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

Chapter 61 : Taken (15)

Taken (15)

In a deep, dark forest where even moonlight could not seep through.

While Yuria was clutching Dellen's corpse in her arms, Ian stood guard by her side.

– Whoooosh...

From atop a tall tree, a pair of red eyes gazed down at the two of them.

'How interesting.'

The eldest daughter of Hisperion, and Yuria's eldest sister.

Aris Hisperion.

'I never expected Young master Ian to appear here.'

Aris's red eyes curved with a cold smile.

'Thanks to him, the entire plan has changed.'

The reason Aris was in this place was due to the order of the Heavenly Sword Lord.

While her father had left Heavenly Sword Palace empty for the Northern Gate expedition, he had ordered her to watch over her youngest sister, Yuria.

'I had originally planned to rescue her myself.'

Aris deliberately waited until Yuria was at the brink of a desperate crisis.

The more extreme the predicament, the heavier the price of a life saved.

'But to think you would intervene.'

Ian Greysel.

'It doesn't seem as if you received the same order from Father.'

If Ian had the same mission from the Heavenly Sword Lord as she did, there's no way she wouldn't have known.

The informants she had placed with both Ian and her father would have reported it immediately.

'Which means... you came to rescue Yuria of your own accord, without anyone sending you?'

How commendable.

Was he already trying to repay the favor he had received from her father?

'But that's not important now.'

What truly mattered was something else.

'Ian Greysel. How did you find out that Yuria was here?'

How on earth did he manage to track Dellen's trail all the way to this place?

And alone, at that.

How did he find Yuria...?

At only fourteen years old, it was unlikely Ian had planted spies in Theo's faction.

Just how...?

Furthermore,

'What Young master Ian just did...'

What was that?

Everything shown during his fight with Dellen. All of it.

'I can hardly even fathom it.'

Aris touched her own lips.

To the outside world, Ian's level was known to be that of an expert.

Given that he was only fourteen, it was a remarkably high level, but as a swordsman, it was still considered an intermediate rank rather than that of a true powerhouse.

Yet, the skills Ian had shown in his fight against Dellen were clearly above the level of an expert.

'First, his swordsmanship and combat sense—absolutely not at an expert's level...'

There's no way an expert could parry the sword strikes of Dellen, a Swordmaster, so perfectly.

In addition, Ian had evaded Dellen's Flostilla— unleashed after Sword Spirit Release— without suffering a single scratch.

Even most Swordmasters would only manage to block Flostilla's sword spirit release by risking serious injury.

'And that's not all.'

If Ian had shown only that much, she might have put it down to god-given talent.

But what Ian had shown was not merely the abilities of a swordsman.

Ian had cast barrier magic several times without incantations or calculations, and he had also demonstrated monstrous regenerative abilities, instantly healing fatal wounds.

On top of that, he had seized Flostilla from Dellen and unleashed the sword spirit release at an even more advanced level...

Just how...?

'... How am I supposed to make sense of all this?'

That boy.

What on earth was he?

'Just what...'

Aris realized that all she knew about Ian now needed to be completely updated.

Was that mysterious, bizarre existence really the son of Hugo, the worst head in Greysel family history?

And even before that, fourteen years old? Was he even truly human?

'Utterly fascinating.'

Though Aris's mind was in complete turmoil, her eyes curved even more slyly.

A hint of greed and desire flickered in those red eyes.

'I want him...'

She had no way of guessing what Young master Ian's true identity might be.

But to Aris, such details didn't matter.

Whether Young master Ian was a contractor who made a deal with a demon, or even a dragon polymorphed as a human—

The only thing that mattered was his ability.

'Haa...'

A burning yearning stirred in Aris's chest.

Perhaps stronger than anything she had ever felt before.

It was the first time she'd ever felt such a powerful desire to make someone her own.

'I'm sure these abilities Ian has shown aren't all there is.'

She felt a strong intuition.

What Ian had revealed so far was only a small part of his true capabilities.

'And he doesn't seem fully developed yet, either.'

She could tell by the fact that Ian had not noticed her presence.

If Ian was hiding power beyond a Master, he would have sensed her lurking immediately.

Yet now Ian seemed to be barely holding onto consciousness, utterly exhausted.

He was on the verge of collapse after his fight with the Swordmaster.

'There is the possibility he's just pretending to be weak now...'

But the chances were low.

A true powerhouse would have no need to act so foolishly.

– Lick.

Aris wetted her lips.

'I want to take him for myself and raise him. Ian Greysel.'

If she could mold him to fit perfectly in her hand and make that boy obey her will...

Just imagining the moment that mysterious boy became hers made Aris's heart beat sweetly.

'How can I make him mine?'

Aris's red eyes flared like ghostly will-o'-the-wisps.

If it were any ordinary person, she would use threats, brainwashing, or trickery to bring them under her wing.

But such means could not be recklessly used against Ian Greysel.

That boy had already been claimed by her own father, the Heavenly Sword Lord.

'How could I steal him away?'

From her own father, the Heavenly Sword Lord Darkan.

How could she snatch that beautiful gray-haired boy and make him hers?

Should she try to gain his favor by giving him gifts, as her father did?

What would Young master Ian appreciate? Elixirs? Artifacts? Promoting martial arts techniques? Or... women?

'I guess I'll just have to find out slowly. This will be interesting.'

With a cool smile on her lips, Aris quietly vanished into the depths of the forest's darkness.

As if she had never been there at all.

But in Aris's mind, a new plan was already beginning.

Ian Greysel...

Until the day that boy was within her grasp, she would slowly and surely narrow the net, with patience and dedication.

And on the day of that grand finale, she would never let him go.

Until his secrets, his abilities—everything, his entire being—became hers.

* * *

After Dellen's death.

Ian and Yuria did not move from that spot until Javier's group rejoined them.

Yuria whispered her final farewells softly for a long time as she held Dellen's corpse, and Ian stood silently by her side.

About two hours passed like that.

"Young master Ian! L-Lady Yuria!?"

Javier and the Heavenly Sword knights tracked Ian's traces and found them.

Their bodies bore the marks of life-or-death battles against five master-rank Barbarians.

Their armor was shattered in places, some were drenched in blood, and some had splints and bandages, likely with broken bones beneath.

Still, it was fortunate that no one had died.

They had fought five master-rank Barbarians with only two master-rank knights and three peak-stage expert knights, and not a single one had died—truly luck had been on their side.

Even if Ian had lent them the cheat weapon Vladiark, he hadn't expected them to hold out so well.

Just how had they managed it?

He'd ask gradually later—for now,

"Sir Javier. And the other knights. I'm glad everyone is safe."

Ian expressed his relief that they had returned unharmed.

Javier exhaled a relieved sigh at those words.

"Hah. That's what I should be saying... For you to be safe, and for Lady Yuria to be found like this... The spirits of the Heavenly Sword must be watching over us. However..."

Javier hesitated as he looked at the corpse Yuria was holding.

"Who is that...?"

The frame looked feminine, but the corpse was so terribly battered that the face could not be recognized.

"That is Dellen Meslow."

The nanny who had vanished the moment Lady Yuria was kidnapped.

She'd been the prime suspect in Javier's mind for this incident.

"...!"

At Ian's words, Javier's eyes widened, and he fell silent for a time, staring at Dellen's body.

"..."

Yuria said nothing, only clutching the corpse tighter and bowing her head.

Her shoulders trembled faintly.

"..."

Javier looked at Ian with a somewhat complicated expression.

"Young master. What exactly happened here?"

Where and how was Lady Yuria rescued from her abduction?

Where had her nanny gone, and why was she now lying here in such a pitiful state?

Were there other accomplices?

He couldn't even begin to piece together the circumstances based on assumptions.

No wonder Javier found the situation confusing.

"I'll explain later. Let's get out of here first."

Ian suggested that they move before discussing anything.

Although he had dealt with all the nearby enemies, this was still a dangerous enemy territory.

With two Barbarians having escaped, it was possible they would return with reinforcements soon.

They had to leave before that happened.

"Let's hurry, before the enemy comes back."

"R-right. The young master is correct. Let's get out of here first."

Javier sent two of his subordinates back to the village to fetch horses.

He ordered the other Heavenly Sword knights to recover Dellen's body, but Yuria quietly shook her head.

"It's fine. I'll carry Dellen myself. All the way to Heavenly Sword Palace."

At that, the knights looked to Javier for guidance.

Javier nodded.

"Then I'll entrust the nanny's remains to you, my Lady."

– Rustle. Rustle.

After minimal preparation, they immediately began moving.

Ian and Yuria, guarded by Javier and the Heavenly Sword knights, traversed the forest.

By the time they escaped the dark woods, the knights sent for the horses returned and rejoined the group.

"First, let's get out of the region of Kartai City."

Javier suggested they ride to exit the western region of Hisperion first.

Using the nearest warp gate would be fastest to reach Heavenly Sword Palace, but with the west in chaos, even the cities weren't safe—it was too risky a route.

Since two of the Barbarians had escaped alive, the enemy surely knew that Yuria had escaped.

No doubt the enemy had spread eyes and ears everywhere in the west to find her.

If they were traced, they might face an enemy even stronger than Hong Yacha.

For safety, escaping the western Hisperion area was the priority.

– Gallop! Gallop!

The group rode their horses at a frantic pace for a while.

They left the forest far behind, pierced through thick fog, crossed wide wetlands, and eventually reached a long canyon.

By then, dawn was breaking.

The horses were tired, and the knights needed to change their filthy bandages, so Ian and the group took shelter among large rocks in the canyon to rest for a while.

"..."

Ian examined Vladiark, which Javier had returned to him.

Vladiark had devoured the master-rank Barbarians, and now had grown into a far more fearsome form.

Still don't like Dellen.

Burn in hell, bitch.

No pity to traitors...

Chapter 62 : Camping (1)

Camping (1)

Dawn breaking.

A foggy valley.

A campsite prepared beneath a large crevice in the rocks.

"Young master Ian."

As Ian was checking on Vladiark, Javier approached him.

When Ian looked up at Javier, Javier pointed outside the crevice.

"May I speak with you outside for a moment?"

Ian quietly nodded and stepped out from the rocks with Javier.

— Kwal Kwal Kwal!

By the riverside, where the valley water rushed by, Javier slowly bowed his head to Ian.

"Truly, thank you. Young master Ian."

"... Pardon?"

"I was so out of sorts getting here, I didn't get the chance to thank you properly. Thank you, truly."

With his head still bowed, Javier continued.

"Thanks to you, young master Ian, we were able to rescue Lady Yuria safely. And because you lent me your sword, I didn't lose a single subordinate to the barbarians. We all survived."

Javier bowed even more deeply.

"Thank you so much, young master Ian. No matter how many times I thank you, it won't be enough to repay this great debt."

"A-ah, no. You don't have to... That's enough, sir Javier."

Ian awkwardly gestured with his hand, then set Javier upright by gripping his shoulder.

"We just helped each other towards a common goal, didn't we? I wouldn't have made it safely without you and the Heavenly Sword knights, either."

Ian himself wanted to give thanks.

Because of Javier, Vladiark had been able to devour master-rank barbarians.

After the battle with the barbarians, Vladiark had grown far more fearsome.

The blade, once snapped off, had grown noticeably longer. The once-chip-ridden edge was now sharpened so keenly it glinted through the mist, and the tentacle engravings carved into the blade's surface were more distinct and full.

The amount of aura absorbed into Vladiark was equivalent to a early-stage master and two who were just entering mastery.

Javier had essentially fed Vladiark a supreme growth elixir.

"No, young master Ian. We were the ones who received one-sided help."

But Javier stubbornly bowed again.

"Especially if you hadn't lent us that sword... And if you hadn't told us the weakness of the Crimson Yaksha, I would have died there myself."

Javier recalled the battle with the barbarians.

They had been stronger than he ever imagined.

Their towering bodies, well over three meters, kept rising even when thunder from Caladbolg struck them repeatedly.

Other Heavenly Sword knights had their armor shattered or limbs broken by a single punch from a barbarian.

The monstrous strength radiating from the disciplined bodies of the barbarian warriors could only be compared to ogres.

The overwhelming aura unleashed recklessly by the five master-level barbarians had felt like standing beneath a landslide.

"We were only able to survive thanks to you, young master Ian."

The enemy had been five master-level barbarians.

Meanwhile, among the Heavenly Sword knights, only two were master knights, and the rest just barely at the expert level.

Normally, even if they fought a hundred times, they would lose a hundred times.

But.

The greatsword lent by young master Ian changed everything.

"Your sword, young master... was a monster."

Monster.

It was the most accurate description.

The greatsword lent by the young master was a monster in itself.

"The moment I used that sword, the course of the battle... no, the battle itself was over. All that followed was... predation."

The barbarians' enhanced defensive energy was extremely firm.

The reason they kept rising even after being struck by Caladbolg's thunder was precisely that energy.

But the greatsword lent by Ian—.

Not only did it pierce through that enhanced energy as if it were cotton candy, but it also slurped it up like pudding.

"I didn't even cut down the barbarians with your sword. All I did was bring your sword to bear against their enhanced energy."

That alone was enough for the barbarians to die.

No martial technique, no psychological warfare, no contest of strength.

He simply brought it near—and they died.

After taking down the first one like that, the barbarians switched entirely to evasion, so it took more time to catch the rest, but Javier was able to kill two more—three in total.

Those devoured by the greatsword perished, withered like mummies, and, terrified, Crimson Yaksha and another barbarian fled at full speed.

He could have given chase, but by then, nearly two hours had passed in the fighting, so I prioritized regrouping with you, Ian.

I was worried about you, since you were moving alone.

And then, I found you had already rescued Yuria.

'This was never an incident that could have ended so easily.'

This was a major case, involving over five master-level fighters and even an insider from the Hisperion.

A thoroughly prepared and carefully orchestrated kidnapping.

If you hadn't been there, young master Ian, pursuing Lady Yuria would have been impossible.

Even if, by some miracle, the pursuit had succeeded, the Investigation division would have suffered countless casualties, and until the Heavenly Sword Lord returned from the campaign, the odds of rescuing Lady Yuria safely would have been zero.

'And yet...'

Young master Ian—just one day.

Just one sleepless night, and this meticulously planned kidnapping was resolved as easily as blowing one's nose.

"Once again, thank you, young master Ian. It's all thanks to you."

"....."

Ian awkwardly scratched his cheek.

Even in his previous life, he'd received gratitude like this several times, but he never found it easy to know how to respond when someone thanked him so earnestly.

"Sir Javier. Shall we talk about something more important? There's more you want to discuss with me, isn't there?"

So Ian steered the conversation away.

"Ah, yes. You're right, young master."

Javier hadn't called Ian aside just to thank him; he had another reason.

A topic difficult to bring up in front of Yuria.

Javier also had to ask Ian about Dellen, who had been a primary suspect in this incident.

Why was Dellen there, was she the mastermind behind the kidnapping, and how did she come to die such a gruesome death?

As someone obligated to report the full details of the incident to the head of the Heavenly Sword family, Javier needed to know.

"Could you tell me in detail what happened from the time you separated from us, young master Ian?"

"Yes. Of course. I'll explain step by step."

Ian explained calmly about everything that had happened after separating from Javier, leading up to rescuing Yuria.

Tracking the traces of Yuria and the kidnapper, swimming across the lake, cutting through the forest.

And how he barely managed to save Yuria just before Dellen killed her.

As he narrated, Ian inevitably had to mention that he'd killed Dellen himself.

Naturally, he omitted any mention of the Authority of Projection or using Flostilla.

A secret, once spoken, could never be taken back.

And the more you spoke, the more likely it was to leak.

No matter how trustworthy Javier was, unless absolutely necessary, Ian preferred to keep his powers hidden.

"Y-you, young master Ian, personally killed Nanny Dellen...?"

Javier gulped upon hearing Ian say he'd killed Nanny Dellen himself.

He remembered the gruesome state of Dellen's corpse, held in Yuria's arms.

Frankly, it was closer to a lump of minced flesh than a corpse.

'Are you saying young master Ian ground up Dellen Meslow like that...?'

But how?

'Dellen Meslow must have been at least a early-stage Swordmaster.'

On the other hand, young master Ian's rank was expert.

Furthermore, Ian looked impossibly uninjured for someone who'd fought a master.

Even when first encountered, he only looked a little tired.

His clothes were torn, and stained with blood, but not a single wound.

'To so overwhelmingly crush a early-stage Swordmaster, you'd need to be at least late-stage master level.'

Are you saying young master Ian is a late-stage master?

Ian, a 14-year-old boy?

It makes no sense.

No matter the talent, it's physically impossible.

Even Ragnar Hisperion, called the greatest swordsman in human history, only reached the entry point of mastery at age 18.

Being a late-stage master at 14 is absurd.

'Moreover...'

Ian didn't even have his own weapon.

He'd lent his greatsword to Javier.

Sure, he could have scavenged a regular sword from a mercenary's corpse, or found something in their base, but nothing he could acquire would match the famed Flostilla wielded by Dellen.

'How in the world did he turn an early-stage Swordmaster into minced meat like that?'

Javier felt a chill run down his spine.

Ian's rank was publicly known as expert.

But someone who minced a Swordmaster like that couldn't possibly be just an expert.

Ian was definitely hiding his true level and power.

He couldn't even guess how much was being concealed.

'Young master Ian... Just who are you?'

Treating the head of Nightingale like a subordinate.

Remaining unflustered even when facing five master-level barbarians, providing not only the best possible strategy but also revealing Crimson Yaksha's weakness.

Rescuing Lady Yuria alone and turning a early-stage Swordmaster like Nanny Dellen into meat paste.

'... Is he even human?'

There was nothing here that a 14-year-old boy should be capable of.

Javier began to doubt: was Ian truly the legitimate heir of House Greysel?

'Truly...'

Perhaps the sword matches the master.

If Ian is this terrifying, it's no wonder he could summon such a monstrous greatsword at the sword spirit ritual.

'Let's make sure I never end up on young master Ian's bad side, no matter what.'

Of course, he'd never intended to clash in the first place.

It was thanks to Ian that this incident was resolved, he'd survived the barbarians thanks to Ian, and Ian even forged a connection to Nightingale for him—he was a benefactor.

'When reporting all this to the Heavenly Sword Lord, I had better summarize carefully.'

To rescue Lady Yuria, Ian had revealed countless hidden strengths to Javier.

He'd shown the connection to Nightingale, the monstrous power of his greatsword, and the fact that he concealed enough power to overwhelm a Swordmaster.

'Young master Ian trusted me enough to show me some of his secrets. I cannot betray that trust.'

He didn't know how much the Heavenly Sword Lord understood Ian's true abilities.

Javier resolved that he would omit as much as possible about Ian's secrets in his report.

Reporting every single thing to his lord wasn't necessarily loyalty.

If such a report caused enmity between someone as fearsome as Ian and the Heavenly Sword Palace, that would only be disloyal.

'I need to approach this report with the utmost caution.'

He resolved to be as careful as possible not to reveal Ian's secrets.

As long as it didn't violate his loyalty to the Heavenly Sword Lord, he would be as discreet as he could.

Hmm, it sucks that Crimson Yaksha fled, but it seems tall order to kill him without any casualties...

Chapter 63 : Camping (2)

Camping (2)

After finishing their conversation, Javier went upstream of the valley, saying he would catch some delicious fish.

Ian returned to the campsite nestled amongst the rocks.

When he arrived, most of the other Heavenly Sword knights were gone.

At the campsite, only Yuria and a single Heavenly Sword knight guarding her remained.

When Ian asked the knight where everyone had gone, she replied that some had gone to feed the horses or to gather herbs.

She then said she would also patrol the area for security, asked Ian to watch over Yuria, and left the campsite.

In the end, only Ian and Yuria were left at the campsite.

"....."

Yuria sat quietly, resting Dellen's corpse—wrapped tightly in a robe—against her body.

Her eyes were closed, but it didn't seem like she was sleeping.

—Ssshhh...

At that moment, Yuria slowly opened her eyes.

Her crimson pupils met Ian's gaze.

"Ian."

Though her eyelids were still tinged red, there was no trace of tears left in her voice.

"Can I sit next to you, just for a moment?"

"I'll come to you."

"No, I'll come to you."

Yuria carefully laid Dellen's body on the ground and stood up.

Then, with quiet steps, she walked over and sat down heavily beside Ian.

"I wanted to properly thank you once again... You. Really, thank you."

"....."

"If it hadn't been for you, honestly, I'd have died at least ten times over. I'm alive thanks to you. And the fact you gave me time to say my final farewell to my nanny... truly, thank you."

"....."

When Ian turned to look at her, Yuria was gazing at him with calm eyes.

Embarrassed, Ian averted his gaze and parted his lips.

He had just heard similar words from Javier moments ago.

How was one supposed to react at times like this?

"I... I only did what I was supposed to do."

He felt there must be a better answer than that.

But this was the only reply that came to mind, and he hated it.

"You call that something you 'just had to do'?"

—Thunk!

Yuria bumped her shoulder against Ian's while seated.

"Don't play coy. How is this something you just had to do? You know that's not true."

Biting her lower lip, Yuria continued,

"You're... just a guest. You had no obligation to come rescue me, yet you..."

Yuria recalled Ian's appearance while fighting Dellen.

Diving through a flurry of petal-like blades threatening to slice him apart.

Taking Dellen's 'Heavenly Flow: Four Forms' attacks head-on with his own body.

That was almost enough to split Ian's body in two.

Yuria closed her eyes and let out a trembling sigh.

"There was no reason for you to risk your life for me."

And yet, Ian was still here.

By her side. Guarding her.

Why? For what possible reason?

"Let's be honest with each other, Ian Greysel."

Yuria's gaze turned serious.

"Why did you save me?"

"....."

"You had no personal reason or official duty. Why?"

He'd blocked blades with his own body to save her.

"....."

Why did he save her?

Ian scratched the tip of his nose, searching for an answer.

The reason was simple.

Because he loved Yuria.

'Uh, ugh...!'

But there was no way he could say that now.

Even just thinking it made his insides squirm.

If he blurted that out now, he'd seem like an utter madman.

Even if they were closest in their past lives,

In this life, they'd only met a handful of times at most.

To say to someone he barely knew in this life that he loved her—enough to risk his life?

There's no way Yuria would believe that.

She'd think he was a pervert, a scammer, a hypocrite, or just plain crazy.

"Ssshh..."

So Ian found himself at a loss for words.

He did have a clear reason for saving Yuria, but it was something he could never say.

And making up another reason—his mind just wouldn't cooperate.

Surely there was a plausible excuse somewhere...

"....."

No.

Yuria hated lies.

Even if they were necessary.

Ian didn't want to do something that Yuria hated, if he could avoid it.

"I won't tell you."

"... What...?"

"It's a secret... That's all."

So Ian gave a non-answer.

She probably wouldn't like it, but that was better than lying.

"Hah...?"

Yuria looked utterly dumbfounded.

"This might sound shameless coming from me, but... do you realize how suspicious you seem right now?"

"I can't help it. I really can't say."

"So you do have a reason?"

"... Yes."

"....."

Yuria exhaled deeply.

"Ian. I'm grateful you saved me. ... But I have no idea with what intentions you did it."

This was an important matter.

Even the people who kidnapped Yuria weren't trying to kill her at first.

That puppet master, Rudeus, was even cackling about turning Yuria into his own doll.

Yuria's enemies weren't always trying to kill her.

Some wanted to exploit her for their own evil purposes.

'That puppet master... he was definitely trying to make me into a Genesis-exclusive golem.'

Genesis was a divine weapon handleable only by the chosen.

To freely manipulate the body of someone capable of wielding the Holy Sword, Yuria, they needed to turn her into a mindless doll.

But when things went wrong, he immediately abandoned that plan and tried to kill her.

'There's no guarantee Ian isn't just like them.'

Ian, too, could be after her authorities and only kept her alive for that reason.

The True Heavenly Blood running through Yuria's veins could make even ordinary bones as hard as adamantium, and her skin as tough as a dragon's.

Maybe the purpose was to keep her alive just to harvest that blood.

If Yuria died, the True Heavenly Blood would just be buried.

And the Heavenly Energy within her could transform even the worst mana circuit into its supreme form.

Maybe someone wanted to extract that Heavenly Energy.

There were plenty of other things to exploit from leaving her alive.

Perhaps the aim was to use her natural brilliance with the sword to uncover martial arts secrets.

Or maybe, like Rudeus, to turn her into a puppet and use her as a Genesis-wielding combat machine.

Unless Ian himself voiced his intent, there was no way for suspicions like these to be cleared.

Just like how her own nanny, Dellen, had her first brother Theo Hisperion working behind her—

How could she know, trust, or exclude the possibility of someone being behind Ian too?

"....."

Yuria looked at Ian.

Why had Ian saved her?

"Ian."

She spoke on, knowing it was probably pointless.

"Then, can you at least answer this one thing?"

Even if it was meaningless to ask,

Maybe, just maybe,

She could find some reason to trust Ian.

"What is it you want from me?"

If he wanted Heavenly Energy, she could give some.

If he wanted her True Heavenly Blood, she could part with that too.

But she didn't want to be betrayed in the back any longer. She was tired of lies and betrayal.

"....."

Ian thought for a moment at Yuria's question.

What did he want?

'... Another hard question.'

There was nothing he wanted from Yuria.

No—

There was one thing,

He realized.

He just wanted Yuria to be happy.

That was all.

But how could he say that now?

"Is this a secret too?"

But if he kept refusing to answer, unnecessary suspicion would only pile up.

And if enough suspicion accumulated, it would turn to misunderstanding, distrust, and eventually, even enmity.

Being estranged from Yuria like that?

That was something Ian couldn't bear.

"I do want something."

So Ian chose to answer this one.

"Yeah. Go on."

"Miss Yuria..."

"Mm."

"I hope you become much stronger."

"...?"

"So that even if something like this happens again, you'd be able to overcome it alone, without the help of someone like me. As soon as possible, I hope you reach Grandmaster beyond Swordmaster... ideally, become even stronger than the current Heavenly Sword Family Lord..."

"Ah, wait, hold on a second!"

Yuria gaped.

"Aren't you being a little too vague and wishy-washy!?"

"I'm serious."

"T-then could you swear on that with a Mana Oath?"

A Mana Oath.

An oath sworn on one's dantian and heart—if broken, the offender's heart and dantian would be twisted, losing all the power they had ever accumulated.

"Of course, if that will serve as proof."

"... Then... do it."

Yuria took a Mana Oath scroll from her inner coat pocket.

Ian blinked in surprise.

"... How did you have that right now?"

"Direct descendants of Hisperion always carry a few."

... Really?

He'd lived at Hisperion for over ten years in his previous life, yet never knew this.

"Well. All right."

But it didn't matter.

If she wanted proof, he'd give it.

Ian took the Mana Oath scroll, placed it over his heart, and summoned his aura.

"The content of the oath: Sincerely wishing that Miss Yuria becomes stronger."

—Wooooong!

The Mana Oath scroll shimmered with an increasing blue glow.

"W-wait, just a second!"

As Ian actually prepared to swear the Mana Oath, Yuria snatched the scroll from his hands in a panic.

"What are you doing! That's dangerous!"

A Mana Oath was a restriction inscribed on one's vital points. The moment you broke your oath, your heart and dantian would twist, causing terrible pain and robbing you of all your strength.

And people's thoughts could change at any time, regardless of how sincere they might be now.

Even if Ian meant it now, if he ever changed in the future, his dantian could be ruined.

He could even become a cripple, or die.

Making a Mana Oath on something so changeable was near madness.

"That's the only way to prove it."

"Haa... All right. I'll trust you."

Yuria waved her hand in surrender.

"....."

Ian gently took Yuria's hand.

"... W-what, what is it?"

"You have an injury."

Only now did he notice the wound on Yuria's hand.

He'd assumed the blood on her was Dellen's, but it was coming from her palm.

It hadn't even stopped bleeding yet.

"... It's nothing. It'll heal if I leave it."

"No. If you leave it, you'll get an itchy scar later."

The wound was fairly dirty.

Even though Yuria had a special body, leaving this alone would definitely leave a scar.

"I'll treat it right away, so hold still."

"....."

Yuria didn't refuse or resist.

She still didn't fully trust Ian, but she was more curious as to what he would do.

"I'll disinfect it first. It'll sting."

—Dribble, dribble!

At that instant, a jet of black liquid squirted from Ian's fingertip.

It was disinfectant, brought forth with the Authority of Projection.

"Hngh!"

As the disinfectant forced dirt and mud from the wound, Yuria twisted and grimaced.

"It really hurts!"

"Hang in there. It'll be over quickly."

"....."

As Ian said, the pain soon vanished.

As soon as the disinfection was done, Ian projected a top-grade potion to heal her wound.

"....."

Yuria flexed and opened her now-perfectly-healed hand, and spoke.

"You... you know your words and actions don't match at all, right?"

"... Excuse me?"

"You're so secretive about why you saved me, yet you don't hide this unusual ability at all."

The treatment had been flawlessly effective.

Yuria marveled at her perfectly-healed palm.

"Wouldn't it make more sense to hide abilities like this instead?"

Keeping an ability like this concealed could give rise to suspicions among Hisperion's people.

And he could've easily lied about his motivations.

But Ian didn't hide his abilities, nor did he cover his intentions with lies.

From the miraculous healing of his deadly wounds taken from Dellen's Heavenly Flow: 4th form, to instant-cast, chantless magic, to fearsome swordsmanship, even stealing Flostilla and skillfully using Sword Spirit Release.

Ian had shown all his gifts to Yuria without reserve, replied with "no comment" instead of lying about his motivations, and had even been willing to immediately carry out a Mana Oath to prove his innocence.

"... I really don't understand you."

Ian—just what kind of person are you?

Maybe I'll figure it out if I see you often from now on.

At least, he didn't seem to be an enemy.

She had no proof, but she had a strong feeling.

"And I should pay you back properly."

She still didn't know what Ian was really thinking, but the fact remained—he'd saved her life.

"Ian. I'll ask just one last thing—this time, answer properly."

—Whap!

Yuria slung her arm over Ian's shoulders.

"Is there something you want me to do for you?"

Ian blinked at Yuria.

Her ruby-like eyes stared at him unwaveringly.

"Whatever it is, just say it. No matter how far-fetched, it's fine. Even if it takes time to grant, I'll make it happen—as long as you ask, I'll be sure to do it."

Of course.

He saved her life.

What couldn't she do in exchange for that?

"It's a debt of life, after all."

"... Is really anything okay?"

"Yeah. Anything. Whatever."

"Really? Even if it's childish, crude, or rude?"

"W-what!"

Yuria's arm slipped from his shoulder like a startled rabbit.

"Wh-what the—! What are you thinking!? J-just say it, already!"

"There is something I want Yuria to do for me."

"W-what is it...?"

Yuria swallowed hard.

Ian looked at her, then slowly opened his mouth.

"I..."

Chapter 64 : Spider Web (1)

Spider Web (1)

'Is he being serious...?'

On the forest path back to the Heavenly Sword Palace.

Yuria recalled the conversation she had just shared with Ian at the campsite.

- '.....'

Ian hesitated for a long while, his lips moving as if debating whether he should speak, but then he slowly opened his mouth.

- 'Miss Yuria, I...'

- 'Yes?'

- '... I'd rather you didn't put your arm around any other man's shoulders like this.'

- '... Huh?'

- 'That includes your brothers. If possible, I'd prefer it if you didn't hold hands with anyone else either...'

- 'W-Wait! Ian!'

Yuria's long lashes fluttered rapidly.

- 'So what you're saying... That's the wish you want in exchange for saving my life? That's it?'

- '... You told me to just say it, no matter how rude or childish it might be.'

That's how Ian replied, turning his head away.

The backs of his ears were quite flushed.

Was he embarrassed after saying it?

'Honestly.'

Ian. She still had no idea what was going on in this guy's head.

'But that was kind of... cute.'

That was Yuria's honest impression.

'Not putting your arm around or holding hands with any other man but him?'

A faint smile played on Yuria's lips, like she was savoring a sweet.

It was an adorable request, and at the same time, such an easy one.

Especially considering it was the price of saving her life.

But.

Why did Ian ask for something like that?

He could have asked for something much more valuable, something far more important.

If Ian had asked for Yuria's True Heavenly Blood, she would have gladly extracted its essence from her marrow and given it to him.

If he had asked her to strengthen his mana circuits with Heavenly Energy, she would have done so, no matter how much time it took.

If he had asked to borrow the Divine Sword Genesis, she would have shared the authority and power to wield it with him.

But even so.

'All he wanted from me was...'

Nothing else.

Just for her not to put her arm around or hold hands with any man but him.

'Seriously... What is this?'

— Clop... clop...

Yuria gazed at the back of Ian's head, riding ahead of her on horseback.

His ears were still glowing red.

He must have been really embarrassed about what he'd said.

Could it be...?

'Does he like me?'

Slowly, sunlight traced across both of Yuria's cheeks.

* * *

'Should I not have said that...?'

Ian let out a deep, silent sigh.

He could feel Yuria's gaze burning into the back of his head the whole way as they rode along.

'... She must think I'm so weird.'

Maybe getting younger had caused a second adolescence.

He'd failed to hold back feelings as childish as a greenhorn's and let them slip out.

'No. Maybe adolescence isn't even the issue.'

He'd always been awkward in everything outside of fighting, anyway.

And even if he could go back and do it over again, Ian figured he would have said the same thing to Yuria.

That was just how Ian was wired.

'... In my previous life, Yuria said she liked this part of me, too.'

Laughter and smiles shared with her flashed through his mind.

'I miss her.'

Ian gripped the reins tighter.

He vowed to himself that in this life, he would protect that radiant smile until the very end.

— Sneak.

Ian turned his head slightly, pretending to check behind him, sneaking a look at Yuria.

He wanted to make sure she was following safely.

"Eep!"

He accidentally locked eyes with her.

"Hm..."

Yuria blushed and turned her gaze away.

Ian quickly looked forward again and bowed his head low.

'Haa...'

He let out a long, silent sigh in his heart.

'She must definitely think I'm a weirdo...'

The way she averted her gaze as if troubled.

It probably meant she didn't want to get involved by making eye contact with him.

'In my previous life, Yuria always smiled when our eyes met...'

She definitely thought he was weird after that conversation earlier.

'Should I have held back, after all...?'

He felt like he was blazing from the tip of his nose all the way to his ears with embarrassment.

"Hrmph!"

And at the very rear of the group,

Javier carefully observed Ian and Yuria's every move, widening his two eyes like a hawk.

'Wh-What was that just now?!'

It seemed like something sparked between the two of them a moment ago...!

No, it definitely did!

It was only for an instant, but the Investigation Division Leader's sharp intuition never missed such things.

'Wh-What's going on!?'

Meeting each other's eyes... both blushing... both looking flustered.

'Eh!?'

Wasn't that... That, right!? That thing!?

'When!? Since when!?'

Between Young master Ian and Lady Yuria!

When!? How did such a strange tension arise between the two of them!?

What happened in just this little while!?

'Ahem...!'

Javier tried to calm his suddenly pounding heart.

'I really witnessed something precious.'

He'd always thought the two of them were just precocious, but for the first time, they seemed to be acting their age.

'Heh heh heh.'

Javier let out a warm smile in his heart.

'Young master Ian.'

Until now, judging him by his actions on this journey, he seemed nothing but mysterious—almost like a ghost.

But seeing those ears flushed red, right now Ian looked every bit like an adolescent boy.

'I feel... somewhat relieved.'

The wariness Javier still harbored toward Ian crumbled away considerably in that moment.

* * *

That night.

Ian and Yuria, together with the Heavenly Sword knights, left the western region of Hisperion.

If they had been using an ordinary carriage or horse, it would have taken at least three or four days, but they crossed the distance in just half a day.

That was partly thanks to the sturdy Heavenly Sword Order's horses, and partly because they rode for twelve hours straight without resting.

— Clop! Clop!

After traveling two more hours beyond the western boundary, a central city loomed into view.

It was a city with a warp gate that could take them directly back to the Heavenly Sword Palace.

"Hm..."

But it was too late.

It was already 11 PM, with the moon high in the sky.

The warp gate's operating hours had long since ended for the day.

"The warp gate customs... are pitch dark."

"The warp gates always close by 8 at the latest."

But waiting for tomorrow's opening was out of the question.

Even though this city bordered the west, so it couldn't be considered completely safe.

They had to wake up the warp gate manager by force if need be and return to the Heavenly Sword Palace urgently.

Even if just a minute sooner.

And a moment later—

"I've spoken with the warp gate night crew."

With Javier taking charge, there was no difficulty in urgently activating the warp gate.

Holding the position of chief of the Heavenly Sword Order's investigative division, he could practically pluck stars from the sky within Hisperion territory.

— Vwoom!

The warp gate dispelled the thick darkness of the night, opening up a magical passageway in radiant light.

"Let's go! The hardships are over now!"

"Yes, see you at the Heavenly Sword Palace!"

Ian, Yuria, and the Heavenly Sword knights all stepped forward through the warp gate without hesitation.

And then—

"Huh?"

They found themselves back in the foggy city of Kartairo in Hisperion's west.

"Wh-What!"

— Fwoosh!

At the same time, as soon as Ian's group fully emerged, the warp gate snapped shut like a candle flame being snuffed out.

Around the gate, dozens of sword-wielding men carrying torches had completely surrounded them.

It looked easily over a hundred.

Some even exuded an aura to rival Javier's.

"It's a trap!"

They had fallen into a perfect ambush.

"Wh-What is this!?"

"This... isn't good..."

Who could have guessed the enemy would have taken over the warp gate in the central city, too.

Ian gritted his teeth and vigilantly scanned the surroundings.

At that moment—

"You've let your guard down, Javier."

A huge knight clad in thick, ornate full plate armor appeared from among those who'd surrounded the warp gate.

"Y-You...!"

Javier's eyes shook as he stared at the giant knight.

"Deputy-Commander Jonathan...?"

This giant was one of only two deputy commanders in the Heavenly Sword Order, a formidable Grandmaster.

Jonathan Feldro.

"Did you really think getting out of the west meant you could safely escort Lady Yuria?"

Jonathan sneered, and another familiar face stepped forward behind him.

"Long time no see, sir Javier. And Lady Yuria."

He was no less a big shot than Jonathan.

Victor Craven, commander of the Heavenly Moon Order—Theo Hisperion's personal knights.

Like Jonathan, a Grandmaster.

Wearing moon-white plate armor, Victor nodded slightly then stood beside Jonathan.

"What is...?"

Javier and the investigative knights exchanged looks, confusion etched on their faces.

'Damn.'

Ian, on the other hand, sized up the situation instantly.

Both of them were heavyweights in Theo Hisperion's faction, eldest son of the Heavenly Sword House.

Being caught by those two meant they might as well have fangs sunk into their necks.

'Who would have thought Theo would send out both these big guns in person...'

Moving such major players would surely leave traces, no matter who Theo was.

Did he no longer even care to hide that he'd kidnapped and tried to kill Yuria?

Or was he confident that if he got rid of Yuria, he could cover up the rest?

'No. I can't bother with Theo's motives now.'

What mattered was how to survive this desperate predicament.

Escaping came first—nothing else mattered if they couldn't.

"Deputy-Commander Jonathan..."

Javier gingerly placed a hand on the hilt of his beloved sword, caladbolg, and asked,

"What exactly... What is happening here?"

"Ho ho. Javier. How can the Investigation Division Leader of the Heavenly Sword Order be so slow to catch on?"

"....."

In truth, Javier already knew the answer.

The warp gate in the central city had sent them back to the western enemy territory.

And here, jonathan and the Heavenly Moon Order were fully armed waiting for them.

There was only one possible explanation for this situation.

"Then... Was deputy-commander the one behind Lady Yuria's kidnapping?"

"Pfft."

Jonathan laughed.

"Did you really need to hear it from my lips?"

"Unbelievable...!"

Not a direct answer, but as good as a confession.

"Sir Victor...!"

Javier looked at Victor, the commander of the Heavenly Moon Order.

"You too? Are you in on this too?!"

Victor merely clasped his hands behind his back.

His silence was as good as confirmation.

"Damn it! Victor! Aren't you Lord Theo's sworn sword, and Lady Yuria's older brother?! How can you point your blade at her!!"

"Hmph."

Victor snorted.

"Let's not be so naive, sir Javier."

— Shing.

Victor slowly drew his sword, glinting blue at his waist.

"You know better than anyone what family affairs are like in the Heavenly Sword House."

Among the direct descendants residing in the Heavenly Sword Palace, not a single one could be called a normal sibling.

They'd been rivals for the position of head since birth.

They shared blood, but not even a pretense of affection.

Whenever they saw an opening, they sank their fangs into each other with no hesitation—that was how family matters were settled in the Heavenly Sword House.

"Damn it..."

Only now did Javier fully accept the situation.

"So... the final mastermind is Lord Theo...!"

"....."

Neither Jonathan nor Victor answered, but that was answer enough.

"A pity, Javier."

— Clank!

Jonathan hefted his massive sword onto his shoulder.

"You're a talented and loyal knight. If it were up to me, I'd rather have you join on our side and hand over Lady Yuria..."

"Eat shit."

Javier replied with a curse.

"Some deputy-commander you are...!"

"Screw you!"

The other investigative knights glared at Jonathan with death in their eyes, cursing him out.

The odds were utterly stacked against them, but at least their spirit was unbroken.

Even if they were slain here and now, they would never betray the head of the Heavenly Sword House nor their own honor.

"I expected you'd say that. A shame, really."

— Thud!

Jonathan rested his massive greatsword on his shoulder.

"But let's not hold grudges. We're just caught in different webs."

Javier clung to the Heavenly Sword House, and Jonathan to Theo.

That was all it was to Jonathan.

— Step! Step! Step! Step!

He began to slowly walk toward them, hefting his greatsword.

— Fwoosh!

Soon, flames of aura flared up from Jonathan's blade.

— Step!

'He's going to come at us suddenly.'

Ian also drew Vladiark from his back and took his stance.

'Damn! What should I do?'

Even for Ian, there was nothing he could do against two Grandmasters facing him head-on.

'Could I respond with Frenzied Insight Style: Extreme Sense?'

Frenzied Insight Style: Extreme Sense (羅流羅).

A technique concentrating aura into every sensory cell to achieve reflexes beyond one's own limits.

But to use that against a Grandmaster's sword attacks?

'... Impossible.'

If Ian were at Master level, maybe, but... in his current state as a mid-high Expert, it was impossible.

'What if I used the aura stored in Vladiark...?'

At the moment, Vladiark held the stored aura of three Masters.

But—

'That won't help much either.'

They were Grandmasters.

Two of them.

Even if he exploded all the stored aura in Vladiark and miraculously took out one, the other would still be a problem.

'Damn...!'

What's worse, Javier and the rest of the Heavenly Sword knights were already exhausted from two days of forced marching.

They'd had no sleep since yesterday, had a fierce battle with the Barbarians, then spent all day riding hard to escape the west after rescuing Yuria.

'There's no way we can win this.'

If they fought, defeat was certain.

'Negotiation is impossible as well.'

Truly, a crisis with no escape.

A stone-cold dead end.

"Then let's finish this."

As Ian was thinking that, jonathan drew even closer.

"Goodbye, Javier. And you too, lady Yuria."

— Shing!

Jonathan, barely five paces away, lifted his massive sword high above his head in one hand.

Raising it to the sky—

— Fwoosh!

— Kwaaah!!

In that instant, his sword erupted with enhanced energy, like the breath of a dragon.

— Flash!

— Fwoom!

The warp gate behind Ian's group suddenly opened again, its magic light shining through the night.

"What the...!"

"What's happening...!"

Jonathan, the Heavenly Sword knights, everyone in the area—no one was exempt from staring in wide-eyed shock at the warp gate.

And soon—

"You're all terribly sleepless tonight. Having trouble falling asleep?"

The third child, and eldest daughter, of the head of the Heavenly Sword House—

Aris Hisperion, accompanied by her personal Heavenly Beast Order and Lord Bellator—the fifth-ranked vassal of Hisperion—emerged from the warp gate.

"Shall this young lady lull you to sleep?"

I'm glad Aris didn't wait for them to be on the verge of dying before making a move.

Unfortunately, even though she saved them now, she could still become an enemy in the future...

Chapter 65 : Spider Web (2)

Spider Web (2)

Aris Hisperion stood with her back to the dazzling warp-gate.

No one present had expected the intrusion of such a figure.

"Ugh...!"

"H-How on earth...!"

At her sudden appearance, the color drained from both Victor and Jonathan's faces.

—Step! Step! Step! Step!

What's more, Aris had not come alone.

Behind her stood the Heavenly Water Knights, arrayed in full armor.

And even the Violet Battalion, the elite swordsmen of the Bellator family, sixth in the ranking of seal-bearers.

All of them proved their iron discipline under Aris's command, without a single break in their formation.

—Step! Step!

Following them, the commanders took their place a single step behind Aris.

Respectively, the leader of the Heavenly Water Knights and the commander of the Violet Battalion.

Both were martial artists at the grandmaster level, strong enough to take on legions by themselves.

"Hmph."

Lastly, a mysterious woman beautifully dressed in a violet gown stood by Aris's side.

She was the head of the Bellator family, one of the Seven Pillar Families of Hisperion.

Katrina Bellator. She too was a grandmaster.

"This—is insane...!"

Such overwhelming force, enough to crush a kingdom in an instant, had suddenly appeared. Jonathan unconsciously took a step back.

Including Aris herself, no less than four grandmasters had materialized out of nowhere.

And lining up behind them were rows of swordmasters as well.

"What is happening...?!"

Victor was wiping cold sweat from his brow, wetting his dry lips.

—Murmur, murmur.

The knights and mercenaries behind Theo were equally unsettled.

"What is going on...?"

"Why is Lady Aris here...?"

Jonathan and Victor couldn't make heads or tails of the situation.

However—

It was at least clear that Aris hadn't shown up to join their cause.

—Goooo!

The pressure radiating from the swordsmen at Aris's side was as sharp as a blade.

"Sir Jonathan. How long do you plan on holding that sword?"

"Ugh...!"

At Aris's cool question, jonathan finally lowered the greatsword he had been awkwardly holding up.

The enhanced energy flowing from his blade winked out like a candle flame.

"Lady Aris..."

Jonathan swallowed hard and asked,

"How did you come to be here...?"

But Aris did not answer his question.

Instead, she strode over to Yuria.

"You must have been frightened, Yuria."

"S-Sister?"

Yuria looked up at her eldest sister in utter confusion.

They had never once shared a kind word in their lives.

What's more, Aris had sent away all the servants Yuria trusted, had once slipped a mischievous but painful poison into Yuria's food then endured the same poison for punishment after being caught, and had even bribed Yuria's combat instructors to impede her progress.

'This woman came to save me...?'

This hypocrite who would sooner laugh at her death than shed a single tear for her?

Does that make any sense at all?

"And Young master Ian as well. Are you unharmed?"

This time, Aris turned to Ian, flashing him a sly, friendly smile.

"Fancy seeing you again in less than a week. I'm glad to see you're well."

"Ah."

Finally, Yuria understood vaguely why Aris was really here.

She didn't come for me—but for Ian.

"..."

Ian simply gave Aris a small nod in response.

Still, Aris's sudden appearance was also surprising for Ian.

Especially with that sly, twisted gaze brazenly showing its cunning, he couldn't help but get goosebumps all over—wondering, 'What is she plotting now?'

It felt as if he was caught in a spiderweb, dozens of tiny spiders crawling over his skin.

'If I accept Aris's help here, I'll owe her my life...'

Well, that's still much better than dying here.

But then, what price might follow this?

What is this woman after?

"Well then, introductions are done..."

Aris unconsciously licked her lips as she glanced at Ian, then turned back to Jonathan and Victor.

"Surrender. All of you."

"Ugh..."

"... Hng."

At Aris's demand, both Jonathan and Victor could not hide their distress.

'I absolutely cannot surrender like this!'

'I refuse to surrender!'

Jonathan and Victor exchanged glances.

Just by that look, they could tell their thoughts were in sync.

Of course.

To surrender now would be as good as suicide for either Victor or Jonathan.

They had just been caught trying to murder the duke's youngest legitimate daughter.

'Even though we acted under Young Master Theo's orders...'

Still, their participation in this heinous treason was obvious.

If they surrendered, the best outcome would be a beheading; at worst, they would be tortured or experimented on alive for the rest of their days.

'I have to find a way to survive! This is our last chance to scheme a way out!'

'Damn it! How did things get turned upside down like this!?'

Jonathan and Victor racked their brains with all their might to escape the situation.

'Ah!'

Suddenly—

It was Jonathan who got an idea first.

'That's it! That could work!'

After all, the real leader of this group was Aris Hisperion.

If he could just persuade Aris and force a negotiation, there was a chance to escape this crisis.

'Aris is kindhearted, obsessed with ideals of justice she can't let go of. She's soft as tofu.'

It was a judgment that anyone familiar with Aris's wicked, hypocritical nature would have been horrified by, but Jonathan was one of those unaware.

'We'll threaten her by holding the city hostage.'

He imagined warning Aris that if forced to fight here, the city would be annihilated, innocent citizens caught up in a tragic, gruesome fate.

Should she condemn her own people to death through a foolish decision?

"Lady Aris!"

—Mutter-mutter!

Jonathan repeated aloud the very words he had rehearsed internally to sway Aris.

"So what? What are you suggesting?"

The answer came not from Aris, but from Roxy Rochberman, Captain of the Heavenly Water Knights standing behind her.

She was a beastkin woman, over 180cm tall, with lithe muscles, and covered in scars, radiating a wild aura.

"With nothing but garbage in this city, we might as well just kill them all now. Isn't this a good opportunity?"

"Roxy?"

At Aris's look, roxy flinched, biting her lip and lowering her gaze.

"S-Sorry, Aris..."

"You shouldn't say things like that."

"O-Okay, I'll be careful..."

Jonathan curled his lips up in a sly smile.

From Aris's demeanor, there was a glimmer of hope negotiations might be possible.

"We will never surrender! But if you try to forcefully detain us? As I said, the city will be wiped from the map."

Aris stared at Jonathan, her gaze sunken.

"That's not what I want."

"I would think not."

Jonathan's smile deepened.

"Then how about a deal, lady Aris?"

"... A deal?"

"Yes."

Jonathan pointed at Yuria.

"Hand over Lady Yuria to us."

"What?"

Aris frowned.

"You're asking me to sell out my own sister?"

Jonathan answered smoothly,

"No. We're only asking that you let us take Lady Yuria into our care."

"You just tried to kill my sister."

"Oh no, that's a misunderstanding."

Jonathan waved his hand nonchalantly.

"It may have looked that way, but not at all. We just had a minor friction with Sir Javier during the process, which gave her a scare."

At that, Javier ground his teeth.

"What kind of bullshit—!"

They clearly tried to kill her!

"No, sir Jonathan."

Aris refused him at once.

"I don't trust you."

"Then what will you do?"

Jonathan gestured across the city.

"Are you willing to sacrifice this city just to save your little sister?"

"..."

"Lady Aris. Since you've stepped up, you must make a choice and take responsibility."

Jonathan raised both hands like a scale.

"Will you save your one little sister but let hundreds of thousands of innocent people die? Or will you trust us with her and ensure everything proceeds peacefully?"

Jonathan added that if Yuria was handed over, the rest would peacefully surrender and face all investigations and trials.

He truly believed—

If they just got rid of Yuria here, theo, the most likely successor, would ensure they were released in time.

'Ha... What a farce.'

Ian barely suppressed a laugh, glancing between Aris and Jonathan.

'Jonathan really doesn't know Aris's true nature, I see.'

That woman is a cold-blooded monster who doesn't care a whit whether it's her own citizens, her own sister, or everyone here.

And yet, seeing her so expertly pretending to worry, Ian almost burst out laughing in disbelief.

"You're a terrible person, sir Jonathan."

Aris glared at Jonathan with teary eyes.

"Make your choice."

"I cannot give up either the people of this city or my little sister."

Jonathan frowned as if tired.

"With that, we get nowhere. If you get greedy, you might lose everything. That'd mean double the blame on you, wouldn't it?"

"I'm not afraid of responsibility. But I don't want sacrifice either. There's a better way."

"... A better way?"

What is she thinking?

Jonathan tilted his head.

"Yes. I'll offer you even better terms. Instead of my citizens and my sister..."

Aris put her hand on her chest.

"I'll wager my life on the scale instead."

"... Excuse me?"

Jonathan looked bewildered.

"What do you mean by that?"

"We'll duel, just the two of us, for a single exchange."

"Hm? A duel? Me... and Lady Aris? Here?"

"Yes."

Aris nodded gently, smiling warmly.

"If Sir Jonathan defeats me in this duel, we'll all simply stand down without doing anything."

"Huh?"

Jonathan stared at Aris in disbelief.

She was proposing to settle everything by dueling him?

'What's the trick?'

Jonathan was an accomplished grandmaster.

Aris, meanwhile, had only reached grandmaster less than a year ago.

True, Aris had mastered the Heavenly Current Style, a transcendent martial art, but as vice-captain of the Divine Sword Knights, jonathan too was a master of formidable martial techniques.

Plus, jonathan had vastly more real-world experience, and in a one-move contest, he was all the more confident.

He knew a secret technique in his martial art that could explosively amplify his enhanced energy for a one-strike victory.

And yet—

"You're saying you'll wager everything on a single exchange with me?"

"Yes."

"What are the details of the duel?"

"Hmm... Let's do it like this."

Aris touched her lips, then continued.

"I'll attack, and Sir Jonathan will defend."

"... And then?"

"If I fail to bring you down in a single exchange, I lose. If you're knocked down or fall, I win."

"Hmm..."

The more Jonathan listened, the more suspicious he became.

The conditions seemed only advantageous to himself.

A single exchange with someone just barely made a grandmaster within a year.

Such a move couldn't compare to Jonathan's regular sparring.

He could last not one but ten exchanges, surely.

'What is she scheming?'

He considered, but quickly dismissed it.

'What scheming?'

Jonathan curled his lips in a sly smile.

'It's just the impulsiveness of a twenty-something with no experience. Her head hasn't fully matured.'

Aris must be drunk on her lineage and sense of specialness.

Maybe she wanted to reenact some old hero story she read as a child.

Believing that if she took matters into her own hands, everything would miraculously work out.

She'd led a sheltered life in the Heavenly Sword Palace, safely swinging a sword in a greenhouse, flowers blooming in her mind instead of thoughts.

'She thinks she can defeat me with one move?'

Utterly ridiculous.

"Very well."

Jonathan accepted the wager.

"All right."

Aris readily smiled.

Then she turned to Ian.

"Young master Ian. Would you lend me that greatsword you're holding for a moment?"

Aris knows Vladiark's secret?

Chapter 66 : Spider Web (3)

Spider Web (3)

"Young master Ian. That greatsword you're holding. May I borrow it for a moment?"

"...?"

At Aris's words, Ian blinked his eyes and looked up at her.

"... Why my sword?"

As Aris unfastened the long sword at her waist, she replied,

"With my own sword, I won't be able to bring down Sir Jonathan in a single exchange."

That was certainly true.

No matter how excellent and superb Aris's sword was, Jonathan, the vice-captain of the Heavenly Sword Knights, was too powerful for Aris to defeat in a single strike.

Jonathan at the realm of fully accomplished grandmaster.

In contrast, Aris had only just reached the entry-stage of grandmasterhood less than a year ago.

She was at a disadvantage in terms of aura class from the start.

Moreover, the martial art Jonathan had mastered was at the highest level, rivaling the Heavenly Sword technique itself.

But—

If Aris used Vladiark...?

'That certainly would allow her to overcome every single disadvantage.'

Vladiark would devour the opponent's aura until death unless their mana circuits were completely severed.

'No matter how strong Jonathan is, at a minimum, he's not getting away without major injuries.'

Unless Jonathan had already prepared countermeasures against Vladiark's magic power absorption, if he got bitten by Vladiark unawares, he would have to tear out a large portion of his own mana circuits just to survive.

No matter how skilled Jonathan was, he could not avoid being brought down, at the very least.

'If that happens, Aris wins this duel.'

The outcome of this duel would be decided on whether Jonathan could withstand Aris's blow intact.

'So, if Aris uses Vladiark...'

The outcome was inevitable: Aris would win.

Vladiark was a vicious weapon that even Yuria, who was nearly demigod-level in his previous life, struggled against.

No matter how seasoned a grandmaster Jonathan was, he could not withstand it unscathed.

'At minimum, his mana circuit would be ruptured, and in the worst case, death.'

Whatever the result, Jonathan would at least be brought down or collapse.

'The issue is...'

Ian was still puzzled.

And for good reason.

Among the many famed swords scattered around, why would Aris specifically ask to borrow Ian's Vladiark, as if...

She already knew about Vladiark's abilities.

'That doesn't make sense...'

He had never properly shown Vladiark's abilities to Aris, nor told her about them.

'And yet.'

She looked as if she was certain she could bring Jonathan down with a single blow if he just let her use Vladiark.

The certainty in Aris's eyes was...

'No way...'

Could it be that the Heavenly Sword Lord had told Aris about Vladiark?

While turning over such complicated thoughts in his mind and looking at Aris, she drew close with a mischievous smile.

"...!"

Without realizing it, Ian stepped back, but Aris was faster.

In an instant, her lips were so close they nearly brushed his ear.

"You look like you've just been exposed for hiding something, don't you?"

"... Ugh."

At Aris's whisper, Ian swallowed dryly.

What was this crazy monster planning to say up close like this?

"I know everything. I saw it all."

"...?"

She saw? Since when? What, exactly?

"Ever since you arrived in Morbeng village. Every last bit."

"...!"

Ian's pupils shook violently.

She had been watching him ever since he entered Morbeng village?

He never sensed a thing.

Creeeep. Goosebumps rose across his body.

Eyeing him as if finding his reaction adorable, Aris continued with an aura message.

[I even saw Sir Javier borrowing your greatsword. Saw how it swallowed the Barbarians' aura and turned them into mummies.]

"...."

Cold sweat beaded at Ian's temples.

Never did he expect Aris had kept an eye on things all the way to Morbeng village.

No, wait, did that mean—did she also witness his fight with Dellen...!

While Ian was briefly distracted by such thoughts—

—Swish!

"... Ah."

It happened in an instant.

With a deft motion, Vladiark slipped smoothly from Ian's grasp and into Aris's hand.

To bystanders, it may have looked like he'd handed it over naturally, but it was in fact snatched away.

"... Wh-What!"

Ian quickly reached out for Vladiark again, but, as if expecting it, Aris pulled the blade back.

"There's nothing to worry about."

And with her other hand, she softly placed it on Ian's shoulder.

"I'll bring it right back to you."

With her white fingers, she gently brushed over his shoulder, then turned away.

"W-Wait!"

Ian urgently grabbed for the hem of Aris's clothes as she tried to turn away.

"...?"

Aris just turned her head, looking back at Ian.

"There are still... some things you don't know about that sword."

No matter how confusing things were right now,

So long as Aris brought down Jonathan and saved Yuria, Ian had no reason not to lend her Vladiark.

But.

Vladiark was a monster that devoured aura without distinction between friend or foe.

Its hunger spared only its master.

If Aris recklessly poured aura into Vladiark and ended up losing the duel, Yuria would fall under Jonathan's control in a complete disaster.

"That sword is—"

"It's all right."

The moment Ian tried to warn Aris about Vladiark,

Aris gently closed her hand over his and flashed a small smile.

[I saw how it's used, so I know.]

Then she placed her hand atop Ian's head and softly stroked it.

[This greatsword grows the more aura it consumes, right? Today, I'll gift you a grandmaster's aura. Look forward to it.]

"..."

Her tone was gentle, but Ian's body stiffened and goosebumps broke out all over.

To outsiders, it might have looked like a kind older sister reassuring a boy, but for Ian, who knew her true cruel and hypocritical nature, it was as if a giant venomous spider had perched on his head.

—Pff.

Aris let out a pff at his reaction, then fully turned away.

In the middle of the open space between the two opposing factions.

Jonathan had already finished his preparations for the duel, standing at one end of the clearing and adjusting his helmet.

"Hmm..."

When Aris took her place on the opposite side, Jonathan slightly tilted his head, eyeing Vladiark.

'That's... not Aris's sword.'

He knew whose sword that was.

'That's Ian Greysel's greatsword.'

The sword was so large and conspicuous; it left an impression impossible to forget.

'But why would she borrow Ian's sword instead of using her own?'

Wait a minute.

Something was off.

From the start—

'From the start, why is Ian Greysel even here?'

Jonathan glanced at Ian's group standing off to the side.

Javier and the Investigation Division knights were sworn to the Heavenly Sword Lord, so it was natural for them to be here protecting the direct line.

But Ian was merely a guest.

And not just any guest—he was a 14-year-old boy with no official duties at the Heavenly Sword Palace.

And yet.

Why was that child involved in the dirty depths of this tangled, politically fraught family affair?

"..."

Jonathan stared intently at Ian, thinking for a moment before shaking his head.

'There's no way to know right now.'

But—

'The thing I've been overlooking may be that kid.'

Jonathan had kept his doubts to himself but had been pondering this all along.

How did Javier and the Investigation Division knights track down Yuria and find her?

That had always been a mystery.

'All of this was painstakingly planned and flawlessly executed over a long period.'

After kidnapping Yuria, they eradicated all traces that could be clues for pursuit, and arranged strict guards all around.

So how did Javier and the others manage to find and even rescue the deeply hidden Yuria?

'At first, I suspected there was a traitor among us.'

He thought there was someone leaking insider information to Javier.

His top suspects were the five Barbarians who had been missing since about a day ago—the Crimson Yaksha and his Yaksha troop.

'But there were still parts that didn't add up if they had betrayed Young Master Theo.'

After all, the Yaksha troop had no reason to betray them.

The rewards they stood to gain this time were prized even among grandmaster-level warriors, and their families were under Young Master Theo's influence.

Not only did they have no reason to betray, but if they even wanted to, they couldn't. Betraying Young Master Theo would bring immediate retribution upon their families.

'But.'

What if the one aiding Javier's investigation was not the Yaksha troop, but Ian?

'That would explain quite a lot.'

Ian Greysel.

That boy must have something.

This world is filled with all sorts of singularities and powers.

'Ian Greysel. That boy must possess a special ability, too.'

Perhaps that was the reason the Heavenly Sword Lord was so affectionate to Ian Greysel, keeping him as a guest.

'Interesting.'

Though he couldn't say for certain what ability Ian had, if Javier managed to rescue Yuria with the boy's help, then Ian's ability must be specialized toward tracking or information gathering.

'A very useful talent.'

If he could put that boy's ability to work for Young Master Theo...

—Shake shake.

Jonathan shook his head to clear away these distracting thoughts.

'This is something to consider later.'

He'd look into Ian after this duel was over.

For now, he must focus on the fight with Aris.

He needed to bring Aris down here, secure Yuria, and return her to that unsettling puppet master, Rudeus, as ordered by Young Master Theo.

'Still, I'd better be cautious about that greatsword.'

The black greatsword Aris borrowed from Ian.

There must be a reason she set aside her own superb sword for that heavy blade.

'If she abandoned her familiar sword for a heavy greatsword, it must be to try and decide the match in a single, overwhelming blow.'

She would try to smash Jonathan's balance by bringing down that weight with all her might.

'Not really a wise idea.'

Jonathan was a swordsman whose specialty was strength rather than speed.

If Aris abandoned her advantage in speed to try brute force, he'd actually have an easier time.

'Still, that greatsword is absurdly huge.'

Jonathan calmly eyed Vladiark resting on Aris's shoulder.

'And to think that's a 14-year-old brat's sword.'

Currently, Vladiark had devoured three Barbarian masters and was greatly swollen.

Its form was not fully restored yet, but the blade that was once snapped in two had grown so thick that it now looked more like a tombstone than a sword.

'It must weigh several hundred kilograms at the very least.'

Depending on the material, it could be over a thousand kilograms.

Even with aura control, wielding something that heavy wouldn't be easy.

At the User level, just lifting it would be the best one could do.

Even Experts might collapse after swinging it only a couple times.

'Wait. Now that I think about it, at first...'

Ian's greatsword was not this massive from the start.

During the sword ceremony, it was nothing but a broken hunk of scrap metal.

He remembered vividly, given how many people laughed at Ian back then.

'And even during the entrance examination.'

Back then, that black greatsword still looked like nothing but a blunt, broken piece of junk.

'Did he get it repaired somewhere?'

Now, the scrap-like state was almost entirely gone.

However—

'It looks like the repair was left unfinished.'

The edge wasn't properly sharpened, and the tip was still broken off.

'How bizarre.'

If he'd taken it to a forge for repairs, they wouldn't have left it so half-done.

'It still looks like junk—just bigger and heavier.'

Another question gnawed at Jonathan's mind.

How did Ian, a mere 14-year-old boy, manage to carry that ridiculously heavy sword all this way?

He'd heard that Ian was given the Heavenly Blood Pill by the Heavenly Sword Lord, but even so...

'Yeah. Must've enchanted it with a weight reduction spell. Otherwise, it'd be impossible.'

At this point, Jonathan brushed off his idle thoughts.

'If the only special thing about it is its weight, it shouldn't be too hard to block.'

The sword looked unbelievably heavy, but if weight was all it had going for it, it meant nothing to Jonathan.

He was a grandmaster who could stop a landslide with bare hands.

Even if Aris poured all her aura into that rock-like greatsword, he was confident he could withstand it for one exchange, at least.

'Let's see what you got, then.'

He would put Aris in her place in this duel and fulfill Young Master Theo's order to turn Yuria into a mindless doll.

Chapter 67 : Spider Web (4)

Spider Web (4)

The terms set for the duel, decided by a brief exchange, were simple.

If Aris won, Jonathan's side would surrender immediately, be taken to the detention center, and cooperate willingly with the investigation.

If Jonathan won, Aris's side would give up custody of Yuria and withdraw from the city.

'I like it.'

They were excellent terms for Jonathan.

'Even if the sky falls, there's always a way out.'

This duel was nothing short of a heaven-sent opportunity.

'If Aris had simply pressed forward with sheer force, we'd all be as good as dead right here.'

This side had only two Grandmasters. The other side had no fewer than four.

'And yet, I'm given an opportunity like this, thanks to Aris's reckless arrogance.'

If he won, not only could Jonathan continue his plan to turn Yuria into a puppet, but he would also buy himself time to escape and hide from the Heavenly Sword Lord, who would soon return from campaign.

'If possible... it's best if I kill Aris here as well.'

Now that things had come to this, even if Jonathan won the duel, he would have to continue dodging the Heavenly Sword Lord.

'Serving Young Master Theo for a while will be difficult.'

So—

'I'll kill Aris Hisperion here and increase Theo's chances of becoming the next family head, even just a little.'

Then, on the day Theo became head, Jonathan himself might escape the life of a fugitive.

"Lady Aris!"

Jonathan called out.

"The duel's terms are agreeable, but there's still a problem."

In response, instead of Aris, her chief retainer—the commander of the Heavenly Guardian Knights, Roxy—answered.

"Whaaat!? You sure make a fuss over every little thing!! Do you think Aris is a pushover!?"

Aris turned to look silently at Roxy.

"Roxy?"

"Ah... ah...!"

The moment she met Aris's gaze, Roxy bit her lips and her eyes started to quiver.

"S-sorry... I won't interfere..."

Mumbling in a voice tiny as an ant's, Roxy bowed her head.

Once she firmly closed her lips, Aris turned her gaze back to Jonathan.

"What problem do you mean, sir Jonathan?"

"Mutual trust."

Jonathan stabbed his greatsword into the ground and shrugged with both hands.

"Even if I defeat you in the duel, there's no guarantee the people behind you will withdraw obediently."

"... You make it sound as if you're sure you'll win. And? Are you saying you want to call off the duel now?"

"No, not at all."

Jonathan snapped his fingers.

"Let's take an Mana Oath. Everyone present."

"Mana Oath..."

A magic in which one stakes their own heart and dantian, etching a vow into oneself.

If someone broke the oath, their dantian would be destroyed on the spot, and their heart's mana circuit would collapse, causing them to lose all strength—and in serious cases, die or be crippled for life. It was a terrifying contract magic.

"If that's what will put your mind at ease... I don't mind. Fine. We'll do it."

Despite the fact that a single misstep could turn everything upside down, Aris nodded without much hesitation.

"What is the vow's content?"

"Everyone here, without exception... will absolutely abide by the results and terms of the duel."

If Jonathan won, Aris's side would all withdraw.

If Aris won, Jonathan's side would all surrender.

"Alright. Agreed."

Aris did not refuse this either.

–Sssmirk.

Jonathan's lips curled up in a wicked grin.

'Stupid woman.'

With this, Jonathan could now ensure his survival completely—and perhaps even kill Aris right here.

'With her head full of flowers, she doesn't entertain even a shadow of doubt.'

Jonathan was convinced.

He wouldn't lose this duel even if he wanted to.

It was just a single-clash match, after all.

A blow from Aris, who'd only just stepped into Grandmaster.

Honestly, he was confident he could easily fend off even ten blows.

'First, I'll lightly block her opening strike.'

Then—

'When the duel ends and Aris lets down her guard...'

He'd launch a sudden attack and smash her head like a watermelon.

Even if Jonathan killed Aris like this, her companions could do nothing.

If the duel ended in Jonathan's victory, they would be bound by the Mana Oath to stand down.

If they ignored the oath and counterattacked? Their dantian and heart would collapse on the spot.

'If that happens, I'll just kill all of them.'

He would massacre those helpless, unable to fight back.

'Young Master Theo will see me as outstanding.'

After all, he would be achieving the great feat of subduing four Grandmasters at once who didn't obey him.

"Lady Aris."

Of course, not everyone among Aris's close followers was oblivious to Jonathan's sinister intent.

"A word, if I may."

The current head of the Bellator family following Aris.

Katrina Bellator approached Aris, covering her mouth with a velvet fan.

"There's no need for you to accept such a dangerous vow when we're clearly at an advantage. Just proposing a duel is already more than lenient to those fiends."

She whispered this in Aris's ear, shot a sidelong glance at Jonathan, and continued.

"Jonathan is as dark inside as his coal-black skin. And if—by a million to one chance—you lose this duel, that bastard will surely exploit the oath's terms in some twisted way. In that case, we won't even be able to protect you because of the oath."

Aris replied with a gentle smile.

"Thank you for your concern, katrina, but you needn't worry."

"But..."

"My lady. Any further would only be interference."

"... Ugh."

As Aris fixed her calm gaze upon Katrina, she licked her lips, met her gaze, gulped, and bowed her head.

"... I apologize."

Well...

Katrina was also one who knew Aris's true nature.

If Jonathan's heart was merely black, a terrifying venomous spider dwelled within Aris's.

So, Aris wouldn't have accepted Jonathan's proposal thoughtlessly.

No—instead, she accepted the Mana Oath fully aware of Jonathan's intent.

Letting Jonathan unwittingly walk into the spiderweb she'd spun.

Dangling a honeyed bait using his own evil intentions.

"... Understood."

Katrina bowed and retreated to the ranks.

"Well then, lady Aris? We're ready on this side."

While Aris and Katrina exchanged words, Jonathan had summoned his subordinate mages and prepared the large-scale Mana Oath.

"Are you ready on your side?"

"Yes. Go ahead."

"Excellent! Then—"

–Snap!

Jonathan snapped his fingers.

–Murmur-murmur!

–Wuuuung!

The mages immediately began casting the Mana Oath.

A huge magic circle formed over the warp gate, and everyone present carved a vow into their hearts and dantian to abide by the duel's results.

"At last."

All preparations for the duel were finally complete.

–Kwoaaaaaaaa!!

Jonathan unleashed all the aura coiled in his dantian.

–Whooooosh!

A colossal outpouring of aura whirled up a fierce storm.

The surge of power split the clouds in the night sky into swirling rings, and the thick mist around the warp gate vanished in an instant.

"Ugh!"

"Eeurk!"

The onlookers, standing in two rows as witnesses, could barely keep their balance in the gale.

–Sssmirk!

From within the storm, Jonathan bared his teeth in a wicked smile.

"Lady Aris! Step forward. I, Jonathan, will receive your opening move!"

"..."

Facing the storm head-on, Aris silently adjusted her grip on Vladiark.

Her platinum hair billowed endlessly in the wind. But that was all that moved.

With a motion that seemed almost unnatural amidst the tempest, Aris assumed the preparatory stance for the 4th form of the Heavenly Flow.

In stark contrast to Jonathan, who unleashed his aura unchecked and shook the surroundings.

–Goooooo!

The two Grandmasters faced off for a moment.

As everyone present held their breath, watching their battle of wits—

–Flash!

In a white flash, Aris's figure shot forward in a single streak.

"...!"

So fast even the air itself seemed cleaved—truly the speed of light.

A blow that extended silently, a stunningly quiet strike.

'Here it comes!'

Even most Masters couldn't follow that speed with the naked eye, but Jonathan's super-senses caught Aris's movement with little difficulty.

'Idiot!'

Attacking with speed while wielding that oversized sword!

With this, neither the power nor speed could reach their full potential—a mediocre strike at best.

If she'd used the first form of Heavenly Flow, focusing entirely on penetration, she might have done a bit of damage.

Instead, she'd put all her effort into speed, without even infusing her blade with aura.

'This paltry 4th form of Heavenly Flow, with no aura at all—'

It would be easily deflected with just a slight push!

–Kwoaaaaaaaa!!

Jonathan infused his greatsword with aura and swung it like a baseball bat.

As if aiming to send a ball flying far away.

'Together with that greatsword, I'll hack off your whole right arm.'

Then—

'Once you're stunned and off-balance—!'

He would bring his sword down and split her from head to torso.

–Ka-ka-ka-kang!!

With a sound like a thousand panes of glass shattering at once, the two blades met in a deafening crash.

'It's over!'

Jonathan's smile stretched even wider in confidence of victory.

–Shuuuuuu!

"H-huh!?"

Jonathan suddenly felt a strange alien sensation.

'Wh-what...!?'

There was no satisfying impact that should be transmitted through his palm.

'What's... going on...?'

All he felt was...

A hollow emptiness, as if pouring out his aura into a void.

–Kwwwwaaaaak!

"Urgh, aaagh!!"

Suddenly, a pain like rusted awls stabbing into his forearm surged.

'W-what is this!?'

Jonathan's thick arm—

No, precisely, something foreign was invading the mana circuit in his forearm.

'Th-this is...!?'

Jonathan stared wide-eyed at Aris.

As if demanding to know what she'd done.

–Sssmirk.

Aris merely smiled.

'Wh-what!?'

A smile dripping with cold malice, impossible for anyone truly innocent to wear.

In that instant—

Confronted for the first time with Aris's true nature, Jonathan was so flustered he couldn't form a coherent thought.

–Kwwwwaaaaak!!

"Aaaargh!!"

Vladiark's hunger seized the opportunity and instantly grasped Jonathan's heart.

'This... this is...!'

Only then did Jonathan realize the cause of the alien sensation.

'My... my aura...!'

As if being devoured helplessly by a starving beast—

'It's being sucked straight into this greatsword!'

"Kh... khuaagh!"

He hurried to recall his aura, but it was useless.

–Cough!

A stabbing pain shot through his heart, vomited blood gushing from his mouth.

'D-damn it, what...!!'

It was a pain as if someone were playing tug-of-war with his heart.

'W-what can I do...!?'

Jonathan desperately tried to separate the clashing blades.

"Don't think you can escape."

But the more he retreated, the heavier Aris pressed down with Vladiark.

"Kh... kghh...!!"

Finally, after several backward steps, Jonathan found himself pinned beneath Vladiark.

"Aaaaargh!!"

He pushed, trying to lift Vladiark, but failed.

The more aura he poured into his sword, the faster it was devoured.

No matter what he did, the weight of Vladiark crushing him did not lighten.

No—instead, it was growing heavier by the moment.

"Kr—khaaaagh!!"

Even as he scrambled for another plan, Jonathan's aura was mercilessly sucked into Vladiark by the handful.

"Gaaahhhhh!!!"

In the end, Jonathan screamed high enough to tear the sky itself.

Once Vladiark's hunger took hold of his heart, even a seasoned Grandmaster like Jonathan could only submit.

If he had immediately torn out his heart and rushed to his subordinates for healing, he might have survived, albeit crippled.

But no matter how experienced, tearing out one's own heart is never an easy decision.

And that brief hesitation spelled Jonathan's defeat.

–Shuuuuuu...

The rampaging storm subsided, and the swirling dust slowly settled.

...

A heavy silence remained where the wind had disappeared.

Everyone stared in fear and shock at Jonathan and Aris.

"..."

Jonathan looked like a desiccated mummy.

Shriveled, he was stuck to the ground.

–Splurt!

Aris yanked Vladiark from Jonathan's chest.

"With this, the duel is my victory."

–Thud.

Resting Vladiark on her shoulder, Aris looked to Ian.

Her expression had already returned to an innocent and pure smile.

"To a traitor, this is a merciful death."

It was a pure, transparent smile—hard to believe it belonged to someone who had just cruelly slaughtered a Grandmaster.

It's an anti-climactic death...

But he got what he deserves...

Chapter 68 : Reason to Grow Stronger (1)

Reason to Grow Stronger (1)

The duel ended with Aris's overwhelming victory.

Jonathan's cunning plan, the Mana Oath, ended up being a self-defeating move.

Since they had sworn absolute obedience to the duel's outcome, those who followed Jonathan had no choice but to surrender without a shred of resistance.

The moment they broke their oath, their dantian and heart would be crushed on the spot, leaving them as invalids.

"Then, we will escort you to the Heavenly Sword Palace."

"Ugh!"

"Damn...!"

— Clank! Clank!

Jonathan's swordsmen and mages, with magic power sealing devices locked on their wrists, were led away by the Heavenly Water knights.

"Sir Jonathan... How could this be...?"

Victor Craven, the Cheonwol Knight Commander, was also dragged away without exception.

"As expected, lady Aris!"

"So this is why you accepted the Mana Oath...! You did it to keep bloodshed to a minimum!"

The knights and soldiers who had accompanied Aris were busy showering her with praise.

"The city wasn't destroyed at all, and the only casualty is a single traitor!"

"There were six Grandmasters facing off against each other!"

"The whole city could have been blown away."

"There's no one but Lady Aris who could end this so cleanly, purging just one traitor!"

"That's what makes her a hero! Lady Aris is the treasure of Hisperion! A treasure!"

Aris simply returned a humble smile at all the praise.

That smile only caused the soldiers' cheers to swell even louder.

— Waaaa!

— Lady Aris looked at me!

— Ohh! Ohhh!

— Hero! Hero!

Seeing such scenes, it's easy to understand why Aris is so meticulous about managing her image.

Those people would probably leap into hellfire itself if Aris gave the order, considering it a glory.

Happy to offer themselves as sacrifices for the hero's just cause.

When in truth, they're just being deceived by hypocrisy and becoming scapegoats.

"Thank you, everyone."

Aris gave a gentle wave to the soldiers and then walked toward Ian.

Her hand still gripped Vladiark tightly.

'Gives me chills.'

The way she's approaching with a sword...

She overlaps with Ian's memories of Aris from his previous life.

With that ghostly look, drenched in blood, Aris used to walk toward me...

"Ian?"

Ian was lost in the past for a moment, and before he realized it, Aris was right in front of him.

When she smiled warmly at Ian, for some reason the stares from the soldiers prickled at him.

"Thank you for letting me use it,"

Aris said as she returned Vladiark to Ian.

"It's a truly fine sword. Makes me want to keep it for myself."

"....."

Ian reluctantly accepted Vladiark.

'... Makes her want to keep it?'

Was that a roundabout way to say she wants it now? Vladiark?

'So this is why Aris came to save us?'

Did she come for Vladiark?

Is she going to demand Vladiark as the price for saving our lives?

"....."

Ian looked up at Aris.

"...? Is there something on my face?"

Aris just tilted her head innocently.

Thinking that such a pure face hid a nature as cruel as a venomous centipede sent chills down my spine.

'But...'

Still, this time I really owed her.

'Who would have thought I'd be saved by this woman?'

If Aris hadn't appeared so dramatically, Ian, Javier, and the others would've become ground meat beneath Jonathan's greatsword, and Yuria would've been kidnapped again, turned into a gruesome puppet in Rudeus's hands.

'I definitely owe her. A debt of my life, at that.'

So I had to repay that debt.

Even if Aris was the mortal enemy who had killed me and been killed by me in my past life, even if she was clearly an evil person—

The fact remains: Aris saved me and Yuria.

'I should properly express my gratitude.'

Ian held Vladiark out to Aris once more.

"If you wish, it's yours."

"Sorry? What is?"

"My sword. Didn't you say you wanted it?"

Of course, losing Vladiark would be a huge loss for Ian.

Maybe even worse than losing his right arm, in terms of combat power.

But Aris had saved both him and Yuria.

If his life was the price, then at least Vladiark was fair compensation.

'And...'

If Aris wants Vladiark, it might be better to just hand it over for now.

Right now, she's maintaining her image, so she won't take it by force.

But eventually, if she wants Vladiark, she'll try every trick to get it.

'Aris is a maniac who'd use any means necessary to get what she wants.'

The greatest risk is not knowing what crazy thing she might do to get her hands on Vladiark.

'If only I were at least Swordmaster, mid-stage...'

Frankly, at his current level, Ian had no confidence he could withstand her schemes.

So, for now, giving it up seemed like the safer option.

'If necessary, I can get it back later... For now, handing it over is right.'

However—

"What are you talking about?"

Instead of taking Vladiark, Aris clasped Ian's hand with both of her own.

I could feel the soldiers' stares growing even sharper from a distance.

"This sword is yours, young master. It's a precious legacy bestowed on you by the ancestors at the Sword Lake. Not just for me—even for anyone else—you shouldn't easily hand over ownership of it."

"....."

The refusal was extremely gentle, but it only made Ian's head a muddled mess, like facing a really tough math problem.

Didn't she want Vladiark?

Or was my timing just off handing it over?

Should I wait until we're alone and give it to her then?

I'd have to meet Aris alone?

Damn. I really don't want that.

As Ian was grinding his teeth and spinning all sorts of thoughts, a breeze gently brushed his ear.

[You want to repay me for what I've done for you?]

It was an aura message from Aris.

"I didn't help expecting any reward."

Aris gave a gentle smile.

[Even if you don't offer it first, young master Ian, I'll make sure to claim my reward from you later.]

What gleamed in her slanted eyes was unmistakable desire.

It flared so hot and vividly that it was hard to believe only I could see it.

'She'll make sure to collect later, huh...'

It was a terribly ominous statement.

It sounded like she was saying she'd use any excuse to take whatever she wanted from me, whenever she wanted.

[You were expecting this, weren't you, young master?]

"....."

Ian locked eyes with Aris.

[You... Seem to know me.]

In her smiling eyes, that same greedy flame burned.

'Haaa...'

Solve one kidnapping problem, and another arises immediately.

'What does Aris even want?'

What will she demand from me from now on?

Aris wanting something from me was about as unpleasant as discovering a cockroach under my pillow.

'But even so...'

Ian gripped Vladiark even tighter in his hand.

'The aura stored in Vladiark right now is immense.'

If he absorb this and grew quickly, even if Aris made a difficult demand, he might find a way to get out of it.

'I need to hurry. I have to become much stronger, as fast as possible.'

The reasons to grow stronger were endless.

* * *

What a relief to have gotten through that crisis.

Yuria returned safely to the Heavenly Sword Palace and would remain under protection in the underground chamber of the family head's quarters until the lord returned.

Javier and the knights from the Investigation Division said there was still more to investigate and headed to the detention center where the traitors were imprisoned, to make a proper report to the Heavenly Sword Lord.

Ian returned to his separate residence, lunabreeze.

It was the late hours of the night, the moon high in the sky.

There was still a long time before sunrise.

'Sophia's probably asleep.'

Afraid of waking Sophia, Ian quietly opened the door and tiptoed up to the bedroom.

"Hm?"

But—

"What the...?"

Sophia, who should have been sleeping in bed, was nowhere to be seen.

"Sophia?"

She wasn't in any of the other bedrooms, not in the bathroom, not in the study, nor the kitchen.

"What... the...?"

After rescuing the kidnapped Yuria, now Sophia is missing?

"Haaa...? No way. This can't be."

Raking his hair in frustration, Ian checked the private training hall in the basement of the house.

"Ah."

Thankfully, Sophia was there.

But—

'Why is she sleeping here?'

Sophia had passed out, sprawled right in the middle of the training hall.

"...?"

Soft breaths.

Her chest gently rising and falling.

A wooden sword gripped in her hand.

She wore just light shorts and a tank top.

"She'll catch a cold like that."

Why in the world was she sleeping here, like this?

Ian would ask her the details tomorrow.

For now, he stepped closer, planning to carry her to bed.

But—

"Mm...?"

In that moment,

Ian noticed Sophia's palms were covered in blisters, the skin peeling away.

Strips of skin had come off, revealing raw, red flesh beneath.

'That must hurt.'

Did she really keep swinging a sword here until her hands got this bad?

'.....'

Ian looked at Sophia with a complicated expression.

Now that he saw her up close, she was covered from hair to toe in dirt and grime.

Apparently, she hadn't just been swinging a sword—she'd also pushed herself through intense basic conditioning exercises.

"Haa... Sss."

She overdid it, Sophia.

"Mm...mm?"

When Ian sighed beside her, Sophia stirred, her brow twitching groggily as she woke up.

"You're awake? Sophia."

"Master... You're home... Ahhhh..."

She yawned, stretching her back upright.

"Ow!"

But as the wound on her palm hurt, she winced, arms hugging herself tight.

"Let me see."

Ian knelt down on one knee, taking her hand.

"Aish... What is this, really."

Her palm was bright red, dried blood and dirt caked into the wound.

"I'm going to disinfect this and treat it, so brace yourself. It'll sting."

"Wait... I just woke up! Give me a moment to prepare myself—"

"There's no such thing. Not with people who don't take care of their bodies."

"H-how could you...! Kyaa! Ahhh!!"

Using the Authority of Projection, Ian squirted disinfectant like a water gun on Sophia's palm, then projected a healing potion to treat the wound.

It must have hurt quite a bit, because Sophia wriggled and stomped her feet.

But since it was late at night, she tried her best to stifle her screams.

"Sophia. You overdid it. I know you want to do your best, but this is not the right way."

It's no use to push yourself like this for a day and spend three days in bed.

Even if you only push yourself halfway, if you do that every day, the total amount of training is much greater in the end.

And—

"If you keep this up, your body won't last."

The amount of training is important, but above all, Sophia's health matters most.

If you wreck yourself for ten years, do you plan to spend the rest of your life sick?

You're going to live a long time—you should consider your old age, too.

'Sophia seems too anxious lately.'

If I want to stop her from overdoing it again, I need to ease her anxiety a bit.

'Let's calm Sophia down and get her to bed, and in the time left tonight, let's also absorb the aura stored in Vladiark.'

It was still far too early to sleep.

Time to eat...

Chapter 69 : Reason to Become Stronger (2)

Reason to Become Stronger (2)

Lunabreeze's underground training arena.

"Sophia. Let's talk for a minute."

Ian took Sophia's hand, slowly exhaled, and organized his thoughts.

It was to comfort Sophia, who was overworking herself out of impatience.

What should he say to her?

"What's making you so anxious?"

"... W-what do you mean?"

"Why are you training to the point that you're wrecking your own body?"

If she simply followed along at her own pace, she'd surely reach Swordmaster, no matter what.

"..."

Sophia blinked at Ian, then pursed her lips and lowered her head.

"... Because I want to become stronger, quickly."

"Why? It's okay to go slowly."

"No, it's not."

"...?"

— Swiff.

Sophia pulled her hand from Ian's and hugged her knees.

"When you left me behind, Young Master... I realized. That if I keep staying like this, I'll never be able to go wherever Young Master goes. ... No matter how much I want to follow."

"... Hmm."

"I... I'm not blaming you, Young Master. It's just... I only realized my inadequacy a bit late."

While Ian was struggling desperately to rescue Yuria...

Sophia had time to reflect on herself objectively, step by step.

She didn't have as much talent as Ian.

She'd even started learning swordsmanship much later.

Ian would continue to grow rapidly, as if he'd sprouted wings, and he'd step into even riskier situations to face ever stronger opponents.

And each time, Ian would leave her behind.

Saying it was still too dangerous for her.

That she still wasn't ready.

"... But I don't want to just worry from behind."

But when would she ever be "ready"?

By the time Sophia had worked so hard that she finally caught up to Ian as he was now, wouldn't Ian have grown several times stronger than this already?

So, wouldn't she just end up hearing the same words in the same situation all over again?

That it was still too dangerous for her, that she still wasn't ready.

"Haaa..."

So if she didn't even do this much...

If she didn't swing her sword until her palms wore out and her shoulders ached so badly she couldn't even lift her arms...

She feared she'd lose even that slim chance of being able to go with Ian.

"I wish I had the same kind of talent as you, Young Master."

Ian was still growing rapidly even now.

He was already so far ahead of her.

And Ian's rate of growth was far faster.

"I... I don't know what I should do."

Was it even possible to catch up to Ian, no matter how hard she tried?

What if she burned her entire being to its very end and still couldn't reach even his toes?

At some point, even time spent thinking began to feel like a waste to Sophia.

So she went straight to swinging her sword.

For two whole days. Skipping both meals and sleep.

"It feels pointless..."

"... So that's how it was."

That's why she'd pushed herself so hard.

'It was my fault.'

Ian bowed his head in a moment of silent self-reproach.

It seemed he'd made Sophia anxious.

"Sophia."

Ian gently took Sophia's hand again, wrapping both of his around hers.

"..."

He quietly opened her hand.

The wounds were gone now, but the newly formed calluses stood out all the more.

"You're already doing plenty well. These calluses prove it."

"But... if I can never catch up to you, Young Master, then what's the point?"

"Sophia. You don't need to follow me specifically. You just need to become strong enough to protect yourself."

"No. I don't want that...! That's nowhere near enough!"

Maybe it was because it was dawn, or because she'd just woken up, but Sophia was being even more honest than usual.

"I'm not going anywhere. Sophia. I'll always be by your side."

"Huh!? You say that, but you left me just the other day!"

"But I came back right away, didn't I?"

"... You came back this time, but what about next time?"

"Hm?"

"You came back this time...! Honestly, who knows about the next time! ... I'm sorry for saying something unlucky, but you might be strong, Young Master, but you're not immortal... I'm scared! I worry... If I can't see you, how do I know something hasn't happened to you...? You don't know what it's like to be alone, anxious, unable to do anything, do you? I get all sorts of bizarre thoughts! That's why I want to go with you!"

Ian quietly listened to all of Sophia's words, then patted her hand.

"I see."

He hadn't realized Sophia was so worried about him.

"Phew..."

Sophia lowered her gaze, letting out a long, frustrated sigh.

"..."

Seeing her lowered head, Ian felt uneasy and instinctively pulled her closer by the hand.

"Wah!?"

Sophia's waist tipped over in surprise.

"W-what are you doing all of a sudden...!"

Sophia grumbled, lying with her head on Ian's thigh.

"I promise, Sophia."

Ian gently stroked Sophia's hair.

"The things you're afraid of will not happen. Ever."

"..."

Sophia quietly looked up at Ian, locking eyes with him.

But she was still pouting, with a horned look in her eyes and her lips sullenly sticking out—no sign of feeling better.

"Don't you believe me?"

"If you could make worries disappear just by saying so, what would anyone ever worry about?"

— Heh.

"That's true."

Ian gently rubbed her furrowed eyebrows in circles.

With every circle, Sophia's expression softened little by little.

"Trust between comrades is important."

"... Comrades..."

"Don't push yourself. Just follow me slowly, Sophia. Let's keep progressing together, step by step."

"... Hmph..."

— Thump.

Sophia rolled over to her side.

She felt the fabric of his thigh become a bit warm and damp.

She was such a crybaby, unable to hide anything.

Expressing her honest feelings had reflexively brought tears again.

Ian didn't tease her.

Instead, he kept talking.

"Don't ever push yourself like this again."

"... Okay."

"It's late, so wash up. And don't ever sleep out here again. Do you know how bad hard floors are for your back!? And you should be careful not to catch a cold! Did you eat properly while I was gone? Did you get a health checkup?"

"A-ah... Here come the nagging..."

"Then stop making me nag! Hup!"

Ian poked Sophia in the side.

She shrieked! in surprise and then burst out laughing as she sat up.

There were tears at the corners of her eyes.

"Okay, Young Master."

Sophia wiped away the moisture from her eyes.

"I trust you. And..."

When all the tears were gone, her green eyes shone even brighter and clearer.

"I may not have as much talent as you, Young Master, but I'm confident I'll keep following you with all I've got! Even if it takes time... Please wait for me! I'll do my best so that I can always be wherever you are, Young Master!"

Ian nodded enthusiastically.

"Of course. I always believe in you, Sophia."

"H-hmph! Good, that's all I needed to hear! Fine, fine!"

Sophia seemed to cheer up again.

'Thank goodness.'

Honestly, he'd forgotten to bring a present when he came back...

He'd been worrying about how to make up for it in case she was still mad.

"Get some sleep after washing up. It's late."

"You should wash, too, Young Master! Didn't you just get back?"

"Yeah. I'll use the first-floor bathroom. You go to the bedroom."

"Mmm..."

Sophia rubbed her stomach.

"I'm hungry... Should we eat something before washing up, Young Master?"

"Hmm."

Now that he thought about it, Ian was a bit hungry too.

He'd been searching for Yuria and bringing her back all this time, barely eating.

"Sounds good."

Tomorrow was a rest day anyway, so skipping another night's sleep wouldn't hurt.

Let's fill our bellies with a late-night snack tonight.

"Then, Young Master Ian, wash up first! I'll grill the pork we have!"

"That's fine. We'll have to wash again after brushing our teeth anyway. Let's just do it together. You must be tired, too."

"Okay! Great!"

Ian stood up with Sophia.

'Let's eat first, get Sophia to bed, then...'

Ian glanced at Vladiark, lying on the training hall floor.

The black divine sword, now considerably restored after having devoured three Masters and a Grandmaster.

'I can spend the night on internal cultivation.'

Ian decided to put off sleep for just one more day.

* * *

A short while later.

Late at night, Ian grilled pork and ate with Sophia.

After putting Sophia to bed, Ian took Vladiark and headed down to the secret cultivation chamber underground.

'Tonight, I'll focus on cleansing as much of the impurities from my body as possible.'

He was going to use the immense aura absorbed by Vladiark to thoroughly cleanse his mana circuits.

Removing impurities from the mana circuits was a necessary prerequisite for reaching the level of Master.

'The stench will be awful.'

The impurities extracted from the body had a truly horrible smell—akin to rotting corpses.

That was precisely why he'd come down from the second-floor bedroom to underground.

He didn't want to interrupt Sophia's sleep with the terrible stench.

'Let's begin.'

Ian gripped Vladiark tightly and sat cross-legged.

'First, check the aura.'

The amount of mana condensed within Vladiark was as vast as a mountain.

The aura of three Master-class Barbarians, plus that of a fully developed Grandmaster-rank knight, made for an overwhelming, vortex-like power throbbing inside.

'If I absorb all this, I'll definitely reach Swordmaster.'

However, he couldn't inherit the same mastery level of the aura he absorbed.

It would be nice if he could, but too much mana would be consumed in expelling impurities from his body.

The mana used for cleansing impurities lost its purity and had to be expelled from the body.

And the process of thoroughly cleansing and expelling all the built-up impurities took quite some time.

'Still, no matter how slow it goes, I'll definitely reach Swordmaster within a few weeks. The time I thought I'd need for growth has... been unimaginably shortened compared to my expectations.'

It hadn't been even half a year—let alone a year—since his regression.

In fact, only a few months ago, Ian hadn't been able to use any aura at all. He was completely mana-impaired.

But now, in only a few weeks, he'd be able to attain Swordmaster.

'Truly lucky. It's thanks to back-to-back fortuitous encounters and sheer luck that is almost unbelievable.'

Meeting Vladiark at the Sword Selection Ceremony, and not even a month later, devouring three Master-class experts and a Grandmaster-rank powerhouse in succession.

'Who could have ever predicted this?'

At this rate, wouldn't he even surpass the level of his previous life by next year?

It seemed hard to believe, but then again, if luck kept piling up like this, maybe it wasn't impossible.

'Whew... A Swordmaster at fourteen.'

It was an achievement four years earlier than that of Ragnar, the 5th head of Heavenly Sword family, who was hailed as the greatest and strongest swordsman of all time.

Ragnar needed eighteen years to reach Swordmaster, but since Ian had started growing in earnest after regressing—even less than a year ago—it hadn't even been a full year.

'At this rate of growth...'

Ten years from now... when the real invasion of the Grand Dukes of the Demon Realm began, he'd likely be several times stronger than even Yuria or Ragnar in their prime.

— Shake shake!

Ian forcefully shook his head to clear away his stray thoughts.

'That's enough fantasizing.'

It was time to focus.

He had a mountain of aura stored in Vladiark to gobble up. He couldn't slack off—he needed to cultivate diligently whenever he had time.

Ian straightened his back and settled more firmly into his cross-legged posture.

Then, spinning the aura in his dantian, he activated Hisperion's secret technique: the Heavenly Dawn Technique.

— Gwooooooo!

About thirty minutes passed like that.

— Glorp...! Gllorp...!

With a sound like bubbles boiling in a swamp, thick black fluid began to seep from Ian's forehead.

As soon as it started to flow, the room was filled with an overwhelming stench.

It was the foul odor of deeply embedded bodily impurities.

Before long, what had started at his forehead began to ooze from his nape, then soon from his armpits and back, and eventually from his entire body.

— Blurp! Blurp!

Sticky black sludge poured from Ian's body, almost threatening to cover him completely.

As the cultivation chamber became increasingly filthy, Ian's mana circuits and blood vessels were gradually opening up and clearing, feeling refreshingly clean.

Ian was now in the process of obtaining a strength that would make him second to none even among the other Hisperion retainers.

Chapter 70 : Reason to Become Stronger (3)

Reason to Become Stronger (3)

The northern region of Hisperion.

A demon realm where, even in April, fierce knife-like winds and blizzards rage relentlessly.

A fortress steadfastly defending Hisperion's territory from the endless monster hordes flooding in from beyond the north.

Winterhelm.

This was the base where Darkan, the Heavenly Sword Lord, was staying for this northern expedition.

—Whiiiiii!

—Hooooooo!

The wind in Winterhelm's audience chamber howled like the wailing of ghosts.

—Kuuung!!

The massive, heavy door to the audience chamber flung open violently, as if it might shatter at any moment.

—Whoooom!

Bitter cold and flurries of snow swept in through the doorway.

The man who threw open the door stood for a moment, facing the fierce wind.

The raging gusts thoroughly disheveled his silver hair without respite.

He didn't care in the slightest, but fixed his blood-red eyes, crimson as spilled blood, on the throne.

"Father!!!"

The man's name—who burst in, as though he'd smash down the door—was Theo Hisperion.

He was the eldest son of the Heavenly Sword house, and the traitor behind the recent Yuria abduction case.

"My son."

The Heavenly Sword Lord stood beside the throne, his gaze resting outside the window.

"Was this your intention from the beginning!!?"

Grinding his teeth, Theo stomped towards Darkan—thud! thud!

With every step Theo took, the floor of the audience chamber cracked and crumbled like eggshells.

"You must be pleased! You must be very pleased indeed!"

Theo didn't quite dare approach right up to Darkan's side but, instead, pointed accusingly at his father from just below the throne.

"You finally have solid justification to kill me!! How does it feel?!"

"Hmph."

Darkan didn't even turn to look at Theo but simply scoffed.

"You never stop disappointing me, Theo."

"Haa..."

Theo contorted his features, so similar to his father's, in frustration.

"Did you ever have any expectations of me to begin with!?"

"I still do."

"What a joke!!!"

Theo's shout echoed out from the audience chamber all the way to the northern mountain range.

"If so, why didn't you appoint me as your successor earlier?"

Theo thumped on his breastplate—thump! thump!

"What exactly do I lack!?"

Martial skill? Impossible. He was counted among the strongest on the continent.

There were only a handful in the whole world who could defeat him.

Mastery? He, though only at an early age, had already reached late-stage Grandmaster.

If he trained for just a few more years, he could easily reach the highest level, and with more effort, even attain the demigod state like his father.

Leadership? Since childhood, he had lived solely to become the head of the family. Now, he commanded a faction second only to the house leader in Hisperion.

So was it fame? Deeds? Or legitimacy?

He could say with confidence that he lacked none of these.

If he didn't deserve to be successor, then who did?

—Ssshh.

The Heavenly Sword Lord finally drew his gaze from the window and looked at Theo.

"Impatience."

Within Theo's chest burned a fire hotter than the breath of a volcano.

That heat was certainly a powerful source of strength, but mishandled, it was a double-edged flame that could consume all, friend or foe alike.

Just as Theo had tried to kill his youngest sibling.

A fire poorly handled is nothing but a disaster.

How could he appoint someone harboring such a disaster as successor?

"If you killed Yuria... did you really think I'd appoint you as my heir?"

"... Krrgh!"

Theo glared at his father, grinding his teeth.

"If only things had gone according to plan... Even you, father, would never have realized!"

There were enemies targeting Yuria not only within Hisperion.

Whether they managed to turn Yuria into a puppet or, if the plan faltered slightly, killed her early—

As long as her self was erased, he could have pinned it on some external force.

"Hahaha."

Darkan let out a low chuckle.

"How foolish you are, my son."

Darkan had known of Theo's designs against Yuria even before departing on the expedition.

That was why he'd left Aris with Yuria—and Katrina, the head of the Bellator, with Aris.

There had been only one unforeseen variable in this Yuria abduction incident.

That the one who resolved it was Ian Greysel—the boy he'd been most interested in recently.

'If only Javier had written a more detailed report.'

The report was filled with Ian's achievements, but the whole process was summarized so vaguely he had no idea what Ian had actually done.

'Honestly, I'd like to summon either Javier or Ian right now and hear it directly...'

But the incidents arising from this expedition were more serious than expected—he couldn't leave his seat so easily.

'But... it's not as if Ian is running away anywhere.'

He could deal with this matter after finishing up the expedition first, and savor it slowly.

He'd summon Ian to hear about the incident in detail, and properly thank him for saving his daughter.

"Krrrrgh!!"

As Darkan smiled absentmindedly while thinking of Ian, Theo ground his teeth even harder.

"If you're done mocking me, then just kill me already! Why do you still keep me alive?! How much longer do you plan to laugh at me!? Is there still something left to ridicule!?"

"...?"

The Heavenly Sword Lord blinked.

"I have never mocked you, Theo."

"Then what's with that smile!"

"Hmm."

The family head's lips grew heavy again.

"Theo. You're my son. How could I kill you?"

"Th-then why...!"

"After spending a few days in the north, you came to my mind quite a bit."

Darkan turned again to look out the window.

"In this biting, harsh storm, perhaps the fire within your chest will lose some vigor. Then it might become easier to handle. For you, yourself."

There were endless tasks to be tackled beyond the northern border of Hisperion.

There were countless neglected gates stranded in the wilderness and many belongings and remains of missing swordsmen to retrieve.

"I'll entrust you with what lies beyond the north."

"... You mean."

"That's your sentence."

"Exile, then."

"And an opportunity."

There were many in Hisperion who followed Theo, nearly as many as the Heavenly Sword Lord himself.

Thus, sending Theo northward without reason was impossible.

But this incident had provided strong justification.

That justification was 'treason'.

With such justification, the branch elders and high vassals who supported Theo could say nothing about this punishment.

"Go beyond the north, and become a greater man. You are still allowed to reside in this fortress, but you are forbidden from going any further south. Understood?"

"K... krrrrgh...!"

Though it was a rather lenient disposition, Theo still ground his teeth.

"S-so you planned this from the start! You knew what I was plotting from the very beginning! You intended to send me beyond the north from the outset...!!"

"Half correct, Theo."

Even now, the Heavenly Sword Lord answered, eyes fixed out the window.

"This was simply one among many countermeasures. You just walked onto the stage I'd prepared on your own."

"Kuh... If you don't kill me now, you'll regret it someday!!"

"We'll see..."

Darkan's demigod's intuition told him otherwise.

"I... will come back from the north much stronger! I'll surpass even you, father!"

"I hope so, my son."

By the time Theo rivaled him in strength, both Yuria and Ian would be even stronger as well.

And if Theo returned with a resolve to use the fire within him for the family, not for himself, Hisperion would enter an era of prosperity and strength.

"If I return from beyond the north...! Then I will take the position of family head by strength, not petty tricks!"

"Then get out of here! How long do you plan to keep yammering on? Go become stronger, and prove yourself through action!"

"Krrrrgh...!"

—Chuk!

Theo placed his palm over his left chest.

The distinctive salute of Hisperion to the Heavenly Sword Lord.

"..."

With that final gesture, Theo withdrew.

"My child. Still gives his respects, at least."

Was it gratitude for being spared after coming expecting to die?

Or perhaps simply etiquette for a position he intended to claim someday.

"Haah..."

"You sigh deeply, my dear."

"Hmm?"

To Darkan's right.

A woman in a thick black fur coat descended the stairway in the wall.

She was Estella Hisperion, the main wife of Darkan.

"My lady. When did you come in?"

"Just now. I wanted to see my eldest son's face after so long, but it seems I just missed him."

"Hmph."

Darkan scoffed and looked to the window again.

"I just sent him beyond the north."

"You did well."

Estella came over and leaned on Darkan's side.

Darkan glanced at her, surprised.

"I thought you'd say something."

"As if."

Estella quietly linked her arm with Darkan's.

"Theo will become stronger—thanks to you. And... someday, he may even surpass you."

"Hmm..."

Darkan looked out beyond the window once more.

"I truly hope so myself."

Now it was Estella who looked up at Darkan in surprise.

But he was still gazing intently at something beyond the window.

Estella, too, followed his gaze outside.

But all she could see was—

Endless mountains stretched out beyond the north.

But Estella quickly picked up on her husband's mood.

"You... must have seen something, out in the north?"

The Heavenly Sword Lord's eyes flickered briefly at her words.

Estella's guess turned to certainty.

"What did you see?"

"..."

Darkan recalled what he'd witnessed beyond the north.

"There's more than one."

At first, it was the gate.

Not the familiar type of gate he'd seen before, but a bizarre one.

If there was a gateway to hell, it would probably look like that.

Its color was like molten lava, it reeked with a vile stench, and it flickered with the screams of the damned.

The structure encasing the gate looked eerily organic, like living tissue, with fine nerve bundles writhing around it.

There were other features, but most grotesque... were the faces.

On the gate's surface, bubbles shaped like agonized faces swelled and burst in perpetual succession.

"I saw a strange gate for the first time, but that itself was not noteworthy."

The problem was that Cultists were there.

Cultists, who committed atrocities and terrorism on a national scale—their presence there was never a good sign.

"I saw them around, and it seemed they were plotting something..."

Darkan had slaughtered the Cultists and entered that grotesque gate.

Inside, foul, dirty energy and evil magic power filled the space.

The monsters within were nothing special.

Just a few enormous undead.

"I may have been a step too late."

For all its terrifying aura, the gate was closed surprisingly easily.

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Chapter 70 : Reason to Become Stronger (3)

Reason to Become Stronger (3)

The northern region of Hisperion.

A demon realm where, even in April, fierce knife-like winds and blizzards rage relentlessly.

A fortress steadfastly defending Hisperion's territory from the endless monster hordes flooding in from beyond the north.

Winterhelm.

This was the base where Darkan, the Heavenly Sword Lord, was staying for this northern expedition.

—Whiiiiii!

—Hooooooo!

The wind in Winterhelm's audience chamber howled like the wailing of ghosts.

—Kuuung!!

The massive, heavy door to the audience chamber flung open violently, as if it might shatter at any moment.

—Whoooooom!

Bitter cold and flurries of snow swept in through the doorway.

The man who threw open the door stood for a moment, facing the fierce wind.

The raging gusts thoroughly disheveled his silver hair without respite.

He didn't care in the slightest, but fixed his blood-red eyes, crimson as spilled blood, on the throne.

"Father!!!"

The man's name—who burst in, as though he'd smash down the door—was Theo Hisperion.

He was the eldest son of the Heavenly Sword house, and the traitor behind the recent Yuria abduction case.

"My son."

The Heavenly Sword Lord stood beside the throne, his gaze resting outside the window.

"Was this your intention from the beginning!!?"

Grinding his teeth, Theo stomped towards Darkan—thud! thud!

With every step Theo took, the floor of the audience chamber cracked and crumbled like eggshells.

"You must be pleased! You must be very pleased indeed!"

Theo didn't quite dare approach right up to Darkan's side but, instead, pointed accusingly at his father from just below the throne.

"You finally have solid justification to kill me!! How does it feel?!"

"Hmph."

Darkan didn't even turn to look at Theo but simply scoffed.

"You never stop disappointing me, Theo."

"Haa..."

Theo contorted his features, so similar to his father's, in frustration.

"Did you ever have any expectations of me to begin with!?"

"I still do."

"What a joke!!!"

Theo's shout echoed out from the audience chamber all the way to the northern mountain range.

"If so, why didn't you appoint me as your successor earlier?"

Theo thumped on his breastplate—thump! thump!

"What exactly do I lack!?"

Martial skill? Impossible. He was counted among the strongest on the continent.

There were only a handful in the whole world who could defeat him.

Mastery? He, though only at an early age, had already reached late-stage Grandmaster.

If he trained for just a few more years, he could easily reach the highest level, and with more effort, even attain the demigod state like his father.

Leadership? Since childhood, he had lived solely to become the head of the family. Now, he commanded a faction second only to the house leader in Hisperion.

So was it fame? Deeds? Or legitimacy?

He could say with confidence that he lacked none of these.

If he didn't deserve to be successor, then who did?

—Ssshh.

The Heavenly Sword Lord finally drew his gaze from the window and looked at Theo.

"Impatience."

Within Theo's chest burned a fire hotter than the breath of a volcano.

That heat was certainly a powerful source of strength, but mishandled, it was a double-edged flame that could consume all, friend or foe alike.

Just as Theo had tried to kill his youngest sibling.

A fire poorly handled is nothing but a disaster.

How could he appoint someone harboring such a disaster as successor?

"If you killed Yuria... did you really think I'd appoint you as my heir?"

"... Krrgh!"

Theo glared at his father, grinding his teeth.

"If only things had gone according to plan... Even you, father, would never have realized!"

There were enemies targeting Yuria not only within Hisperion.

Whether they managed to turn Yuria into a puppet or, if the plan faltered slightly, killed her early—

As long as her self was erased, he could have pinned it on some external force.

"Hahaha."

Darkan let out a low chuckle.

"How foolish you are, my son."

Darkan had known of Theo's designs against Yuria even before departing on the expedition.

That was why he'd left Aris with Yuria—and Katrina, the head of the Bellator, with Aris.

There had been only one unforeseen variable in this Yuria abduction incident.

That the one who resolved it was Ian Greysel—the boy he'd been most interested in recently.

'If only Javier had written a more detailed report.'

The report was filled with Ian's achievements, but the whole process was summarized so vaguely he had no idea what Ian had actually done.

'Honestly, I'd like to summon either Javier or Ian right now and hear it directly...'

But the incidents arising from this expedition were more serious than expected—he couldn't leave his seat so easily.

'But... it's not as if Ian is running away anywhere.'

He could deal with this matter after finishing up the expedition first, and savor it slowly.

He'd summon Ian to hear about the incident in detail, and properly thank him for saving his daughter.

"Krrrrgh!!"

As Darkan smiled absentmindedly while thinking of Ian, Theo ground his teeth even harder.

"If you're done mocking me, then just kill me already! Why do you still keep me alive?! How much longer do you plan to laugh at me!? Is there still something left to ridicule!?"

"...?"

The Heavenly Sword Lord blinked.

"I have never mocked you, Theo."

"Then what's with that smile!"

"Hmm."

The family head's lips grew heavy again.

"Theo. You're my son. How could I kill you?"

"Th-then why...!"

"After spending a few days in the north, you came to my mind quite a bit."

Darkan turned again to look out the window.

"In this biting, harsh storm, perhaps the fire within your chest will lose some vigor. Then it might become easier to handle. For you, yourself."

There were endless tasks to be tackled beyond the northern border of Hisperion.

There were countless neglected gates stranded in the wilderness and many belongings and remains of missing swordsmen to retrieve.

"I'll entrust you with what lies beyond the north."

"... You mean."

"That's your sentence."

"Exile, then."

"And an opportunity."

There were many in Hisperion who followed Theo, nearly as many as the Heavenly Sword Lord himself.

Thus, sending Theo northward without reason was impossible.

But this incident had provided strong justification.

That justification was 'treason'.

With such justification, the branch elders and high vassals who supported Theo could say nothing about this punishment.

"Go beyond the north, and become a greater man. You are still allowed to reside in this fortress, but you are forbidden from going any further south. Understood?"

"K... krrrrgh...!"

Though it was a rather lenient disposition, Theo still ground his teeth.

"S-so you planned this from the start! You knew what I was plotting from the very beginning! You intended to send me beyond the north from the outset...!!"

"Half correct, Theo."

Even now, the Heavenly Sword Lord answered, eyes fixed out the window.

"This was simply one among many countermeasures. You just walked onto the stage I'd prepared on your own."

"Kuh... If you don't kill me now, you'll regret it someday!!"

"We'll see..."

Darkan's demigod's intuition told him otherwise.

"I... will come back from the north much stronger! I'll surpass even you, father!"

"I hope so, my son."

By the time Theo rivaled him in strength, both Yuria and Ian would be even stronger as well.

And if Theo returned with a resolve to use the fire within him for the family, not for himself, Hisperion would enter an era of prosperity and strength.

"If I return from beyond the north...! Then I will take the position of family head by strength, not petty tricks!"

"Then get out of here! How long do you plan to keep yammering on? Go become stronger, and prove yourself through action!"

"Krrrrgh...!"

—Chuk!

Theo placed his palm over his left chest.

The distinctive salute of Hisperion to the Heavenly Sword Lord.

"..."

With that final gesture, Theo withdrew.

"My child. Still gives his respects, at least."

Was it gratitude for being spared after coming expecting to die?

Or perhaps simply etiquette for a position he intended to claim someday.

"Haah..."

"You sigh deeply, my dear."

"Hmm?"

To Darkan's right.

A woman in a thick black fur coat descended the stairway in the wall.

She was Estella Hisperion, the main wife of Darkan.

"My lady. When did you come in?"

"Just now. I wanted to see my eldest son's face after so long, but it seems I just missed him."

"Hmph."

Darkan scoffed and looked to the window again.

"I just sent him beyond the north."

"You did well."

Estella came over and leaned on Darkan's side.

Darkan glanced at her, surprised.

"I thought you'd say something."

"As if."

Estella quietly linked her arm with Darkan's.

"Theo will become stronger—thanks to you. And... someday, he may even surpass you."

"Hmm..."

Darkan looked out beyond the window once more.

"I truly hope so myself."

Now it was Estella who looked up at Darkan in surprise.

But he was still gazing intently at something beyond the window.

Estella, too, followed his gaze outside.

But all she could see was—

Endless mountains stretched out beyond the north.

But Estella quickly picked up on her husband's mood.

"You... must have seen something, out in the north?"

The Heavenly Sword Lord's eyes flickered briefly at her words.

Estella's guess turned to certainty.

"What did you see?"

"..."

Darkan recalled what he'd witnessed beyond the north.

"There's more than one."

At first, it was the gate.

Not the familiar type of gate he'd seen before, but a bizarre one.

If there was a gateway to hell, it would probably look like that.

Its color was like molten lava, it reeked with a vile stench, and it flickered with the screams of the damned.

The structure encasing the gate looked eerily organic, like living tissue, with fine nerve bundles writhing around it.

There were other features, but most grotesque... were the faces.

On the gate's surface, bubbles shaped like agonized faces swelled and burst in perpetual succession.

"I saw a strange gate for the first time, but that itself was not noteworthy."

The problem was that Cultists were there.

Cultists, who committed atrocities and terrorism on a national scale—their presence there was never a good sign.

"I saw them around, and it seemed they were plotting something..."

Darkan had slaughtered the Cultists and entered that grotesque gate.

Inside, foul, dirty energy and evil magic power filled the space.

The monsters within were nothing special.

Just a few enormous undead.

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After witnessing something like that, there was no way Darkan could return home just yet.

He would need to dig up concrete information before he could rest easy.

'I've neglected my training for fear of touching divinity...'

Because if he ascended, leaving his place vacant, a civil war would break out in Hisperion at once.

'But the moment I sensed that evil energy, I realized how arrogant and careless I've been.'

Darkan would have to become even stronger.

Fortunately, he already knew the path to greater strength.

'And...'

He couldn't neglect nurturing the next generation either.

At once, someone popped into Darkan's mind.

It wasn't Theo, who'd just left for the northern wilds, nor his youngest daughter Yuria, renowned as the greatest genius in history.

'Ian.'

His demigod's intuition was telling him—

'From now on, I suspect I'll truly be in need of your help.'

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