as possible."

—Tsk!

When the MC pressed the button again, a video appeared.

It showed explanations of the obstacles featured in the entrance exam.

"However, the testing ground will do its best to hinder you. The floor will constantly move toward the dead line, and the speed will increase over time. Fireballs will rain from the sky, fierce winds and waves will batter you, and high stone walls will rise to block your way."

—Tsk!

The next video showed new cadets clashing swords against each other.

"This test is both survival and battle royale. You are free to duel and actively interfere with your rivals, even directly knocking them out."

—Tsk!

The further explanations were straightforward.

Extra points for knocking out rivals.

Eliminated cadets would be treated by healers on standby.

Getting knocked out early wouldn't get you expelled, but your score would be affected, so it's best to last as long as possible.

'So to sum up...'

Ian nodded.

'Basically, just beat everyone and survive.'

Currently, Ian was a low-intermediate-stage Expert.

Even higher than Yuria, called a prodigy of the heavens.

And his swordsmanship inherited the swordmaster's insights from his previous life.

Ian was a perfect predator now.

No matter if Kargon Hisperion charged him with his lackeys, Hector Goldhound rallied his gang against him, Kuga the Barbarian pushed through with brute force, the test's mage focused every obstacle on him, or Yuria crossed swords with him wielding her natural brilliance...

Ian could nullify all those attacks and schemes with a casual yawn.

'This'll be fun. Now, let's see... just how capable these kids are.'

With a smile of expectation, Ian slung Vladiark over his shoulder.

Most of the examinees mentioned by Ian will probably get one-shotted by him...

Chapter 29 : Entrance Exam (3)

Entrance Exam (3)

"And finally, I will introduce the top reward for this entrance exam."

The top reward for the entrance exam.

Everyone's attention focused on those words.

It was well known that the reward given to the top scorer in each exam at the Dragon Sword Hall was of such tremendous value that even master-level powerhouses coveted it.

Just what kind of supreme treasure had been prepared as the reward for this entrance exam?

"The top reward for this entrance exam is...."

- Dugu dugu dugu dugu!

Tension rose along with the sound of beating drums.

The host swept his gaze across the sparkling eyes of the crowd and announced in a booming voice.

"It is the Heavenly Blood Pill bestowed by the Heavenly Sword Lord!"

"Huh, wh-what!?"

"H-huh!?"

"What did you say!?"

The announcement left the new cadets and spectators in shock.

"... What?"

Ian was just as taken aback.

'Did he say the reward for the entrance exam is the Heavenly Sword Lord's Heavenly Blood Pill?'

The Heavenly Blood Pill of the Heavenly Sword Lord.

It was an elixir made by condensing the blood and aura of Darkan, the Heavenly Sword Lord.

'Insane....'

Made from the blood and aura of Darkan, the greatest swordsman in the world and one who had reached the realm of a demi-god, it was already a priceless treasure by its very existence. But its effects also far surpassed those of most uppermost-grade elixirs.

'If it was made with the Swordmaster's blood... It isn't just helpful for refining aura cultivation.'

The blood of Hisperion, called 'Heavenly Blood' in the world, had particular efficacy.

'Just having it flow inside you strengthens your body.'

Ordinary people weaken with age.

But the Hisperion bloodline, thanks to that unique blood, instead became tougher with age.

Of course, their strength wasn't limitless—there was a ceiling—but that ceiling was sky-high.

Probably by now, Darkan's bones were harder than adamantium.

And his skin would be as tough as dragon hide.

'And the Swordmaster's Heavenly Blood Pill...'

A supreme treasure made by concentrating the essence of that magnificent, powerful blood into purest magic power.

If you pop one of those pills and completely digest it, you'd gain the effects of Hisperion Heavenly Blood for several years all at once.

'If an ordinary person took it, they could turn into a powerhouse who could easily lift a 500kg boulder in an instant.'

What if Ian took it?

'I'd experience at least double the effect compared to that.'

This was thanks to the [Orc's Strength Lv.15] stored in his Authority of Projection.

Three days before entering the Dragon Sword Hall—

As soon as he reached ealy-stage Expert, Ian had fully manifested [Orc's Strength Lv.15].

Not as 'Temporary Manifestation', which required constant mana expenditure, but 'Full Manifestation', which could be maintained permanently without draining his aura.

Now, even without using any aura, Ian could always utilize [Orc's Strength Lv.15].

Currently, he could exert the strength of five grown men without aura.

If he consumed that elixir made from the demi-god's heavenly blood in that physical state...

'Ha... Vladiark will feel as light as a feather.'

He'd probably be able to kill a troll barehanded, even without aura.

Essentially, he'd become an adult barbarian in the form of a boy.

He'd be able to overpower any new cadet with just his grip strength.

He'd be able to crush human bones like cookies.

'To think such a treasure is offered as a reward right from the start...'

However—

'In my previous life, I heard the entrance exam reward was definitely a fire attribute elixir.'

The top reward Yuria had told him about wasn't the Heavenly Blood Pill.

'There's no way Yuria would've lied about something like this... don't tell me...'

Was it a butterfly effect originating from himself?

'If the reason for the changed reward is because of me... that's the only explanation.'

Most likely—

The Heavenly Sword Lord now wanted to see Ian's full power.

He wanted Ian to engage his genius daughter Yuria in a true contest.

And as fitting payment for that, he would offer his own blood.

'He must be curious.'

Curious to see whether Yuria or Ian possessed greater talent.

Curious whose abilities were superior.

So, he'd incited an all-out clash between the two by dangling the Heavenly Blood Pill made from his blood.

Meanwhile, from the stands, Darkan, the Heavenly Sword Lord, watched Ian.

'I hope you'll like the reward I've prepared. Ian Greysel.'

Ian's guess was half right, but also half wrong.

'I am looking forward to your duel with my daughter Yuria... but you will likely defeat her quite easily.'

A satisfied smile curled at Darkan's lips as he gazed at Ian.

'Consume my blood, Ian Greysel. Accept my feelings—my wish to think of you as my own blooded child.'

But there was a deeper intention behind Darkan's thoughts than Ian could imagine.

'If the Heavenly Sword Lord wants to see a true match between Yuria and me... then I have no choice but to show him!'

He was fired up to go all out from the beginning anyway, but the Swordmaster had just poured oil on that fire.

'Now, there's no way I can yield the top spot, even if I die.'

I must obtain it!

The Heavenly Blood Pill of the Heavenly Sword Lord!

* * *

"Then, let the entrance exam begin!"

— Kugugugugugu!

With the host's shout, the floor of the training hall shook violently.

Soon, the ground began to move toward the deadline.

The new cadets standing in the arena staggered for a moment, but quickly regained their balance and began to run.

'Now it begins.'

Each drew their sword, wary of one another as they ran.

From this moment on, stopping your feet meant death.

The floor of the training hall was moving relentlessly, driving the new cadets toward the deadline.

"Young master! Don't worry about me! I'll do my best on my own!"

— Nod!

In response to Sophia's declaration, Ian answered with a nod.

Failing early in this exam wouldn't result in expulsion from the Dragon Sword Hall.

It would just disadvantage future grades a little.

Anyway, with Ian's private tutoring, Sophia would grow rapidly over time and end up well within the safe zone for graduation.

So this was a good opportunity for her to experience struggling through on her own.

"Then I'm heading ahead. See you later!"

"Yep! See you later!"

Above all, right now, the examiner mage from Charlotte's faction could potentially target Ian.

If Sophia was with him, she might get caught up in the crossfire, so it was better to separate for now.

— Chae-eng!

— Chang!

At the front, sword fights had already broken out between Yuria and Kargon's group.

"Kargon. Are you really attacking me with numbers, how cowardly?"

"I just chose the way to defeat you!"

"This is interesting. Fine, I'll play with you."

Ian watched that scene quietly, then shifted his gaze.

'Looks like Yuria will win over there without any issues.'

What about Hector Goldhound?

In his previous life, he'd heard Hector targeted Kargon.

"Hm. Sure enough."

Just as expected, he was running at a distance, watching Kargon with his own group.

He was probably planning to strike once Kargon was worn down.

'No need to worry about them for now.'

Just as Ian was about to look for Kuga—

— Kugugugugugu!

The arena shook hard again, and the ground began to rise.

The first obstacle in the magical obstacle course marathon:

The beehive staircase.

A ragged set of stairs full of hole traps rose up.

"Urgh!"

"Ack!"

"Hiiyaah!"

In an instant, some cadets missed a step or lost their balance and were eliminated.

Ian turned hastily to check on Sophia.

"Oof! U-ugh!"

Luckily, Sophia was surviving just fine.

Dodging the falling new cadets with agility proved her two weeks of training hadn't been for nothing.

'Sophia's doing well. As for Kuga the barbarian...'

— Bounce!

— Kwaaaang!

Kuga laid waste to those around him with tremendous jumping power and destructive force.

"....."

— Bounce!

— Kwaaaang!

"Aaaagh!"

"Graaah!!"

'What the heck is that monster?'

Cadets caught in the shockwaves of Kuga's devastating landings were sent tumbling.

'That guy's pure combat strength might be at the Expert level as well.'

His aura rank might be low, but—

With that overwhelming physique, he wouldn't be an easy opponent even for Yuria.

'Hmm... but somehow....'

Kuga, who was bouncing from the back—

Was getting closer and closer.

Seemed to be heading toward Ian.

— Bounce!

"Huh...?"

Suddenly, Kuga leaped over Ian's head.

The sunlight was blotted out by his massive frame.

And then—

— Kwaaaang!

The ground in front of Ian exploded with the landing.

"Ugh!"

Ian immediately dove sideways to avoid the debris.

In a flash, Kuga passed nearby.

— Bounce!

"Damn it."

And again.

— Kwaaaang!

Kuga blew up the ground right in front of Ian.

"Damn."

In the dusty haze, Kuga's fierce eyes gleamed ominously.

Those eyes were fixed directly on Ian.

'He's after me?'

This entrance exam had survival rules, allowing attacks on competitors.

Kuga was definitely trying to eliminate Ian.

'Why?'

The answer came immediately.

'Aris Hisperion. That woman put him up to this.'

Aris Hisperion.

The third child and eldest daughter of the Heavenly Sword Lord.

Barbarian Kuga was a slave purchased by Aris.

She must also have been curious about Ian—who was admitted as a guest by her father, the Heavenly Sword Lord.

So, she was using her slave to test Ian's skills.

'I have no ill will, but if he keeps interfering, I'll just have to retaliate.'

— Bounce!

Sure enough, Kuga lunged at Ian's front again.

But—

'Frenzied Instight Style—Extreme Point!'

— Kwajik!

Kuga couldn't land.

"Kuh, guhk?!"

Ian had smashed his ankle with Vladiark before he could touch down.

— Kudangtang!

Kuga was horribly thrown across the stairs.

— Roll roll roll!

He tumbled down the steps like a boulder.

— Thud! Thud! Thud!

"Gah!"

"Agh!"

The cadets caught up in Kuga's massive frame as he fell were sent crashing down as well.

'Good. That's one less thing to worry about.'

A technique that focused aura at a single extreme point.

Frenzied Instight Style's Extreme Point, used with Vladiark, was far more powerful than Ian had expected.

'I hadn't meant to break his ankle...'

Who would have thought such a thick ankle would snap like a reed.

And he hadn't even struck with his full strength.

'But if they treat him immediately, there should be no aftereffects.'

There were healers on standby below, so there shouldn't be a problem.

That Kuga...

'Such destructive power at age fourteen. I'd like to train him.'

He looked quite useful—it'd be good to keep an eye on him.

'If I raise him well, he'll be a great help when fighting the Grand Dukes of the Demon Realm.'

Felt like he'd met a good warrior.

However—

'Damn.'

Having taken down someone as conspicuous as Kuga in one blow, Ian now found everyone's eyes on him.

'Even Hector is watching me now.'

Originally, Hector's gang was targeting Kargon.

But now, their target seemed to have changed.

To Ian.

— Kugugugugugu!

Then, the terrain shifted again.

The second obstacle of the magical marathon:

Mudslide.

The stairs disappeared, leaving only treacherous slopes.

At the same time—

— Kururururu!

— Fudududududuk!

"Aaagh!"

"Ooof!"

A tsunami of mud swept down the entire slope.

No room to dodge to the side.

'I'll have to jump over it.'

— Bounce!

Ian lightly leaped over the mud tsunami.

— Shweeeek!

Just then, a throwing knife flew toward him.

'Haaa... Hector.'

It was a dagger thrown by Hector Goldhound.

— Chae-eng!!

Ian blocked it with the broad blade of Vladiark.

"Ho!"

Hector, who was suddenly nearby, glinted his eyes maliciously.

"You blocked that? That was supposed to be a perfect sneak attack."

— Srrrng!

Three more daggers appeared on each of his knuckles.

Each one sharp as a razor.

'Wait a minute...'

That Hector jerk—he's carrying a greatsword on his back and even uses daggers?

And his throwing skills aren't bad either.

Not a bad variation.

"Get him!"

Hector moved his lackeys.

'These fools are just looking to shorten their lifespan.'

Well—in the end, anyone aiming for top scorer would have to get through them.

They were attacking first for the same reason Ian would've.

Better to attack while their stamina was higher.

However—

'They've picked the wrong opponent.'

If they'd just behaved, they would've gotten a high ranking.

— Kaang!

"Guh!"

A lackey charging at Ian was struck in the jaw by Vladiark and sent flying.

"All right. Who's next?"

Already, Ian was starting to enjoy life at the Dragon Sword Hall.

Yeah, even the barbarian got one-hit.

Chapter 30 : Entrance Exam (4)

Entrance Exam (4)

Hector's fingertip pointed at Ian.

"Get him!"

At Hector's command, his gang rushed forward all at once.

"Yee-hap!"

"Get him! Get him!"

— Paat!

— Tadatdat!

"Encircle him!"

"I'll go to the back!"

"Then I'll take the front!"

They swarmed toward Ian like a pack of wolves.

"Hup!"

The one who swung his sword at the very front.

It was Jacob, the second-in-command of Hector's gang.

'I'll just disarm you first!'

His target was Ian's wrist.

Jacob planned to render Ian empty-handed and then leisurely toy with him.

However.

— Kaaang!

There was no way Ian would fall for the cheap trick of a third-rate who hadn't even become an Expert.

"Kehek!?"

Jacob was struck on the chin by Ian's Vladiark and was sent flying into the air.

— Kudangtang!

He crashed hard onto the ground and tumbled unceremoniously past the deadline.

"Next."

"U-ugh!?"

"Kugh...!"

Those who had boldly rushed in came to a sudden halt at Ian's overwhelming presence.

"C-crazy...!"

Hector too was startled, his lips twitching in disbelief.

'What's with that reaction speed...!?'

Jacob was the second-in-command of Hector's gang.

And at least in terms of speed, he was even faster than Hector—a prodigy.

'I thought with that massive greatsword, he'd never be able to react to Jacob's speed...'

He thought that if Jacob made the first strike with his superior speed, Ian wouldn't even be able to react and would stumble or quickly surrender.

But.

'That bastard...! He swung his sword as if he predicted exactly where Jacob would come from!'

Like smacking a flying ball with a bat.

Ian, with a smooth and fluid motion, sent Jacob's chin flying.

As a result, Jacob traced a splendid arc and crashed outside the deadline.

"U-uurgh!"

"H-hector?"

"W-what now?!"

Their ambush crumbled right from the outset, and Hector's gang floundered, caught between the glances of Hector and Ian.

"Damn... Looks like we underestimated our opponent too much."

Hector gritted his teeth hard.

He had guessed Ian had some ability, especially after watching that guy topple the muscly Kuga with a single blow, but hadn't thought he was someone he couldn't handle.

He believed Kuga only lost because he was careless, and that Hector himself, as a swordsman of higher rank than Kuga, along with his loyal gang, would be different.

But he never imagined Jacob would fall to a single blow without even a chance to respond.

Ian's true skill far exceeded expectations.

"Hey! Gray hair. What's your name?"

"My name?"

Hector didn't know Ian.

He had, of course, heard rumors about the Greysel family's dim-witted eldest son, and they had attended the Sword Spirit ceremony together, but he'd never paid attention to Ian's face.

In a sense, this was the first time Hector consciously registered Ian's existence.

However, Ian had no intention of introducing himself here and now.

— Chuk!

Ian rested Vladiark on his shoulder and smirked.

"What, exchanging names now? Just hurry up and come over here."

"Tch. How annoying."

Hector scowled and gave a sinister smile.

He thought about suggesting a temporary alliance, considering Ian's skill.

But that gray-haired boy clearly had no intention of being friendly.

'Well, I guess he's skilled enough to be arrogant.'

Ian had taken down the monster-sized Kuga in a single blow, and sent Hector's own number-two Jacob flying with ease.

He must be at least 'User Intermediate' in skill.

'But—'

But arrogance is arrogance.

'I am a late-stage User. I'm in a different class from those two you've defeated so far.'

— Srrrng!

Hector drew the greatsword slung on his back.

— Chwarururuk!

"Hoo...."

At first glance it seemed an ordinary greatsword, but now revealed to be a segmented sword that could be wielded like a whip.

— Chwiiik!

Hector swung the segmented sword to the side, and the blade, connected by chains, curved like a whip and struck the ground with force.

— Kwaaang!

Where the sword tip struck, the ground erupted as if hit by a catapult.

Indeed.

Based on the principle of a whip, its destructive power was tremendous.

If wielded skillfully, a segmented sword could display power several times beyond its user's raw strength.

'Interesting.'

Ian looked at Hector with amusement.

'Throwing daggers at long range, using a segmented sword at mid-range...'

It felt like watching a circus.

"Hey. Gray hair."

Hector made his proposal to Ian once more.

"You seem to be pretty skilled. How about a temporary alliance? Let's take down Kargon and Yuria over there first, then fight each other. Sound good?"

— Chwaruruk!

Hector's segmented sword squirmed like a snake.

"Not sure if you realize, but you're within my striking distance. I could whip you down right now."

Hector's threat.

"If you don't answer within three seconds, I'll attack. Three. Two—"

Ian was so amused by Hector that he almost burst out laughing, but he kept it under wraps.

"Hector."

"Hm? You know my name? Then you should tell me—"

"Let me tell you one thing."

"Huh?"

— Paang!

"Huh!"

In a flash, Ian closed the gap to stand right in front of Hector.

He used a footwork technique based on the principle of Frenzied Insight Style Extreme Point.

"When you make threats like that—"

— Kwajik!

"K-kuhek!"

Ian used the momentum of his charge to seize Hector's thick neck in a firm grip.

"— you should only start when you're sure you've established your dominance."

"Ke... kek! Kurk!?"

— Tatatat!

With Hector's neck in his grasp, Ian ran up the slope.

"Kuh... Ke! Kurk!"

Hector tried to resist, grabbing at Ian's wrist, but Ian's grip was tougher than an old tree root.

Hector naturally dropped his segmented sword, but even as he used both hands to resist, it was useless.

Hector's segmented sword slid down the slope and disappeared past the deadline.

"D-damn it!"

"Hector!"

Hector's goons anxiously chased after Ian.

But no one dared to actually try and rescue Hector.

Overwhelmed by Ian, who had already crushed both the second-in-command and the boss, their courage was simply not enough.

"Your leader's been caught. Are you just going to watch?"

So Ian provoked them.

He also wanted to test out the skills of Hector's goons.

"Y-you bastard! Don't underestimate us!"

A rather large one fell for it nicely.

"Fine."

— Kaang! Chaeng! Chaeng!

Ian grasped Hector with one hand, and with the other, wielded Vladiark to block the goon's sword.

— Chaeng! Chaeng! Kaang!

"Hup! Hruup! Huaaap!"

'He's strong, but too agitated. He's full of openings.'

Ian calmly evaluated the goon's skills, parrying his attacks.

Yet, to a third-party observer, it appeared Ian was almost evenly matched with the goon.

"O-oh! Thomas is pushing him back!"

"Maybe he's getting tired?!"

"L-let's go in too!"

"Oooh! We can do it!"

"He's only using one hand! Press in!"

This emboldened the other goons, who also rushed in swinging their swords.

— Chaeng! Chaeng! Whiik! Chaeng!

— Kang! Whiik! Whik! Chaeng!

However, it took less than three minutes for their courage to turn back into fear.

"W-what the—!"

"What kind of monster is he...!"

A total of eight goons clashed swords with Ian.

But in three minutes, not a single clean hit could land.

"He's making us look like children..."

"W-what the hell!! That bastard!!"

Whenever they swung their swords, Ian dodged like a gentle breeze.

When they tried to surround him to prevent escape, he just smashed the encirclement using Hector as a shield.

When they went for a frantic barrage, he parried every last strike as if amused by their efforts.

"D-don't get cocky! Uaaaa!"

Goon Thomas, yelling almost like screaming, charged at Ian.

— Kaaang!

"Kehk!"

Like Jacob, he was struck on the chin and rolled straight out beyond the deadline—eliminated.

"K-Kugh...!"

"You monster!"

The rest of the goons' footwork faltered again.

— Chuk!

Ian rested Vladiark on his shoulder, scanning the goons with a gleeful gaze.

'How cute, these guys.'

He could tell they'd spent a lot of time training together.

They were young, of course, so being intimidated by a strong enemy was to be expected.

But seeing them grit their teeth and refuse to give up was rather endearing.

There seemed to be a sense of camaraderie, too.

"Hahaha."

Meanwhile,

"Heheheh. Cute little guy."

The Heavenly Sword Lord, Darkan, watched Ian's performance from the stands, wearing a similar smile.

"Kelbian, isn't he amazing? Even Hector of the Goldhound family is a promising talent. But look at Ian—a whole gang attacks at once and he still overwhelms them! He's a real genius! An undeniable genius!"

"... Lord. Miss Yuria is also overwhelming Young Master Kargon..."

"Hmm? Oh, well. I've seen that so many times it's lost its impact."

"....."

"Heheheh. Ian. Yes, that's it! Be the top scorer, become my blood-related child!"

"Haaa..."

It seemed like ages since anyone had seen the Heavenly Sword Lord as giddy as a child.

'Good thing I put up a sound barrier as soon as I sat.'

Otherwise, all the Heavenly Sword Lord's childlike excitement would've echoed through the arena.

To maintain the prestige and dignity of the lord of the house, Kelbian would have to keep a close eye on him for a while.

'Well, honestly, I understand how the lord feels.'

Kelbian, too, looked at Ian with satisfaction.

'If that boy became my junior, I'd feel totally secure.'

Remarkable talent, humility, and good manners as well.

Kelbian was just as fond of Ian as the Heavenly Sword Lord was.

'I wish he'd hurry up and join us. There's so much I'd like to teach him.'

— Kugugugugugu!

Then, the terrain of the exam hall shifted once more.

The third stage of the magical obstacle course marathon.

The Infinite Cliff.

"What? Whoa—!!"

"Aaaaah!!"

With the slope suddenly rising, countless new cadets lost their balance and slipped.

They rolled a while, reached the deadline, and were eliminated.

— Kwajik!

— Kwak!

"Whew, whew!"

"I almost died!"

The sharper cadets barely survived by stabbing their swords into the cliff, but the peril was not over.

— Kugugugugugu!

The cliff began to sink down, drawing the cadets relentlessly toward the deadline.

To survive, they had to keep climbing upward along the cliff.

— Kwaang!

— Kwaang!

Yuria and Kargon's battle had just reached its conclusion, too.

"K-kyahhh! Yuriaaa!!!"

"Let's play again next time, Kargon."

Kargon and his gang plummeted down the cliff with screams.

'Looks like things are settled over there.'

Dangling from Vladiark, which he'd driven into the cliff, Ian looked down after glancing at Yuria.

'Those poor bastards.'

Hector's gang, too, floundered and then fell down below the cliff.

"Ke, ke-kehk! Kurk!"

Hector was still in Ian's grasp by the neck.

'Sturdy guy, this one.'

Truly a fitting 'late-stage User' prospect.

If he'd been an ordinary guy, his neck would've snapped long ago.

Hector merely looked a little pale but was still conscious.

"Good work, Hector. Reflect on today's battle with your gang."

At that, Ian tried to release Hector—

— Hwarururuk!

— Kuaaa!

A magical obstacle appeared.

'A fireball!'

From above Ian's head, a fireball the size of an elephant was falling.

'You've got to be kidding me!'

Ian reflexively used Hector as a human shield against the fireball.

— Kwaaaaaang!

"Kehek! Gyaaaaaaah!!!"

Hector took the brunt of the fireball and screamed.

"....."

— Sizzle sizzle sizzle...

Finally, Hector lost consciousness.

"I'll let go now. Sorry about that."

Ian let Hector fall below the cliff.

— Wheeeeee....

— Phlump!

Hector tumbled down, smoke rising from his body.

There was a healer below, so he'd be treated soon.

'That was dangerous just now.'

The fireball flew straight at Ian as if he were being targeted.

'The power was no joke either.'

Even the tough Hector would have died with a second hit—such was its force.

'Looks like the exam mage is targeting me. Charlotte must have put him up to it.'

He knew this from his past life, thanks to Yuria.

The exam proctor mage was aligned with Charlotte's faction.

Charlotte was trying to take revenge after being disciplined because of Ian by manipulating the mage.

'Well. Let them try.'

All the riffraff had already been eliminated by the rising cliff.

Now, the only things to worry about were the magical obstacles and Yuria.

'Ah, right, what about Sophia...'

"Huff! Huff! Argh! I'm dying here!"

Sophia was tenaciously climbing up the cliff, persisting.

"Wow."

How had she survived until now?

She'd even managed to keep her sword strapped to her back.

"Impressive."

Sophia clearly knew how to handle things by herself.

That made Ian's heart swell with satisfaction.

'Kugh! Why isn't the magic activating!?'

Meanwhile, the 4th-circle mage Alberto, furiously manipulating the test obstacles, was silently grinding his teeth.

'It's the perfect moment! Why is the magic device unresponsive!?'

Alberto was trying to send a shockwave through the cliff and cause Ian to fall.

But the magic device producing the shockwaves was as unresponsive as if it had died.

'D-damn it! I have to force it to work before I miss my chance!'

When a magic device is dead, five out of ten times it's a power issue.

Insufficient mana supply makes the machine inoperable.

With direct infusing, it should work again.

'I don't know why the power supply's cut, but I'd better hurry!'

If he lost this timing, there might not be another opportunity.

'No! Actually, I'm already way too late!'

He'd spent so long waiting for a chance to drop Ian that he'd let Ian's performance go unchecked.

The entire point of eliminating Ian was to suppress his success in the test.

Even if he dropped Ian now, Charlotte would still scold him.

'So I have to hurry! Drop him now—!'

— Tuk!

Alberto placed his hand on the magic control panel and channeled his mana.

His mana flowed through the intricate mana circuits toward the device in front of Ian.

And then...

Alberto's mana reached the magic device where Vladiark was embedded.

'Wh-what the...!?'

A handful of his mana was instantly sucked away.

Vladiark began to ravenously devour Alberto's mana.

"Ku... Kuuuaaahhhh!!!"

As if every vein in his body was being ripped out, excruciating pain and dizziness overtook Alberto.

Serves that mage right...

Get wrecked noob...