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

Chapter 31 : Entrance Exam (5)

Entrance Exam (5)

The moment Alberto's magic power touched the magical device where Vladiark was embedded,

— Swoooosh!!

Vladiark began to suck Alberto's magic power in like a black hole.

— Gulp! Gulp!

"K-Kkhuaaaah!!!"

Alberto screamed at the pain he'd never before experienced in his life.

It was a pain as if every nerve in his body was being forcibly pulled out alive.

"K-Kkeuuuugh!!"

In an instant, his vision blurred, and something—whether it was blood or froth—kept pouring out of his mouth.

"G-Guuaagh!!"

He desperately tried to pull his hand away from the control panel, but it was no use.

It was as if he had been electrocuted—his limbs simply would not obey.

'I-I can't anymore... s-stop...!'

Alberto, on the verge of death in an instant.

Just as his consciousness was about to fade away—

— Boom!!!

By great fortune.

The mana circuit of the magical device connecting Alberto and Vladiark couldn't withstand the pressure and exploded on the spot.

— Ssssss...

With the explosion, Vladiark's magic power absorption ceased.

"U-Uuuek...!"

Alberto fell backward, overcome by a dizzying drowsiness.

He lost consciousness and did not get up again.

— Murmur, murmur.

"W-What is that? An accident?"

"What's going on?"

"The exam mage collapsed."

A small explosion erupted from one side of the training grounds, and at the same time, Alberto fainted outright, causing the assembled nobles and spectators to buzz.

"There is no need for anyone to panic."

The head of the Heavenly Sword family, Darkan, calmed the noisy hall as if it were nothing significant.

"Support team, see to the fallen, and replace the supervising mage at once. The exam will continue."

A mage to substitute for Alberto appeared almost immediately, and within less than a minute, the test was back on track.

As everyone began to watch the new cadets' struggle with renewed interest...

"....."

The Heavenly Sword Lord's gaze remained fixed on Alberto.

Alberto, who was now receiving first aid at the edge of the arena from healers.

'What is with that bastard?'

The calm expression Darkan had just worn vanished, and a smoldering anger burned in his eyes.

'Why did he target only Ian so persistently?'

When the entrance exam reached its third trial, the infinite cliff section...

That mage dropped a powerful fireball on Ian.

At a glance, it was a normal magical obstacle.

Fireballs had fallen over other cadets' heads before, too.

But at the level of the Heavenly Sword Lord, one could distinctly sense the difference in magic power density within them.

'The fireball that dropped over Ian's head had a magic power density five times higher than the others.'

The power of a spell is proportional to its magic power density.

That level of magic power density is more suited for actual combat than an exam.

If he'd taken a direct hit, even Ian wouldn't have been able to hold on to the cliff unscathed.

'Moreover...'

Even up to here, it would be hard to dismiss as mere coincidence, but the mage took it a step further.

'He laboriously tried to activate the magical device right in front of Ian—even twisting his body in desperation.'

The magical device embedded in the cliff where Ian clung.

Alberto had aimed explicitly at Ian by infusing magic power directly into it.

It didn't look like he wanted to hide that he'd been instructed.

There was nothing to gain from getting caught.

Was it a mistake made in anxiety, rushing his actions?

No. Or perhaps he simply didn't know that experts above Swordmaster rank could read magic power flows.

In any case, since Alberto so openly targeted Ian, the Heavenly Sword Lord was now certain.

'Someone definitely hired that mage to make Ian fall. Who? Who instructed that bastard to target my Ian?'

Darkan glared and scanned the audience one by one.

The instigator was surely present here.

They would want to confirm Ian's downfall with their own eyes.

Now that the hired mage had collapsed, the culprit was likely immensely flustered or disappointed.

'I'll track them by their aura.'

So, the one most bewildered or disappointed among them would be the perpetrator.

— Glare!

Darkan's eyes glinted coldly.

In front of the Heavenly Sword Lord's eyes appeared various forms of aura.

Auras fluctuated with emotions like interest, admiration, anticipation.

As he slowly swept through the area—

One particular aura surged forth like wild waves.

A surge full of surprise, anxiety, and unrest.

'Charlotte...'

It was Charlotte's aura.

'You again.'

My daughter.

After losing all her assets for meddling with Ian, and yet she still hadn't learned her lesson?

Veins throbbed in Darkan's temples.

"Kelbian."

"Yes, my lord."

"That mage who just collapsed. What's his name?"

"Alberto Boroff, age 47. A 4th-Circle mage of the Heavenly Tower."

"What about his faction? Any ties to my children?"

"Alberto belongs to no faction. Retirement is near, and his ability isn't remarkable, so he's never been chosen by any faction."

"I see."

Darkan stroked his prickly white beard.

'So, he was bribed in exchange for joining Charlotte's faction?'

With frigid eyes, Darkan gazed at his fifth child, Charlotte.

Charlotte, being a direct Hisperion bloodline, sat just below the Heavenly Sword Lord's seat.

On the surface, she feigned composure, but to the lord's eyes, her trembling aura was plain to see.

Her feelings were shifting from panic to anger.

'That idiot Alberto!'

Charlotte ground her teeth silently, fists trembling.

'He didn't get a single thing right! Not one!'

Her plan to hinder Ian's success was now in utter ruins.

'I told him to block that brat from doing anything! But all he did was let him shine even more!!!'

The spectators were all watching Ian with sparkling eyes.

Their gaze overflowed with shock and admiration.

Of course, they would.

That brat had taken down Barbarian Kuga as soon as the test began, and even single-handedly overpowered Hector's gang in a spectacular display.

'I—I definitely heard he can't even use aura...! Uuugh! Just what is going on!!'

Charlotte desperately resisted the urge to scratch her head raw.

'Seriously... what is he!? D-Don't tell me he's been hiding his skills from everyone till now!? T-There's no way! Why would he hide his power while getting mocked as a useless halfwit...! Ahh! I don't know anymore! Y-You fraud...!! And you, Alberto, you idiot!! Why did you collapse all of a sudden!! Argh! The plan's a total mess!! Damn! Damn! Damn!! Idiot! Idiot! Idiot!!! It's all a scam!!!'

'... Haaa.'

The Heavenly Sword Lord looked pitifully at Charlotte's quivering back.

"Kelbian."

"Yes, my lord."

"You noticed as well?"

"... You mean that mage targeting Young Master Ian?"

Kelbian, being a master of the highest rank himself, could also follow the flow of magic power.

"I knew it. You never disappoint."

"I am honored."

"We must prepare for a trial."

"What preparations should be made?"

"First, thoroughly investigate who hired that mage."

Darkan sighed softly.

"I suspect Charlotte."

He was speaking right into the back of Charlotte's head, but as his voice was blocked by his aura, Charlotte could not hear.

"Get a proper testimony from the mage, and bring him as a witness to the family trial."

"Yes, your will be done."

"Haa..."

Darkan leaned into his throne and let out a deep sigh.

"Kelbian. What should I do with my foolish daughter?"

"... As I have no children myself, I do not dare to advise. My apologies."

"Hmmm... Is that so. What should I do...? I already have seven children, yet raising them seems harder than war or politics."

Darkan rubbed his temple, deep in thought.

"If I punish Charlotte for this again, will she ever leave Ian alone?"

"In my opinion... if it's Lady Charlotte, she'll just become more jealous and resentful of Young Master Ian and try to torment him further."

"Whew... That's true. Charlotte is my daughter, but she is arrogant and spoiled. She used to listen to me well, but now she won't even heed my words. Well... I suppose it's that time. Hard to accept."

"I apologize for being of no help."

"Let me think alone for a while."

"Yes."

Darkan tapped the armrest thoughtfully.

"Hm!"

A while later, apparently struck by a good idea, he straightened up with a slap on the armrest.

"That's it!"

"?"

"Have Charlotte live together with Ian!"

"...? My lord?"

Kelbian's head tilted in rare confusion.

How on earth could that be a solution?

Charlotte already seemed to dislike Ian extremely.

Wouldn't keeping them together just make them fight more?

Young Master Ian also seemed to have quite the temperament.

Had he not utterly destroyed the five knights of Greysel?

"Charlotte is arrogant and prickly, but once she opens her heart, she is more affectionate than anyone. Ian is calm and composed as well—if I put the two together, surely they'll get along better in time."

"..."

Kelbian could not agree, so he simply bowed his head silently.

The Heavenly Sword Lord's idea had two fatal flaws.

First, right now, there was absolutely no basis that Charlotte would ever open her heart to Ian.

Second, while Ian was calm ordinarily, if angered, he could become violent enough to draw his sword even against his own father.

"E-Erm..."

To Kelbian, if he put them together, they'd be far more likely to become enemies than friends.

If he were a true loyalist, he should have spoken up...

"Isn't it a good idea!"

"E-Errrrm..."

With his master so confident, Kelbian couldn't easily protest.

"Kelbian. Ian will someday become a knight that protects Hisperion like you. So making such connections from a young age is good. That's right. The closer they are, the better."

Humming, Darkan tapped the armrest again.

"After the trial, have Charlotte and Ian assigned to the same class."

"M-My lord..."

Kelbian broke out in a cold sweat.

"If you do that, lady Charlotte will be demoted by a whole grade. Her pride will be most deeply wounded. The other direct scions will mock her harshly as well."

"Of course. It's a punishment—there needs to be that much weight."

"B-But... this will only make Lady Charlotte resent Young Master Ian even more."

"That may happen at first. But time will fix it."

"E-Erm..."

Where did this optimism come from, exactly?

But...

'The Heavenly Sword Lord's intuition is rarely ever wrong.'

If his master was this convinced, he must be seeing something.

"My mind is set. If Charlotte lives together with Ian, they'll soon get along. Charlotte might be difficult, but she's not bad at heart. Ian is mature beyond his years—he'll surely treat Charlotte kindly, even if she acts up."

"E-Erm..."

Kelbian pursed his lips.

Would Young Master Ian really tolerate Charlotte's childishness?

It seemed to him Ian only cared about his own people.

"And both are in their youthful prime. Who knows? They may even go beyond friendship and develop feelings between boy and girl."

"H-Huh! My lord!"

"Why so surprised, Kelbian? I even once encouraged you to be engaged to my daughter, Aris, didn't I?"

"T-That was a little different..."

"And you tactfully refused."

"I-It was too great an honor for me, sir."

"I can understand your feelings."

Aris Hisperion, the third child and eldest daughter of the Heavenly Sword Lord.

Even her father sometimes thought of her as gloomy and cunning.

She was a beloved daughter, but to others, she must seem like a chilling witch.

However, very few people knew her true nature.

Most only saw her beautiful appearance and admired her.

But anyone who'd experienced her dark inner side once could never see her as a romantic partner.

'Aris isn't all that sinister deep down, though.'

Still, only her father or perhaps her future husband would ever know.

"Well... anyway."

The master wished to bring the loyal people he loved and trusted into his family, by matching them with his daughters.

"I hope Ian and Charlotte end up getting along after all this."

"I-I hope so too, my lord."

"Yes. I'll personally ask Ian to help my daughter."

"But, my lord."

"Hm?"

"... Isn't Young Master Ian also in the same year as Lady Yuria?"

Kelbian had another concern.

It would be great for Charlotte and Ian to become close, as the master wished, but that too had its complications.

"I fear that if Young Master Ian becomes close with Lady Charlotte, he may end up in a rivalry with Lady Yuria."

"If that happens, I'll step in, of course."

Darkan smiled.

"I will raise Ian as a loyal guardian of our family. If I ask him to mediate, he'll do so without fail."

Ian's aura was that kind.

"In fact, the boy has the talent to become the mediator of our house. One day, he'll bloom and possess great power as well."

Darkan smiled quietly.

"If possible, I'd like him to get close to our youngest, Yuria, as well."

"I too hope Young Master Ian and Lady Yuria become close."

"... Yes. But that will be hard. Yuria simply won't open up to new people."

Yuria had never been easy to befriend for anyone other than those she'd known for a long time.

She had been tormented by countless enemies and betrayed by those she trusted since childhood.

Around her were always those who envied, feared, or wished to get rid of her talent.

"My heart aches."

Yuria was, among Hisperion's direct bloodline, one of the very few gifted with the pure white aura 'Heavenly Energy' and the supreme talent to summon the Genesis sword— the founding lord's divine blade—after one thousand years.

But, as the youngest daughter and one who closed her heart so early, her position among her siblings was the most precarious.

Even with more than enough capacity to be the next lord of Hisperion, she refused to put anything in that vessel.

Still...

"I must gently speak to Yuria as well. If it's that child Ian, he's worthy to be accepted by Yuria. Their auras are, in fact, a perfect match."

Ian's aura resembled a mother defending her young from wild beasts.

Yuria's was like a castle fortress with its gates tightly barred.

If Yuria opened her gates to Ian—

And Ian, too, accepted Yuria as one of his own—

They would fit together perfectly.

Ian would become the wall protecting Yuria, and Yuria the nest for Ian.

Of course, opening their hearts to each other wouldn't be easy.

"Ian... I do feel it's right to expect something from that boy."

Even for her father, opening Yuria's closed heart was difficult. But somehow, with this boy, he had hope.

An expectation born from his transcendent intuition, developed after reaching the realm of the demigods.

'I'd best trust this intuition.'

As Darkan shone his gaze on Ian—

— Rumblerrrrrrumble!

The examination ground, once a cliff, was now transforming again.

The final trial of the entrance exam.

The circular arena.

Soon, the one-on-one match between Ian and Yuria was about to begin.

I don't like Charlotte...

Chapter 32 : Entrance Exam (6)

Entrance Exam (6)

About five minutes ago.

While Alberto was activating the magic device on the cliff, trying to drop Ian.

'As expected.'

Ian was now certain that the test supervisor mage was targeting him.

'When that fireball fell on my head, I was honestly half in doubt.'

But seeing the supervisor openly channeling magic power toward him, he was now sure—he was definitely being targeted.

'But you picked the wrong opponent.'

— Swooooooosh...!

Stuck into the magic device Alberto was trying to operate was Vladiark, which devours magic power.

— Gulp! Gulp!

Naturally, all the magic power Alberto channeled into the device became Vladiark's feast.

"Argh, aaaargh!"

Alberto twisted in pain and screamed from the distant podium.

Ian, his expression emotionless, looked on before shifting his gaze below his feet.

— Kugugugugugugu!

The cliff was still slowly descending toward the deadline.

'About 15 seconds left.'

If he just did nothing, in 15 seconds, both his feet would touch the deadline.

'I'll suck out as much magic power from that guy as possible in these 15 seconds.'

You can't let prey that walked into a tiger's jaw escape so easily.

To extract the maximum benefit from him, he had to increase the speed of magic power absorption.

— Kkyaaak!

Ian clenched his grip on Vladiark.

'Hup!'

He then spun the aura in his dantian at full power, spurring Vladiark's magic power absorption speed.

— Shuwaaaaaa!!

Already fierce, the absorption grew exponentially with Ian's own magic power control.

It was like the deep breathing of a whale.

Ian and Vladiark mercilessly devoured Alberto's magic power.

— ShuaaAAAAAAAK!!!

'Good. This is far enough!'

Just before his feet would touch the deadline, Ian stopped and pulled Vladiark from the cliff, having drained Alberto's magic power to the edge.

— Jjeoong!

— Puh-urung!

At that moment, one of the magic power circuits connecting the cliff and the magic control panel exploded.

The magic power, condensed within the circuits, blasted through with immense pressure, causing an explosion.

— Bounce! Bounce!

Confirming that Alberto had collapsed, Ian refocused on climbing the cliff.

Harnessing the kick strength from [Orc's Strength Lv.15] and the 'low-intermediate-stage Expert' aura to the fullest, even the 90-degree cliff felt as easy as flat ground.

"Y-young master...!"

At that moment, a familiar voice made Ian pause.

"Sophia...?"

"Heh... Heh..."

She was clinging to the cliff, utterly exhausted, like a barnacle stuck to a rock.

"When will this unfair pattern ever end...! I'm past the point where I can even hang on, let alone climb!"

"Heh."

Ian couldn't help but let out a small laugh of admiration.

At this point, nearly all the other freshmen cadets had dropped out.

Even if Sophia fell now, she'd probably still get a top ranking.

'Honestly, I thought with her current skill, even a mid-ranking finish was a stretch.'

How did she hold on this long?

Maybe it was just luck, but even then, using luck is a skill in itself.

Ian had to admit he had underestimated Sophia.

"Impressive, Sophia."

"Hehe... Of course. Whose disciple do you think I am?"

This girl.

Even giving a line like that.

'But...'

Sophia now looked like she was at her limit.

Trembling limbs.

Pale complexion.

Ragged, uncontrolled breathing.

In that state, even just hanging on would soon become impossible.

'Hmm...'

Ian was contemplating how he could help Sophia, when—

"Young master!"

She made an unexpected suggestion.

"Take my sword!"

"What?"

Ian looked at the sword strapped to Sophia's back.

A top-tier longsword costing a whopping 5,000 gold.

The pinnacle of modern metallurgy was resting on her back.

"Why would I take your sword?"

"Your greatsword, young master... It's a pain to use freely here!"

"Hm..."

Indeed, as she said, Vladiark was much trickier to handle than a normal sword.

To begin with, it was broken in half, more like a blunt weapon than a blade, and, more importantly, its magic power absorption ability was a problem.

Vladiark absorbs the opponent's magic power upon contact, and continues to do so until the opponent dies.

The only known way to stop the absorption is by severing the mana circuit.

That was the only method Ian knew so far.

Maybe he could stop it by sheer will, but he hadn't tried yet, so he couldn't be sure.

'At the end of the entrance exam, I'll definitely face Yuria.'

If Yuria got seriously hurt by Vladiark's magic power absorption, that would be a disaster like none other.

Moreover, Vladiark was the sword that crippled Yuria in her previous life.

To wield such a greatsword against Yuria herself—

That was something Ian would never be able to do.

'Accepting Sophia's sword would definitely help.'

Yuria was now wielding the Divine Sword Genesis.

He couldn't very well fight her barehanded.

If he took Sophia's sword, he'd have no need to use Vladiark against Yuria or fight empty-handed against Genesis—the issue would be resolved.

But...

"Sophia, what about you? If you're left without a sword?"

"... I'm already done for..."

— Kugugugugugu!!

Even now, the cliff was continuing to sink toward the floor.

If he didn't keep climbing, he'd soon touch the deadline.

"I don't have any strength left in my hands or feet... If I could, I'd have kept going and helped you to the end...! So at least, take my sword!"

"You...!"

Could her stubborn survival until now have all been just to help him?

Sophia's current skills, if he was being objective, weren't enough to land her in the upper ranks.

Her aura level was still at the very beginning, and her swordsmanship couldn't compare with that of nobles who received early training.

For her, even a mid-tier finish would've been an accomplishment.

Yet she stubbornly endured to make it to the upper ranks.

All to help him.

Even though Sophia was two years older biologically, Ian, before he knew it, was looking at her with the eyes of a father moved by his grown-up daughter.

— Kugugugugu!

"Hurry! There's no time!!"

The cliff was sinking even faster.

The test site was transforming into the final stage—a round arena.

If he didn't climb up now, Ian too would touch the deadline.

"Got it."

Ian retrieved the sword from Sophia's back.

"I've got it."

"That's good..."

Feeling lighter with the sword gone, Sophia released her grip and loosened her legs.

"Then survive for my sake too, young master."

"Sophia?"

"Goodbye..."

Sophia gave him a wistful look.

And threw herself off the cliff.

— Thud.

"...?"

But the cliff had already sunk so low that her fall was hardly dramatic.

It was like stepping down from a single high step.

"Ah, geez... I wanted to make a cool exit."

"Then rest up."

"... Please, just go. This is embarrassing."

"Okay. Oh—hold onto this for a moment too."

Ian handed Vladiark to Sophia.

— Thunk!

"Ugh... This thing is heavy. I really have no strength in my limbs~ Just standing is already at my limit~"

"Then I'll count on you."

"Yeahhhh..."

Watching Sophia drag Vladiark offstage, Ian resumed his climb.

— Bounce! Bounce!

Switching to Sophia's longsword, his body felt much lighter.

Every cadet he passed by was utterly exhausted.

All were just waiting to fall like withered leaves.

Now, the only opponent left for Ian was Yuria.

She would be standing at the very top of that dizzyingly high cliff.

"Hup!"

Ian tensed his lower abdomen and raced up the cliff.

Though the cliff was all but collapsing, Ian scaled it even faster.

"Oh, ooooh...!"

"What speed!"

"To think the eldest son of Greysel was hiding such skill!"

The noble spectators of Hisperion gasped in awe at Ian's burst of energy.

"The barbarian Kuga, whom Ian took down, is a famous monster rookie in the arena! Not only did he take down that well-known monster in a single stroke, but he also overwhelmed Prince Hector and his companions single-handedly! His aura mastery must be at least user top-tier!"

"Unbelievable... Who would have thought the famously hopeless Greysel heir would show such a reversal?"

"Why would he have hidden his skill until now?"

"... Don't you get it? With talent like that, hiding it makes sense. If you openly show off, you don't know who might try to hold you down. The wise hide their talent until it fully blooms."

— Whisper, whisper.

"In fact, lady Yuria is also called a natural talent, but she's been through all sorts of unfortunate incidents because of that."

"Right. At least Lady Yuria can be protected under the Heavenly Sword Lord. But Young master Ian had no such protection. If he'd revealed that talent early, he might not even be alive by now."

"But doesn't Ian have Lord Hugo? He is still the heir of a great house; would anyone dare harm him?"

"Haha, think about it a little more. Do you really think Hugo could protect that boy properly?"

"Hmmm... True... Lord Hugo isn't exactly thorough."

"Hohoho. Let's be blunt. Hugo is the most incompetent waste among all Greysel lords."

"Ka-Katarina! He might hear you!"

"Let him. Frankly, I wish he would hear it."

The long-time rival of the Greysel family.

Katarina, head of the Bellator family, fluttered her velvet fan and curled one lip up.

"There are even rumors that he disowned such a talented son himself! Ha, so foolish. He probably didn't even know his son was hiding his skill."

Of course, she herself didn't know.

Who would've thought that Ian, the one so widely rumored to be useless, was hiding such power?

Katarina had been the first one to scoff and say it was a perfect match of fools, when Ian summoned that broken scrap metal sword during the Sword Selection Ceremony...

'Haah... If I'd even slightly sensed his actual skill back then, I would never have made such a fool of myself...'

Katarina was now regretting her words from the Sword Selection Ceremony in real time.

Ian had exposed overwhelming talent and was now under the Heavenly Sword Lord's protection, meaning he would become the core of Hisperion's future.

Nothing good would come from making an enemy out of him or getting on his bad side.

'Whew... I'll have to make it up to him little by little, every day...!'

Determined to make up for her past mistake, katarina openly criticized Hugo even more fiercely and supported Ian.

"Hugo Greysel. That man has never done anything right since he was young. The gods must have pitied Greysel and sent them such a blessing, but Hugo just kicked his luck away with his own feet. So very foolish."

"Khahah! Absolutely right!"

A big, bronze-skinned man laughed heartily to her remarks.

Golden hair, golden eyes.

His smile revealed prominent fangs.

As the head of the Goldhound family, the strongest vassal among the Hisperion faction—

He was Tywin Goldhound.

"Hugo is the most useless imbecile among all Greysel lords!"

"E-even Lord Tywin!"

"Haaa... Now I see why the Heavenly Sword Lord made Ian a guest at his estate. He must have been the first to recognize Ian's hidden power."

"Hoho. That boy really is clever—unlike his father. He must have known his father couldn't protect him, that's why he hid his talent until now."

"Yeah. Now that Young master Ian is also a guest of Hisperion and under the Heavenly Sword Lord's protection, it's only now that he can show his true abilities."

"Indeed, the Heavenly Sword Lord is remarkable. To recognize Ian's talent before anyone else."

"That's why he stands at the pinnacle of them all. Tywin Goldhound only respects him alone. Khahah!"

Just a month ago, Ian was called a halfwit who couldn't even use aura.

Now, opinions of him were being completely overturned at every moment.

"... Whew."

While the noble vassals in the audience marveled over Ian, he finally reached the summit of the towering cliff.

At the top, reminiscent of a round arena.

"Oh? We meet again here?"

There, Yuria was standing alone, Genesis resting on her shoulder.

"It's been a while, Ian. First time we've met since the Sword Selection Ceremony."

Yuria smiled brightly, waving her hand.

— Tap tap.

Ian brushed the dust off his clothes and bowed slightly.

"It's an honor that Lady Yuria remembers me."

"Hmph."

— Thunk!

Yuria stabbed Genesis into the ground and folded her arms.

"Of course. Do you know how many times I've heard your name these two weeks? Ever since Dad took a boy my age in as a guest, the Heavenly Sword Palace has been buzzing every day."

"I see. Sorry if my name caused you any inconvenience."

"Not really? In fact, it was nice."

"... Excuse me?"

Yuria hid her mouth with her hand and grinned mischievously.

"Because I got to hear the name of the boy who cried in front of me. Fufufu. If you cry again, I'll comfort you this time."

"... Seriously."

She was bringing up that incident during the Sword Selection Ceremony, in the hallway.

It was just a single slip, a one-time moment of emotion. Please, just forget it.

"....."

Truthfully, Ian still felt a lump in his throat, but he was holding it back.

Just seeing Yuria, alive and well, made an indescribable tide of relief wash over him—how could he not be emotional?

But.

'Now is the time to settle things with Yuria.'

No room for reminiscence.

'Whew...'

Ian calmed his turbulent heart with a silent breath.

His opponent was Yuria.

There was no space for carelessness.

The valedictorian reward of this entrance exam.

He had to surpass her here to claim the Heavenly Blood Pill made from the Heavenly Sword Lord's own blood.

'No matter about anyone else—at least, Yuria, I can't let you have the Heavenly Blood Pill.'

It would be great for Yuria to become stronger with the pill.

But the stronger Yuria became, the more she tended to sacrifice herself.

If Yuria outpaced Ian this life as well, she'd try to shoulder everything alone, just like in their past life.

'I never want to see you sacrifice yourself again.'

Yuria losing her dantian to the Grand Duke of Gluttony in her past life was ultimately because of her self-sacrificial nature.

She had the power to escape, but stayed to protect every last person.

'You don't need to do that this time, Yuria.'

From the moment he regressed, Ian resolved long ago.

That in this life, he'd become so strong Yuria would never have to step forward at all.

So she wouldn't have to bear any burdens.

He'd become so absolute and overwhelming—a force transcendent, almost godlike—that she could rely on him completely, without any worries.

'I'll become someone you can trust with all your heart.'

For that, he absolutely needed the Heavenly Blood Pill awarded to the valedictorian this time.

'So, I'll be the one to take it, Yuria.'

He had to ingest the Heavenly Blood Pill and absorb the essence of Hisperion, to forge a body of steel.

Finally, showdown with Yuria...

Chapter 33 : Entrance Exam (7)

Entrance Exam (7)

'I never imagined a day like this would come in my life.'

He would never have thought that a day would come when he would go back 15 years and fight Yuria as a 14-year-old.

Ian swallowed dryly as he looked at Yuria standing before him.

— Gulp.

She had Genesis planted in the ground, arms crossed, staring back at him.

'In my previous life, I never won against her, not even once.'

In his past life, Ian had not managed to defeat Yuria even once.

Was it because of the Authority of Projection?

No. Yuria had never used the Authority of Projection against Ian.

Was it because of her overwhelmingly superior aura rank?

That wasn't it either.

It was true that Yuria's cultivation was always ahead of Ian's, but when they sparred, she would always adjust her level to match his.

'It was purely a difference in swordsmanship.'

Yuria in his previous life had overwhelmed Ian solely with her swordsmanship.

'Truly, she had a divinely blessed talent...'

Ian, too, was considered a genius worthy of being called heaven-sent, but Yuria's talent in swordsmanship was several levels above his.

Even the Heavenly Sword Family Head, Darkan, peak of all swordsmen of the era, would have had to concede if comparing her brilliant natural swordsmanship and talent.

The only person who could rival her fearsome gift was, perhaps, Ragnar Hisperion the 5th Heavenly Sword Lord, famed as the greatest swordsman in history.

'Even now, Yuria is by no means an opponent I can underestimate.'

The current Yuria was young—only 14 years old.

No matter how exceptional her talent, it was still too early an age for it to fully bloom.

But youth was no reason to underestimate or let down one's guard.

'Yuria can copy any technique on the spot.'

If Ian made full use of the "Frenzied Insight Style" techniques he had devised in his former life, defeating this young Yuria would not be too difficult.

But he had to use them only at truly critical moments.

If he used them carelessly, Yuria would just copy them on the spot.

'If my Frenzied Insight techniques are copied, I might not be able to guarantee victory.'

Frenzied Insight was a set of techniques created to catch opponents stronger than himself.

If Yuria managed to copy them, it would be hard for Ian to claim certain victory.

'Right now, Yuria's aura realm is just entering the Expert rank.'

He knew this from what he'd heard in his previous life.

As a 14-year-old, Yuria had just stepped into the realm of an Expert.

And Ian's current level was low-intermediate-stage Expert.

In terms of aura cultivation alone, Ian was ahead.

'But still—'

Yuria held the divine sword Genesis.

'A difference of this level in cultivation is meaningless before Genesis.'

While Ian was one or two ranks ahead, the overwhelming aura amplification granted by Genesis would put the balance of power heavily in her favor.

'I did borrow an excellent sword from Sophia, but...'

He had borrowed a highly expensive 5,000-gold longsword, a masterpiece of modern smithing, but if it clashed with Genesis, it would shatter in a few exchanges.

'I should avoid damaging this sword as much as possible.'

When he bought this sword for Sophia, she had joyfully declared it would be her most treasured possession from now on.

She would certainly be heartbroken if it were ruined.

He would have to be careful to prevent even a big scratch.

"Phew..."

He felt tension boiling up inside him.

The more he thought about it, the more he realized Yuria was not an opponent to take lightly.

With her innate genius to instantly copy any technique, he couldn't freely use Frenzied Insight.

With Genesis, she could dominate even in aura strength, and there would be limits to direct sword clashes.

'So, with what advantage should I press?'

How was he to overwhelm Yuria?

'There's really only one.'

Even if he lagged behind in talent, physical level, and weapon, there was one thing where he was ahead of Yuria.

Experience.

'The immense experience I accumulated in my previous life, battling countless powerful warriors to the death.'

This gap in experience was an undeniable advantage.

'I'll have to win with experience, with cunning.'

Cunning.

The shrewdness he had gained from so much experience—that would be Ian's weapon in this duel.

"Hmmm~"

Yuria, wearing a relaxed smile, casually loosened her shoulders.

She looked full of openings and defenseless, but as soon as the duel started, that would change completely.

She'd immediately draw that terrifying Genesis and swing it relentlessly.

'I need to finish this in a short match while Yuria underestimates me. I'll go all out from the start.'

— Clack!

Ian placed his hand on the sword slung on his back, lowering his stance.

A sword-drawing position, ready to counter immediately if Yuria charged in.

"Hmm~ You're already getting ready? I wanted to talk with you a bit more."

Ian was fully prepared.

But Yuria put on an impish, relaxed face.

She seemed completely unbothered, as if she hadn't even considered the possibility of losing.

"Where'd you leave the sword you received at the Sword Selection Ceremony? Why'd you bring such a common sword?"

"....."

A common sword, she said. This sword cost a whopping 5,000 gold—a price that would take an ordinary commoner 14 years to earn.

"I entrusted my greatsword to a friend."

"Why?"

"....."

How could he say, "How could I wield the sword that crippled you in our past life against you now?"

What would be the best way to answer this?

Well, since it was Yuria he was dealing with, he decided to be honest, at least somewhat. He also wanted to warn her in advance.

"My greatsword has a function where it absorbs the opponent's magic. Once absorption starts, it doesn't stop until the other's mana circuits are broken—or they die."

"So?"

"I'm still inexperienced in wielding that greatsword. I worried you might be grievously injured, so I left it behind."

"Hmmm~ Is that so?"

Yuria narrowed her eyes, giving him a meaningful smile.

"That's funny, considering you swung it just fine at others—Kuga and Hector."

"....?"

Was she watching him fight?

He thought she had been busy fighting Kargon. When did she see him?

"Were you watching me?"

"Not particularly? I just happened to see you while looking around."

"..... I see."

"I'd like an explanation, though. Why did you use it just fine on the others but bring a different sword against me?"

"..... Hm."

Was that really important now?

Still, since Yuria was pressing so persistently, he had no choice but to answer.

"Well, the other new trainees aren't at the Expert rank like you, lady Yuria."

If you're not at the Expert rank, you can't release aura outside your body.

So unless he stabbed Vladiark directly into their bodies, there was no risk of unwanted aura absorption.

But Yuria was a fresh Expert—a level where she could project her aura and imbue her sword with blade energy.

If her aura-coated Genesis clashed with Vladiark, compulsory magic absorption would trigger without fail.

"My greatsword begins absorption the instant it comes into contact with aura. If we're not careful, lady Yuria... you could die. I left it behind to prevent such a tragedy."

"Hmph. Is that so?"

Yuria still kept her narrowed gaze.

"That sword seems fishier to me, though."

"......?"

"You switch swords when your opponent changes? Feels like a tool you prepared just for me. Creeps me out."

Ah.

So that's why she was being so persistent with her questions.

Yuria was suspicious of Ian.

'Is she suspecting this sword is some kind of kidnapping artifact or poison blade?'

It was clear paranoia.

But he couldn't blame her. Yuria had, from a young age, been beset by countless plots and assassination attempts.

Such paranoia was a defense mechanism for her survival; it had actually helped her survive up to now.

That explained why she would tenaciously pursue any small oddity.

But...

Ian had his own position as well.

"Even if you are uneasy, lady Yuria... I can't exactly fight Genesis barehanded, can I? If you're so uncomfortable, you can always forfeit first."

"Well, that's true."

Yuria surprisingly accepted that without complaint.

"But I still want to fight you. Father acknowledged you. You're about my age. I'm curious—about your skills."

"Hmm..."

So what did she want, then?

"Then how about this?"

"……?"

"If you don't use that sword, I won't use Genesis either."

"You mean ..."

"Yup. Let's both go empty-handed—hand-to-hand."

"Oh..."

This was an unexpected turn of events.

And an excellent one at that.

'She won't use Genesis?'

That meant Ian would have the advantage in aura as well.

If Yuria didn't have Genesis boosting her aura absurdly, she'd have no way to overpower him in strength.

Yuria's realm was just entering Expert.

Ian was mid-ealy-stage Expert.

Yuria probably didn't know it, but in terms of cultivation, Ian was the superior.

"Are you sure? That's a big advantage you're giving up in not using Genesis, lady Yuria. Isn't that unfair to you?"

"I don't go back on my word."

"If you insist."

Ian had absolutely no reason to refuse.

He untied the sword on his back and placed it at the edge of the clearing.

— Thud!

"It's a borrowed sword. I can't just toss it off a cliff."

"Hmm... Well, it's a bit unsettling, but I'll let that slide."

— Clang! -Whish!

Yuria, too, drew Genesis from the ground and immediately flung it toward the edge.

— Thunk!

It stuck deep into the cliff's edge.

— Clack!

At the same time, Yuria raised both hands and took up a fighting stance.

'Well now...'

Ian pursed his lower lip.

The situation had become unexpectedly favorable.

'Yuria, that was a mistake.'

With fist against fist, it would be impossible for him to lose.

Skill, experience, and strength—he surpassed Yuria in every regard.

Moreover, hand-to-hand combat was one of Ian's specialties.

When he sparred barehanded with Yuria in his previous life, he had held up fairly well.

But this time...

Yuria was much weaker than at her peak, and Ian's aura level was higher.

For the first time in his life, he had a complete advantage over her.

"Huhu..."

"W-what's with that ominous laugh!?"

"I just feel good—like I already have the secret techniques of the Heavenly Sword Family in my hand."

"What? Sorry, but the match hasn't even started yet! Why are you so complacent? Are you asking for trouble?"

— Whoosh!

As her long golden hair fluttered with her clothes, Yuria's aura shifted.

— Fwoosh!

At the same time, white flames bloomed in both her hands.

This was the manifestation of "Energy", the symbol of an Expert, and also proof of the 'Heavenly Energy', the light-element aura said to be inherited by only a few direct descendants of House Hisperion.

"It's not complacency. It's conviction."

Ian, too, took his stance and raised his aura.

Soon—

— Vwooom!

A blue light sprang up in his hands.

He, too, was manifesting Energy—the "Fist Energy" of an Expert.

"W-what!?"

Yuria's eyes opened wide in shock.

"Huh!? Th-this can't be!!"

"N-no way, expert!? Lord Ian is an Expert?!"

Even the noble vassals in the stands were thrown into chaos.

Achieving the Expert rank at age 14 was something that had happened only twice in the entirety of human history: Ragnar Hisperion, greatest swordsman in history, and the genius Yuria Hisperion.

But with Ian now manifesting Fist Energy, another name was added to history.

"Hahahaha!"

Heavenly Sword House Lord Darkan, delighted, struck the armrest of his throne.

"Kelbian! I'm not seeing things, am I?"

"... No, my lord. I see it too. Lord Ian... is manifesting Fist Energy."

"Ha—hahaha! Truly astonishing. Absolutely fascinating."

Darkan stroked his bristly beard, smiling deeply.

"The last time I saw him, his aura was only at a user's level, wasn't it?"

"Yes... That's how I felt too... Lord Ian was certainly not yet an Expert then."

"Exactly. And that was barely two weeks ago. Good heavens."

This meant only two possibilities.

Either Ian had grown his aura realm to the Expert rank in the impossible span of two weeks—

Or he was so adept at hiding his cultivation that even Masters and stronger couldn't sense it.

"Whatever it is, it's ridiculous. I have no idea what's going on. Hahaha!"

"Y-yes...! It's almost unbelievable."

Darkan chuckled.

"Nothing has delighted me this much lately. Every time I see that boy, he surprises me. Ian Greysel. He really is fun to watch."

"Y-yes. I never expected to see Lord Ian manifesting Fist Energy..."

It was true that Ian had once manifested enhanced energy using Vladiark—but that was only thanks to the overwhelming aura absorbed into the sword from the Heavenly Swordmaster, not something arising from his own cultivation.

But now, manifesting Fist Energy barehanded was clearly a result of his own achievement.

"A prodigy like Lady Yuria, but twice in one generation... This is a historical moment, truly."

Kelbian was certain.

Even if it wasn't just because of the House Lord's interest—

That boy had to be kept on their side for the future of House Hisperion.

Fist fight!

Chapter 34 : Entrance Exam (8)

Entrance Exam (8)

The blue light shimmering around Ian's two fists.

"Fist energy...?"

Yuria swallowed hard as she looked at Ian.

The aura rippling around his fists was undoubtedly fist energy.

"I-Ian Greysel?"

"Yes, lady Yuria."

"You...! You're fourteen. Right?"

"... That's correct."

Biologically, that was true.

Though what he had inside was the soul of a 29-year-old.

"H-hmm!"

Yuria made an odd sound and cleared her throat.

The manifestation of energy was a symbol of having reached the Expert rank.

Meaning, Ian had also reached Expert rank at the age of fourteen, just like herself.

'T-that can't be... right?'

There had only been two cases in history of reaching the Expert rank at fourteen.

The first was Ragnar Hisperion, her distant ancestor and the fifth head of the Sword Saint clan.

The second was herself, Yuria Hisperion, hailed as one blessed with heavenly talent.

'There's never been a single case of anyone reaching Expert at fourteen who wasn't a direct descendant of Hisperion...!'

Yuria had also reached Expert at fourteen, but her case was different from Ian's.

She was a Hisperion; Ian was not.

Yuria's extraordinary talent didn't just appear out of nowhere—it was a culmination of great ancestors' legacies, finally completed after much accumulation.

It was a talent completed by the combination and overlap of noble blood and supreme inheritance.

Called a natural-born genius for how special she was, but all within the bounds of logic.

However...

'Ian. You're different!'

Greysel was also a great house known for swordsmanship.

Its ancestors counted among them excellent heroes, and the family's achievements were undeniable.

But compared to the greatness of Hisperion, it was nothing.

Hisperion had more than a dozen ancestors who ascended to the heavens upon reaching the realm of Sword God.

On the other hand, Greysel had so few who reached the demi-god stage that you could count them on one hand.

Of course, even having any ancestor reach the demi-god stage was an enormous feat and a proud legacy.

But that was only within the realm of humanity.

Compared to Hisperions, who were born with the very qualities to become divine, that accomplishment seemed paltry.

From the very beginning, Hisperion's founder wasn't even human.

It was passed down that the founder of Hisperion descended from the heavens with the Divine Sword Genesis, left behind countless legacies that surpassed his era, and ascended back to the sky at the end of his life upon attaining the Sword God status.

In contrast, the founder of Greysel was no more than a human with slightly superior sword talent, and though he attained the demi-god stage at the end, he never ascended.

Hisperion and Greysel were fundamentally different from their very roots.

That's why it was acceptable, even taken for granted, for Yuria to reach the Expert stage at fourteen.

Because Hisperions were the descendants of Sword Gods.

But Ian was not.

He was just the descendant of humans.

A non-Hisperion reaching the Expert stage at fourteen?

How could someone not of divine roots be born with the talent to become a god?

This simply made no rational sense.

'Besides...'

If someone had talent to reach Expert at fourteen, it couldn't possibly have stayed secret until now.

Unless he had hidden his abilities so perfectly that no one ever noticed—but was that even possible?

Yuria had begun being called a child of heavenly talent when she was around ten.

Not only had she manifested her aura two years earlier than her siblings, she had also reached the intermediate user level within a year.

Back then, Yuria cared only about flaunting her ability, worrying nothing about the consequences.

Everyone applauded and marveled at her, so she simply thought it was a good thing.

'I was so naive.'

Four years later, she was left with nothing but regret.

She'd never imagined that, behind those faces full of admiration, there lurked such terrible jealousy and envy.

By the time she realized that, she'd already made countless enemies.

'I should have listened to Dad more seriously.'

The family head of the Heavenly Sword family hadn't left her unchecked.

He privately called her in and warned her multiple times that she must hide her talent, and had her attendants strictly sworn to secrecy.

He knew what could happen if her talent became widely known.

But ultimately, Yuria's talent would inevitably be revealed unless she herself cooperated actively.

The family head urged her to conceal her power until the right time—but she took those words lightly.

She merely pretended to restrain herself, but showed off freely to anyone she considered even slightly close.

Thus, rumors about her talent spread like wildfire by word of mouth.

Only half a year after first manifesting her aura, all the nobles sworn to Hisperion knew of her gift.

'I made too many enemies out of needless vanity.'

For a child, hiding one's talents is never an easy task.

Without experience or fully developed judgment, there's no way to foresee how one's actions will affect the future.

However...

'How did you... How did you manage to hide your strength so perfectly until now?'

What's more, the head of Greysel, Hugo, was known for his vanity.

Had he recognized his son's talent, he likely would've boasted without a second thought, regardless of the consequences.

'So, if you truly hid your strength all this time, you must have kept it even from your father...'

Was that even possible?

She herself, despite her father's repeated warnings, ended up showing off and making many enemies.

So how did that boy realize, long before making any mistakes, the need to conceal his own talent so thoroughly all this time?

'This is something you can only truly understand after making a mistake yourself, even with outside advice...'

Furthermore...

'I'd also heard rumors that Ian couldn't use aura. So what's that about?'

The rumor that the heir of Greysel had a disability in his dantian and couldn't use aura was so widespread among the Hisperion nobility that anyone would've heard it at least once.

On the other hand, his swordsmanship skill was outstanding, earning him the nickname "Half-Talent".

'Haaa... I don't get it. Why go so far as to hide your aura talent, suffering insults as a half-talent, while not hiding your swordsmanship at all? What was your motive...?'

Now, Ian had revealed the power he had kept hidden until now.

'Maybe now he feels safe to reveal his power, because he's under my father's protection. He thinks he'll be protected even if he shows it...?'

— Shake shake!"

'Ah, no! Wait!'

Yuria shook her head vigorously.

'I'm getting way too distracted. The enemy is right in front of me. I let my guard down.'

What mattered now wasn't how Ian hid his power, nor his background.

'Winning this fight. I'll focus on that for now.'

She could think about Ian afterward, at her leisure.

'Still... is it really okay to reveal power he hid so thoroughly? I'm still suffering for it... Will Ian have to live underground like I do from now on...? Focus, focus! Ugh...'

Although she'd resolved to focus on the match, once her stray thoughts began, they just wouldn't stop.

'I just need to clash fists with him quickly.'

Once the fight started, she'd be forced to focus on it, whether she liked it or not.

–Thunk!

Yuria assumed her stance.

A martial art passed down only to direct heirs of Hisperion.

The basic ready stance of the Heavenly Flow (天流).

Seeing this, Ian spread his stance wider and lowered his posture.

'Looks like she's finally ready.'

Yuria had been staring dazedly for a while after he'd shown his fist energy.

'Ugh...'

Now all she had to do was push off the ground and throw a punch.

'Ugh...! Please, stop thinking!'

Her stray thoughts still haunted her.

How had Ian managed to hide his strength all this time?

Were there any dangerous events or enemies during that period?

Could they perhaps share a mutual understanding that only two genius children in the same circumstances could know...?

'Argh.'

Her curiosity and concern for Ian kept sabotaging her concentration.

'This won't do. I need a better motivation—set up a reward, give myself a reason to focus.'

–Ahem!

Yuria cleared her throat and called Ian.

"Ian Greysel."

"... Aren't we starting the match?"

"Let's make a bet. Just one bet, okay?"

"A bet? What kind of bet..."

"It's simple. Whoever loses can't keep any secrets from the winner for a whole year. How's that?"

"Hm...?"

Without realizing it, Ian raised an eyebrow.

"I don't get it. Why are you proposing this?"

"Well? I just think it'd be fun to share secrets with you. You seem like you have a lot of interesting things hidden."

"Hm..."

He certainly had a lot he was hiding.

His past life, his regression, the Authority of Projection, all sorts of knowledge about the future...

Whether those were interesting stories or not, who could say.

But.

"No, thank you. I don't see any reason for me to take that bet. There's no benefit for me."

He wasn't likely to lose to Yuria, but as long as there was any risk at all, there wasn't any point in adding extra potential loss.

"Ian~ How can you say there's no benefit?"

"What's in it for me..."

"Think about it. Whoever loses can't keep any secrets from the winner. If you beat me, I can even tell you Hisperion's secret arts."

"Ku-kugh!"

Ian choked on his own saliva.

"If you get caught by the Heavenly Sword Lord, even as his daughter, you'll be thrown out instantly. I'd lose my head. I'm not ready to die yet."

Even making a pact with the devil would be safer than that.

"Oh, come on! It could be just our little secret. If you're worried, I'll swear by mana."

Mana Oath.

A terrifying contract that engraves a vow in the dantian and heart, making you lose all mana if broken.

"... You're saying things that would truly enrage the Heavenly Sword Lord."

"So, are you in, or not?"

"Hmm..."

For Yuria to suggest this, she must want to ask him something.

And she didn't seem to think there was any chance she'd lose to Ian.

'Even after I showed her my fist energy, she's still this confident.'

Of course, he could understand Yuria's confidence.

Even at the same Expert rank, the outcome could be determined by aura affinity and skill.

Yuria had the supreme aura 'Heavenly Energy' and the ultimate martial art 'Heavenly Flow.'

'But...'

Ian smiled to himself.

'Too bad, Yuria. There's no way you can beat me.'

Seeing her so complacent only made him more certain of victory.

The Heavenly Flow, the direct lineage Hisperion martial art, overwhelmed opponents with sheer aura output.

If Ian used the Gwanghye Style's Counter-Current (回天), he could seize the initiative with even a single exchange.

"All right."

Ian accepted Yuria's wager.

'To be able to ask all of Yuria's secrets for a year...'

At first, he wasn't sure, but the more he listened, the more he realized how useful it could be.

'I could ask questions that are difficult to answer, and if Yuria can't bear to reply, I could make other demands under the guise of 'in exchange'.'

Even if he lost the top reward to Yuria someday, he could use the bet to reclaim it later.

He could even insist she join a dungeon expedition that would help them both grow.

She even said she'd swear by mana...

Depending on how he used it, there was almost nothing he couldn't demand.

He had no intention of tormenting Yuria, but for moments where he needed to drag her along even by force, it would be a great tool.

"A bet where the loser cannot hide any secret from the winner for one year. I accept."

Yuria answered with a smile.

"Great. You agreed. No backing out."

"Of course."

"All right, then..."

–Whoooosh!

The moment the bet was set, Yuria unleashed her full force.

"My mind is clear now. Let's begin. I'll end this for you as painlessly as possible."

The white flame blazing over Yuria's body began to whirl and concentrate around her right hand.

Soon, from her fist to her elbow, she was enveloped in pure white light.

It was a bit less refined than Ian's Gwanghye Style Point Shot, but still an impressive aura condensation technique.

'Here we go.'

Ian also lowered his stance and readied his Gwanghye Style Counter-Current.

He planned to concede the initiative and go for a counterattack.

The moment her foot struck the ground, the duel would truly begin.

"Ku! Kuuu! What is this! What a historic moment!!"

The heat in the spectators' stands was searing.

"My old heart hasn't beaten this fast in ages!"

"To see the continent's greatest geniuses clash at such a young age!"

"It's a historic moment! We're really witnessing a sight to treasure for life!"

"It's finally starting!"

The Heavenly Sword Lord, Darkan, could not hide his anticipation.

"Kelbian. Who do you think will win? My daughter? Or my son?"

"... E-eh? W-wait. Did you say son? Lord, are you officially acknowledging Young Lord Ian as your adopted son?"

"Hm? I decided that long ago. I just haven't made it public because I worry my children will bully him. Well, such trivialities aside, what do you think?"

"U-uh... Hmm! If you ask me, lady Yuria seems somewhat more likely to win. It was unexpected that Young Lord Ian could use fist energy, but even as an Expert, I think it would be hard for him to beat Lady Yuria."

He knew Ian was skilled.

After all, he'd witnessed Ian single-handedly handle five knights at Greysel manor.

But that was something Yuria could have done as well.

The aura stage was an important indicator of combat ability, but it didn't tell the whole story.

Aura stage was just 'weight class'.

Increasing your class improved your raw power, but didn't raise your combat skill.

In other words, martial arts mastery and aura stage were totally separate.

With a good training method and elixirs, you could raise your aura stage without actually learning any martial arts.

'That's why those Greysel knights got trounced by Young Lord Ian.'

They had raised their auric class with good elixirs and methods, but neglected training in actual martial arts.

So they were helpless against a better-trained Ian.

But...

'Lady Yuria is on a totally different level from those declining noble house knights. She wields the supreme martial art, Heavenly Flow, at a high level, and uses the preeminent Heavenly Energy aura, which is superior in all affinities.'

With similar aura classes, the one with better technique and affinity would inevitably prevail.

He knew Ian's skills were remarkable, but there could be no martial art superior to Heavenly Flow, and ordinary aura was at a disadvantage against Heavenly Energy.

"I'm fairly sure Ian Greysel can't beat Lady Yuria."

Darkan gave a keen, interested smile.

"Heh. That's how you see it, is it?"

"... How do you yourself see it, Lord?"

"I think Ian's been hiding even more."

The intuition he'd developed to transcendental precision upon reaching the demi-god stage...

That intuition was telling him Ian would win.

"Oooooh!"

"It's starting! Wow!"

"This is the moment when the greatest genius of the century will be decided!"

The spectators' cheers rose in a surging wave.

All attention and expectation converged in a single moment.

The climax of the Entrance Exam was about to begin.

Chapter 35 : Entrance Exam (9)

Entrance Exam (9)

'You're more naïve than I thought, Ian Greysel.'

Yuria took the preparatory stance of Heavenly Flow First Form with a faint smile.

'It was a bet I half-forced, but I didn't expect him to accept so readily.'

The bet was that the loser of the duel could not hide any secrets from the winner for one year.

'He must've really wanted the secret martial art of Hisperion, huh?'

At first, Ian refused the bet, but when Yuria promised to teach him Hisperion's secret martial art, he immediately accepted.

'But sorry, Ian. This match... You have no chance of beating me.'

Ian being at the Expert rank was truly unexpected, but even so, Yuria never thought for a moment that she could lose.

After all, she possessed the supreme aura, celestial Energy, and the supreme martial art, Heavenly Flow.

'With ordinary aura, you can't beat Heavenly Energy; with standard techniques, you can't overcome Heavenly Flow.'

Ian's talent was certainly extraordinary—reaching the Expert rank at just 14—but Yuria possessed similar talent as well.

'If we have matching talent, obviously the one with better techniques and better aura wins, right?'

No, in fact, maybe her own talent even surpassed his.

Heavenly Blood, which enhances the human body, flowed within her, and the legacy of countless sword saints was embedded in her genes.

On top of that, she had received full support from the Heavenly Sword House since childhood and underwent rigorous training.

In contrast, Ian must have spent his years hiding his abilities, unable to train properly.

'No matter how I look at it, Ian! This bet is ninety-nine percent mine!'

— Whoosh!

With solid confidence in her victory, Yuria gathered her aura into her fist even more strongly.

The white light enveloping her fist soon radiated even more dazzlingly, like the noonday sun.

Aura of light—something only the rarest of Hisperion direct descendants are born with.

It was the manifestation of Heavenly Energy.

'What secret should I ask about first if I win?'

Currently, Ian was the center of all attention among the direct line and vassal nobles.

Since he'd kept his power hidden until now, his true nature was shrouded all the more in mystery, provoking even more curiosity.

If she won this contest, Yuria could unveil every secret Ian had been so thorough in hiding...

She would have sole access to everything people wondered about Ian.

She might even come to know more about Ian than his own sponsor and her own father, the head of the Heavenly Sword House.

'Hoo, hoo...!'

But more than anything, what she looked forward to the most—

Sharing a mutual understanding and empathy only those born geniuses could have.

For the first time in her previously lonely and aloof life, she felt she'd found someone who could be a friend.

'I want to know. What kind of life have you led until now?'

And—

'Can you see the world at the same eye level as me?'

Maybe she'd understand a little by crossing fists.

And by the end of the match, she'd know even more clearly.

'I'll finish this quickly, Ian! Let's end this and talk about all sorts of secrets!'

— Bang!!

The ground where Yuria stood burst as her figure vanished.

— Swish!

Like a bullet, Yuria sliced through the air at incredible speed.

Before a second had passed, she'd closed the gap to just a hand's breadth from Ian.

So close they'd touch shoulders with the slightest movement.

Yuria, carrying all her momentum, thrust her fist forward.

'Heavenly Flow First Form!'

Truth(彰)—!

A destructive strike that pierced and shattered everything before her with overwhelming aura output.

'As expected of Yuria.'

In the extreme perception where each second was split into tenths,

Ian watched the white light flying swiftly toward his solar plexus.

'If this lands, I'm out cold.'

Even for Ian, a swordmaster in his second life, there was a force he could barely withstand in Yuria's attack.

'But...'

Heavenly Flow First Form - Truth, was a technique focused solely on overwhelming attack.

It had no illusionary principles to deceive the foe, no variations to complicate defense—just a simple, straightforward strike.

'If the path is obvious, it's just as easy to dodge.'

Moreover,

'It's easy to use against her.'

Frenzied Insight Style.

Reversing Heaven.

An exquisite technique that counters by exploiting the flow of the opponent's aura.

— Swish!

Ian clasped Yuria's fist with both hands, as if catching a ball.

— Spin!

At the same time, he rotated his body along the attack's trajectory.

— Swish!

He spun using Yuria's own force.

Then, adding his own power to the momentum, he countered with a stabbing strike.

"?!"

— Thwack!

Ian's elbow landed deep into Yuria's unprotected side.

"Ugh, kuh...!?"

— BOOM!!!

Immediately afterward, a powerful shockwave erupted.

Aura concentrated at the tip of his elbow burst, creating an explosion.

"Gah!!"

— Thud! Thump!

Yuria was blasted away, rolling across the ground like a skipping stone.

— Bang! Thump! Sssseee—

She slid across the floor and fell flat.

This was the first time Yuria, regarded as unmatched among her age group due to her extraordinary talent, had been knocked down by a peer in front of everyone.

"What just... how, how!?"

"L-lady Yuria has fallen!!"

Vassal nobles in the audience seats gasped and leapt to their feet.

"What is this... Is what I'm seeing truly real!?"

"T-the entire balance has been overturned...!"

The officials and retainers around them murmured, unable to hide their shock.

"My god... What was that technique...?"

Kelbian, standing next to the Heavenly Sword House head, dropped his jaw in awe.

"Kuhaha!"

Darkan, head of the Heavenly Sword House, slapped the throne's armrest and roared with laughter.

"As expected! I knew Ian was hiding something!"

Yet even Darkan couldn't help but be impressed by Ian's technique.

'That's the technique that turns the opponent's aura against them—a skill I saw him use against five knights at the Greysel mansion before.'

But,

'The principle is the same as back then, but the technique's level is on a whole different plane.'

Darkan saw why instantly.

'The higher the opponent's technique, the greater the level of this counter-attack.'

Since the technique turns the opponent's own aura use against them, the stronger the opponent's move, the higher the level of Ian's corresponding response.

Darkan licked his lips in interest.

'But my daughter Yuria isn't completely down yet. She's just as much a genius as Ian. She won't fall for the same trick twice. Hoo... It's been a long time since I've been this excited. Ian, what will you show us next?'

— Clench!

Meanwhile—

"H-huh...!"

Sitting below Darkan, Charlotte clenched her fists tremulously.

But it was not the shivers of anger, but of shock.

'W-what?! Y-Yuria lost!? To Ian!? What... What is this? What's happening!?'

Charlotte at that moment forgot all her animosity toward Ian.

Her original goal was to bring Ian down and thus escape the punishment placed on her, but after seeing his skills firsthand, there was no way she could continue with such a plan.

— Whirr! Whirr! Whirr! Whirr!

Confronted by such an unbelievable sight, Charlotte's mind spun more fiercely than ever.

With each revolution, her scheme shifted rapidly from hostility to alliance.

'I was being completely stupid!'

Ian was not someone you could drive out.

In fact, she should be doing everything in her power to recruit him to her side.

Opposing him just to avoid disciplinary action would've been foolish.

It was clear—without deep thought—that showing remorse and actively trying to get closer to him by accepting the punishment would be far more advantageous for her future.

Even if she sold off every treasure in her own palace, it wouldn't come close to the value of Ian himself.

No wonder her dad brought Ian into Hisperion as a guest.

"H-ha, hehe!"

Charlotte covered her rising lips with both hands as she stared at the fallen Yuria.

'Wow! This is unbelievable! Yuria's fallen! That monster girl is down!'

Even though Charlotte was a year older than Yuria, her aura didn't awaken until half a year later.

Yet compared to other Hisperion, that was still considered fast.

If she'd been born in the era without Yuria, Charlotte undoubtedly would have been Hisperion's top prospect.

That's how outstanding her talent was.

To reach the late-stage User rank at 15 was an achievement seen only a few times in a century.

But even with such historic talent, Charlotte always found herself in the background.

Because—as long as she lived in the same era as Yuria, the overwhelming luminary—Yuria cast too huge a shadow to ever escape.

To rise to Expert at fourteen, a talent unparalleled in history.

Charlotte's feat of reaching late-stage User at fifteen... was nothing compared to Yuria's shining royal road.

So, to Charlotte, Yuria was always an object of envy and a thorn in her side.

Monopolizing her father's attention, monopolizing the hopes of the Elder Council and retainers, instilling fear in the vassals without ever lifting a finger, and advancing far faster than Charlotte despite equal effort.

'But now! Yuria!'

That monstrous Yuria was down.

And to a boy her same age.

A talent even more overwhelming than her own!

'P-puhahaha! What's wrong, Yuria? How disgraceful! How does it feel to be lying on the floor in front of someone with a talent greater than your own? Now you finally know how I've always felt! Serves you right!'

A blossoming aura like a flower bud rose above Charlotte's head.

'This...! Things have gotten really interesting!'

When Ian entered Hisperion as a guest, Charlotte thought he'd be just another headache stealing her dad's attention. But now, if she played it smart, she could use the tiger to catch the bear.

'I'll win him over somehow and use him to keep Yuria in check...!'

This was the moment Charlotte's entire attitude toward Ian changed.

'Haah... If only I'd noticed his talent sooner... I would have tried to recruit him from the start, not antagonize him...! Ugh...'

The terrible first impression she'd made on Ian was a clear blunder.

Her father would never have welcomed Ian into Hisperion without good reason, so she ought to have approached him more carefully from the start, but her pride and impatience had caused her to blunder.

Still, if she worked at it moving forward, this much could be recovered.

'After all, yesterday's enemy may be today's ally, right? That's politics. That's right, that's right.'

If she kept showing her best side and offering good terms, surely Ian would side with her someday in the house succession war.

'Hehehe...!'

As Charlotte gazed at Ian with these vain hopes—

"Kuh, check..."

Meanwhile, Yuria was only just able to get up.

'Huff, huff... Finally, I can breathe... I really thought I was going to die.'

She gritted her teeth and forced herself up.

She managed to rise, but the pain was so intense that her legs were shaking.

'If Ian had immediately followed up with another attack, I definitely would have lost. Why didn't he keep going? D-did he go easy on me...? Is a boy my age showing mercy... to me!?'

In truth, due to the recoil from the Reversing Heaven, Ian had also damaged his muscles and ligaments, so he was using Authority of Projection to heal himself.

But Yuria could not have known that.

To her, it simply looked as though Ian was staring at her blankly.

— Swoosh.

— Crack. Pop.

He was still healing himself with [Healing Potion Lv.15] Projection, but to Yuria, it just looked like he was letting her recover.

'It... It really just looks like he's going easy on me. H-how!'

This was a first.

Getting knocked down by someone her own age.

Being treated with overt composure by a boy her own age.

Not to mention, that boy wasn't even a blessed bloodline of Hisperion.

It wasn't just the first time it happened in her life—she'd never even dreamed of it.

— Thump! Thump! Thump!

Conflicting confusion and excitement churned in Yuria's heart.

'A-anyway, w-what was that just now?'

When she'd unleashed the Heavenly Flow First Form - Truth, Ian had countered with a martial art she'd never seen before.

'Nothing I've seen has ever been even remotely similar.'

Even in that fleeting moment, Yuria's transcendent talent let her comprehend more than half of the technique's structure.

'He turned my aura's flow against me.'

— Ache!

"Hak...!"

Aagh...

Yet what she felt along with the pain was not humiliation or rage, but intrigue and excitement.

'Interesting...!'

Ian.

That boy.

His aura level wasn't the only thing on par with hers.

To think he'd also been hiding such a consummate martial art...!

'How...?'

She had received the best support possible under the Heavenly Sword House, learning countless top-tier martial arts, yet she'd never seen anything like that.

Whereas Ian was said to have gotten not even the least bit of support in Greysel House...

And yet, he'd mastered a skill sharp enough to counter Heavenly Flow, direct martial art of Hisperion!

'Did he have a secret teacher...? But who could possibly teach a technique like that... Even Kyle, who's obsessed with collecting sword skills, never showed me something like that... No, could it be...! Did he invent such a skill himself? N-no way, that can't be. Even I would take quite some time to master something like that. There's no way a boy my age could devise it himself.'

— Gulp!

Still, if by some chance he really did invent it himself...

Yuria's throat bobbed.

'Still... One thing's for certain.'

This boy in front of her was not someone she could take lightly.

'I seriously underestimated you. I admit it. You might be my equal—or even greater.'

— Huff...!

Yuria steadied herself with deep breaths and raised both arms again.

Her side still throbbed, but her body wasn't something that could be taken down with just one blow.

She had the true Heavenly Blood of Hisperion's first head running stronger in her veins than even Darkan's.

'Ian. Thanks for showing me the technique you've been hiding. My heart's pounding.'

Their secret conversation had already begun.

'I should show you what I've been hiding, too.'

Yuria unclenched her fist and sharpened her palm.

Then, like a runner on her mark, she lowered her stance.

Heavenly Flow 4th Form. Flash.

She took the preparatory stance.

"W-what!?"

Charlotte, watching Yuria, couldn't help but let out an exclamation.

'That... that's the basic stance for Heavenly Flow 4th Form!!'

The Heavenly Flow 4th Form is said to require at least late-stage Expert rank to use.

But Yuria was publicly known to be just an entry-stage Expert.

'C-could it be!? Yuria, you were hiding your true level too!? Huh!?'

No.

Yuria was indeed at entry-stage Expert.

Just—

'Watch. Heavenly Flow 4th Form, revised by me.'

Her overwhelming talent allowed her to modify the Heavenly Flow 4th Form to be usable even at entry-stage Expert.

'That stance... That's Yuria's revised Heavenly Flow 4th Form.'

Ian calmly prepared to counter.

Yuria's modified Heavenly Flow 4th Form was a technique he'd experienced countless times fighting her in his previous life.

However, the current Yuria was far weaker than the Yuria in his previous life.

Her technique was among the continent's strongest, but for Ian, it was not particularly hard to respond to.

'This next move will be the last, Yuria.'

Thanks to [Healing Potion Lv.15] Projection, all the muscle and ligament damage from the Reversal had just been healed.

— Swoosh...

Ian lowered his fists and relaxed his entire body.

Since Yuria was about to show a new technique, it was time for him to reveal a new Frenzied Insight Style as well.

Ian is lowkey cheating...

Chapter 36 : Entrance Exam (10)

Entrance Exam (10)

'Heavenly Flow 4th Form - Flash...!'

If the Heavenly Flow 1st form - Truth (彰), focused all its overwhelming power on destructive force, then the 4th - Flash (閃), was a technique that focused entirely on overwhelming speed.

—Squeeze!

Charlotte clutched the hem of her skirt and nervously chewed her lip.

'T-That's impossible to block, even for Ian! There's no way he can handle it!'

She didn't know Ian's real, hidden strength, but no matter how talented he was, for a fourteen-year-old boy to withstand the Heavenly Flow 4th Form was out of the question.

'That's a technique that even master-rank knights barely manage to react to!'

Surely, he hadn't reached master rank at just fourteen.

'Unbelievable... Heavenly Flow 4th Form is only usable by someone at late-stage Expert rank... How is Yuria already...?'

Heavenly Flow 4th form - Flash, required an immense amount of aura to support its overwhelming speed.

That was why reaching late-stage Expert was the bare minimum.

But a late-stage Expert at age fourteen?

That was an achievement far surpassing even the heads of the five great Heavenly Sword clans, renowned as the greatest swordsmen of all time.

It was something beyond talent—utterly impossible by common sense.

To use an analogy, it was like a five-year-old running 100 meters in eight seconds; simply nonsensical.

"Huh..."

Darkan, the Heavenly Sword Lord, also let out a low exclamation as he watched Yuria preparing the Heavenly Flow 4th Form.

"Yuria. Don't tell me..."

In fact, Darkan had known for several months now that Yuria was adapting the Heavenly Flow 4th Form to suit herself.

He had, however, been privately skeptical about what she was doing.

'I thought it was impossible to adapt it.'

The art of Heavenly Flow could be called the very essence of Hisperion.

From the founder, revered as a deity, to the past 5th Heavenly Sword Lord, famed as the strongest swordsman, all the way to Darkan, one of this era's strongest.

It had continually evolved through countless master swordsmen refining and adapting it, reaching the very pinnacle of ultimate technique.

Thus, mastering Heavenly Flow perfectly was said to raise one to the rank of a sword god.

But, for all its heights, to try and adapt it recklessly could only diminish its power, not elevate it.

Even so, the swordmaster didn't stop Yuria.

She was a child with talent surpassing even his own.

He believed even her trials and errors would be good experiences for her, so he let her be.

But to think, she would suddenly display the Heavenly Flow 4th Form here and now.

'She's not the type to use an incomplete technique in a real fight...'

There was no way Yuria could have attained late-stage Expert at this age.

Even by Darkan's standards, it was impossible.

Ragnarr Hisperion, called the greatest swordsman and who ascended to sword godhood before he was even elderly, hadn't reached late-stage Expert at fourteen.

So, only one possibility remained.

Yuria had successfully refined 4th Form to the point where it could be used even at the entry-stage of Expert rank.

'Ha, haha... Yuria, you're rewriting history again.'

Swordmaster Darkan's intuition still predicted Ian's victory, but with things like this, he wondered if his instincts might be proven wrong for once.

'Ian. If Yuria is using Heavenly Flow 4th Form, then even you must not let your guard down.'

With the techniques Ian had shown so far, he could not withstand the fourth form.

To counter 4th Form, he would have to show something even greater.

Ian was thinking the same as the swordmaster.

'Neither Frenzied Insight's Reversing Heaven nor Extreme Point can stop Yuria's Heavenly Flow 4th Form.'

Reversing Heaven, which reverses the opponent's aura, was far too slow to react to the fourth form's speed.

Extreme Point (尖尖), which gathers aura to one point for tremendous speed and power, might be able to counter if focused and timed perfectly, but that would be as reckless as catching lightning with your bare hands.

Even the slightest lapse in timing or focus, and his defeat would be certain.

'But... It's not as if there's no way.'

Yuria's Heavenly Flow 4th Form was a technique that had tormented Ian endlessly during their sparring matches in his previous life.

Of course, he'd thought hard about ways to counter it.

Ian had once devoted a great deal of effort solely to neutralizing this technique.

His Frenzied Insight Style - Extreme Point was a byproduct from that research.

He had developed Extreme Point after being inspired by Yuria's efficient aura control when she adapted 4th Form.

And the technique he designed specifically to counter the overwhelming speed of 4th Form was Frenzied Insight Style - Extreme Sense (羅流羅).

The principle behind Extreme Sense was similar to Extreme Point.

It also involved focusing aura in specific places.

But it didn't compress aura to a single point like Extreme Point.

Instead, to every spot where tactile sensation existed—fine hairs, skin, nerves—a practitioner poured aura into all their sensory receptors to the very extreme, so as to perceive even the slightest movement or change in air currents, environment, and the world around.

At first glance, it sounded simple enough for anyone to try, but to execute it actually required immense study and training.

To focus aura perfectly on tactile sense, first, one needed to know every location of their sensory nerves with the precision of someone who'd dissected their own body.

Second, it required ultra-high concentration to evenly distribute aura to every tactile point and maintain that balance.

Thus, while performing Extreme Sense, a swordsman fell into a semi-unconscious state of total focus on aura control.

In that borderline-unconsciousness, you reacted to attacks purely by reflex.

'A technique that relies solely on conditioned reflexes to counterattack.'

So, the effectiveness of Extreme Sense surged the more combat-hardened the swordsman was.

Those well-versed in battle had bodies that reacted faster than thought, and could counter more appropriately.

And at present, the soul inside Ian's body contained the countless experiences he had accumulated across many wars and over a long life.

'My body may be different, but my conditioned reflexes are intact. I can feel it.'

The moment he faced 4th Form.

He felt goosebumps all over his body, and realized his fingertips and toes twitched instinctively.

'Come, Yuria.'

He was sure he could respond perfectly to her Heavenly Flow 4th Form.

Frenzied Insight Style

Extreme Sense (羅流羅)–!

—Shuuuuuuk!

In an instant, Ian's atmosphere subdued, as if it were a tranquil lake.

'... What!?'

Yuria, who'd been tensed and timing her charge with 4th Form ready, almost lost the strength in her legs at the sudden change.

'Wh-what is that...?'

The aura Ian emitted felt so unfamiliar.

Outwardly, it looked as if he was just lowering both arms limply, but his aura was reminiscent of a calm, still lake.

Only, it was a lake of unfathomable depth—like an abyss.

A sense of foreboding told her that if she threw herself in recklessly, she'd be swallowed whole.

'Ugh... This, this is no joke.'

Yuria felt an instinctive fear towards that endless depth.

But.

'Ha, haha...'

Along with the fear, she felt exhilaration and delight.

'This is fun. Really fun! Ian Greysel!'

A broad smile bloomed on Yuria's lips before she realized it.

'You just casually reveal such amazing techniques, don't you! Are you saying you can easily counter something like my Heavenly Flow 4th Form?'

Her whole intuition was warning her.

Throwing herself into that vast, deep lake would be basically suicide.

But.

'Fine...! I won't disappoint you! Ian!'

A genius could sense it in another.

A prodigy of that caliber could only have lived a proud, lonely life.

Only he could see and understand what he did; no one else could share his vision—

So whatever he pursued, he had to do alone; whatever he discussed, he had to reason with himself.

'Is that why you've been hiding your strength so far...?'

A genius no one could understand anyway.

No matter how much he revealed himself, he could never truly share understanding or empathy with another.

He must have concluded that it was meaningless.

'And now, the reason you're revealing your strength at last...'

It must be because he's finally encountered a true genius like himself.

He's sending a message to her, the greatest prodigy of this age, the one called divinely gifted.

Let's clash, and see if we share an understanding—if the worlds we see from the same height can overlap.

'Of course.'

That was why, all the more.

Yuria could not help but throw herself into that lake.

'I can understand you. I'll prove it here. We can truly understand one another.'

Her Heavenly Flow 4th Form, imbued with all her genius and realization.

And Ian's mysterious, unknown technique.

The two secret arts would clash, and maybe they could glimpse the worlds they saw, and meet at eye level.

'Then here I go, Ian...!'

Yuria concentrated her aura to its very limit in her toes and the edge of her hand.

Ordinarily, using 4th Form from entry-stage Expert would be impossible.

With the amount of aura at that rank, you couldn't produce the overwhelming speed of Flash (閃).

But that was a limitation only for an ordinary Hisperion.

Yuria's birth had gifted her with a plethora of special talents and miracles, and for her, it wasn't impossible at all.

As for lacking aura?

She could make up for it with the overwhelming explosive power of the celestial energy, a trait only a select few Hisperion possessed.

If even that wasn't enough?

She'd use her innate genius to pinpoint only the most essential parts of 4th Form and maximize efficiency at every step.

Moreover.

The blood flowing in Yuria's body was especially remarkable, even among the direct line of Hisperion.

She possessed the True Heavenly Blood (眞天血), inheriting the founder's blood more purely than anyone.

If she used 4th Form with a body empowered by True Heavenly Blood,

even with entry-stage Expert aura, she could easily produce power surpassing late-stage Expert.

—KWAANG!!

Yuria kicked off the ground.

With a sonic boom, the air itself was ripped apart.

For a moment, she felt all sound in the world vanish.

She'd surpassed the speed of sound, leaving all noise behind.

—SHWEEE-EEEEK!

In just 0.02 seconds, Yuria reached Ian.

A moment too brief to even allow the simplest thought.

In that instant, her body repeated the motions it had practiced countless times, purely by reflex.

Her hand became a blade, swung at her opponent.

But.

Yuria's white 'blade' never touched Ian.

Frenzied Insight Style - Extreme Sense (羅流羅).

Ian's fist was already at Yuria's solar plexus.

Frenzied Insight Style - Extreme Point (尖尖).

Just like a monster lurking at the bottom of a black lake snatching at a bird flying overhead.

The instant Extreme Sense detected Heavenly Flow 4th Form, extreme Point revealed its fang.

There was not a shred of thought or hesitation in the process.

Too brief to even savor thought—

In a fraction of a second, in the moment split into a thousandths,

A counterattack made entirely of reflex.

—JJAEEEOOOONG!!!

Yuria took the blow to her solar plexus,

"... Kuh, kuh!"

Her own momentum, augmented by the power of Extreme Point, sent her flying—

—KUDUNK! PUHUK! PUVUK! CHIIIK...

She was mercilessly flung across the floor, and unable to get back up.

Just two exchanges.

In merely two exchanges, the greatest prodigy of this century had been decided.

"WOOOOAHHH!!"

"Y-Yuria lost?"

"O-Oh my god! I never expected this!"

"A new legend is beginning!!"

The stands erupted.

The warriors and swordsmen leaped to their feet in awe at the birth of a new genius.

"H-How could this be..."

"Is this really possible!"

"... Once again, another stone is cast into the already chaotic succession race."

Meanwhile, the scholars and political nobles on the other side exchanged glances and whispered frantically.

"Send people to Greysel."

"Puhat! Yuria actually lost?"

"What an interesting child. Churrup."

"Investigate everything about Sir Ian's background!"

"H-How... I-Ian Greysel... W-what a monster! What in the world is he?!"

The direct descendants of Hisperion began full-scale investigations into Ian.

"Kuhahaha! The Heavenly Sword Lord has found a truly fascinating child!"

"Hmmm... A treasure in human form. Honestly, I'm jealous."

"To have hidden such talent this whole time—surely his mind as well as his skills are extraordinary."

"W-We must take that child into our Elder Council and raise him ourselves!"

"The Elder is old and should enjoy his remaining years peacefully. By the way, I have a daughter about Ian's age—wouldn't they suit each other?"

"Nonsense! That talent must not fall into any of your hands! No! I must have him!"

"...?"

The elders of the Hisperion branch families and heads of vassal clans flaunted their greed and interest toward Ian without trying to hide it.

"Hmph."

Heavenly Sword Lord Darkan could only let out a dumbfounded chuckle.

"He's a rough gem I already had my eye on. Why are so many trying to lay claim to him?"

He grumbled, but the smile on his lips was bright and pleased.

"I have to hurry, Ian. Quickly drink my blood and become my blood child."

Now that victory was decided, only the reward for the top rank remained.

It was time for Ian to consume Darkan's Heavenly Blood Pill—containing the blessed pure essence of Hisperion blood.

Darkan's Heavenly Blood Pill was made with the blood of a demigod, and even a mere ordinary person who ingested it would gain a superhuman body.

His bones would grow hard as steel, his skin tough as leather armor.

Right now, Ian already commanded everyone's attention, but when he grew wings as well, the world would truly focus on him.

Chapter 37 : Entrance Exam (11)

Entrance Exam (11)

Yuria, struck in the solar plexus by Frenzied Insight Style Extreme Point, completely lost consciousness.

With that, the match was entirely over.

"Waaaaah!"

"Ian! Ian Greysel!"

"Unbelievable talent!"

Thunderous cheers erupted.

However, as the direct descendant Yuria had lost, most of the nobles exercised restraint, watching the reactions of the direct lines around them.

Those shouting for joy were mostly Barbarians who paid little heed to such matters, or warriors indifferent to politics.

"The top scorer of the Entrance Examination is the guest of House Hisperion! Ian Greysel!"

With the announcer declaring Ian's victory, the entrance exam of the Sword Dragon Hall officially came to an end.

As soon as the exam finished, Ian rushed over to Yuria.

He laid the gasping Yuria out straight and first checked her consciousness.

He grabbed her cheeks and shook them, but she was utterly unconscious, her eyes rolled back.

Ian immediately checked her breathing and pulse.

Fortunately, her breathing grew steadier with time, and her pulse was strong and regular—perhaps owing to her robust physique.

As Ian breathed a small sigh of relief, the medical team ascended to the arena.

These were the elite medical staff directly under the Heavenly Sword Lord.

Yuria was lifted and taken to the infirmary by them.

Once Yuria had completely disappeared along with the medical staff, the announcer took the stage.

The announcer presented an audio amplification artifact to Ian and spoke.

"Top scorer Ian Greysel! Please share your thoughts on your victory!"

It was time for a speech as required by the ceremony.

If it were up to him, Ian would have much preferred to follow after Yuria, but in any case, he couldn't see Yuria without the permission of the Heavenly Sword Lord.

If he wanted to check on Yuria's condition, it would be fastest to wrap up the event quickly and then receive permission directly from the Lord.

"Ahem!"

Ian turned his head, cleared his throat, and recited a customary speech.

"It is an honor to be the top scorer."

.

.

"I will always do my utmost so that I may, even in small measure, repay the Heavenly Sword Lord for his boundless grace someday—and also be of help to my senior swordsmen of Hisperion."

Ian had no desire to make himself stand out with his speech, so he filled it with the most conventional remarks.

"Ian...! Th-this gentle fellow...!"

However, the Heavenly Sword Lord seemed deeply moved simply because Ian had mentioned him.

"Neat. It's as if he expected from the outset he would win. Well, with such skill, confidence is warranted."

"Ha ha ha. To be so composed even after toppling the famed genius Yuria—no arrogance, not a trace of conceit, remarkable!"

"You can feel Ian's sincerity toward the Lord. He's got both skill and character. The Lord has truly unearthed a rare talent."

"Right after the match ended, he immediately checked on Yuria's state. A truly rare boy. As good-hearted as he is skilled. How did the Lord find him? I envy his discerning eye."

"Ha ha ha. Saying he hopes to help senior swordsmen someday—how adorable, given such talent. By then, the seniors won't be able to keep up with him. He's a charming and endearing boy."

The martial lords and nobles in the audience lavished praise upon Ian, each attaching their own meaning to his victory speech.

"Thank you for your excellent remarks! Next, we will have the top scorer's reward ceremony!"

The next step was the reward ceremony.

–Boom! Boom! Boom! Boom!

With grand drumbeats, Ian followed the ceremonial protocol, kneeling before the Heavenly Sword Lord.

"Well done, Ian Greysel."

Amid applause and cheers from all.

Darkan handed Ian the 'Heavenly Blood Pill', the top scorer's reward, and patted his shoulder.

"And thank you."

"...?"

Thank you?

For what?

Ian had done nothing that warranted words of gratitude from the Lord.

In fact, he felt considerable embarrassment, having just knocked the Lord's youngest daughter, Yuria, unconscious.

But why say "thank you" now?

"A swordsman learns most from defeat. Today's loss will be a very valuable experience for Yuria. After all, it's the first time she's ever lost to someone her own age."

There were still many who were stronger than Yuria.

But since those were all much older than her, they couldn't deliver a "true" defeat.

In time, Yuria would surpass them anyway.

But losing to a peer was different.

If one's peer was more gifted, there was no guarantee she could ever win in the future.

In short, for the first time in her life, Yuria had truly tasted defeat.

And that happened today. To Ian.

"You are probably the only person in this world who could give my youngest daughter such an experience, Ian Greysel."

And once someone has tasted genuine defeat, they are faced with two paths.

Give up and slump down in place, or seek a way to overcome and move forward.

"Yuria will brood over today's loss and seek a way to grow faster. And it won't take her long to find it. She's as much a genius as you are."

"Ah..."

So it was about that.

Still, Ian's expression remained somber.

Seeing this, Darkan playfully disheveled Ian's hair and laughed.

"Ha ha, are you that worried about my youngest daughter?"

"... How did you know?"

"There are things you come to see naturally once you go beyond Grandmaster level."

"... I—I see."

As the Lord had said, Ian was brooding over Yuria, now unconscious.

Upon returning fifteen years to the past, he had sworn above all to protect Yuria.

"My poor skill failed me at the end and I couldn't control my strength. As a result, I harmed Lady Yuria more than necessary. I am deeply remorseful for that..."

"Hm? What? Wait. Strength... control? Hahaha! Ha ha ha ha!"

At Ian's words, the Lord threw back his head and laughed heartily.

"T-to think the Lord would laugh so freely!"

That wide laughter also struck the martial lords and nobles observing the stands in varied ways.

"... It's been ages since I saw the Lord laugh with such good cheer."

"You can tell how much the Lord cares for young master Ian. See how he ruffles his hair? It's almost like a father and son."

"To be favored by the Lord at such a young age—truly enviable."

"It's best not to become an enemy of young master Ian. Unless you want to incur the Lord's wrath."

The Lord himself knew that his every action could have political repercussions, but it was hard to keep up his dignity in front of this charming boy.

"Kah! To think of strength control, against Yuria! Ian Greysel! Thanks to you, I had a great laugh today. What a delightful remark."

Darkan straightened out Ian's rumpled hair.

"Even my youngest daughter was utterly lacking against you."

"... That's not true."

Quite the opposite.

"Lady Yuria... was indeed a formidable opponent."

It was precisely because the young Yuria was so gifted that Ian failed to control his strength.

'I must grow faster...'

If he advanced at a mediocre pace, he would keep injuring Yuria in this way.

That was the last thing Ian wanted.

'Even a day sooner. I must become strong enough to completely overwhelm Yuria.'

Then, he could subdue her without injury and monopolize the top scorers' rewards.

Deep in Ian's eyes, a fierce yet quiet flame blazed.

To Darkan, that made him seem very endearing.

'Hah, what a fascinating boy.'

Most youths at this time would grow conceited after defeating Yuria.

Yet rather than be arrogant, he reflects and hones his will even further.

As the lord of ten thousand swords, the Heavenly Sword Lord couldn't help but feel pride when seeing such a model swordsman.

'Moreover, it's not just his character that's exceptional—his talent is otherworldly. Perhaps even greater than Ragnar Hisperion, hailed as the strongest swordsman in history.'

How could such transcendental talent emerge from the House of Greysel?

Greysel and Hisperion had never mingled blood even once.

A child born of mere human lineage, yet with far greater innate potential than even a Hisperion born to be the Sword God.

'This cannot be simple coincidence. It can't be.'

What's more, this boy even summoned an unknown divine blade at Bladelake.

With his near-divine intuition, Darkan could feel it.

A certain destiny was beginning to revolve around this boy.

'However...'

Darkan felt that he himself was becoming part of that destiny as well.

'Ian. I do not know what great tasks the world will demand of you, but do not worry. As one who walks the path of the Sword God, it is my duty and role to protect and guide someone like you. Simply remain as you are and become the greatest swordsman. I will always stand behind you, watching over you.'

The existence called the Heavenly Sword Lord, as much as he loves the sword itself, must also love those who walk the path of the sword with sincerity.

* * *

The Frenzied Insight Style Extreme Sense is a technique that enables reaction speeds beyond one's limits, but as it entrusts all to reflexes, it has the fatal flaw of being impossible to control one's strength.

Because of that, Ian had harmed Yuria more than necessary.

'Haa...'

Ian, after watching over Yuria lying in the recovery room, had just returned to the Lunabreeze Mansion.

The image of Yuria, eyes rolled back and unconscious, would not leave his mind.

Even though, for the first time in both his past and present lives, he had triumphed over Yuria, he did not feel happy at all.

Because he never wanted to win by hurting her.

'However...'

Had he not used Extreme Sense, he would have lost.

With his current abilities, he had no means to counter Heavenly Flow 4th form, without Extreme Sense.

'I'm on my second life, and Yuria is much weaker than in her previous one...'

Yet even so, she was still such a handful to deal with.

It was a renewed realization of Yuria's strength and greatness.

'Yuria will grow strong rapidly in this life, just as before.'

No, she might even grow faster than previously.

Because Ian's presence had stimulated her.

After tasting defeat by a peer for the first time, she would now seek out faster paths to strength to never lose again.

She had already been growing rapidly—he had just given a genius an extra impetus with his victory.

'In other words, if I let my guard down, what happened today could repeat itself.'

Though Ian too was rapidly getting stronger, he felt that he would have a hard time losing to Yuria going forward.

However, if he grew complacent, he might continue to get these unsatisfying victories.

That was something he desperately wished to avoid.

'Never again.'

To gain the strength to protect Yuria, he had to continue taking the Sword Dragon Hall's top scorer rewards.

To do that, ironically, he had to keep defeating Yuria until graduation.

'Yet, winning this way must never happen again.'

He must become yet stronger.

'Strong enough to completely overwhelm and subdue Yuria without hurting her.'

Ian turned his gaze to the Heavenly Blood Pill on the table.

'This will be the first step.'

The top scorer's reward for the entrance exam.

A tonic made from the Lord's Heavenly Blood and aura.

It would be wonderful if he could just endlessly duplicate it using the Authority of Projection, but as it was made with demigod's blood and aura, the magic power required for copying it was astronomical. So, he had no choice but to give up on projection for now.

'It's a pity, but replicating the Heavenly Blood must wait for the future.'

Heavenly Blood of Hisperion was also something he absolutely had to copy using the Authority of Projection someday.

In this life, Ian planned to use every means possible to become stronger.

So that he would not lose a single precious person to the demon grand dukes.

But for now, his magic power was far too insufficient to properly project even rare items.

–Hawp!

So for now, he should just ingest it directly.

As he accumulated such experiences and honed his skills, one day he would be able to project anything.

Not only the Lord's Heavenly Blood, but also Yuria's True Heavenly Blood.

If he could select only the essence of the Heavenly Blood and project it, then within a few years, he could attain a body as powerful as Darkan's or Yuria's in her previous life.

His bones would be as sturdy as adamantium, his skin as tough as dragon hide.

'With this Heavenly Blood Pill, I take my first step.'

–Crunch!

Ian bit down on the Heavenly Blood Pill, swallowing it in one go.

Simply digesting this properly would grant him monstrous strength, allowing him to tear an orc apart barehanded, without aura.

His bones would become harder than steel, his skin as tough as leather armor.

The stronger the body, the more powerful the aura manifested from it.

Naturally, the efficiency of his aura manipulation would also skyrocket.

Ian sat cross-legged, savoring the taste of the Heavenly Blood Pill.

It was unexpectedly sweet.

A human tongue reveling in the power flowing from demigod's blood.

'Now, let's begin training.'

It was time to truly make all the power contained in the Heavenly Blood Pill his own.

Chapter 38 : Plan (1)

Plan (1)

After the entrance exam at the Sword Dragon Hall, the new cadets were granted a ten-day leave.

This time was given to treat the injuries sustained during the exam and to allow for rehabilitation.

Ian spent a full three days of that ten-day break focusing solely on absorbing the Heavenly Blood Pill.

As a result—

- Boom! Boom! Boom! Boom!

Ian had experienced a meteoric rise, going from low-intermediate-stage Expert to high-intermediate-stage Expert.

He could now handle Vladiark, which was much heavier than an average adult man, as if it were a light staff.

'This ridiculously huge greatsword now feels like a rapier.'

The aura of the Heavenly Sword Lord that had been condensed within the Heavenly Blood Pill was incredibly pure and impressive, but the physical strength gained from that blood's essence was nothing short of astonishing.

His body was still that of a 14-year-old boy.

But the power contained within was on par with even an adult barbarian.

An adult barbarian, even without aura, could easily muster over ten times the strength of an average man.

If a bear could tear apart a human, then a barbarian could tear apart a bear.

It was strength that could never be attained through ordinary training.

Thanks to the Heavenly Sword Family's blood, Ian was able to acquire physical power that would otherwise have been utterly unattainable.

'And on top of that...'

Currently, Ian's aura level was high-intermediate-stage Expert.

'To be high-intermediate-stage Expert at 14... Even Ragnar Hisperion, known as the strongest swordsman in history, is said to have reached mid-intermediate-stage Expert only at 15.'

What's more, it wasn't even late spring yet, and Ian was already at high-intermediate-stage Expert.

'This is insane growth.'

His rate of advancement was far faster than even Ragnar, the so-called strongest swordsman in history.

If he maintained this pace, reaching Swordmaster before turning sixteen wouldn't be impossible.

He could go down in human history as the youngest Swordmaster ever.

'But...'

Yet, even with this much power, he still couldn't subdue Yuria's Heavenly Flow 4th Form safely.

Of course, beating her itself wouldn't be an issue, but if he tried with his current abilities, just like in the entrance exam, he would end up hurting her again.

'To safely counter the Heavenly Flow 4th Form, I need, at minimum, intermediate-stage Master super-senses.'

If he used Frenzied Insight Style - Extreme Sense, he could counter the Heavenly Flow 4th Form, but since he couldn't control his strength, Yuria would surely get hurt.

Yuria would continue to develop various techniques, applying the overwhelming speed of the Heavenly Flow 4th Form.

To subdue her supersonic moves safely, he absolutely needed super-senses capable of smoothly keeping up with that speed.

'The best way is to quickly raise my aura level.'

Raising one's aura level naturally increases their sensory abilities as well.

However, even just reacting to the Heavenly Flow 4th Form required at least early-stage Master level.

To subdue them safely, being at intermediate-stage Master level or higher was required for stability.

At this point, reaching that level would take at least two to four years.

Since he could be facing Yuria again in just a few weeks, two to four years was far too late.

'I could consider using a super-sense artifact, but...'

Of course, using artifacts was strictly forbidden during Sword Dragon Hall examinations.

Sword Dragon Hall was a place for honing swordsmanship and aura levels.

Allowing artifacts would undermine that purpose.

'Hmm...'

There was, of course, a way to use artifacts in secret.

He could store them with the Authority of Projection, materialize them only briefly when needed, and use them.

'But the risk is too high.'

If he were caught even once, Ian's second life would be thrown into utter chaos.

It would mean exposing the power of Authority of Projection to everyone.

'What about projecting sensory traits from a monster or demi-human with super-senses?'

He considered this, but it was still too difficult to pull off right now.

To project super-senses capable of countering the Heavenly Flow 4th Form safely, he would need to capture a high-ranking lightning-attribute spirit or an Elder-class vampire at minimum.

Both were beings that even a Master might not be able to take down.

'Then... What about projecting sensory abilities from insects with great reflexes, like a fly...?'

Immediately rejected.

If only his reflexes became faster, it wouldn't be meaningful.

He needed super-senses that allowed him to control his strength in an instant.

Besides, even flies can't dodge an ordinary person's palm.

The same went for animals with extraordinary reaction speed, like cats or fish.

With those lesser creatures' traits, it was simply impossible to counter the Heavenly Flow 4th Form safely.

'There's also the method of obtaining a runestone from a dungeon, labyrinth, or gate...'

Runestones.

Stones imbued with mysterious magic power.

They were used when making artifacts at the Magic Tower, when enchanting equipment, or could awaken special abilities in the user through engravings—true treasures.

'I even know where a runestone for super-senses can be found...'

Among the dungeons Ian had conquered in his previous life, there was one that yielded a Super-sense Rune.

But—

'That place, too, is at least Master-level in difficulty.'

That required being a Master. So did something else. Master, master everywhere...

'That leaves, in the end...'

There was only one option left.

'I'll have to go the route of chemical enhancement.'

He would project a drug that boosts super-senses, and inject the pure liquid into his belly or veins whenever necessary.

'There are some side effects, but...'

They weren't severe.

He would just feel a little queasy and spacey for a while.

Resting would clear the symptoms, so it was merely a minor inconvenience.

'Of course, this isn't an easy path, either.'

The potion for super-senses: Elder Vampiric Sense.

As the name suggests, making this potion required the blood of an Elder-class vampire as an ingredient.

Meaning, the ingredient itself was of Master-level value.

'Currently, I'm at high-intermediate-stage Expert...'

Even if he obtained Elder Vampiric Sense, it would take quite some time to completely project it.

He would probably have to proceed bit by bit over several days, just like when he had projected Sophia's dantian and mana circuits before.

'And it will require a lot of magic power to manifest, too.'

That was inevitable, since the potion was made from Master-level ingredients.

Still, if he wanted to acquire super-senses right now, the Elder Vampiric Sense was the best option he had.

'For now, this is the fastest and surest method.'

Once he had Elder Vampiric Sense, he could deal with any shortcomings later.

At the very least, it was worth attempting to project it.

'Yes, I won't know for sure until I try.'

Once he had finished deliberating, Ian immediately sought out the mansion caretaker, Cheryl, and asked her to procure a bottle of 'Elder Vampiric Sense'.

Elder Vampiric Sense was mainly used by vampire hunters, but swordsmen also occasionally took it when training advanced techniques, so no one would find it odd that Ian was acquiring it.

However, after a while, the person who came to see Ian was not bearing Elder Vampiric Sense—but rather, it was the Alchemy Workshop Master of the Heavenly Sword Palace.

"... I'm sorry, Young Master Ian. Providing you with Elder Vampiric Sense will take a considerable amount of time."

"... Pardon?"

He explained that recently, there had been so much demand for Elder Vampiric Sense that their reserves were depleted, and all the ingredients were out of stock as well.

"..."

So, not only was there no stock, but even the ingredients were unavailable...?

In the Heavenly Sword Palace that had everything...?

- Downcast.

What unfortunate luck.

"How long would it take for new stock or ingredients to arrive?"

"... I feel ashamed, but as the ingredients are rare, it is difficult to give you an exact date."

"Ah..."

Well, it was not as if Elder-class vampire blood was common.

For a vampire to reach Elder-class was, for humans, equivalent to attaining Master-level.

"We're out of Elder Vampiric Sense, but we still have ample stock of Noble Vampiric Sense. Shall we provide you with that instead, if you'd like?"

"... Um. No, that won't be necessary."

Noble Vampiric Sense was a potion that boosted one's senses up to the level of Expert.

If Ian took Noble Vampiric Sense on top of his current abilities, his sensory power would overlap and he would benefit somewhat, but it was nowhere near enough to safely counter the Heavenly Flow 4th Form.

"I need Elder Vampiric Sense no matter what—is there really no other way?"

"... Well, we have been searching for ingredients ourselves, so there are a few options I can suggest..."

The Workshop Master proposed two solutions.

The first was an auction.

"There will be an auction held in the southern part of the Empire in one month. Rumor has it that Elder-class vampire blood will be up for sale, so we intend to send someone as well."

"In one month...?"

One month was too late.

He might have to face Yuria as soon as next week.

"Hmm... And the other method?"

"A gate."

The other method involved raiding a gate.

"A week ago, a gate opened in the eastern part of the Kingdom of Serion. Analysis shows that it connects to ancient vampire ruins."

Gate.

A dimensional portal connected to another world.

Though it seemed mysterious, its principles and causes were much more understood than people thought.

However, explaining it would take some complex terminology—fragments of destroyed dimensions, celestial sphere collisions, and so on—words only the mages of the Magic Tower would enjoy.

Anyway, to put it simply.

The materials and treasures found inside gates were highly lucrative.

For adventurers, gates were among the best sources of income, along with dungeons and labyrinth towers.

"If you go there, you can obtain Blood Demon Jade and Blood Light Mushrooms. If you use them as substitute ingredients, you should be able to craft Elder Vampiric Sense. However..."

The Workshop Master smacked his lips and continued.

"Since it's a foreign gate, it will be quite tricky for us to gain entry. And, as gates are extremely dangerous places with high casualty rates, it's a risky path."

He added that even if they managed to obtain entry permits, the most they could send would be one Expert and one User—two people in total.

"I see."

From a nation's standpoint, gates were vital resources.

Naturally, they would not want to let those resources be taken by another country, so restricting foreign participation made perfect sense.

Letting even two outsiders join was likely a minimum courtesy as an allied nation.

'One Expert and one User...'

He and Sophia—it was a perfect match.

Since there really was no other way, all that was left was to aim for the gate.

While Blood Demon Jades and Blood Light Mushrooms were rare, searching through an ancient vampire ruin would usually turn up at least a few, so with some work, it should be possible to obtain them.

"Understood."

As Ian rose and extended his hand, the Workshop Master bowed deeply and grasped Ian's hand with both of his.

"If we receive any new information, we will notify you at once."

"Thank you."

Even so, to think the Workshop Master personally came to inform him like this just because he was the honored guest of the Heavenly Sword Lord.

Once again, Ian realized just how high a position a Hisperion guest held.

* * *

After the Workshop Master left Lunabreeze, Ian began planning in earnest.

Now that he was headed for the gate, he had to consider what he needed to prepare and how his future schedule should look.

Sophia was currently napping, having trained hard all morning.

Once she woke up, he would tell her they needed to go to the gate.

As he considered various matters, scribbling plans on paper for the coming days—

"Young Master Ian!"

Housekeeper Cheryl burst urgently into Ian's office.

"Cheryl? Is something wrong?"

— Gasp! Gasp!

Cheryl caught her breath, forcing out her words.

"L-Lady Aris Hisperion! She has arrived at Lunabreeze!"

"... What?"

Aris Hisperion.

First daughter and third child of Heavenly Sword Lord Darkan.

And to Ian, the woman who most quickly sprang to mind at the words 'hypocrite' or 'crazy bitch'.

'Why, of all things, has that monster come here...?'

Chapter 39 : Plan (2)

Plan (2)

'How did things end up like this?'

Aris Hisperion.

Who could've imagined I'd end up having tea with this crazy hypocrite all of a sudden.

"....."

– Sip.

Presently, they were at the drawing room in the Lunabreeze estate.

Across from Ian sat a woman with abundant platinum blonde hair and crimson eyes.

Aris Hisperion was calmly sipping tea with graceful movements.

"....."

– Smile.

When her gaze met Ian's, Aris beamed, her eyes shining with naïve innocence.

As though she had been raised within a greenhouse, without ever encountering the world's filth—her very appearance overflowing with love.

Just by looks alone, you wouldn't find another lady so perfectly crafted by hand.

Yet within that exterior lurked a monster that could make even demons weep.

'It's a damn good thing I know this woman's true nature. Anyone fooled by her looks wouldn't even find their bones left.'

Aris, with a single hand gesture or step, exuded malice.

Her wickedness and cruelty could be compared without exaggeration to the demon grand dukes of the demonic realm.

'I had enough of her during the Hisperion civil war—never again.'

Wherever Aris went, there was always gruesome blood and screams in her wake.

Viscera strewn about, shattered bones, flesh flying everywhere... It was beyond such simple descriptions.

'... Just the memory disgusts me.'

Several horrors flickered across Ian's mind.

A laboratory of human experiments filled with a stench.

And the horrific monsters born from that abominable lab.

The rotten pus he saw in her torture chamber.

Piled high, festering and as sticky as a swamp.

Those sacrificed to her torture hung everywhere like works of art or banners.

'Among them were old people and children.'

All her victims were the families of those who had dared to oppose her.

'A madwoman.'

Aris Hisperion was someone who cared nothing for means or methods to achieve her goals.

That gentle, benevolent appearance—just a thoroughly played mask for her own gain.

'Now that I'm inside the Heavenly Sword Palace, I couldn't help but get involved with her one day... but I'd hoped to put it off as long as possible.'

Who'd have thought that stubborn woman would come to me of her own accord first?

No way she came just to make friends.

She's the very sort who weaves deceit into every breath.

Just what kind of scheme did she come here to propose?

Aris Hisperion.

"I apologize for coming unannounced, young lord Ian."

Aris smiled bashfully, feigning embarrassment.

At her innocent-looking face, Ian nearly let out a hollow laugh.

"Yet you welcomed me with such fine tea and hospitality... This lady was deeply moved by your kindness, young lord."

Ian hadn't prepared the tea.

Cheryl, the estate's manager, had done so.

It was nothing more than the customary treatment for guests.

And yet, she pressed her hands together over her chest as though genuinely thankful and moved.

She looked truly modest and compassionate—but, knowing Aris's true nature, Ian only felt chills.

"... So, what brings you here?"

"Oh... Right..."

Aris lowered her neatly clasped hands to just below her navel.

"I've come and taken up so much of your time without warning. My apologies. I know you must be busy with many matters... I was just so happy and delighted to meet the new family member... Of course, I'd love to converse longer if I could, but I'll deliver my message and withdraw promptly."

Aris performed the role of the pitiable lady to perfection.

Most people, when faced with such an act, would respond along the lines of, "No, not at all! It's fine! Please stay as long as you wish! Let's talk slowly. Servants! Bring more refreshments!"

But—

"Yes. Please finish within a minute."

To Ian, who saw right through Aris's intentions, her act was just sickening.

'She's just pretending to be sociable to pry loose information from me.'

It was obvious she wanted to learn about Ian to find a way to exploit him.

If she found a weakness, she'd bite down. If she spotted desire, she'd dangle bait.

'I must never reveal any hint of weakness or desire to Aris.'

For that reason, Ian hadn't brought Sophia along.

Sophia was currently hidden away in a second-floor room.

If Aris learned of Ian and Sophia's relationship, who knew what she might do to Sophia just to get to Ian?

"Young Lord Ian! Aren't you being terribly rude?"

At that moment, a knight standing behind Aris barked angrily at Ian.

From the insignia on the armor, Ian could tell he was from Aris's personal Celestial Water Knights.

"No matter if you're the guest of the Heavenly Sword Lord, the lady is the direct line of the Lord himself! What, within one minute? If you do not observe proper courtesy, I'll be forced to show you what rudeness truly means!"

Even as he finished, the knight unleashed the full aura of a late-stage Expert and glared at Ian.

"B-Brienne!? S-stop! Please, that's enough!"

Aris hastily tried to hold back the knight.

Ian could only laugh lightly in response.

"Hah."

"D-did you just laugh at me!?"

So, when pity didn't work, the next step was intimidation.

Most would shrink, their spirit suppressed when threatened by someone of higher cultivation.

Then, seeing Aris step in to protect them, they'd feel relieved and perhaps even unconsciously grow fond of her.

If Ian were simply a fourteen-year-old boy, such tactics might have worked.

Fourteen is an age too young for courage and sensitive enough to be touched by the smallest bit of kindness from the opposite sex.

But—

'What a farce.'

Ian may have looked fourteen, but inside was a war-hardened veteran who had survived the Hisperion civil war and the war against the demon army.

Threats and cheap theater like this didn't even scratch him.

"If you're here to pick a fight, I'll be leaving first."

"W-what...!?"

"Uh, um...?"

As Ian stood up to leave, both Aris and the knight were visibly flustered.

In truth, for a guest—even one invited by the Lord—to walk out first before a direct family member was a serious breach of courtesy.

That Ian dared do so was a bold move—but with Aris Hisperion, showing this much firmness was necessary.

If he showed even a lukewarm attitude, she'd keep coming at him with nonsense.

"Y-young lord Ian?"

As Ian started to leave the drawing room, Aris sprang to her feet and called out urgently.

"I came to visit only to offer my help, young lord Ian! I absolutely didn't come to pick a fight!"

"..."

Help?

She means a scheme.

"... Young lord Ian. I heard you're searching for an Elder Vampiric Sense, aren't you?"

"...?"

What?

Was that why you came?

Rumors sure do spread quickly in the Heavenly Sword Palace.

I don't think it's even been two hours since the master of the alchemy atelier left.

"Where did you hear that?"

Only when Ian showed interest did Aris's smile return.

"Looking after the palace members is my job. Especially when someone is troubled, these walls and pillars become my eyes and ears."

Ian nodded.

Of course. She wouldn't say where she heard it.

"So, if you wish, I can procure the Elder Vamp..."

"I refuse."

Ian cut Aris off without hesitation.

Now that he knew her real reason for coming, there was no need to listen further.

"... Pardon?"

"I'll find the Elder-rank Vampiric Sense myself, with my own power."

"Uh, um... Young lord? I haven't even begun to explain properly..."

"You wanted to offer your help acquiring an Elder Vampiric Sense, didn't you?"

"..."

"I refuse. Now, I wish you a pleasant return."

Ian strode toward the drawing room exit.

A clear signal he didn't wish to speak further.

"... This is difficult to understand."

Just as he opened the door to leave, Aris's voice stabbed into the back of his head.

Now her tone was completely different from before—

Low and cold.

For an instant, Aris's aura changed, and when Ian looked back, she was smiling at him, but her eyes were not smiling at all.

'Half the mask is off now.'

Her expression still showed composure and gentleness, but within those unamused eyes, anger and murderous intent burned unmistakably.

"I came to help you out of pure goodwill—and yet why do you treat me so coldly, young lord Ian?"

"... Hah."

Pure goodwill, she says.

She means pure malice.

"Have I ever committed any offense against you, young lord?"

You have.

Not just in his previous life—even in the present you already have, once.

At the entrance exam.

Didn't she try to probe his skills by using her slave, barbarian Kuga?

But Ian had no intention of bringing it up.

Whether the matter of a past life or the entrance exam—

There was nothing to gain by confronting her, only further entanglement.

'The best course is to minimize all contact with that woman. Breathing the same air is a risk.'

Ian shook his head and offered a final farewell in lieu of a sigh.

"I take it you have nothing more to say. Then, good day."

Without looking back, he left the drawing room.

* * *

'... Ian Greysel.'

On her way back to her own residence, Heavenly Water Hall.

– Clatter! Clatter!

In the carriage, Aris recalled what had just happened and smiled quietly.

'So... he doesn't fall for things so easily. Hmhm.'

If Ian had eagerly accepted her offer of an Elder Vampiric Sense then and there, he would have become her puppet.

She had planned to plant a Mind Worm on the Elder Vampiric Sense.

A Mind Worm.

A magical parasite created with magic power.

It could read a host's thoughts and be used for mental manipulation—a malicious creation indeed.

"Still, it was an enjoyable time, Ian Greysel."

Though she had failed to carry out a single scheme thanks to Ian's stubborn walls, Aris wasn't in a bad mood.

'It's the first time anyone has seen right through me at a glance.'

Ian's attitude—

So resolute, as if he had no wish to get involved with her at all.

No matter how prickly someone's nature was, no one would be so rude to a direct descendant of the Lord without cause.

Moreover, from the servants' talk, Ian's character wasn't bad at all—if anything, many said he was kind and mature.

He must have noticed her schemes well in advance, hence the solid defenses.

'How did he know?'

He couldn't have known her entire plan in detail.

Her decision to give Ian the Mind Worm only formed two hours ago, after all.

Yet for him to so resolutely show hostility and wariness—

'It means he knew my true nature from the start, doesn't it?'

Sensing her sadism and malice, he wanted nothing to do with her.

'How did he know? From when?'

Aris's lips curled in an ever-sharper crescent.

But her eyes only grew deeper, like the abyss.

'Ian Greysel. What an interesting child. You've become much more intriguing. I'll be keeping an even closer eye on you.'

Aris's carriage steadily rolled toward Heavenly Water Hall.

But her mind still lingered at the Lunabreeze estate.

* * *

The vampire relic gate opened in the Serion Kingdom.

'The raid is set to start the day after tomorrow, huh?'

Call it luck, but by coincidence, the raid would begin in just two days.

With preparations for the journey and a warp, they'd arrive at the gate perfectly on time.

"Sophia."

Ian called out to Sophia, who was snacking.

"Nom nom. Yes?"

"We're going out for a few days."

"Nom nom. We're going out? Where to?"

"Serion Kingdom."

"Oh!? Abroad!? Wait, is this an overseas trip to celebrate passing the entrance?"

"No. We're going to raid a gate."

"Ugh...!"

"Even if you don't want to, you have to come."

Ian had originally planned to bring Sophia, but now that Aris had visited the estate, it was even more important that he didn't leave her behind.

Who knew what might happen if she were left alone.

"If you don't like it, you can just follow me quietly. I'll get us a good hotel in Serion Kingdom."

"Oooh! I'd never refuse! How could I let young master go alone? If you hadn't suggested coming together, I'd actually be mad!"

Sophia stuffed all the snacks on the table into her mouth at once.

– Chomp! Chomp!

With a gulp, she swallowed everything and replied,

"And besides, it's a rare chance for actual combat! Of course I have to come along!"

"Ooh... Impressive, Sophia."

"Hehe! I'll get ready right now!"

"Pack your toothbrush and toiletries, and bring a big water bottle."

"Okay! I'll pack yours too, young master!"

– Dash!

"Yay! Overseas business trip!"

Sophia ran straight up to the second floor.

She could handle things like supplies and clothing herself.

She looked that way, but Sophia was actually quite meticulous.

'Then I...'

Ian took a small notebook from his pocket.

'I'd better organize the things I need to get from the vampire ruins.'

The very first objectives at the gate: Blood Demon Jades and Blood Light Mushrooms.

Crucial ingredients for Hyperperception potions and Elder Vampiric Sense.

'And... I should defeat as many monsters as possible. If I absorb their life force with Vladiark, they'll all be nourishment for my growth.'

By refining the life force absorbed with Vladiark, cultivation of inner energy would greatly help Ian advance his aura level.

'Since I'm heading into a gate anyway...'

Ian planned to extract as much benefit from it as possible.

Level up time!

Chapter 40 : Vampire Ruins Gate (1)

Vampire Ruins Gate (1)

Eastern region of the Serion Kingdom.

An adventurer camp set up in a clearing within a sunlit forest.

In front of the gate connected to the vampire ruins, adventurers equipped with all sorts of weapons had gathered in small groups.

There were 18 of them in total.

They were all members assembled for the raid on the gate.

"It's nothing but a gathering of trash~."

Johnson, a early-stage Expert adventurer and former knight, grumbled as he squatted down in the shade of a tree.

From his perspective, among the 18 assembled, only his own party of five looked like they'd be any real help.

"How the hell did the group end up like this?"

Johnson pointed to one corner of the camp.

"Over there. Those guys."

Where he pointed, young porters with oversized backpacks were gathered together.

"Aren't those Jack's party's porters? Where's Jack's party? Why are only the porters here?"

"Johnson. You didn't hear?"

A pointy-hatted mage sitting next to Johnson, Linda—a 2-circle mage on the verge of 3—murmured while looking at her book.

"Been about a week now? I heard Jack died. His lackeys also got badly hurt. Think they're still in the infirmary."

"Huh? How did that happen?"

"Word is, they had a dungeon accident. Triggered the wrong trap. A golem trap. Just unlucky. They said Jack held off the monsters to buy enough time for the others to escape, at least."

"Damn? Man, that guy's story is sad~. Always lived like a pushover, even died like one. Who's going to recognize that kind of sacrifice?"

"... Tch. I liked him, though. He lent me money easily."

"Did you pay him back?"

"No. Well, there's no one left to pay back now, so I guess it's my money now."

"Heh. What a wretch."

"Ah, come on."

Johnson chuckled, spitting on the ground with a "ptoo."

"But wait... that means Jack's party can't make it? So besides the porters, it's just us as the raid members?"

Jack's rank was Expert mid-rank.

The members of his party were all at least high-rank adventurers, even the weakest among them.

Jack's party was supposed to be the core fighting force along with Johnson's party.

"If Jack's party isn't here, what are we supposed to do? Are they expecting us to do everything? Shouldn't they have found another party to replace Jack's?"

But no matter where he looked, there were only porters or shabby amateurs.

"Why don't I see anyone else?"

"They came. Two of them. I heard they were dispatched from overseas to stand in for Jack's party."

"From abroad? Where?"

"Hisperion."

"What, Hisperion? They sent people from there?"

Johnson craned his neck and looked around.

"Why can't I spot them? If they're knights from there, you could always tell just by the gear! They'd be wrapped in flashy armor or something, right?"

But no matter where he looked, there were only porters in worn casual clothes or amateur adventurers in light armor.

— Tap tap.

Just then, a hulking man standing next to Linda—Sam, early-stage Expert martial artist—tapped Johnson on the shoulder and gestured.

"Over there. Those two."

"Huh?"

Where Sam pointed stood a boy and girl, clearly not even past their teens.

A gray-haired boy who didn't even seem old enough to have armpit hair.

And a girl a bit taller, but surely only a year or two older, with brown hair.

They were Ian, an Expert high-rank swordsman from Hisperion who had come to gather vampire materials, and his childhood friend Sophia.

"Huh? Just kids, aren't they?"

But to Johnson, they looked like nothing but average brats.

Those snot-nosed kids were the raid members sent in place of Jack's party?

Jack's group were all at least high-rank in ability, while those kids didn't seem older than low-rank. Not even mid-rank.

And they were outnumbered too. Jack's party: six. Those brats: just two.

"What the hell. Which bastard gave final approval for the raid team? You want us to go into the gate with this crew? Trying to get us killed?"

"Whoa. Calm down, Johnson."

As Johnson was about to fly off the handle and storm to the guild, the thug Dean next to him spoke in a low voice.

"I thought the same way at first, but maybe... maybe this is a good opportunity for us."

"...? What are you talking about?"

"Look closer at that girl's sword hilt."

"Hmm...?"

Narrowing his eyes, Johnson stared at the sword strapped to the brown-haired girl's back.

His eyes widened in shock.

"What! Shit! Hey! That—?"

On the pommel of the sword's hilt, he noticed a tiny engraved emblem.

It was the mark of Elegance Armory, the ultra-luxurious weapon brand.

"Th-that's an Elegance Armory weapon, isn't it?"

–Nod.

Thug Dean grinned wickedly and nodded.

"That's right. That thing is damn expensive."

Even the cheapest Elegance Armory weapon easily topped 1,000 gold.

1,000 gold—money a regular city-dweller could only scrape together in three or four years, eating nothing but grass.

Enough to buy 20,000 piping hot bowls of pork soup at 5 copper a try.

And those long swords? They were among the most expensive in the arsenal.

Easily worth well over 3,000 gold.

"Wow. Shit. I can't believe I missed that."

From the sheath to the guard, it was so unremarkable that he just assumed it was a regular sword.

Who would have thought there'd be such a crucial detail at the pommel?

"How does a little girl like that carry a sword worth thousands of gold?"

Did that little brat even know how to use such a fancy weapon?

If only it were his.

With a sword like that, he'd have graduated from silver-rank adventurer to gold-rank in no time.

"This feels so unfair."

"Johnson. Why feel deprived? Once inside the gate, we're all in the same boat, right? You know that."

As Johnson gave him a questioning look, dean grinned with malice.

"Anyone can die in the gate if luck runs out. Whether you're from the streets or a noble—doesn't matter."

"Hm...? Hey. Dean. You sound like..."

Johnson's expression twisted into a matching wickedness.

"Are you suggesting we do a 'job'?"

"Well... if you agree?"

"Of course I do, you bastard."

At this secretive exchange, Linda the mage sitting nearby scowled.

"Hey! What? Are you out of your minds? Aren't those kids from Hisperion? It's obvious they're nobles! Are you really going to target them?"

"When did we say we'd target them?"

Dean feigned innocence.

"We're just saying that anyone could have bad luck in a gate. If a sword like that drops, we'll just... pick it up."

"Ha. Like I can't read your minds? Don't try anything stupid. You pull something with Hisperion nobles, do you know what revenge you could get?"

"Why would we get punished?"

Johnson grinned slyly.

"In a dungeon, anyone can die. Those brats are at even greater risk. Isn't Hisperion crazy for sending kids into a gate like this in the first place? Obviously."

"... There's going to be an investigation from Hisperion, no matter what."

"Pfft. Hey, so what? What can they do? The bodies will disappear when the gate closes, and even if the foreigners investigate, what could they possibly find?"

"You want to steal that weapon? Then Hisperion will obviously suspect us first. I don't want to get wrapped up in this."

"Relax. There's no way they'll trace it back to us."

Dean looked around and lowered his voice.

"Just hide the sword for a few days after picking it up. Once things calm down, take it to another city and sell it on the black market. They'll never find out."

"... Hey, are you really going to do it?"

"Of course, idiot. It's a huge chance for a big score. That sword alone is worth thousands of gold—thousands. That's more than we'd make risking our necks for years."

"B-but! Isn't that too dangerous? What if, by any chance..."

"I'm telling you, they'll never catch us."

Dean and Johnson twisted their lips into cunning smiles.

"No matter how hard Hisperion investigates, how can they prove we did it? Even if they suspect us, we just play dumb. No evidence. What can they do?"

"Right, right. What are Hisperion people going to do, arrest Serion citizens without evidence?"

"Uh, umm..."

"Linda. Just keep your mouth shut. We'll give you a cut, too, okay?"

"Think about it, Linda. It's barely any risk. Why are you even an adventurer if you can't handle this much? If you want to quit this shit job someday, you need to grab opportunities like this. How long are you going to keep doing dirty work?"

"He's right. Just keep your head down and you can earn thousands of gold. How long are you going to keep risking your life? Miss this, and you'll end up like old Jack, dying old and penniless."

"Ha. Selling out Jack now, huh? You scumbags."

Linda sighed and shook her head.

"Fine. I'll keep my mouth shut. Just make sure my cut is fair."

"Don't! Worry! Linda."

Johnson pinched Linda's cheek and shook it.

"When it's time, just use a Silence spell for us. We'll take care of it quietly if we get the chance. Okay?"

"Then give me a bigger cut."

"Fine, fine. I'll give you enough to ditch that ugly pointy hat."

"W-what! What's wrong with my hat! It's expensive, you know!"

–Slide.

At that moment, two men pushed their shadowed faces in.

"Don't leave us out."

"Give me a cut too."

Sam, the martial artist, and Harris the archer, who'd been silently listening, finally spoke up.

"Fine."

Johnson accepted them without complaint.

"You two handle the bodies. So no one else catches on. OK?"

"Leave it to us. We'll make it clean."

"We can rig it to look like a monster attack."

Just like that, the malice of Johnson's five-man party aligned perfectly with a single wicked intent.

* * *

'Their stares are really obvious, aren't they.'

Ian had sensed the harsh gazes directed at himself and Sophia for quite a while.

The stares of the five men and women squatting in the shade, staring holes through the two of them.

Their eyes were filled with thick malice and greed.

'There are people like that everywhere, huh.'

Ian had experienced countless stares like those in his previous life too.

Most of them came from thugs and bandits.

Those guys were certainly no different.

In Ian's experience, they were surely after Sophia's expensive sword.

"Sophia."

"Yes?"

"Look over there. The group sitting in the shade. Five of them."

Ian glanced toward one corner of the camp with his eyes.

Over there, five men and women were grinning as they blatantly stared at Ian and Sophia.

"Yikes... Who are those people? Why are they looking at us like that?"

"Remember their faces. I think they're after your sword."

"M-my sword?! After my most treasured possession?! That's outrageous! Wait, are you serious?"

"Yeah. In a gate, stealing or robbing other adventurers' equipment is pretty common. Maybe I'm just being paranoid, but there's no harm in being cautious. Your gear is super expensive, so to them it must look like a lump of gold rolling on the ground."

"Oh, dear..."

"And we're both the youngest here, obviously. Easy to underestimate. We look like the weakest targets, so they figure it'll be easy to steal from us. Be careful."

"Yes... Got it. I thought only the monsters would be dangerous, but looks like I can't even trust people around here. In the end, the only ones I can rely on are you and myself, young master!"

"Exactly. Especially in dangerous places like this, never trust others lightly. In places like this, people will kill for even a single chocolate bar. Let alone a 5,000 gold sword. I'll say it again: be extra careful. All right?"

"Yes! Umm... I'm kind of nervous now. But young master, where did you learn stuff like this? Isn't this your first time raiding a gate too?"

"... I read it in books. Adventurer essays and that sort of thing."

"Ah, aha... But, um... I don't remember seeing you reading any books lately..."

"..."

Of course not.

Truth was, Ian hadn't read a single adventurer essay in this life or the last.

Everything he said came from direct experience in his previous life.

Past Ian had dealt with all sorts of lowlifes countless times.

In the many dungeons and gates he raided, he'd probably clashed with other humans half the time.

And Ian was always the one to survive.

Ian fixed his gaze on the group of five in the shade under the tree.

They were still looking at Ian with greedy, predatory eyes.

'Bastards.'

In truth, Ian welcomed their greedy stares.

'If they give me an excuse to act, that works out perfectly for me.'

That just meant more prey he could feed to Vladiark.

'Nothing is as efficient at raising my aura rank as human life force.'

Ian's eyes burned with a greed more intense than those five combined.

'If I use Vladiark to drain their vital energy down to my dantian, I can even project the skills and spells they had.'

He coveted their very lives.